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Dubai Ports Fallout Islamophobia on the rise

Parvez Ahmed

Monday, March 13, 2006

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The recent hysteria surrounding the approval of a Dubai firm to manage parts of several American ports demonstrates how fear of Islam, or "Islamophobia," can overpower rational discourse and harm our nation's true interests.

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What would normally have been a routine business deal with a stable ally turned into a political fiasco that sent a "no Arabs or Muslims need apply" message to our partners in the Middle East and beyond.

Indications of how politicians from both major parties were able to exploit the Dubai ports deal appear in two new polls on attitudes toward Islam. These troubling poll results should serve as a wake-up call for all

Americans who value our nation's traditions of religious tolerance and who seek to improve our sagging image in the Muslim world.

The polls, one by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the other by the Washington Post and ABC News, indicate that almost half of Americans have a negative perception of Islam and that 1 in 4 of those surveyed consistently believe such stereotypes as: "Muslims value life less than other people," and "The Muslim religion teaches violence and hatred." The Washington Post-ABC poll found that one-fourth of Americans "admitted to harboring prejudice toward Muslims," which, experts said, is "fueled in part by political statements and media reports that focus almost solely on the actions of Muslim extremists."

CAIR's survey also showed that the majority of Americans have little or no knowledge of Islam.

A majority of the respondents in CAIR's survey said they would change their views about Islam and Muslims if they perceived that Muslims condemned terrorism more strongly, showed more concern for issues important to ordinary Americans, worked to improve the status of women, and worked to improve the image of America in the Muslim world.

The results of both polls suggest that education is the key to decreasing anti-Muslim prejudice and that Muslims must do a better job of letting fellow Americans know what is being done to address their concerns.

CAIR and other American Muslim groups have repeatedly condemned terrorism of any

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kind. The "Not in the Name of Islam" public service announcement campaign, a fatwa against terrorism, and an online petition drive rejecting violence in the name of Islam are but a few examples.

Efforts are under way to increase the participation of Muslim women in American mosques. CAIR helped distribute a brochure, called "Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Working Together to Reclaim Our Heritage," to mosques throughout the United States.

American Muslims have also worked to help build bridges of understanding between the United States and the Islamic world. American Muslim leaders recently took part in diplomatic initiatives during controversies stemming from the rioting in suburbs of Paris and the worldwide reaction to publications of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. A CAIR initiative, called "Explore the Life of Muhammad," offers free DVDs or books about Islam's prophet to Americans of all faiths.

In the past, educational and cultural exchanges promoting mutual understanding between the West and the Islamic world were viewed as a kind of frill, a nice undertaking if the resources were available. Today, such efforts ought to be viewed as long-term investments vital to the national security interests of the United States.

Islamophobia, like anti-Semitism or other forms of bigotry, should be of concern to all Americans. It was Islamophobia that prompted 44 percent of Americans surveyed in a 2004 Cornell University study to believe that some curtailment of American Muslim civil liberties may be necessary.

There is a silver lining to all this bad news. Those Americans who had a chance to meet with or interact with Muslims often tend to have more enlightened attitudes. Surveys repeatedly show that people who feel they do understand Islam are much more likely to view it positively.

Our nation's experiences since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, coupled with recent research, should spur American religious and political leaders to make fighting Islamophobia a top priority. Otherwise, we risk becoming stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle of mutual mistrust and hostility.

The best way to fight anti-Muslim prejudice and to prevent an often-predicted "clash of civilizations" is for people of goodwill in this country and around the world to open their houses of worship, homes and hearts to each other.

As the Quran, Islam's revealed text, states: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another." (Quran, 49:13)

Parvez Ahmed, Ph.D., is board chairman of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the nation's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy group (www.cair.com).

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