



American Foreign Policy Council

Conference Summary

2024 “Airlie Dialogue”

February 12, 2024
Washington, DC





On February 12th, the American Foreign Policy Council convened its second “Airlie Dialogue” conference at the University Club in Washington, DC. The event, a follow-on to an inaugural 2022 closed-door roundtable addressing the common intellectual fight against Islamic extremism, brought together leading scholars, officials and experts for a day of discussions about the “war of ideas” against radical Islam now taking place in the Muslim World. What follows is a summary of the conference’s proceedings.



PANEL I

The conference's first panel, on the subject of "New Technologies and the Struggle for Hearts and Minds," featured presentations by Dr. Ibrahim Negm, Senior Advisor to the Grand Mufti of Egypt; HE Ahmed Al Qasimi, Executive Director of the Hedayah Center in the United Arab Emirates; Amb. Alberto Fernandez, Vice President of the Middle East Media Research Institute; and Foundation for Defense of Democracies Senior Fellow Hussain Abdul Hussain. The session was moderated by AFPC Senior Vice President Ilan Berman.

Participants noted that new technologies are having a transformative effect on the contemporary media landscape, generating both opportunities and challenges. While technology has facilitated an era of unprecedented access to information, there are now concerns over information credibility and democratic integrity. Moreover, the rapid proliferation of digital platforms has not only reshaped the way individuals consume media but also amplified the risk that disinformation and extremist propaganda proliferate unchecked. Terrorist groups in particular have exploited these new pathways to play upon the vulnerabilities of individuals, exacerbating feelings of social alienation and purposelessness and offering belonging and alternative identity as ways of fueling radicalization and recruitment.

In this context, the efforts of countries such as Egypt to counter the rise of "media jihadists," individuals and groups responsible for disseminating disinformation and hate speech, through training programs and observation platforms are significant. However, the efficacy of such measures hinges upon international cooperation and information-sharing, the transnational nature of extremist propaganda.

Additionally, in this evolving media landscape, the growth of artificial intelligence (AI) represents a double-edged sword – one whose capabilities can be leveraged for both constructive and nefarious purposes. As technology continues to reshape the ideological battlefield, participants argued, there is a pressing need for a concerted global effort to establish transparent and easily understood rules governing online discourse. This necessitates the establishment of a global internet forum, involving stakeholders from both the public and private sectors, to mitigate the spread of extremism and safeguard democratic principles in the digital age. Additionally, investing in initiatives aimed at enhancing the psychological resilience of youth and promoting critical media literacy are essential components of a holistic approach to the challenges posed by tech-enabled extremism.



PANEL II

The conference's second panel, on the theme of "Religious Authority and State Power," included presentations by HE Shaikh Abdulla bin Ahmed bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, Chairman of the Kingdom of Bahrain's King Hamad Center for Peaceful Coexistence; Ambassador Yousef Amrani, Morocco's envoy to the United States; C. Holland Taylor, Senior Advisor to the Chairman of Indonesia's Nadhlatul Ulema; and Middle East Institute Vice President Brian Katulis. The session was moderated by Dr. Svante Cornell, Director of AFPC's Central Asia Caucasus Institute.

The panel's discussion revolved around the intersection of religious authority and state power, which represents a crucial dynamic in Arab and Muslim nations. Religion permeates various aspects of these societies, including literature, institutions, and the overarching societal vision. Countries like Morocco, Bahrain, and Indonesia present a diverse tapestry of religions and cultures, representing what one participant described as a "cosmopolitan mosaic." While there are positive developments in this sphere, such as an increased capacity for open dialogue in many quarters, challenges nonetheless persist. Many nations grapple with the manipulation of religion for political ends, whether through external state-sponsored extremism or via the actions of non-state actors. The instability created by groups such as ISIS underscores the urgent need for concerted international efforts, and for greater involvement from entities like the United Nations, to address critical vulnerabilities that threaten the well-being of Muslim societies.

Countries throughout the Muslim World, speakers noted, each strike a balance between religion and state in a different way. Bahrain, for instance, places a premium on robust laws protecting religious freedoms and preserving multi-culturalism. Morocco, meanwhile, is actively mitigating the root causes of extremism through legislative reforms designed to dismantle hateful narratives, as well as, initiatives designed to foster greater inclusivity within society. And in Indonesia, mass Muslim movements like the Nadhlatul Ulema serve a crucial function, providing "guardrails" for society and reinforcing the authority of the national government. Notably, however, these practices have made each a target of extremist forces seeking to dilute and diminish the authority of the state, and thereby aggregate greater power to themselves.



EXPERT CONVERSATION

The conference's lunchtime programming featured an expert conversation on China and the Middle East between AFPC Senior Vice President Ilan Berman and Josh Rogin, foreign affairs columnist of the *Washington Post* and author of *Chaos Under Heaven: Trump, Xi, and the Battle for the Twenty-First Century*. In his remarks, Rogin laid out the shift in strategic thinking regarding China that has taken place in Washington in recent years, with the PRC moving from being considered a "responsible stakeholder" on the world stage to being viewed as a competitor, perhaps even a strategic adversary, of the United States. Rogin's evaluation of the Biden administration's China policy was mixed, given its new initiatives to compete with Beijing on the one hand and its persistent efforts to avoid issues (such as human rights) that could heighten bilateral tensions on the other. In this regard, Rogin noted, China's approach to the Muslim World is significant, insofar as Beijing has clearly been attempting – via its extensive investments in African, Middle Eastern and Asian states – to immunize itself from global criticism regarding its own problematic policies. Chief among these has been the PRC's systematic persecution of its Uighur Muslim minority, which successive U.S. administrations (as well as a number of foreign governments) have termed a "genocide."



PANEL III

The conference's third panel dealt with the issue of "The Taliban Emirate and Its Impact on Asia." Featured speakers included HE Furqat Sidiqov, Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States; Dr. Davood Moradian, President of the London-based Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies; AFPC Senior Fellow James S. Robbins; and Dr. Hassan Abbas, Distinguished Professor at the National Defense University's Near East South Asia Center. The session was moderated by Dr. Kamran Bokhari, Director of Analytical Development at the New Lines Institute.

The past two-and-a-half years, panelists noted, have been one of great change and strategic importance in Southwest Asia. Despite not being universally recognized, the Taliban has maintained its influence since its return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, and is now seeking to engage with various countries, including China. This engagement is pragmatic, allowing the Afghanistan to reap economic benefits and trade dividends, but it raises concerns on the world stage about legitimizing the Taliban's actions or its repressive regime.

The United States is still grappling with defining a clear Afghan policy which balances its values with strategic interests. Concurrently, other countries, like Uzbekistan, have gravitated toward a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban, engaging in humanitarian aid to and education initiatives in Afghanistan while advocating for open dialogue to mitigate radicalization risks. However, the pressing humanitarian crisis now visible in the country underscores the need for a coordinated international response, and for greater coordination of national policies toward Afghanistan's new rulers.



PANEL IV

The conference's concluding panel dealt with the topic of "America's Role in the 'War of Ideas.'" Speakers included Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Michael Doran; Dr. Colin Clarke, Director of Research at the Soufan Center; America Abroad Media CEO and President Aaron Lobel; and Amb. J. Peter Pham, Distinguished Fellow at the Atlantic Council. The session was moderated by Dr. Eric Brown, Senior Research Scientist at the College of William & Mary's Global Research Institute.

The participants highlighted what they identified as significant shortcomings in U.S. strategic communication efforts, which cumulatively put us at a disadvantage vis-à-vis extremist groups. Despite the crucial role of effective messaging in countering radical ideologies, the U.S. has tended to struggle because of a lack of competent professionals, uncommitted leadership, and inadequate resources. The resulting disparity in investment in the information space has allowed extremist groups to exert greater control over narratives and manipulate media platforms to their advantage. Moreover, the inconsistency between U.S. actions and rhetoric weakens the impact of those strategic communication efforts that we do attempt.

Central to improving this state of affairs is the recognition of the pivotal role of the private sector, particularly industries like Hollywood and the media, in amplifying the reach of U.S. messaging. Collaborating with these sectors could facilitate engagement with diverse audiences, including tech-savvy youths, and foster local partnerships crucial for countering extremist narratives. However, realizing this potential requires a concerted effort to cultivate interested and knowledgeable leadership within the U.S. government and allocate adequate resources to support strategic communication initiatives. Additionally, addressing the human resource challenge in counterterrorism, such as the dwindling pool of experts, is imperative to bolstering America's capabilities in the information space.

Finally, recalibrating America's approach in the Middle East requires both pragmatism and realistic goals. Rather than imposing cultural agendas and investing in open-ended democracy promotion efforts, which risk alienating allies and playing into adversaries' hands, the U.S. must adopt strategies that resonate with local communities and address their specific needs and concerns.



About AFPC

For more than four decades, the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC) has played an important role in the U.S. foreign policy debate. Founded in 1982, AFPC is a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing information to those who make or influence the foreign policy of the United States. AFPC is widely recognized as a source of timely, insightful analysis on issues of foreign policy, and works closely with members of Congress, the Executive Branch and the policymaking community. It is staffed by noted specialists in foreign and defense policy, and serves as a valuable resource to officials in the highest levels of government.

