

# The Egypt Speech: Obama's Watershed Moment

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**P**olicyWatch #1522 is the first in a two-part series on President Obama's trip to Egypt on June 4 and focuses on the president's much-anticipated speech to the "Muslim world." **Part two (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3060>)** will examine the likely impact of the visit on U.S.-Egyptian relations.

On June 4, President Barack Obama will give a seminal speech in Egypt that will define not only his approach to the "Muslim world" but also his administration's aspirations for ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and bringing Iran in from the cold. Until now, he and his administration have been engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy designed to shape the environment for an integrated strategy toward the Middle East. Although the speech will give Americans and the international community the first real indication of what the president actually plans to do, raised expectations in the region and at home will be difficult to meet, and the risks from negative effects from what he will (and will not) say are real.

## Background

Early in his presidential campaign, Obama promised he would give a major speech to the "Muslim world" within his first hundred days in office. In January, to provide a down payment on the promised speech and to demonstrate his seriousness, he granted his first major television interview to the pan-Arab satellite station al-Arabiya, in which he sent a clear signal that both the tone and direction of U.S. policy toward the region would change.

During the interview, the president said that he would close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay and would soon announce the drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq. Obama emphasized his commitment to relaunching the Israeli-Palestinian peace process when he said, "The most important thing is for the United States to get engaged right away." He also reiterated his promise to reach out to Syria and Iran, stating, "It is impossible for us to think only in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. . . . These things are interrelated."

The next stop along the road to Egypt was in Turkey, on April 6, when the president delivered his first speech in a Muslim-majority country. Speaking before the Turkish parliament, Obama again touched on the need to advance peace, engage Iran, and "seek broader engagement" with the "Muslim world." Toward the end of the speech, he made clear that the United States "is not and never will be at war with Islam."

## So Why Now?

For many, the speech in Turkey checked the "Muslim-world-speech" box, but in a March 27 press briefing, the administration made clear that this was not the case. That speech would come later, and the United States would use the additional time to make progress on diplomatic efforts with Syria, Iran, and the peace process. As the president noted on al-Arabiya, "Ultimately, people are going to judge me not by my words but by my actions."

The interview and speech in Turkey created space for largely behind-the-scenes diplomacy, indicated by a flurry of high-level visits to Washington and emerging news reports that hint at likely policy directions. It has been reported that administration officials have sought critical changes to the Arab Peace Initiative that would make it more palatable to Israel and have urged Arab states to take important steps toward normalizing relations with Israel. On May 5, Tony Blair told the Associated Press that the U.S.-led Middle East Quartet (comprising the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the UN) would be coming forward with a comprehensive new strategy in "five to six

weeks."

During this time, the administration has provided few public indications of its ultimate policy directions, with neither U.S. special Middle East envoy George Mitchell nor the special advisor for the Gulf and Southwest Asia, Dennis Ross, giving public interviews on their respective agendas. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton herself, apart from congressional testimony, has not discussed these issues publicly or appeared on a single Sunday morning news program.

Clearly, the president now believes his actions and rhetoric have simmered sufficiently to allow for a more dramatic unveiling of his policies toward the region.

#### What He Is Likely to Say

Given the timing, venue, and geopolitical importance of the speech, President Obama is likely to speak primarily about what he believes the "Muslim world" cares most deeply about: America's effort to bring peace to the region. He believes that if he can convince Muslims, specifically Arab Muslims, of his commitment to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, he can successfully undercut the appeal of rejectionist powers like Iran and Syria and bolster the legitimacy of "moderate states" such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Speaking just days ahead of Lebanon's parliamentary elections and two weeks before Iran's presidential elections, he may also hope to influence voters to choose more moderate leaderships that will partner with the West in this endeavor.

This can be the only reason why the administration chose Egypt as the venue. Egypt was the first Arab state to make peace with Israel and has recently been standing up to Hizballah and working to forge a coalition of moderate states to resist Iranian assertiveness. By traveling to Egypt, the president hopes to demonstrate U.S. confidence and support for President Hosni Mubarak's new proactivity and pay tribute to Egypt's past greatness.

And yet, even as it tries to reform itself economically, Egypt remains a lethargic power where the vast majority of the population subsists on less than a dollar a day. Led by an octogenarian who has been in power since Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, Egypt persists as an authoritarian regime lacking any truly democratic institutions, making this speech Obama's first delivered in a nondemocracy. This latter fact perhaps explains why White House spokesperson Robert Gibbs emphasized that the speech's scope was "bigger than where the speech was going to be given or who is the leadership of the country," during the press briefing announcing it.

This attempt at evasion, however, fails to fully address the downside of the choice of venue. There is no way for the president to travel to Egypt without providing implicit support for the Mubarak regime. Although it is true that Egypt's courts threw out Saad Eddin Ibrahim's conviction for treason and earlier released Ayman Nour from prison, these moves are widely perceived as gifts to the administration to sidestep criticism from members of Congress who are familiar with these two prominent Egyptian dissidents. In the meantime, the regime continues its ongoing crackdown on students, bloggers, journalists, and political activists of all stripes.

In her 2005 Cairo speech, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told students at the American University that "for sixty years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither. Now we are taking a different course." Unless he finds a way to indicate otherwise, Obama's speech risks signaling that the brief dalliance with this policy is now officially over. This return to the status quo ante in the name of "realism" would fulfill the greatest hopes of the region's oppressive regimes. To avoid this, the president, without lecturing, must include a challenge to Egypt and governments across the region to create more open, democratic, and therefore, resilient societies. Insisting that Middle East governments do more to protect their citizens' civil and political rights will put him squarely on the side of the people.

The president should also use the Egypt speech to drop the phrase "Muslim world" from his public rhetoric. This unhelpful abstraction belies the rich diversity of Muslim communities around the world and emphasizes the narrative of al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups that aim to unite the Muslim world in a new Caliphate under sharia (Islamic law). The United States is part of the international community of nation states, and Obama, much as he did in Turkey, should speak to the peoples of the region as citizens of their respective nations rather than as members of the "Muslim world."

#### Conclusion

Obama's Egypt speech represents a watershed moment both for the president and his approach toward the region. Believing as he does that sincere efforts at peacemaking remain key to reconciling America with the "Muslim world," he must now make a case for his intended actions. Unfortunately, experience indicates that whatever he proposes will fall short of expectations. For many in the region, only a promise that the United States will strong-arm Israel on settlements will prove American seriousness, and even then, skepticism will remain high. As one Jordanian columnist recently put it: "The sole bridge toward reconciliation is a Palestinian state."

In the meantime, by traveling to Cairo, Obama risks signaling a return to the era when the United States ignored human rights and democracy as an element of national security. Moreover, should Obama fail to deliver peace on their terms, the same undemocratic Arab regimes will blame him for the failure, providing Iran and others another stick with which to beat the United States for being on the wrong

side of history. By seeking peace at the expense of democracy and long-term stability, the president risks achieving none of these regional objectives.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow and Director of [Project Fikra \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms), an initiative to empower mainstream Muslims in their struggles with Islamist extremists. ❖

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