President Obama's Cairo Speech:

A First-Year Scorecard

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Brief Analysis

Although likely eclipsed in the media by recent Israeli naval action against blockade runners, the first anniversary of President Obama's much-quoted address in Cairo occurs on June 4. In his remarks, described as a "new beginning," he identified seven issues at the heart of tensions between the United States and the world's 1.2 billion Muslims: the need to confront violent extremism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran's drive to obtain nuclear weapons, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights, and economic development. For each issue, the president indicated where American action was required. On violent extremism, for instance, he highlighted his decision to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center within the year. Given that two issues -- the Arab-Israeli peace process and Iranian nuclear issue -- have garnered the lion's share of attention over the past year, it is timely and useful to assess progress on the other five.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

In Cairo, the president made clear that "America is not -- and never will be -- at war with Islam." Since then, his senior advisors have jettisoned language targeting "radical Islamism," "Islamic extremism," or "jihadism" as the ideological underpinning of America's adversaries. He also narrowed the definition of CVE to confronting al-Qaeda and its affiliates while challenging his listeners not to tolerate extremism: "Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism -- it is an important part of promoting peace."

Over the past year, the United States has in fact registered some success in degrading al-Qaeda's leadership and ability to project power. At the same time, the ideology that nurtures the group's violence has metastasized, spreading to the United States. Fully 30 percent of all post-September 11 domestic incidents involving violent Islamist extremism occurred in 2009, according to a recent Rand report. In Pakistan and other countries, the rise of Islamist extremism is threatening the state, while the narrative of extremist ideology continues to spread worldwide among burgeoning youth populations most susceptible to it.

So far, the Obama administration remains hesitant to address ideology's importance as a key driver of violent extremism. And in limiting the definition of CVE to al-Qaeda and its affiliates, it has failed to develop sufficient policy or doctrinal approaches to deal with other nonstate actors such as Hamas and Hizballah.

Democracy

In Cairo, the president pledged to uphold human and political rights, stating clearly that the United States "will support them everywhere." This portion of the speech received the loudest and most sustained applause from the young people in the assembled crowd.

Yet the past year has witnessed a step backward in the global march toward increased democracy. According to Freedom House's annual report on the subject, the status of "free" or "partly free" states has regressed. In the Middle East, setbacks were recorded nearly everywhere outside of Iraq. Elections in Tunisia, where President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali won a fifth term with nearly 90 percent of the vote, took place without comment from the White House. The administration also generally ignored the Syrian government's continued abuse of journalists, bloggers, and democratic activists.

Nowhere, however, was a greater opportunity missed than in Egypt, where the regime renewed the emergency law just weeks before the anniversary of Obama's speech. Washington did not adequately press Cairo to honor its years-old commitment to replace the law with modern antiterror legislation, reflecting the apparent lack of priority the administration placed on the issue. Despite assurances that it consistently voiced human rights concerns at the highest levels throughout the past year, the administration's efforts were clearly insufficient to convince Cairo that ending the emergency law was high on the U.S. agenda.

Religious Freedom

In perhaps the most pointed challenge to his audience, the president described a "disturbing tendency" among some Muslims "to measure one's own faith by the rejection of somebody else's." He also asserted that religious freedom was central to U.S. foreign policy. It was the only section of the speech without an applause line, and it contained Obama's only direct reference to an Arab leader -- Saudi King Abdullah.

Most observers believe that the administration has done little to advance religious freedom globally since Cairo. For example, the president has yet to nominate a new ambassador-at-large to direct the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom. According to former director Tom Farr, "religious freedom was not one of the issues deemed worthy of pursuit" when the National Security Council and State Department formed post-Cairo working groups to implement the speech's proposals.

In releasing its latest annual report in April, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRF) noted the lack of progress, stating that "the report's conclusions are clear -- the administration must do more!" Not surprisingly, Saudi Arabia remained on CIRF's list of "countries of particular concern," alongside nations such as Iran and North Korea. The commission also kept Egypt on its "Watchlist," citing persistent and "serious problems of discrimination and intolerance against non-Muslim religious minorities and disfavored members of the Muslim majority."

Women's Rights

In recent years, a number of notable positive changes have emerged in the area of women's rights across the Middle East, including the election of four women to Kuwait's parliament and a host of legal reforms on issues ranging from gender-biased nationality laws to personal status codes. A recent Freedom House report noted, however, that progress on women's empowerment issues in the Middle East "is stymied by the lack of democratic institutions, an independent judiciary, and freedoms of association and assembly." Such findings indicate that deficits in democratic governance remain one of the key obstacles to women's progress across the region.

Despite this limitation, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's early appointment of Melanne Verveer as ambassador-at-large for global women's issues is to be applauded. Former executive director of the women's leadership organization Vital Voices, Ambassador Verveer has been tireless in her efforts to empower women, particularly in Afghanistan, where she and the secretary have publicly stated that no potential deal with the Taliban can come at the expense of women.

Economic Development and Opportunity

In Cairo, President Obama sought to connect with Muslims around the world by highlighting America's perceived strengths in education and scientific innovation. Specifically, he announced thirteen new public diplomacy initiatives ranging from expanded exchange programs to a promised "Summit on Entrepreneurship." After the speech, the bureaucracy in Washington shifted into high gear to devise mechanisms for implementing these initiatives, with the State Department's Policy Planning Staff -- not typically an operational institution -- taking the lead in what was projected to be an exemplary use of "soft power."

So far, however, only one of the original thirteen Cairo ideas -- the Entrepreneurship Summit, which convened in Washington in April -- has fully come to fruition. In the meantime, regional disillusionment has simmered amid growing perceptions that the president has not made good on his various promises.

Changing Tack?

Recognizing that tangible deliverables from the Cairo address were in short supply, key administration officials have spent the past few months reframing the speech's intent and legacy. No longer was it to be viewed as outreach to Muslims; instead, it was retroactively couched as a more general example of "global engagement." Describing it as the opening gambit of a major initiative was no longer acceptable either; as one senior official stated during remarks on Capitol Hill last week, the speech should now be viewed as a "generational mission statement."

In this context, the issuance of a new National Security Strategy (NSS) just days before the Cairo anniversary is apparently no coincidence. The NSS shores up many of the speech's weak points, including the declaratory policy on democracy and counterradicalization. The NSS also takes a broader view, discussing national security beyond engaging Muslims. The timing of its release seems aimed at shifting discussion away from retrospectives on the Cairo speech and toward evaluations of the administration's overall approach.

So far, however, Washington's strategy remains open to the same critique as the original Cairo address. As Obama poignantly noted in his very first interview as president (a January 27, 2009, discussion with al-Arabiya satellite television), "Ultimately, people are going to judge me not by my words but by my actions." This remains true today -- doubly so for those in that Cairo auditorium a year ago.

J. Scott Carpenter is The Washington Institute's Keston Family fellow and director of Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra%3A%20Defeating%20Extremism%20through%20the%20Power%20of%20Ideas&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&n**
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