

# [The Indonesia Opportunity](#)

## **Why this Southeast Asian country is Obama's best hope for relations with the Muslim world.**

**BY JAMES K. GLASSMAN, JUAN ZARATE | NOVEMBER 9, 2010**

After three previous cancellations, U.S. President Barack Obama has finally made his long-overdue visit to Indonesia, where he lived for four years as a child. The trip provides the perfect venue to use his personal history to reset an engagement strategy with international Muslim communities that has proved strikingly deficient.

Indonesia is not only the fourth-most populous country in the world, it is also the nation with the largest Muslim population -- larger than Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria combined. Indonesians have traditionally practiced a moderate form of Islam while, more recently, also committing to modern democracy. Indonesia's strong economy quickly shrugged off the global recession and is forecast to grow [6.3 percent](#) next year, according to the Asian Development Bank. Indonesians are proud of Obama's personal ties to their country and remember the compassionate American response to 2004's devastating tsunami. Indonesians continue to give high favorability and confidence ratings to the United States (59 percent) and Muslim Indonesians to Obama personally (65 percent), according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

In other Muslim countries, however, disappointment with Obama reigns. His speech last year at Cairo University promised a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect. The implication was that George W. Bush's offending policies would be set right and a more sensitive nomenclature deployed. Gone were such phrases as war on terror, war of ideas, and violent Islamic extremism.

Nevertheless, only a year after the speech, [Pew](#) found that U.S. favorability in Egypt, the largest Arab country by far, had dropped from 27 percent to 17 percent -- five points lower than it was during Bush's final year in office. In Jordan, it dipped from 25 percent to 21 percent. The proportion of Muslims who felt confident in Obama fell in all seven countries polled by Pew.

A survey by [Zogby International](#), released by the Brookings Institution in August, was even worse. In April and May 2009, 51 percent of the respondents in the six Arab countries polled expressed optimism about U.S. policy in the Middle East. A year later, the figure had dropped to 16 percent. Clearly, Arabs especially have been disillusioned by Obama's inability to make headway toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and by what they perceive as continuity between Bush's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan and those of the current White House.

None of these developments should have come as a surprise. Perhaps people in the Middle East, like many Americans, feel disappointed because they were oversold on Obama's abilities or simply saw him as a blank slate on which they could write their own hopes.

Much of the blame, however, rests with Obama's strategy. His main point in Cairo was that he was breaking with the past, with no concrete admission that U.S. interests would persist and no attempt to advocate for the importance of America's presence and values in the world. His expectation was that increased popularity would translate into policy breakthroughs.

Unfortunately, the breakthroughs did not materialize, and Obama has achieved little. His biggest mistake was a failure to reframe the corrosive narrative of the West being at war with Islam that continues to threaten Americans and keeps Muslim communities from achieving great potential. In a September PBS [interview](#), former British Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the powerful narrative that Islam is under oppression from the West, that the West is hostile, has become embedded in the Muslim imagination -- not just among a violent minority but among a peaceful but hostile majority.

More importantly, the president has not challenged Muslims to confront the pervasive narrative that the West is trying to destroy Islam. The real story is that Islam is being rent by two internal struggles. The first and most obvious is the attempt by a ruthless, intolerant group of violent extremists to impose its version of Islam on other Muslims. The second struggle is political -- a desire for freedom, democracy, and women's rights -- that is being thwarted by both violent extremists and authoritarian regimes.

The United States has a vital stake in the outcomes of both these struggles. Obama should not merely describe and promote them as a way to deflect the pernicious power of the dominant narrative. He should also say clearly that, while these are conflicts within Muslim communities, America is on the just side in both cases. And moreover, the United States will support Muslims and governments that join these battles -- standing up forcefully against violent extremists and defending individuals' rights and freedoms, including by pressuring America's nondemocratic allies for meaningful political change.

This is why Indonesia proves so important now. As a modern democracy that has taken strong and smart counterterrorism steps against violent Islamist extremists in its midst, Indonesia has proved that Islam and democracy can coexist and that modernity and moderation are possible in the world's most populous Muslim country.

These are the shared values that the United States should laud, support, and defend. Favorable poll ratings should not be an end of foreign policy but a means. Even if people don't like the United States, we can all share, in Obama's words, mutual interest and mutual respect. The mutual interest, in this case, is that tolerant Islam prevails over a bloodthirsty minority and that freedom prevails over oppression.

The mutual respect is on display in Indonesia, and it is refreshing to see a U.S. president welcomed warmly in Jakarta. We hope that Obama will use his popularity to send a clear and consistent message to the Muslims of Indonesia and around the world -- challenging them to

engage in the internal struggles that affect them most directly, and committing the United States to being their steadfast ally.