

## OBAMA'S ADDRESS AT AL AZHAR: SEPARATING THE DREAM FROM REALITY

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*"I have come to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings ... The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now, that must be our work here on Earth."*

*– Obama's address at Cairo University, Egypt, June 4, 2009.*

Well, there it is in as simple and plain terms as it could be: the adversarial struggle that has characterized relations between the Western and the Islamic worlds for centuries *must* find common grounds for the "dignity of all human beings". Those are some very powerful words; some would say nothing short of being messianic; to be seriously contemplated by world leaders, policymakers and implementers, academics and the civil society. The many bloggers who haunt the cyber space in our age of computers have filled the blogger rooms with fantastic notions of the promised messiah incarnate in Barack Hussain Obama.

To quote one, "No one saw him coming ... God comes at us from strange angles and places we don't expect, like He sent Moses to be raised in the house of the Pharaohs, or Jesus being born in a manger, or Muhammad (PBUH) raised in the desolate sands of Arabia." (<http://obamamessiah.blogspot.com/>) – linking that with the ascent of a black man into the White House. But, that is just the use of free speech and ideas that have found expression in the computer world.

Uttered at the historic seat of Islamic learning, Obama's remarks were designed particularly to reset relations after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S.-led 'war on terror'. Yet, even as he called sternly for Israelis and Palestinians to live up to their obligations in seeking peace which is in the interest of the whole world, he demanded that Iran bow to international demands to halt its nuclear weapons programme, and sought Muslim countries' help in eradicating the threat of

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fundamentalist violence across the globe. In seeking a 'new beginning', he identified seven broad sources of tension that need to be addressed in partnership rather than resorting to conflict and religious wars that dominate the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century just as the two disastrous world wars dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> (See transcript, President Obama's Address at Cairo University, July 4, 2009). These include:

1. *Confronting violent extremism in all forms* – in that he made it clear that while the U.S. is not at war with Islam, it will nevertheless confront violent extremists who pose a threat to its security, pointing out Al-Qaeda not as an opinion to be debated, but a fact to be dealt with in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
2. *Discuss the situation between Israel, Palestinians and the Arab world* – while the bond between the U.S. and Israel is unbreakable, the time has come for *all* to live up to their responsibilities. The right of both the Palestinians and the Israelis to exist in two states cannot be denied. The Arab Peace Initiative is an important beginning in this regard, but not the end of responsibilities.
3. *Shared interest in the rights and responsibilities of nations on nuclear weapons* – the main source of tension on this issue at the moment is between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran .While admitting that the U.S. played a role in the overthrow of a democratically-elected government in Iran in the middle of the Cold War, Obama stressed on overcoming decades of mistrust and proceeding on a future course of not what Iran is against, rather what future it wants to build.

But, it must be clear to all that when it comes to the question of nuclear weapons, the Western world has reached a decisive point that a nuclear arms race must be prevented in the Middle East that could lead the world down a dangerous path. Though, in his address however, Obama "reaffirmed America's commitment to seek a world in which no nation retains nuclear weapons and that any nation – including Iran - should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it is in compliance with the provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty." (*Ibid*)

4. *Address promotion of democracy* – all people yearn for the ability to speak their mind and have a say in how they are governed; confidence in the rule of law and equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and does not steal from the people; freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas,

- they are human rights, and must be supported everywhere. While elections alone do not make true democracy and there is no straight line to realize this, the governments that protect these rights are ultimately more stable, successful and secure.
5. *Address religious freedom* - people should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind, heart and soul. Tolerance is essential for religion to thrive. While Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance, there is a tendency among some Muslims to measure one's own faith by the rejection of others. Religious diversity must be upheld and the fault lines must be closed. Faith should bring the Christians, Muslims and Jews together, and efforts for an Interfaith Dialogue and Alliance of Civilizations must be turned into Interfaith Service.
  6. *Addressing women's rights* – equality of women is not simply an issue of Islam. Common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity – men and women – to reach their full potential. The West and the Muslim world need to be partners in supporting expanded literacy for girls because countries where women are well-educated are far more likely to be prosperous.
  7. *Discuss economic development and opportunity* – need to get rid of the fear that because of modernity and globalization we will lose control over our economic choices, our politics and our identities. But, human progress cannot be denied and Muslim-majority countries from Kuala Lumpur to Dubai have made astonishing progress. All need to recognize that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is underinvestment in too many Muslim communities in these areas, and investments in these areas must be emphasized. The U.S. will host a Summit on Entrepreneurship in 2009 to identify how ties can be deepened between business leaders, foundations and social entrepreneurs in the U.S. and the Muslim communities around the world.

There can be no denying that all the issues pointed out by President Obama need to be tackled in complete partnership between the Western and the Muslim worlds for pursuing a better life and dignity of human beings around the world. Actions, they say, speak louder than words, and it is the American actions that will determine if they are really serious in terms of following an even-handed policy for the greatest good of the greater number. Barack Obama certainly had the right approach when he laced his speech with pertinent quotes from the Holy Quran that touched

emotions in the entire Muslim world which certainly does not subscribe to the Al Qaeda brand of Islam.

However, past experience has shown that the Americans have always drawn 'redlines' when it comes to the question of Palestine and its relations with Israel, or nuclear weapons in the hands of some Muslim countries . Only a day after Obama's speech at Al Azhar, Israeli officials said on June 5 that Israel will not heed his powerful appeal to halt all settlement activity on lands the Palestinians claim for a future State. That did not ruffle any feathers in Washington and is not likely to cause a policy clash with its most important ally.

Similarly, while on one hand, the Barack administration wants 'unconditional' dialogue with Iran, the Secretary of State announced during a visit to Southeast Asia on July 22, 2009 that the U.S. is considering to extend a nuclear umbrella over the Middle East if Iran continued to defy international demands that it halt work that could lead to nuclear weapons. Nor is it ready even to discuss the question of peaceful nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, a country that has become the focus of intense U.S. military attention. It is clear that merely giving a good speech is not going to be enough if selective American institutions of the state choose to dole out 'sweet words' while others continue to wield T. Roosevelt's famous 'big stick'.

The setting and tenor of President Obama's speech at Cairo University was a calculated exercise in eloquence and 'smart diplomacy'. The setting at Al Azhar, the breeding ground of the Muslim Brotherhood, sought to reach out to the 1.3 billion people of the Muslim world, and to find a new beginning to a relationship mired in hatred, suspicion and mistrust. The use of the term 'calculated' is deliberate with an understanding that the speech was certainly not just some individual's flight of fancy. It came amid the much vaunted 'change' in America and President Obama's promise of improving relations with the Muslim world that since the events of September 2001 have deteriorated to the levels of paranoid suspicions.

The American policymakers need to understand that many not only in the Muslim world but the entire 'Third World' have been so scarred by the manipulations of the developed world that followed the colonial age that it would be a Herculean task for anybody, leave alone Barack Hussain Obama, to find a cure. No doubt, there are many faults to the system of governance in countries that Obama mentioned specifically and many of those he forgot in his speech. There is much to be taken care of in terms of improving the lives and living standards of a vast majority that forms the bulk of the developing world today, and who would love to work in

partnership with America on the issues that Obama mentioned in his speech only if America lives up to and acts upon the values it cherishes for itself.

A recurring issue in Ahmed Rashid's new book, *Decent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, that discusses and describes the U.S. war on terror, is the growth of independent policy fiefdoms in American State institutions such as the Pentagon, the State Department, the CIA and other agencies who have indulged in their own personal 'shadow boxing' in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2001 instead of focusing on developing a unified strategy for dealing with the need of reconstruction and development in countries that were used as proxies in the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union.

By far the most important action would be the withdrawal of all offensive and combat troops still being deployed and fighting in foreign lands. Such a step alone would be enough to show those who hold on to the strategy of violence, that America is really serious when it talks of a 'new beginning'. It is gestures and actions that will help mitigate the scourge of terrorism and depravity in much of the still developing world, and in the countries that are the focus of U.S. military attention. Till such unprecedented actions are apparent, presidents like Obama with all their 'sweet words' will be seen as little more than an errand boy, sent by the grocery clerks, to collect the bill for the groceries sold.