



United Nations Association in Canada  
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## **Report and Comments on a Presentation by Farah Pundith**

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By Michael Shkolnik  
Security & Defence Officer

Canada is the 50<sup>th</sup> country Farah Pundith has visited in the last 23 months. As the appointed U.S. Special Envoy to Muslim Communities, Pundith is travelling to implement President Obama's engagement strategy outlined in his Cairo 2009 speech. Connecting with civil society and faith based groups is not a new phenomenon in the United States; however, this is the first time in history a special representative has been appointed to work specifically on the administration's efforts to link with Islamic communities throughout the world. All of the U.S. embassies were asked to be more innovative on how to enhance their commitment to engaging the Muslim World, which comprises roughly ¼ of humanity. It may have been a coincidence that the day the ambassador came to speak in Ottawa was also the International Day for Tolerance. This was a particularly appropriate occasion, as Pundith outlined the administration's global mandate of embracing these communities on a people to people level. The ripple effect of ideas in this age of participation demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Muslim community throughout the world, prompting the Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to specifically request for information on the youth demographic (of 1.6 billion Muslims, most are under the age of 30). A lot of effort and research has been undertaken to help realize this unique objective.

There has to be a campaign for connecting these ideas in an effort to build strong networks and eradicate stereotypes. In today's world, there are narrow conceptions of what it means to be Muslim, characterized by a cross cutting theme involving "us and them". It is in America's best interests to debunk 'Clash of Civilizations' type narratives which pit groups against one another and invoke Obama's vision of "us." It must be made clear that the West is not at war with Islam, but rather a tiny radical minority that continues to defame the religion they claim to defend. The long-term grand strategy of winning the hearts and minds of Muslims worldwide is the only way to defeat a fundamentalist political ideology that exploits a religion of peace.

The post- 9/11 Muslim generation struggles with defining their identity, questioning the relationship between religion and culture, nationality and ethnicity. What does it mean to be a Muslim? The younger generation has been brought up seeing the words "Muslim" and "Islam" all over the media, watching and reading about how the world is analyzing and reconstructing who they are. It is therefore essential to pursue a campaign that builds trust and dialogue, which is at the core of an authentic bond. Investing in the next generation is crucial so that the

government can foster a relationship with partners to work on making a difference for the future. There are many challenges to be overcome, such as addressing opposition to certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy. However, directly communicating with Islamic communities in every country is congruent with America's national interests.

The concept of citizen diplomacy is often promoted by Secretary Clinton, as part of projecting "smart power". This approach means that civil society matters and the voices on the ground are extremely important. Twenty-first century statecraft has been impacted tremendously by the role of social media, providing the opportunity for interface between individuals and governments. In combination with various other approaches, social media is a vital tool that enhances governments' ability to actually listen to what these communities have to say.

Last year, Pundith attended a panel on countering intolerance sponsored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with her colleague, Hannah Rosenthal, who is the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism throughout the world. At the conference, however, both women decided to switch roles: Farah spoke of the dangers of anti-Semitism, Hannah on Islamophobia. The concluding paragraphs were the same – hate is hate no matter who the victim is. The successful conference prompted civil society organizations from around the world to request real action on this impressive initiative. As a result, the OSCE launched a campaign called 2011 Hours against Hate, asking people to pledge some time on Facebook to reach out and do something for another individual of a different culture, religion, or ethnicity. It is these types of people-to-people initiatives that really make an impact and help foster relationships between various communities.

On this International Day for Tolerance we must all look beyond simply "tolerating" people who differ from us. Even Pundith mentioned that she reluctantly incorporates that word in her work for diplomatic purposes only. It somewhat possesses this negative connotation associated with the concept of simply "putting up with" others. Instead of commemorating one day a year for 'Tolerance', everyday should be treated as the "International Day for Mutual Respect."