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## Bridging the West and the Muslim world

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After successfully addressing the Muslim World in Egypt last Thursday, US President Obama has sought a new beginning to relations between the West and the Muslim World. While his speech was generally welcomed, many Muslims remain sceptical about Obama's words, as actually enacting a solution to today's political disputes is of far greater importance.

Although President Obama has renewed talks in the Middle East, many in the Islamic world claim, however, that as long as there is no solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict, the US is unlikely to win over the hearts and the minds of the Muslim world. The ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also contributed to the growing gap.

While in the West Islam is often associated with the Middle East, The Muslim world in fact stretches beyond the Arab World far into Asia. The world's largest Muslim population is in Indonesia, a place where people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds have lived a relatively peacefully co-existence throughout history.

In Indonesia, one cannot deny that there has been a tendency toward a more radical interpretation of Islam and after the Sept. 11 terrorist attack, or that religious parties have gradually been gaining a stronger grip on its political system. Tension between Muslims and Christians has occasionally resulted in violent clashes. However, the country has always upheld its values of secularism, tolerance and pluralism.

Indonesia's cultural norms and values do not include honor killings or blood revenge, and women have enjoyed political freedom and equal rights throughout the modern era. Across the archipelago girls go to school. Illiteracy among females is a rare phenomenon and women have the liberty to rise to the highest echelons in both the government and private sectors.

With this backdrop, Indonesia can and should play a much larger role to bridging the gap and changing the negative perception people in the West may have of Islam. In order to present a non-Arab face of Islam, Indonesia needs to move to the forefront of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative of the UN secretary-general which seeks to reduce tensions across cultural divides that threaten to inflame existing political conflicts or trigger new ones.

Although President Obama has rightfully put strengthening ties between the West and the Muslim world at the top of his agenda, many debate whether or not he made the right decision to address the Muslim world from Egypt instead of Turkey or Indonesia.

During the Alliance of Civilizations Forum in Istanbul in April 2009, which is the premier global event to bridging the gap between the West and the Muslim world, leaders of both worlds came together. Although President Obama initially confirmed his attendance for the second day of the forum, he regretfully missed

out on a unique opportunity to address both worlds during the forum, which was held in a secular and modern Muslim State located at the intersection of East and West.

As President Obama has been working hard to ease tensions, across the Atlantic in The Netherlands, Dutch opposition leader Geert Wilders continues to exploit Islam and induce hatred in a western audience who often have no idea what the true essence of Islam really is. As though Fitna wasn't enough to falsely portray Islam as a brutal religion, it appears that Fitna II is now on the way.

To undermine any efforts the Dutch government has made to strengthen relations between the two worlds, Wilders recently demanded the resignation of Nikolaos van Dam after he gave a lecture on cultural aspects in the Muslim world. Van Dam is the Netherlands' heavyweight Ambassador to Indonesia; he is fluent in Arabic and an expert on the Islamic world from whom many, including Muslim scholars, could learn from.

In last week's EU elections, Wilders anti-Islam party won four seats in the European Parliament and is now the second largest political party in the Netherlands.

Nevertheless, to build long lasting and solid ties between the West and the Muslim world, a solution on various international issues, such as Palestine, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kashmir is essential to change the negative perception the Muslim World has of the West. This, however, is not enough. To decrease tension and to eradicate the danger of religious extremism, one should press for a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict.

As Obama's speech is strong evidence of the US president's goodwill to improve his country's relationship with the Muslim world, the world, including Muslims, expect much more concrete action from Obama to overcome the above conflicts.

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