

# **Obama's Cairo Speech: Reaching out to the Muslim World**

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## **Abstract**

*President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo in 2009 was primarily addressed to the Muslim world. He had sought to dispel the impression that the US is anti- Islam or anti- Muslim. No other US president had done this before. The Cairo speech is a classic example of persuasive discourse wherein the speaker praises Muslims for their past achievements and contributions while at the same time reminding them of certain shortcomings in Muslim- majority countries. He appealed for partnership between the US and the Muslim world for the common good of both. The present paper analyzes the language used in the speech text objectively. Quotes and lexical expressions from the speech are identified and analyzed to illustrate his conviction as well as his country's "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition." The language used in the speech text is critically analyzed and described in the context of his attempt to reach out to the Muslim world to forge a new beginning. A critical interpretation will be made of the much heralded speech which had initially raised huge expectations among Muslims.*

**Keywords: Obama Cairo speech Muslims United States**

## **Preliminaries**

US President Barack Obama's Cairo speech in June, last year, was delivered at a time when there was no love lost between the US and most Muslims around the world following the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the "war on terror"- an expression made popular by his predecessor George Bush, an expression which many Muslims regard as an excuse to wage war on Muslim countries. His predecessor had also included two Muslim nations in his "axis of evil". Although the speech was delivered in Cairo University, the audience was not only Arabs and people of the Middle East, but also Muslim countries worldwide. Whether the present president can indeed walk the talk with regard to his intentions contained in the speech is beyond the scope of this paper. The persuasive speech text comprises nearly 75 short paragraphs. "The goal of presentational persuasion" according to Johnstone "is to make the claim for which one is arguing maximally present in the audience's consciousness, by repeating it, paraphrasing it, calling aesthetic attention to it" (2000: 212-3).

In the introduction, he greets his mainly Muslim audience with the common Islamic greeting: Assalaamu alaykum which means "May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon you". This is a great way for a non-Muslim leader to bond with his Muslim audience. Since the speech was delivered in the Egyptian capital, he sees it fit to pay tribute to "two remarkable institutions" namely the Al-Azhar with a history of "over a thousand years.....as a beacon of Islamic learning" and Cairo University which "has been a source of Egypt's advancement".

He acknowledges there are tensions between Muslims and the West for various reasons. But he rightly admits that only a small minority of Muslims engage in violent extremist activities. He's very careful in describing such Muslims. He refers to them as "violent extremists" and not "Islamic militants". "Islamic radicals", or "Islamists". Obama seeks to assure his larger audience that "America and Islam are not exclusive". The two are not incompatible since they share valuable common principles- "principles of

justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings". He repeats the word "mutual" before "interest" and "respect" in the same sentence: "...seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect....", although he could have used the cohesive strategy of ellipsis (please refer to Halliday and Hasan, 1976 for their seminal work on cohesion).. This repetition of 'mutual' is to emphasize the importance of both US and Muslim countries playing their respective roles to work in tandem, not against each other.

The American president whose father was a Kenyan Muslim and has Muslim relatives, but a Christian himself quotes from the Holy Qur'an to show that he has something in common with his Muslim listeners: "Be conscious of God and speak always the truth". This quote is intended to be sincere and truthful in relations between the US and Muslim nations. The two do not have to be at odds with each other, as his own experience of growing up and working among Muslim communities demonstrates.

He devotes the whole of paragraph 8 to how civilization is indebted to Islam: As a student of history he mentions about the many contributions Muslims have made in diverse fields. Throughout the next paragraph he acknowledges America's own debt to Muslims. This is something no American president has so far done and it demonstrates genuineness to establish a partnership between US and Islam. He vows to fight negative stereotyping of Islam. No leader in the Western world has come out so forcefully against prejudiced stereotyping of Muslims. The sentiments expressed here undoubtedly endear him to Muslims who have been unfairly portrayed and victimized. But likewise, America too should not be stereotyped negatively by Muslims.

The US president goes on to give some statistics of the large Muslim presence in his country. There are nearly 7 million Muslims and 1,200 mosques. Muslims there "enjoy incomes and educational levels that are higher than the American average." He goes on to add that the US government defends a Muslim female's right to wear the hijab (headscarf) "and punish those who would deny it". The situation of Muslims in the US must be comforting to those who do not know the true picture.

### **Violent Extremism**

He appeals for partnership as both US and Muslim countries are interdependent. They should come together to confront "violent extremism", which he identifies as the first major source of tension between the two. He avoids using Islamophobic terms to refer to Muslims who commit acts of terror as their actions are not sanctioned by Islam (refer to Haja Mohideen and Shamimah, 2008, for a discussion on Islamophobic language). While assuring Muslim nations that America "will never be at war with Islam," it will "relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat" to its security. He singles out the Taliban and al Qaeda as such extremists, not Muslims in general. Obama argues that the actions of these violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan are against the teachings of Islam. He cites from the Holy Quran "that whoever kills an innocent is as—it as if he has killed all mankind. And the Holy Quran also says whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind".

He acknowledges the shortcomings of invading Iraq—a Muslim majority country and causing so much destruction, by brushing aside diplomacy and building international consensus. He promises to get all American troops out by 2012. The invasion and subsequent occupation have been a very sore issue among Muslim countries.

The President admits how the previous administration had acted contrary to American traditions and ideals following 9-11. In the Guantanamo Bay Muslims suspected of anti-American involvement in Afghanistan have been held without trial for many years. It is a dark and sinister episode in modern US history. So, he has ordered the prison there to be "closed by early next year".

## **Situation between Israelis, Palestinians and Arab World**

The hostile situation between the Israelis and Arabs is the second major source of tension. He reminds the Muslim world in no uncertain terms that America has “strong bonds” with Israel and the “bond is unbreakable”. It’s like telling Muslims “Read my lips, people, our special relationship is non-negotiable, come what may”. He justifies that “the aspiration for a Jewish homeland..... cannot be denied”. He talks about the persecution of the Jews in the past and the intolerable situation endured by the Palestinians now. Both peoples have legitimate aspirations and these can be met by having two states. It is very heartening to hear an American president’s support for a Palestinian state in very positively worded statements: “And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own”. It is in everybody’s interest, including Israel’s to have a Palestinian state. It is assuring to Muslims everywhere that a US president intends “to personally pursue this outcome”. It seems that he will approach the long standing problem even-handedly.

Obama urges Palestinians to renounce violence which is self-defeating, but rather accept political reality and recognize Israel’s right to exist. He also urges Israel to recognize Palestinian statehood. And as an occupying power, it must also act responsibly and humanely. The Arab states in turn must recognize Israel’s legitimacy and move on in pursuit of progress. Many Israelis too “recognize the need for a Palestinian state”. This is realpolitik.

Israel and Palestine have much in common, not only geographically, but also in terms of religion. They make up “the Holy Land of the three great faiths.....a place for all the children of Abraham” to live in peace. Jews, Christians and Muslims are known as people of the book, and therefore have a common destiny as illustrated “in the story of Isra, when Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, peace be upon them, joined in prayer”.

## **Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East**

On the relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, he says US is “willing to move forward.....on the basis of mutual respect”. He mentions about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East” in the context of US- Iran relations. Without mentioning Israel he forcefully declares “I understand those who protest that some countries have weapons that others do not. No single nation should pick and choose which nation holds nuclear weapons”. According to a letter published in *Newsweek*, October 19, 2009, on page 4, from Gregg Smith, a reader in Oregon, US, the solution to the current Iran problem “is to demand that Israel allow international inspections of its nuclear program, dismantle its nuclear bombs, and agree to a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. If not, it is only a matter of time before some other country in the region wants to produce nuclear bombs, too”. While he expects Iran to comply “with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”, he makes no mention of Israel at all in what he refers to as the third source of tension which is “our shared interest in the rights and responsibilities of nations on nuclear weapons”. This part of his speech may have sounded very hollow to his Muslim listeners. That Israel is a nuclear power is no secret at all is evident from the American reader who wrote the letter in *Newsweek*. Muslims will not fail to see the biased statements made here, the practice of double standards, as American leaders are perceived to be soft and weak in their criticism of Israel’s nuclear ambitions.

## **Democracy**

On the issue of democracy, Obama emphasizes that “No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on another”. This should be comforting to regimes and rulers who are not comfortable with democratic institutions or new ideas alien to them. However, the statement may be of little comfort to those people for whom democracy represents the will of the people. Nevertheless, he appeals for democratic governance where the citizens are treated with dignity. These are part of human rights, not ideas imposed from America. Islam respects human rights, but maybe some governments and rulers are not aware of the sanctity of human rights. The practice of electing a leader by consensus was first done after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Realizing that quite a number of Muslim-majority countries do not practice democracy, he advises discreetly that governments which are more democratic “are ultimately more stable, successful and secure” in the long run.

## **Religious Freedom**

He cites the example of Islamic governance which has a “proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition”. Although Indonesia is “an overwhelmingly Muslim country”, he had seen devout Christians worshipping freely there. Even though a non-Muslim himself, he’s appalled by the mindless bloodletting between the Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq. Right thinking Muslims the world over cannot but feel sad by the “tragic violence”. He emphasizes that freedom of religion is important for harmonious living. He promises to work with American Muslims so that they can fulfill their zakat (Islamic tax for deserving Muslims) obligations since US rules have made it difficult for them to donate to charities, supposedly on suspicion that the charitable organizations may help extremist organizations. Faith, should bring us together, not drive us apart. He lauds the efforts of two friendly countries- Saudi Arabia and Turkey for promoting interfaith dialogue. Some other Muslim nations are also in the forefront in interfaith understanding as well as interfaith service.

## **Women’s Rights**

Realizing that women’s education is not widespread in Muslim countries, he reminds the audience that “countries where women are well educated are far more likely to be prosperous. In fact, Muslims do not have to be reminded about the importance of education for them, women included. There are *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) which emphasize education, regardless of gender: “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave” and “It is incumbent upon every Muslim to seek knowledge”. Denying Muslim women an education has nothing to do with Islam, but more so to do with tribal, cultural, attitudinal and ignorance factors. This part of the speech may have gladdened women in less industrialized countries with which US has good relations, hoping that it would open the doors to equal opportunities. The issue of women’s equality may not be unfamiliar to Muslim nations as some of these countries have elected women as leaders and women do hold high positions. Whether women want to lead a traditional role or aspire “to reach their full potential,” through education or employment, it must be their choice.

## **Economic Development and Opportunity**

The last item in his speech is related to economic development and opportunity. He stresses that development and tradition are not contradictory. He singles out two Muslim-majority countries, namely Malaysia and Dubai to illustrate this is the case. He pays tribute to Muslim communities that “have been at the forefront of innovation and education” for a long time. However, in many countries there has been underinvestment in these two critical areas, despite the great wealth enjoyed by some countries. This is indeed an irony. He offers to expand educational and internship opportunities for overseas Muslim

students in US. Likewise, more Americans will be encouraged to study in Muslim communities. Such mutual cooperation premises on the belief that Americans and Muslims can benefit from each other.

On economic development, he expresses willingness to strengthen business ties between US and “Muslim communities around the world”.

The United States wants “to support technological development in Muslim-majority countries,” work “with the Organization of Islamic Conference”, and also work “with Muslim communities to promote child and maternal health”. The American leader is offering partnership to Muslims in critical areas such as science, technology and healthcare.

He exhorts people of all faiths “to find common ground” and work for the betterment of mankind since our time on earth is short. He may sound philosophical, but it is true.

Towards the end of his speech, he uses quotes from the holy books of three religions, all of which have their origins in the Middle East, and the followers are known as people of the book. Of special interest to Muslims is “O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another”. The Quranic quote is intended to emphasize that the differences are for identification and recognition, not division and discrimination among fellow human beings.

He ends his speech with an English translation of Assalamu Alaikum: May God’s peace be upon you. Muslims begin and end a speech with this Islamic greeting. In the introductory and concluding parts of his speech, he has shown empathy with his Muslim audience by using this very familiar greeting among Muslims.

## **Conclusion**

It may be generally concluded that his speech delivered last year came from the heart, and it was not mere rhetoric to appease his audience. The speech is substantive and may be described as discourse “that sounds or looks better is more persuasive, more memorable, more effective, better at creating conversational rapport” (Tannen, 1989, as cited in Johnstone, 2002). His choice of lexical expressions such as “Muslim communities” and “Muslim- majority countries” refers to Muslims whether they live as majority communities in a country or otherwise. The speech appears to give the impression that Americans, now have a president who would not be largely Eurocentric, a president who can empathize with the problems of Muslims in countries where they live as a majority community or as a minority. Here is an American leader who has personal experience of Islam and its followers to deal with them in ways they understand. His speech then must have given a sense of optimism for Muslims.

Whether this president who comes from a minority background can carry his intentions through is difficult to predict. In his first debut State of the Union address, there was no word on the Middle East process (*Obama shifts agenda closer to home*, New Straits Times, January 29, 2010, p.28). In his Cairo address, he had so eloquently put it as follows: “And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own”. He steered clear of the elusive peace process which is always a topic for the annual presidential address. So, one might be tempted to think that he was playing to the gallery to please the Arab and Muslim world. But we can empathize with him. No American president can act unilaterally and face the might and wrath of the Jewish lobby. Besides, he has his second term to think of. If he does not play his cards right, he may go on to become a one-term president. Certainly, there are specific issues in the speech for Muslims to ponder over and for analysts of discourse to look at such texts critically. Muslims have had a glorious past which paved the way for

Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. They had made great contributions to navigation, printing, medicine, architecture, poetry, music and calligraphy, all of which were acknowledged by Obama. Muslims could consider this as a wake-up call to reminisce about their great past and recapture their lost glory through pursuit of peace, democratic governance, giving Muslim women the right to pursue education and seek employment, expand economic development and acquire scientific and technological know-how to pursue a much better life for themselves and the world.

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