

# WebMemo



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## Obama's Cairo Speech Stresses Common Interests but Fails to Identify the Common Enemy

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President Obama's speech in Cairo yesterday was an attempt to create deeper understanding between Americans and Muslims throughout the world. However, the feel-good impact of the speech is unlikely to last long or significantly change opinions about America among those who oppose U.S. policies in the Middle East and South Asia.

Many Muslims were receptive to President Obama's efforts to demonstrate respect for Muslims and to stress common values. But Obama missed an opportunity to clearly identify the common enemy: Islamist extremists. Instead, he spoke of "violent extremists," shied away from using the term *Islamist*, and glossed over terrorism, which continues to be a threat not only to Americans but to Muslims as well.

**A New Beginning with Muslims.** President Obama called for a "new beginning" in U.S.–Muslim relations based on "mutual interest and mutual respect." He recognized the important contributions made by Muslims in arts, sciences, mathematics, philosophy, and medicine and pledged to fight against negative stereotypes of Muslims.

He also emphasized the need for more tolerance and the safeguarding of diversity in Muslim-majority countries. He noted the importance of protecting religious freedom for minorities and suggested that Muslims need to be mindful of one another's differences. He was also right to emphasize the importance of women's rights.

The President also highlighted the success of Muslims in America, noting that people from all

racess, creeds, and religions have opportunity in America. But he should have gone further to make the point that this is possible because of the rule of law and democratic checks on authority.

It was also important that he talked about the founding principles of America. This should happen more often in our public diplomacy. It is much more productive than trying to promote popular American culture as an instrument of public diplomacy, which is a losing proposition.

He could have been more explicit, however, about non-violent Islamist extremism and the dangers it poses to individual freedom and religious liberty. He addressed it indirectly by expressing the U.S. commitment to democratic values, but he should have provided more moral support for Muslims around the world who are themselves fighting against such ideologies.

By avoiding using the word *Islamist*, he is downplaying the ideological underpinnings for terrorism and oppression. Obama is right that we should not equate terrorism with the religion of Islam, but we also need to be ready to engage in the battle of ideas and be clear when Islamist ideologies contradict the ideals of individual freedom and religious liberty.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm2468.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm2468.cfm)

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**Missteps on the Arab–Israeli Conflict and Other Middle East Challenges.** President Obama shared his personal experience of living in a Muslim-majority country and sought to connect the civil rights movement in the U.S. with the Palestinians’ struggle for an independent state. The problem with this comparison is the context.

Unlike the struggle for civil rights in America, there are significant extremist and sometimes violent movements in the Palestinian territories and broader Middle East dedicated to Israel’s destruction. This makes for a much more treacherous problem. Establishing an independent Palestinian state is not likely the end of Israel’s existential insecurity. In fact, such a state could pose a much more severe threat to Israel’s security if it reverts to terrorism and allies itself to Iran or other hostile powers.

Moreover, President Obama also failed to make the point that Muslims living in Israel have more civil rights and freedoms than Muslims living under Hamas repression.

Obama also grossly understated the threat posed by Hamas to Israel and to Palestinians themselves. He vaguely talked about Hamas as if it is just another political party, without acknowledging its revolutionary Islamist ideology, which rejects not only peace negotiations but Israel’s very existence.

And he echoed the Arab narrative in talking about “occupation” and “humiliation” without mentioning the Arab attacks on Israel that triggered repeated wars and the Palestinian terrorism that has sabotaged past peace efforts. The Arabs could have created a Palestinian state after 1948 but did not. Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt occupied Gaza.

By raising Muslim expectations of a rapid movement to a peace settlement that downplays Israel’s security requirements and the threat of continued terrorism, the President may be creating the conditions for a dangerous backlash if these hopes are disappointed.

Terrorism and the refusal to accept Israel’s existence—not Israeli settlements—are the chief obstacles to peace. In Israel, the speech is likely to be perceived as an attempt to appease Muslims at Israel’s expense. There will be growing concern that

the Obama Administration is giving short shrift to Israel’s security needs and underplaying the threat of terrorism.

**Iraq and Iran.** Obama also criticized the Bush Administration’s decision to go to war in Iraq, calling it “a war of choice,” without mentioning that Saddam Hussein stubbornly failed to respond to several years of multilateral diplomacy and instead chose to flout 16 U.N. Security Council resolutions. If the U.S. had not led a coalition to enforce those resolutions, Saddam’s regime today would still be systematically repressing and murdering Iraqis, threatening Iraq’s neighbors, and disrupting the peace and security of the Middle East.

President Obama also broke from past American foreign policy by taking a very soft line on the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear weapons program and its strong support for terrorism. He repeated his offer to engage Iran without preconditions and even went out of his way to become the first sitting President to admit that the U.S. played a role in overthrowing Iran’s Mossadegh regime in 1953, thereby implicitly vindicating the narrative of Iran’s Islamist revolutionaries. While this may earn the President some personal popularity, it is unclear, to say the least, how this advances American national interests in Iran or the Middle East.

**Al-Qaeda Attempts to Upstage Obama.** Al-Qaeda failed in its attempt to upstage the Obama speech. Releasing two successive tapes this week, one on Tuesday by al-Zawahiri and one on Wednesday purportedly recorded by Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda sought to portray Obama as an enemy of the Muslim world who was sowing hatred among the Muslim community, particularly with regard to U.S. policies toward Pakistan.

The videos demonstrate that al-Qaeda is worried about Obama’s ability to appeal to the Muslim community and is desperately searching for ways to blunt his ability to do so. Al-Qaeda is focusing its efforts on Pakistan, where U.S. policies are often blamed for the rash of suicide bombings in the country over the last two years.

Al-Qaeda may have erred by mentioning the situation in the Swat Valley, however, since the Pakistani public has recently galvanized behind

the Pakistani military operations to oust the Taliban from the region. Pakistanis are increasingly viewing the Taliban as malevolent actors seeking to undermine the Pakistani state and its democratic institutions.

**Greater Clarity Needed.** The al-Qaeda messages aimed at denigrating Obama's speech are a reminder of the very real threat posed by a common nihilistic enemy. In future speeches, President Obama should outline how the U.S. and Muslims can cooperate to defeat that enemy.

Obama will also eventually have to address issues related to Islamist ideologies that contradict ideals of individual freedom and religious liberty.

Speaking with greater clarity and authority and devising a broader public diplomacy strategy to take them on is necessary to counter the intellectual underpinnings and justification for the terrorism and oppression that continues to emanate from some Muslim countries.

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