

## Religious communities must be engaged in foreign policy by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf

A report issued Tuesday by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs urges the U.S. government to take religious issues into consideration and to engage religious organizations in forming foreign policy.

Such a report is long overdue. Its recommendations go to the heart of what we at the Cordoba Initiative have been advocating for years.

Religion is the solution to conflict.

For decades, the United States has shied away from using religious arguments and engaging religious groups to further American diplomatic objectives. Church and state are separated in foreign policy just as in domestic government. U.S. diplomats can't even talk about religion. The United States has seen issues dividing people not as religious but as secular demands for power and for territory that require secular solutions.

As a result, a fundamental variable has been missing from peace initiatives.

Certainly history has shown that religion and politics can be dangerous things to mix.

But we believe that if the highest ethics of religion are mixed with politics rooted in justice, the combination can be positively powerful and extremely effective.

Ignoring religion will doom peace initiatives because so many of the conflicts in the world today are based on interpretations of religious belief that promote violence rather than the peace on which these religions are founded.

At the bedrock of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the belief that we love God and we love each other. All three religions embrace reconciliation and forgiveness.

Peace agreements signed reluctantly by secular governments will have a hard time succeeding. Secular leaders are changeable and subject to popular passions. That is one lesson from the failure of the Oslo peace agreements. To achieve peace in the Middle East, one has to understand the role of religion from the Israeli side and from the Palestinian side.

Only by reaching people at their core religious values can diplomacy build coalitions that will produce a sustained peace. Any agreement must be built from the ground up by engaging religious organizations to provide a broad base of support and to promote reconciliation.

For that reason, we agree with the recommendation of this report that the U.S. government incorporate people with a deep knowledge of religion into the highest levels of foreign policy.

And we certainly applaud the conclusion that religion should be viewed &ldquo;as a source of creativity, inspiration, and commitment to human flourishing that can and often does provide enormous opportunities.&rdquo;

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf is chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, an independent, non-partisan and multi-national project that seeks to use religion to improve Muslim-West relations. ([www.cordobainitiative.org](http://www.cordobainitiative.org)) He is the author of &ldquo;What&rsquo;s Right with Islam is What&rsquo;s Right With America.&rdquo;