

# President Obama Speaks to the World's Muslims: An Early Assessment

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## Brief Analysis

Combining the roles of bridge builder and strategist, President Barack Obama delivered a wide-ranging 55-minute speech to the world's Muslims today, designed to put flesh on the bones of his signature concept of "mutual interests and mutual respect" and to launch a "new beginning" in U.S.-Muslim relations.

Aspiring to speak to the world's billion-plus Muslims has always been a controversial gambit. With Muslims living in every country of the world, speaking every language, and observing a kaleidoscope of religious practices, it is no simple task to say something meaningful and avoid a level of abstraction that would not have people asking, after the excitement of the event wears off, what did the president actually say. For many Muslims, the medium was the message: that a president would come to a major Muslim capital to address Muslims directly and that this president, with his compelling personal biography, would make a special effort to talk to Muslim youth -- these are likely to be the most lasting impressions.

Clearly, the president had a lot on his mind. He touched on seven core themes, bracketed by a discourse on the historical and societal role Muslims have played and continue to play in America and by an appeal to young Muslims to "reimagine [and] remake" the world. The fundamental message was a call for partnership -- the idea that U.S. goals and the objectives of Muslims around the world are not only congruent but also realizable by active and close cooperation. Obama did not, however, announce many new initiatives; at the close of the speech, he outlined a number of educational, exchange, and private-sector projects, but on no major policy issue, including the Middle East peace process, did the president make headlines.

The seven themes of the speech -- violent extremism; the Arab-Israeli peace process; Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions; democracy and human rights; religious freedom and tolerance; women's rights; and economic development -- each contained important statements of government policy and revealing clues of how the president conceives of critical issues. Highlights included:

- an unapologetic opening statement that the president's "first duty" is to protect American citizens, thereby explaining our efforts to "isolate the extremists" and persist with military action against al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and around the world

- a powerful defense of the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish homeland (though not a specific referral to Israel as a "Jewish state"), a condemnation of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, and a call on Palestinians to reject violence in pursuit of political objectives as both immoral and counterproductive
- an empathetic description of Palestinian life under "occupation" as "intolerable"; a blunt call for a "stop" to Israeli settlements; and an affirmation of U.S. support for, and his own personal commitment to, Palestinians having a "state of their own"
- a repeat of Washington's offer of negotiations with Iran without preconditions, coupled with a thinly disguised reference to Arab and Muslim sensibilities about Israel's own nuclear arsenal
- a general reaffirmation of U.S. commitment to universal human rights and the pursuit of democracy, defined broadly by an accountable, law-abiding, service-providing government, rather than by elections alone. Though he neither mentioned his predecessor's favorite term "freedom," nor suggested how the United States would, in policy terms, operationalize its commitments, the president went a long way toward explicitly adopting the pillars of George W. Bush's democracy agenda, including its support of human rights, women's rights, religious freedom, and economic opportunity
- a stark, declarative commitment to recognize all "peaceful and law-abiding" political parties and peaceful and elected governments in Muslim-majority states
- a stirring call for religious freedom and tolerance, both inside Muslim countries and in the West. This included, on the one hand, specific references to the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt (but, curiously, not the widely persecuted Bahais) and, on the other hand, a sweeping critique (though not by name) of a French law banning the wearing of the hijab in public schools as "intolerance hiding behind liberalism"
- a defense of the right of Muslim women to wear the hijab and to choose traditional roles coupled with an appeal for equal investment in education and literacy for Muslim girls and women as essential for economic development and prosperity.

### Key Observations

Limited strategic objectives. Despite his often soaring rhetoric, the president actually outlined a strategic agenda for U.S. interests that is narrowly defined and limited in scope. On Iran, the president again focused on the limited objective of ensuring that Iran does not have nuclear weapons; no longer do senior Americans talk about preventing Iran from completing the nuclear fuel cycle, having a uranium enrichment capability, or even being able to develop a nuclear weapon. Additionally, in contrast to recent statements by Arab leaders, he made no reference to Iran's state-sponsoring of terrorist groups Hizballah and Hamas, including their activities against host-country Egypt. On Iraq, the president defined America's twin goals as building an undefined "better Iraq" and leaving Iraq to the Iraqis; he made no reference either to having democracy take root in that country or to aspirations for long-term U.S. alliance with a country that was a long-time adversary. Notably absent was any reference to Lebanon, viewed widely as a strategic fulcrum for both the current and the previous administrations, except for an odd reference to religious tolerance for Maronite Christians. And in terms of combating extremism, the president narrowly defined the objective as countering violence (i.e., counterterrorism), moving backward from the emerging consensus among professionals here and abroad that it is essential to compete against extremists far earlier in the process of radicalization (i.e., counterradicalization).

An implicit acceptance of political Islam. The president waded into heated political debate within Muslim societies and, either by design or by inattention, came down in favor of local Islamists, not local liberals or even anti-Islamists. Islamist parties across the region will cheer the fact that Obama cited only two benchmarks for U.S. recognition of Islamist parties, i.e., "peaceful and law-abiding," when the content of their message and the values

they project -- including the imposition of sharia (Islamic law) -- can often be antithetical to our own. He made no reference to the frequent cooperation of autocrats and Islamists in denying political space to non-Islamist political parties, especially liberals who often do share American values. Most strikingly, no fewer than three times the president defended the right of Muslim women to wear the hijab, but at no point did he defend the right of Muslim women not to wear the hijab. (Indeed, immediately after the speech, the White House website put up a full-screen picture of a hijab-wearing woman, an eerie echo of an amateurish post-September 11 State Department brochure about Muslim life in America in which all American Muslim women were depicted wearing hijabs. Millions of Muslims -- including Muslim women -- will not be heartened by this message.

Lots of respect, not enough interest. In charting his proposed "new beginning," the president's words certainly emphasized the "mutual respect" part of his signature formula over the "mutual interests" part. His forceful words on terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and other difficult policy questions notwithstanding, the speech was notable for its often manufactured parallelism between blemishes in Muslim societies and blemishes in America and the West. From his opening refrain of decrying a "cycle of suspicion and discord," the president suggested that we are all equally at fault for bringing down the U.S.-Muslim relationship. This is problematic on two levels. First, this approach inflates the gravity of current problems and thereby aggravates the search for a solution; the reality is that America has excellent relations with numerous Muslim-majority countries, from Africa to Asia, and equally harmonious relations with hundreds of millions of Muslim citizens of those countries. Second, this approach equates heinous crimes in the name of religion -- e.g., the state-approved killing of apostates, adulterers, and others in some Muslim countries -- with laws adopted in Western countries for legitimate political and security objectives (e.g., France's law to ban headscarves in public schools or U.S. laws to prevent the illegal funding of terrorism via the cover of charitable organizations). More generally, in its appeal to "our common humanity" -- its recitation of largely discredited population statistics for Muslims in America and strikingly defensive declaration that "America and Islam are not exclusive" (who, after all, suggests this is the case?) -- the speech conjured up uneasy reminders of the "I'm OK, you're OK; we're all just moms and dads" speeches of previous failed attempts at public diplomacy.

This parallelism was perhaps most artificial in the president's discussion of the contours of the Arab-Israeli conflict. While no impartial observer can dispute the hardship of Palestinian life, it runs counter to history to suggest that Palestinians have "suffered in pursuit of a homeland," when, since 1937, Palestinian leaders have rejected no fewer than six proposals to achieve just that goal. Similarly, the president's statement about Palestinians who "wait in refugee camps . . . for a life of peace and security" says as much about Arab governments' indifference to their fate as the inability to reach a diplomatic solution with Israel. And the president's drawing of a connection from the Palestinian conflict with Israel to the fight for civil rights in America or the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa will be interpreted by many as an endorsement of the moral righteousness of the Palestinian cause, not -- as he apparently intended -- a call for strict nonviolence.

This focus on respect was not matched by a focus on interest. On no issue, except when discussing plans for economic development projects, did he go beyond generalities and offer specific policy initiatives or definitive positions. While the president said a lot, he also didn't say much, choosing to leave many critical questions unanswered: What is the U.S. view of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, a party that may be peaceful (for now) but is not legal? What will be the U.S. position if the Hizballah-led alliance wins Lebanon's parliamentary elections? What will the United States do if Iran persists in its pursuit of nuclear weapons? What implications will there be for U.S. relations if Arab and Muslim autocrats do not move toward accountable, transparent, democratic rule? What will the United States do if Saudi Arabia, generally recognized as among the world's foremost violators of religious freedom, moves at glacial speed on its promised reforms? And, perhaps most importantly, how will the United States, as a global superpower, prioritize the various themes and interests the president outlined? On none of these issues did the president's speech reveal much.

## What He Didn't Say

The Cairo speech was also notable for specific words the president did not say and references he did not make.

- Most important was the absence of any reference to "the Muslim world" and a preference instead for the more accurate phrase "Muslim-majority countries." This recognition of the continued primacy of states and an implicit rejection of the Islamist objective of a global caliphate that unites all Muslims in a single, supranational entity is a major step forward and should be commended.

Now that "Muslim world" has been banished from the lexicon, the next textual improvement he should make is to distinguish between his defense of Muslims and defense of Islam. While the U.S. government has a strong interest in preserving and protecting the rights of Muslims to live freely and practice their religion, as we have done in Bosnia, Iraq, and elsewhere, it is unsettling for any president to suggest that "partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't." First, America partners with peoples and governments, not religions; second, the president executes the U.S. Constitution, he doesn't interpret the Quran. President Bush made the mistake of donning the mantle of "Imam-in-chief" when he applauded certain Muslim religious edicts (e.g., fatwas against violence) over edicts he didn't like (e.g., fatwas calling for resistance to U.S. forces in Iraq); President Obama risks the same mistake with language that suggests a relationship with a religion, rather than its adherents.

- Surprisingly, in the capital of one of only two Arab countries at peace with Israel, the president made no reference to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary this year, no reference to the courage and vision of Anwar Sadat, nor even a reference to the role of courageous leadership as an essential element of peacemaking. This was a lost opportunity and will be celebrated by some as a nod to Islamist antagonism toward Sadat.
- On the Middle East peace process, the president notably avoided announcing a new plan to translate the Arab Peace Initiative into an operational process that would incentivize Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy through actions and commitments of Arab states. While he did make an important plea for Arab states to stop exploiting the conflict with Israel "to distract the people of Arab nations from other problems," he did not appear to press the matter or to demand clear and speedy action. Vagueness on this issue (and the president was very vague in this part of the speech) suggests he did not get from Saudi king Abdullah substantive commitments that could form the basis of a truly new approach.
- Also on the peace process, the president roundly criticized Israeli settlement activity, but did not use the Cairo platform to repeat the specific demand to end "natural growth," perhaps the most contentious aspect of U.S. policy on the issue. Whether that suggests a willingness to engage with Israel on the issue is unclear.
- In a discussion of tolerance and religious freedom, the president missed an opportunity by failing to celebrate the success of Muslims in India, home to the world's third-largest Muslim population.

## Phrases Pregnant with Implication

As officials, diplomats, and scholars pore over the speech for hints of policies yet to come, two passages deserve special scrutiny:

- In the peace process section, Obama said the following on Jerusalem: "[We should all work for the day] when Jerusalem is a secure and lasting home for Jews and Christians and Muslims, and a place for all of the children of Abraham to mingle peacefully together as in the story of Isra, when Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them) joined in prayer." This sentence is a prima facie rejection of Israel's position that adherents of all faiths

currently enjoy freedom and access in Jerusalem and, by its invocation of a Quranic vision of Jerusalem, will be interpreted in Muslim capitals as tilting toward an Arab/Muslim view of Jerusalem's eventual disposition.

- On nuclear issues, Obama made a veiled reference to Arab charges of a U.S. double standard in focusing on Iran's nuclear ambitions while overlooking Israel's existing weapons. Some have cited a recent statement by a U.S. State Department official calling for Israel's inclusion in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as a sign that the Obama administration intends to address this issue directly, in a way certain to provoke tension with Jerusalem. In Cairo, however, Obama offered a different vision, suggesting that addressing Israel's nuclear capability falls under the heading of "America's commitment to seek a world in which no nations hold nuclear weapons." Israelis can happily live with that worthy -- and long-term -- goal.

## Conclusion

Cairo marks President Obama's fifth major message to the world's Muslims -- following his inaugural address, early al-Arabiya television interview, Iranian New Year greetings, and speech to the Turkish parliament. Debates about the content of these remarks notwithstanding, no one can contest the fact that he has fulfilled a personal commitment to make "engagement" with Muslims a high priority. If there is any meaning to the phrase "mutual interest and mutual respect," America can now rightfully expect to hear and see what Muslims -- leaders and peoples -- say and do in response.

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