

The Meaning of Obama's Speech in Egypt

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Although a statement of intentions, Obama’s speech in Cairo covered critical challenges facing the US in the Muslim world and offered a new paradigm, a new beginning, for managing relations between the two civilizations. The address sent a clear message:

“I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.”

Yes, Obama’s speech was short on policy prescriptions but that criticism misses the big picture: The significance and power of Obama’s address lies in its symbolism and intellect, a grand vision pregnant with historic possibilities.

What Obama sought to do was to re-frame and shift the debate away from conflict and war to cooperation and partnership. He reminded his audience that the relationship between Islam and the Christian West includes centuries of co-existence and cooperation, not just conflict and religious wars.

Most groundbreaking and most startling were Obama’s talking points on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Islam and America, and Iraq.

Palestine and Palestinians

Of all sitting U.S. presidents, only Obama has spoken so explicitly and eloquently about the suffering of the Palestinian people—Muslims and Christians—in the pursuit of a homeland:

For more than 60 years they’ve endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations—large and small—that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.

And again, of all sitting U.S. presidents, only Obama has so closely and organically linked the construction of a Palestinian state to America’s strategic interests: “That is in Israel’s interest, Palestine’s interest, America’s interest, and the world’s interest. And that is why I intend to personally pursue this outcome with all the patience that the task requires.”

Those are powerful, symbolic words delivered by the president of the world’s most powerful country—and Israel’s most pivotal patron. They will resonate for many years to come.

After Obama’s address, most analysts in the US and the Arab world focused on whether Muslims would buy the president’s rhetoric or find it lacking in substance. We were told

that Obama did not flesh out the specifics of his vision of a two-state solution, even though he made it very clear that the US does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. He also said that “Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel’s right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine.”

Obama is the only US contemporary president who used the historic term “Palestine” more than once in his speech, a bold move.

What commentators did not say is that these symbolic words are as much important for Westerners and Israelis as they are for Arabs and Muslims. In the Western imagination, particularly American, Palestinians tend to be demonized and perceived in a highly negative light. To a large extent Israel and its friends have portrayed the Palestinians as violently militant and anti-American. Peace-loving and democratic Israel is compared and contrasted with Palestinian extremism and authoritarianism. Stereotypical images of Palestinians are deeply entrenched, and Obama’s language is a step in the right direction – humanizing the Palestinian people.

Americans take their president’s words seriously. By beginning to stress the humanity of the Palestinian people and their suffering, Obama, a moral voice, will likely make many Americans critically reflect on their prejudices against the Palestinians. Do not underestimate the power and symbolism of the presidential pulpit in shaping public opinion, particularly if Obama decides to educate American citizens about the Middle East crisis.

The contrast is striking between Obama’s stance during the presidential elections and after inauguration. During the early stages of the presidential campaign, candidate Obama was cited as saying that no people have suffered as much as the Palestinians. After being relentlessly grilled by Israel’s friends for uttering such a dangerous statement, Obama retreated and said that failed Palestinian leaders are to blame for their peoples’ suffering, implying that Israel is innocent.

There is no pretense any longer. “We must say openly the things we hold in our hearts, and that too often are said only behind closed doors,” pledged Obama in Cairo, citing the Koran, Islam’s holy book: “Be conscious of God and speak always the truth.”

Speaking the truth about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is politically costly at home. Obama has to tread carefully and gently lest he faces a storm of Congressional opposition from Democrats and Republican alike. He knows well that the pro-Israel lobby is ready to attack if he goes too far in pressuring the right-wing government led by Netanyahu.

Pro-Likud voices in the US have already bounced on Obama and denounced his speech as “a renunciation of America’s strategic alliance with Israel.” Writing in the Washington Post, Charles Krauthammer, a die-hard Likud activist, said “the Obama strategy not just dishonorable but self-defeating.”

At this juncture the Obama administration has decided to focus its energy on nudging Israel to stop building new settlements. It is not a risky strategy because there is also

concern within the US Congress about the expansion of Jewish settlements in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Public opinion in Israel is also divided over the building of new settlements.

The Cairo speech and other previous pronouncements by US officials lay out the foundation of the Obama administration approach to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking:

- 1) active presidential engagement to achieve “serious progress” in a year or two;
- 2) sustained moral and political pressure on the Israeli government to halt all new settlement activity;
- 3) prodding both camps, particularly the Arab states, to undertake confidence-building measures;
- 4) involving the international community, including Muslim states, in the quest of an Arab-Israeli peace settlement;
- 5) keeping the focus on the big prize: two states - Palestine and Israel – living side-by-side in peace.

Despite his pledge to “personally” help broker a peace settlement, President Obama is unlikely to take concrete measures to force Netanyahu to stop settlement expansion. Instead, the administration will use the presidential pulpit to appeal to Israelis over the heads of their right-wing leaders. Only time will tell if this strategy will bear fruits and if Obama’s peace message will resonate with the Israeli public? Opinion surveys of Israelis’ views on Obama are not reassuring so far.

Nevertheless, there is a breath of fresh air in Washington. Obama’s stated policy represents a departure from his predecessor. While the Bush administration said the building of new settlements was “unhelpful,” a tame and passive term, Obama has clearly stated that the US “does not accept the legitimacy of continued settlement.

In fact, the Obama administration has already gone much further than previous US administrations in calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state and for Israel to acknowledge Palestine’s right to exist. That is a good start, even though the chances of a breakthrough are slim.

The road to Palestine is long and fraught with minefields. Before he returned home, the right has vehemently criticized Obama for being an apologist to America’s enemies (we are not told who those enemies are) and for weakening its deterrence and that of its special ally, Israel. As the US administration turns up the heat on Netanyahu, the attacks on Obama will become more visceral.

Islam and America

The focal point of Obama’s speech was on relations between America and the world of Islam. To appeal to Muslims, he interweaved his own story (from boyhood to the present) with the new narrative and paradigm that he advanced:

“I am a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk. As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith.”

He said he knows Islam from the inside-out and that personal and direct knowledge informs his conviction that partnership between America and the world of Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't. In a genuine gesture, Obama pledged to educate Americans about the real Islam as opposed to dominant negative stereotypes of Islam that have been prevalent since Sept. 11, 2001.

To humanize America in the eyes of Muslims, Obama said that far from being alien or a stranger, Islam has always been a part of America's story, and that the seven million Muslims have enriched the United States.

The End of War on Terror

Unlike his predecessor, George W. Bush Obama did not mention the word terrorism or the war on terror once. The Obama administration no longer uses the global war on terror to refer to its fight against Al Qaeda, clearly breaking with the previous administration that coined that term.. In his Cairo speech, Obama talked about extremism, a common denominator in many societies. He too addressed the causes that fuel and sustain extremism. Unlike presidential preacher W. Bush, Obama talked about partnership. A refreshing departure from the crusading moralism of Cheney & Co.

Although President Obama did not apologize for America's mistakes, he was critically reflective. He compared and contrasted the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and said that the United States invaded Afghanistan out of necessity because Al Qaeda, sheltered by the Taliban, killed 3,000 people on 9/11. In contrast, “Iraq was a war of choice that provoked strong differences in my country and around the world,” implicitly reminding his audience that Obama himself opposed the Iraq War.

Obama conceded further that after 9/11 the Bush administration (without naming it) acted “contrary to our ideals” sanctioning abuse and torture: “I have unequivocally prohibited the use of torture by the United States, and I have ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed by early next year.” He pledged to defend his countrymen respectful of the sovereignty of nations and the rule of law and in “partnership” with Muslim communities.

That near-apology statement speaks volumes about the moral compass of Barack Obama who is not afraid to speak truth about critical aspects of US foreign policy to a foreign audience in a faraway land (never done before), knowing full well that his political rivals at home will use it against him (Republicans already have).

One could disagree with some of Obama's premises. But he is the best ambassador that America has. Speaking power with humility, Obama never once implicitly or explicitly used threats, showed arrogance, or preached.

Soft Embrace of Muslim Rulers

In his Cairo address, Obama struck a balanced stance between showing support for pro-Western authoritarian Arab rulers like Mubarak and commitment to the promotion of human rights and the rule of law. His advisers were aware that while the government-controlled media in Egypt welcomed Obama's decision to deliver his speech in Cairo, an acknowledgment and recognition of Mubarak's leadership, the opposition feared that Obama's embrace of Mubarak would bolster his regime and legitimize its further repression of dissidents.

Human rights and pro-democracy activists on both sides of the country's nationalist-Islamist political divide had called on Obama to send a powerful message to Muslim public opinion that he will genuinely promote the rule of law and human rights as a central plank of the U.S. agenda in the greater Middle East.

Obama walked a fine line between offending his Egyptian host, Mubarak, and undermining the stability of his regime and downplaying human rights violations and subversion of the rule of law by Mubarak and his Arab counterparts. As a balancing gesture, the US embassy in Cairo invited a dozen or so Muslim Brothers deputies and leading opposition figures like Ayman Nour and others.

Obama's approach to democracy promotion is best described as subtle and non-activist. Breaking with his predecessor, Obama was crystal clear: "no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other."

While Obama voiced his preference for open governments that reflect the will of the people, an implicit criticism of Mubarak and other Arab rulers, he hardly said a word about the widespread violation and abuse of citizens' rights in many Muslim countries. Obama and his advisers have decided to bolster America's ruling allies and refrain from saying or doing anything that weakens them further.

The Obama administration will unlikely take a gamble on oppositional forces or actively promote democratization; it will not sacrifice its hard-core material interests on the altar of human rights and the rule of law. Rather, the Obama team led by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton will pursue a quiet and gradual low-risk

Obama advisers recognize that Egypt's political authoritarianism is the norm, not the exception, in other Arab countries. It is well known that autocratic Arab rulers repress legitimate political dissent and stifle personal initiative and innovation. Their prolonged repressive and failed policies have broken Arab societies and caused chronic poverty, pervasive corruption, and the rise of extremism.

The consensus in Washington is that there is no credible oppositional alternative to the existing political order in the Arab world. Islamically-based groups and movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas and Hizbollah are viewed suspiciously and considered a threat to US primary interests. In contrast, pro-Western Arab rulers are seen as the least of the two evils, pliant, durable, and predictable.

In terms of hierarchy, the US foreign policy agenda revolves around

- (1) stabilizing Afghanistan and Pakistan and dismantling Al Qaeda and deny it shelter and refuge and weakening the Taliban and changing its behavior.
- (2) Engaging Iran and finding ways and means of convincing the ruling mullahs to stop nuclear enrichment.
- (3) transitioning withdrawal of US troops Iran and finalizing it by 2112.
- (4) investing political capital in conflict management and peace-making between Arabs and Israelis.
- (5) stabilizing oil prices and preventing a big hike that could torpedo global economic recovery.

It is no wonder that the Obama administration has softly embraced pro-American authoritarian Muslim rulers whose help is needed to assist the US in tackling thorny strategic challenges in the greater Middle East. As to dealing with violations of human rights and the rule of law by America's Muslim allies, the Obama team will opt for closed-door, quiet diplomacy.

In the view of the Obama team, America's strategic predicament in the Muslim world tops everything else.

As Obama recognizes, the speech is part of a concerted effort to undo the damage done in the last seven years of the Bush administration and extract America from the region's killing fields.

Will Obama be able to translate his positive rhetoric into concrete policy initiatives? Every president, including Obama, has limited political capital to invest in international relations. Will he invest some of his political capital in brokering a peace settlement between Arabs and Jews, or will he spend most of it in the war-torn countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan? Will he extract U.S. troops from Muslim lands? Will his call for political engagement with Iran turns into a deadly embrace?

Only time will tell if Obama carries out his grand vision. But one point must be made crystal clear: Obama is a daring and unique politician in the annals of the US contemporary history. It would be foolish to underestimate the skills and determination of this young African-American president.

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