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## Our hand to Islam

1952 airlift showed statecraft we now lack

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## Tennessee Voices

Lost in the news coverage in recent weeks about the ailing U.S. economy and the Democratic presidential nomination has been an issue that may define the future security of the United States: how the Muslim world views America.

Among analysts and political figures in both parties, there is agreement that the Bush administration's attempts to improve the standing of America in the Muslim world through soft power or cultural diplomacy have failed. As we search for ways to improve America's relationship with Muslims, we would do well to recall the most successful example of U.S. cultural diplomacy in the Muslim world: the Hajj Airlift in 1952, when the U.S. Air Force flew nearly 4,000 Muslims from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia for the pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca.

Virtually unknown today, the "Airlift for Allah" was not the result of a U.S. policy or official initiative specifically meant to engage Muslims. Instead, it reflected the creative response of Lebanese, Saudi and U.S. officials to a humanitarian crisis.

During the summer of 1952, thousands of Muslims flocked to Beirut, hoping to take advantage of a reduction in Hajj pilgrimage fees and direct air service to Jeddah, the gateway to Mecca. As Air Liban and other airlines became overwhelmed and it appeared that thousands would miss the Hajj, Lebanese officials sought an unorthodox solution: U.S. military assistance.

## Quick thinking praised

The U.S. ambassador, Harold Minor, readily agreed to the idea and sent a telegram to Washington recommending, as a goodwill gesture, that the U.S. Air Force fly pilgrims to Saudi Arabia. An affirmative response came immediately from Washington, and 13 U.S. C-54 military transport planes soon arrived in Beirut. Grateful Muslims shouted "Praise Allah, Praise America," as they left Beirut for Jeddah.

Over the next four days, a C-54 took off every hour from Beirut, and each pilgrim with a ticket for Jeddah arrived before the Hajj started. Saudi officials also did their part; they extended the Hajj deadline a day to facilitate the airlift. Upon reaching Saudi Arabia, a Turkish pilgrim cabled his nation's prime minister and president: "At no time in history has so much help been offered from so far away and for such a large number of people in such a noble cause. Muslims will not forget this gesture."

A leading Lebanese Muslim religious figure publicly proclaimed that Muslims must include Americans

— "infidels though they are" — in their prayers. After the airlift, State Department officials discussed using the proceeds from the unused tickets sold to the airlines (approximately \$260,000) to fund Muslim cultural exchanges and a center for pilgrims in Jeddah or Beirut, the "Dar al-Diyafa al-Amrikiyya" (House of American Hospitality).

Unfortunately, none of these ideas were adopted. Washington found that it was easier (and more politically expedient) to donate the \$260,000 to the Lebanese Muslim Welfare Committee. In June 1953, the State Department sent a telegram to U.S. posts throughout the Muslim world stating that under no circumstances would Washington be involved in another Hajj airlift. By the late 1950s, the Hajj Airlift had completely disappeared from public consciousness and ceased being a tool of public diplomacy.

The Hajj Airlift provides us with two lessons for public diplomacy and the Muslim world: First, if we retain flexible conceptions of public diplomacy and take advantage of opportunities quickly, we can achieve significant diplomatic successes.

Second, if we do not follow up on future public diplomacy successes, they may disappear from public consciousness and be of little value to us as a tool of statecraft.

Forgotten or not, "Airlift for Allah" was one of our few genuinely creative exchanges with the Muslim world.

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