



## The Tsunami and U.S.-Muslim Relations

by Richard W. Baker

The devastating Dec. 26 earthquake and tsunami off Sumatra provides an opportunity for the United States to improve its badly battered reputation in the Islamic world, especially in Southeast Asia. Perhaps the most striking image in this regard was the initial arrivals of helicopter-borne U.S. troops on Indonesian soil, where they were welcomed literally as lifesavers by the fervently Islamic Acehnese. This picture alone shows the power of a genuine disaster and a sincere response to put differences aside.

It is quite correct to see the possibility that the U.S. response to the disaster – from civil society as well as the government – could lead to an improvement or at least a mitigation of attitudes toward the United States on the part of the Muslim community in Indonesia (and elsewhere). But this is also a subject that needs to be carefully and sensitively handled. The tsunami response is not and should not be seen – in the United States or the region – as just some sort of image-building or “PR” exercise.

The fact is that the virtually spontaneous reaction to the tragedy reflects aspects of American life and society – humanitarianism and generosity of spirit – that are well established and have been long recognized, but which have been obscured recently by the high-decibel international (and U.S.) controversy and debate over the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq. There can be no doubt that the Iraq issue, which has heightened attention to and concern over U.S. policy in the Middle East generally and U.S.-Israel relations specifically, has greatly eroded confidence in the United States throughout the Muslim world. What the tsunami response can do is to throw light on these broader and more fundamental American attributes of charity and concern for the suffering of others. This can be a step toward rebalancing international understanding and attitudes toward the U.S. and its global role.

But the keys here are sincerity and follow-through. A sustained U.S. response to the tsunami, with initial steps followed up by long-term commitments, would provide the most eloquent demonstration of the goodwill of American society – and the Bush administration. (A successful election and greater stability in Iraq would certainly help cement this message, but that is a separate issue.) Any organized effort to extract short-term mileage from the operation would only sully the spirit and detract from the true intention and sentiment involved. The effort should speak for itself – self-congratulation and exploitation would as easily backfire as reinforce the positive and lasting impact.

The media, which plays a major role in the creation or at least coalescing of perceptions, also has responsibilities in this situation. The constant pressure of the 24/7 news cycle on U.S. media leads both to a tendency for group focus on the story

angle of the day and to an impulse to find and break the followup story, including assessments of second-order and downstream implications. When these proclivities are combined with an ethos of “spin” in American political life and a corresponding element of cynicism in media perspectives, this can produce an excessive emphasis on ulterior motives and agendas.

Thus in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster, an initial focus in the U.S. media on the Bush administration’s tardy (and modest) first response has been succeeded by an emphasis on what the administration has to gain (especially internationally) through a stepped-up contribution to the rescue and reconstruction effort. A similar impetus seems to underlie the spate of stories now appearing about the relative stinginess of the oil-rich Arab Muslim states in their participation in the tsunami response. The point here is not that these elements are not part of the story – they clearly are. But at a time of a desperate race to save hundreds of thousands of lives and a genuine response by governments and societies across the region and the world, the calculus of political payoffs should not be allowed to become the story, which it definitively isn’t.

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