

OBAMA'S MIDDLE EAST CHALLENGE

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One of the most difficult challenges confronting the new American President includes the Muslim World's troubled relationship with the U.S. and the West at large. Perceptions of American power, exploitation and discrimination of Muslims and also unsettled disputes in the Middle East widen the existing rift. Obama being the first African American President symbolises a revolution in American politics and is synonymous with a positive change. However, restoring American respect and prestige in the world and taking steps towards reconciliation are definitely on Barack Obama's agenda and this may also be seen as a good opportunity to redefine U.S. relations and mend fences with the Muslim world. It is very clear that the Obama Presidency is committed to changing much of what went wrong during the Bush years but only time will tell whether words match actions. However, the initial moves, as far as the Muslim world is concerned, are quite positive and can be used to move forward in the near future.

At the start of his campaign for presidency, Obama made it clear that America was not at war with Islam. He was obviously referring to the current wave of Islamophobia and symbolic hatred for the Muslim world in America and the west. Prosecutions at Guantanamo, troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and peace between Israel and Palestine pose the biggest challenge to America. President Obama's 'A New Beginning,' the speech he made on June 4, in Cairo, Egypt was a step in the right direction. This much awaited speech came at a time when the ever widening gulf between the west and Muslim world had reached enormous proportions and done irreparable damage to America's image in the Arab and Muslim world. America's unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and muted responses to Israeli aggression in Gaza has deeply hurt and enraged Muslims.

Although, the speech was long overdue, and a welcome move by a newly elected American President, however, reaching out to the Muslim world remains an arduous task for Obama, and one, fraught with challenges. The speech paid tributes to the richness of Muslim civilization; presence of Muslim community in the United States; and also alluded to common goals and issues of mutual importance. Apart from this, Obama also highlighted problems of violent extremism, the Israel Palestine conflict, nuclear proliferation, with a specific mention of Iran and other important issues. However, the main issues of Israel Palestine conflict and also US support to democracy in the Muslim world remained where they were prior to the speech. Moreover, many critics pointed fingers at the fact that the country he chose to make his speech in is ruled by a long time dictator and also the fact that many dictatorships in the Middle East are supported by the United States, despite their oppression and suppression of human freedoms and civil liberties.

Although, the speech was widely hailed and appreciated all over the world, skepticism will remain regarding the real intentions until concrete steps are taken to undo previous damage. This is only possible; if actions match words and concrete steps are taken in the right direction. The real challenge in the Middle East remains the creation of an independent Palestinian state that is sustainable and also rolling back illegal Jewish settlements, along with the return of the territories belonging to the Palestinians and also the return of the Palestinian refugees. These

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contentious issues have never been touched upon by any American president due to the presence of pro-Israel lobbies in the congress and other important and influential power centres within the United States. On one hand, he has urged Israel to freeze settlements on land belonging to Palestinians, while on the other, President Obama urged the Arabs to normalize relations with Israel. It may be note worthy that he spoke of Hamas with respect, while asking it to denounce violence, and also hinting at the fact that he would welcome a Palestinian Unity government. However, the challenge remains translating rhetoric into reality with a fair and reasonable dialogue process required to reach a workable solution. The task is tough for Obama as Israel has a right wing hawk as the newly elected Prime Minister, who is vehemently opposed to the two- state solution and wants Israel to be recognized as a Jewish state.

Another equally big challenge for President Obama in the Middle East is stability in Iraq. A stable Iraq after the American withdrawal could become a good example in the region if the country is able to survive as an independent, democratic Muslim Arab state. However, the challenges in the Middle East are tough and the interconnected nature of conflicts and alliances make the prospects of peace even tougher. Readiness to withdraw from Iraq, willingness to negotiate with Iran and opposition to illegal Israeli settlements are all positive moves, but challenges remain as U.S. policy towards Syria is also an important element of the administration's approach to the region. The Arab Israeli conflict leads to anti-Americanism and encourages terrorist ideology and this has in fact been the case in the last many years, therefore, resolving the Arab Israeli conflict is the key to solving the regional crises. The challenge is tough and shifting the political landscape is not easy but President Obama can surely make a start and this is only possible by using his leverage over Israel. Demands for a fundamental change in policy may seem far from realistic but there is still room for optimism, if followed by actions. The tough tasks before Obama include efforts to persuade Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace on fair terms, and also withdrawal from Iraq, as promised, as well as a more conciliatory approach towards Iran.

Although, Obama's speech is a welcome departure from the past, he has yet to make a very serious and sustainable effort to start the process of reconciliation with the Muslim world. This is all the more difficult as American policy towards the Middle East up till now, is riddled with contradictions, such as the support for autocratic regimes and monarchs. The truth is that Obama must deliver as he has raised expectations among Muslims for a new era of relations based on equality. Therefore, broken promises and unfulfilled pledges could lead to even more hatred and widen the existing gulf, making the already volatile region a theatre of a greater war.