

Government Response to the Report of the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and International Trade

Introduction

The Government would like to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade for their work on their report entitled Exploring Canada's Relations with the Countries of the Muslim World.

Events over the past three years have brought home a sobering fact: we cannot continue to enjoy security and prosperity at home, in the West, without regard for the state of the rest of the world. If free markets, democratic values, and pluralist societies are our strength, sharing in their benefits must also be the hope which lifts the rest of the world. By helping these societies become more prosperous, better governed, and better informed, we increase the chances for collective sustained security and prosperity.

Many leaders of Muslim countries have identified good governance and economic development as key to their prosperity, and they are reaching out to others for partnership. When working with those societies, we need to think and act decisively and creatively. Most importantly, we need to work in partnership with the overwhelming majority of citizens, be they Muslims or from various minorities who want to share the fruits of democracy, human rights protection, free markets and education. The Government will work not only with governments, but also with NGOs and civil society, including minorities. Canada, as a pluralist, tolerant and open society which respects Islam and appreciates the contribution Muslim civilisation has made to the West's own development, can be a valued partner.

Most of the G8 and other allies have begun to look at how to manage their relations with the Muslim World. At the heart of the matter is how best to address immediate concerns while also addressing the inequitable conditions that separate the West and developing countries. Although religion is a factor in these countries, it is only one element of the context in which inequitable conditions occur, and should not be considered as a causal factor. The Committee stresses, and the Government agrees, that Canada must avoid a confrontational approach. Islam upholds pluralism, including the liberal-democratic precepts of equal rights for women and minorities. However, there are significant differences in the political systems of the 50-odd countries of the Muslim world, precluding the development of a single policy to cover all of them.

The Government agrees with the three main areas of action proposed by the Committee. Our policies towards countries of the Muslim world will continue to be informed by, but not limited to, the substance of most of the recommendations of the report. The guiding principle will be a focus on issues of governance when considering program or policy initiatives in this area. First, the Government, particularly Foreign Affairs Canada, will increase its capacity to understand and enhance Canada's relations with Muslim countries. Second, Canada will use its strengths to develop partnerships with countries of the Muslim world focussing on good governance, human rights, democratic participation and economic development in response to needs identified by these partners. These goals will be important in improving many of the conditions that incubate extremism. Third, the Government will take steps to improve mutual understanding between Canada and the countries of the Muslim world, through more exchange and dialogue, including through enhanced public diplomacy efforts to be led by Foreign Affairs Canada.