

Keep the Faith

Jun 2, 2009



Articles & Testimony

When President Obama speaks to the world's Muslims from Cairo this week, he'll touch, again, on the themes of respect and engagement. But he's delivered that message at least three times already, and this time his audience will expect more. They'll want to know whether Obama has a "big idea" about U.S. policy toward Arabs and Muslims.

For all his faults, President George W. Bush did have a big idea -- that a witch's brew of radical Islamist extremism and repressive autocracy was destroying Muslim societies, and that the antidote was democracy. Bush not only believed it, he translated this idea into real policies, such as promoting a democratic, Shiite-led government in Iraq and endorsing flawed elections in Egypt, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Some of his initiatives worked well and some were disastrous, but they all flowed from Bush's grand view of the situation.

So far, Obama has defined his approach to Arab and Muslim societies as, essentially, anti-Bushism. It has included four key elements:

First, in place of the polarizing posture of "either you're with us or you're against us," Obama has offered the more salutary concept of "mutual respect and mutual interests." This phraseology leaves room for nuance, debate and a pragmatic recognition that politics is a two-way street.

Second, instead of seeing the world through the lens of the 9/11 attacks, Obama specifically told the Turkish parliament that "America's relationship with the Muslim world cannot and will not be based on opposition to Al Qaeda."

Third, instead of characterizing problematic countries as "evil" and working for their political, diplomatic and economic isolation, Obama has offered a willingness to talk, without preconditions, with radical governments (though not yet non-state actors) that had previously been off-limits.

Fourth, instead of making U.S. support for Palestinian statehood contingent on democracy and reform, as Bush did in his landmark June 2002 Rose Garden address, Obama has returned to the more conventional notion of promoting diplomatic solutions -- i.e., the "peace process" -- without saying much about the internal dynamics of Palestinian politics.

Whereas Bush elevated democracy promotion to a touchstone of his Middle East policy -- certainly in rhetoric, sometimes even in fact -- Obama has said almost nothing on the issue. Indeed, the stirring words of his inaugural address -- "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist" -- are less than meets the eye. Read closely: They show that Obama neither suggested there were any practical implications in terms of relations with the U.S. for leaders who refuse to unclench their fist, nor did he offer any support for the millions of ordinary citizens fighting for political change in their countries. In fact, his next sentence was to promise poor nations that America will help "farms flourish and clean waters flow" -- important commitments but nothing revolutionary or even political.

Taken together, this is a coherent policy of anti-Bushism, but it doesn't offer a new "big idea" in place of the one Bush articulated. That's too bad, because expectations are high and, what's more, when Obama arrives in Cairo, he will be surprised to find he has two strikes against him.

First, there's the fact that he continually refers to "the Muslim world," which horrifies many Muslims who know this as the language of Al Qaeda and other radical Islamists, an unintentional echo of the concept that Muslims are really best viewed as members of a single, transnational community of believers rather than loyal citizens of their various nation-states.

And second, there's the fact that he chose an Arab capital to deliver a message to the world's Muslims, thereby feeding the suspicion among the 900-million-plus non-Arab Muslims that America only views them through an Arab lens, one that represents less than a quarter of the world's Muslim population. (Too heavy an emphasis on Israeli-Palestinian peace would reinforce this; Obama should steer clear of too much "peace process" talk.)

Obama's trip offers an opportunity to correct these misperceptions, but he should do more. Now is the time to give real substance to his signature concept of "engagement." So far, it is just a tactic, devoid of much content. Obama can fix that by outlining a Muslim-targeted version of "change you can believe in." It would sound a lot like another bumper-sticker slogan: "Think globally, act locally."

One does not have to view the world through an Al Qaeda prism to recognize that many Muslim-majority (and even minority) countries are, as Bush argued, under threat from extremists who want to destroy the nation-state, sometimes in unholy alliance with autocrats who use the radical threat to keep a tight grip on power. The best way to defeat the former and weaken the latter, however, is not the straitjacket of "elections first." Rather, Obama should eschew the goal of a cosmic shift in U.S. relations with the "Muslim world" in favor of a country-by-country strategy that marries two objectives that appear contradictory but in fact go hand in hand: strengthening the ability of individual states to compete with the radicals while chipping away at the power of despots to choke off any politics but their own.

Customizing our strategy is essential. We will need different approaches to war zones (Iraq and Afghanistan), fragile countries (Yemen, Nigeria and Pakistan), pivotal regional powers (Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia) and an entire continent -- Europe -- whose problems with Muslim integration pose a long-term strategic challenge all its own.

Defining and implementing country-specific strategies to stem the spread of extremism and strengthen legitimate, accountable government is a difficult but worthy task. If Obama's Cairo speech gives the tactic of engagement this sort of real strategic meaning, then it may be a turning point in America's evolving relations with Arabs and Muslims. After four months, he will have found his "big idea."

Robert Satloff is executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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