Obama's Speech: Vexing Issues

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President Barack Obama began the dialogue between the West and the Muslim and Arab worlds by directly confronting the vexing issues between them. The new tone is devoid of arrogance and emphasizes peaceful coexistence — in contrast to the prior administration's bellicose tone and militaristic policy.

The speech Obama delivered in Cairo deemphasized the U.S. conflict with Iran, reached out to moderates, and didn't blame the entire Islamic world for actions of a small minority of "violent extremists." Moreover, he focused everyone's attention on the most important issues in the Middle East.

Obama admonished Israelis for continuing the building of settlements, but recognized their fears for their continued lack of security and their need for recognition of the state of Israel. He admonished Palestinians for violence against innocent Israelis while acknowledging their need for a two-state solution and an ending to their suffering under the occupation. He recognized, however subtly, the right of Muslims to a free, representative democracy and basic human rights. Obama's themes are frightening the violent extremists on both sides — in both Israel and the Muslim world — because it undermines their message of bigotry and hatred. Recognizing injustices is the first step to resolving them.

In his speech and through the comments he made afterward, Obama recognized the need for reducing nuclear proliferation and having a nuclear-free Middle East. The implication of including Israel in the nuclear-free zone is a new and positive direction for the United States.

As this new chapter in American foreign policy begins, the basis for long-term U.S. goals must be examined in every arena. In his speech, Obama declared: "I have made it clear to the Iraqi people that we pursue no bases, and no claim on their territory or resources. Iraq's sovereignty is its own." He went on to emphasize the removal of all troops from Iraq by 2012. He narrowed U.S. aims in Afghanistan to removing those who plot against this nation from Afghan soil. This long-term goal will help those who live in the region to see our need for our security while protecting their autonomy.

Oil and Oppression

In the last half century, U.S. Middle East policy has emphasized stability and access to oil. Instead, the United States should help bring about progress towards human rights and representative government. By doing so, promoting U.S. interests would benefit everyone across the globe. Obama's compelling personal story propelled a high level of expectation for his visit. And his speech marked the first step toward injecting a sincere moral vision into U.S. foreign policy in the past three decades.

Cairo was an excellent choice for this speech. The city represents the heart and soul of the Arab and Muslim worlds. However, Obama and his advisors should have paid more attention to the fact that Egypt is a police state. The United States must prepare for the day when President Hosni Mubarak's regime and the days of his 99.9% landslide election victories are gone. Moreover, the many other Muslim governments that are corrupt allies of the U.S. will eventually be replaced, and we must get ready for the upheavals that will ensue as these governments evolve or are overturned.
Mubarak has run the Egyptian government for 27 years. His goons neutralize his opponents with killing, torture, and imprisonment. Lawrence Wright, in *The Looming Tower*, described how Egyptian security forces raped a 13-year-old boy, threatening him with distribution of photographs of this act to his community if he didn't squeal on his father. The brutal regime in Egypt was also where Ayman al-Zawahiri, the second man in command of al-Qaeda, was radicalized.

In his address, Obama had to work hard to avoid numerous obstacles and pitfalls. But by referring to "governments that reflect the will of the people," and saying "each nation gives life to this principle in its own way," he gave the impression that Egypt is on its way to respecting human rights and democracy. That's inconsistent with his new vision for U.S. foreign policy. Egypt has a totalitarian, corrupt, and murderous regime. I can understand Obama going to Cairo and giving a speech there, but he should be under no illusion about Mubarak's regime. The regime in Cairo, along with many of its counterparts in the Muslim world, remains in power with our help. When will our new "changed" policy stop propping up corrupt dictators? This is an enormous challenge.

It will take action and sustained efforts to translate Obama's historic new vision into a reality.

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