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Obama's Al-Arabiya Interview: A Naïve Re-Branding of American Foreign Policy

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President Obama's first formal televised interview after his inauguration, given to the Arab television network *Al-Arabiya*,¹ was a glib attempt to address a global Arab and Muslim audience, re-brand American foreign policy, and distance himself from the policies of the Bush Administration. In many respects it resembled a campaign speech replete with vague rhetoric that elevated tone over substance. The speech also raised troublesome questions about the naïve assumptions on which President Obama will apparently base his foreign policy.²

Obama began by answering a question about the moribund Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations: “Well, I think the most important thing is for the United States to get engaged right away. And George Mitchell is somebody of enormous stature. He is one of the few people who have international experience brokering peace deals.” While this response served a political purpose—distancing his Administration's policies from those of the Bush Administration—it grossly misstates the problem.

The breakdown of the Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations was not the result of America's lack of engagement but of Palestinian failure to halt terrorism. American engagement cannot deliver progress toward peace if the situation is not ripe for resolution. President Clinton spent much of the last five months of his Administration heavily and personally engaged in the negotiations, but the Oslo peace process (which began with a negotiating breakthrough reached without American engagement) was destroyed by persistent Palestinian terrorism.

As long as the Palestinian leadership (then the PLO's Yasser Arafat, now the Islamist extremists of Hamas) continue to use terrorism, no genuine peace is possible. The problem then, as it is now, was not a lack of engagement by Washington but the rejection of peaceful compromise in the Palestinian territories. It does not matter that the American special envoy has “enormous stature” when Hamas remains committed to destroying Israel and has taken Gaza hostage to advance its hate-fueled agenda.

President Obama also presented a weak case against Iran's nuclear weapons program and support for terrorism, suggesting that such behavior was merely “not helpful.” By downplaying the threat posed by Iran, Obama undermines the case for greater Arab cooperation in pressuring Tehran to halt its nuclear weapons drive and support for terrorism—an area of mutual America–Arab interest that could serve as a basis for closer cooperation in the future.

President Obama offered a new tone but little substance. He proclaimed that “we are ready to initiate a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest.” But he displayed amazing naiveté in defining what those common interests are, sug-

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gesting that al-Qaeda leaders “seemed nervous” because their ideas are bankrupt: “There’s no actions that they’ve taken that say a child in the Muslim world is getting a better education because of them, or has better health care because of them.”

This statement reveals an enormous misunderstanding of the ideological roots of Islamist terrorism and a shocking lack of respect for the powerful motivating force of the idea of *jihad* for al-Qaeda supporters. The President implies that a better education policy or health care plan will inevitably doom al-Qaeda, as if that terrorist network is competing like a political party to benefit Muslim voters rather than trying to violently impose its radical ideas on people that it views as misguided Muslims.

This naïve mirror-imaging dangerously underestimates the threat posed by Islamist extremists,

both to the United States and to the Muslim world. After all, al-Qaeda has murdered more Muslims than non-Muslims and more Arabs than Americans. Hopefully, when President Obama speaks again to the Muslim world from a Muslim capital—as he affirmed he will do in this interview—he will demonstrate a more realistic appreciation of the threat of Islamist extremism, the ideological force motivating al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Iran. Moreover, Obama must offer a plan of action to defeat al-Qaeda through cooperation on something more than just health care.

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1. Hisham Melhem, interview with Barack Obama, President of the United States, January 26, 2009, at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/01/obamas_interview_with_alarabiy.html (January 29, 2009).
 2. *Ibid.*