

The Obama Cairo Speech - Context and Implications

Paul Rogers

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Introduction

President Barack Obama made a major speech on US policy towards Islam and the Middle East on the occasion of his visit to the region at the end of May. The speech was given at the University of Cairo and was preceded by firm indications that it was intended to ease the tensions that had developed between the United States and the Islamic world during the eight years of the Bush administration.

It was a wide-ranging address delivered with considerable skill to an invited audience that included many young people. The speech was very well received by most of those present and was broadcast live by TV and radio channels right across the region as well as attracting worldwide attention.

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Some commentators argued that Cairo was an inappropriate venue, given the autocratic nature of the Mubarak regime, and there had been suggestions that Indonesia would be a better location, given Obama's family connections and the fact that Indonesia is the most populous Islamic country and is also a functioning democracy. Even so, since the focus of US concern is inevitably on the Middle East and Southwest Asia, the argument in favour of a more immediate location was very strong.

This briefing assesses the main elements of the speech and the likely impact on the diverse target audiences, and then relates it to current US policy towards the region and how this may develop in the coming months. Interestingly, what was billed as a speech designed to improve relations with Islam attracted markedly adverse comments from Osama bin Laden in advance of delivery and some antagonism from the current leadership in Iran. Perhaps both feared that there was a risk of Obama removing, or at least downgrading, a useful enemy.

Iran

President Obama devoted only a small part of the speech to relations with Iran and did not indicate any substantive changes in policy beyond a willingness to engage at a level that was higher than the Bush administration. While this relative lack of attention to a key aspect of the region might be surprising given the location of the speech it is understandable. The speech was given barely a fortnight before the Iranian presidential election at a time of intense political debate within Iran that has been heightened by some very robust televised exchanges between the candidates. Any announcement of policy developments would easily have been challenged as unacceptable interference in the election campaign.

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Israel and Palestine

Obama made clear the robust support that the United States has for Israel but what was much more significant was the strength of his recognition of the dire state of the Palestinians. While he called for unity among Palestinians, the phraseology used to describe their circumstances was tougher than many expected. What was notable was that the support for a viable Palestinian state, and the markedly implied criticism of Israeli policies, was at a level that would have been unthinkable from the Bush administration.

There has clearly been a substantial shift in US thinking, even if the basic support for Israel remains strong, and this follows the Israeli elections that moved that country towards a more hard-line stance. There is a significant current of opinion in Israel that the attitude of the Netanyahu government towards negotiations with Palestinians is so uncompromising that the government risks becoming isolated to an extent that could even damage Israel's standing in the United States. The worse-case scenario for Israel would be if a reformist candidate won the forthcoming presidential election in Iran, aiding the possibility of improved relations between Washington and Tehran just at a time when the Netanyahu government is trying to represent Iran as the immediate challenge to Israel's security which transcends any need for progress with the Palestinians.

More generally, Obama's positive comments about the Palestinian predicament were well-received by the immediate audience and were also welcomed across the region. If they were to be followed up by intensive efforts to move towards a settlement, then this would be of real concern to many radical Islamists, including the al-Qaida leadership. While movements such as al-Qaida have little connection with the Palestinian cause – indeed most Palestinians do not look

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to them for support – their circumstances are akin to a running sore for the region as a whole and underpin much of the anti-American mood.

Human Rights, Gender, Development and Democracy

If the Palestinian cause is a fundamental aspect of current Middle Eastern politics, three other elements of society are also important: the autocratic nature of many of the region's regimes; serious abuses of human rights in many countries; and the role of women. Even speaking in Cairo, the heart of one of the most undemocratic regimes in the region, President Obama still addressed the need for a democratic transition directly, and also spoke up for stronger adherence to human rights. A specific section of the speech highlighting the role of women was very well received by an identifiable part of the audience.

In one sense, Obama's focus on these issues was welcome, but given the level of sophistication of the informal political discourse across much of the Middle East, Obama is limited by the behaviour of recent US administrations, not least in terms of persistent support for regional autocracies, the six-year occupation of Iraq, torture, rendition and Guantanamo. Even so, Obama's clear statement of support for these issues, all set in the context of the need for a focus on the economic development of marginalised societies, will have struck a chord.

Perhaps most significant was the ease with which Barack Obama was able to quote from the major texts of the "three religions of the book", especially the Koran but also the Torah. In doing so, Obama was able to speak of his personal experience as a child in an Islamic country (Indonesia). Once again, the manner in which he was able to address relations with the Islamic world was in

remarkable contrast to anything of which his immediate predecessor would have been capable.

Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan

While President Obama confirmed the desire of the United States to progressively withdraw from Iraq there was less evidence of any substantive change in policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. Current intentions for Iraq appear to be to reduce the US military presence by approximately two-thirds over the next 18 months, but this is in parallel with a substantial increase in military deployments to Afghanistan, and a much more substantial degree of pressure on the Pakistani government to suppress Taliban and other paramilitaries, especially in North West Frontier Province (NFWP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Part of the reason for the lack of emphasis on Pakistan and Afghanistan is undoubtedly because the new administration has little new to say – and it may also be in the early stages of a rethinking of policies – but also because the speech was focused primarily on the Arab world. This was not a presentation for a South Asian audience and that may come on another occasion.

Implications

The main focus on any analysis of the speech must address the two issues of style and substance. As to style, this was a radical change for the US Presidency. The venue of the speech was the Great Hall of the University of Cairo and the symbolism of an American President, who is also an able orator, making such a speech to an Arab audience in such a historic venue should not be underestimated. The level of mistrust of the United States across the region

remains considerable but Obama can accurately represent himself as able to reach out in a manner that is unique among post-war US presidents, not least because of his family origins. As such, the speech may turn out to be groundbreaking.

This, though, depends very much on substance, and on the policy follow-up. Leaving aside the nature of relations with Iran (this briefing is written before the first round of the Iranian presidential election on 12 June), three areas of concern are relevant – Israel/Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan.

As already mentioned, there is concern in Israel that the hard-line nature of the Netanyahu administration is proving counter-productive to Israel's security interests, given the essential need to maintain a close relationship with the United States. In one respect the Obama administration has been fortunate in that the recent elections in Lebanon did not bring Hezbollah to power in a coalition. If that had happened it would have been difficult for Washington to ignore the legitimate results of an election, and the Obama administration's response would have been closely watched in Israel.

As it is, the administration has useful room for manoeuvre and is now in a position to put some pressure on the Netanyahu government. There is considerable urgency here because of the situation in Gaza. While largely ignored in the western media, the appalling difficulties being faced by ordinary people in Gaza are being widely covered across the Middle East and are causing considerable anger. It is a situation that is complicated by the attitude of governments such as that of Egypt to Hamas, where there is a real concern that Hamas can act as a beacon to marginalised communities in their own countries. As a result, there is little governmental sympathy for Hamas, even if it attracts grass roots support. The issue is that Gaza is the most grievous

aspect of the Palestinian predicament and needs to be addressed far more specifically by the United States if the tenor of Mr Obama's speech in Cairo is to have a sustained impact.

On Iraq, there are two issues. One is whether the recent upsurge in violence is an indicator that the Malaki government cannot control security without US assistance. If that is the case, then the US military withdrawal may be slowed down, whatever Mr Obama's intentions. This will, in turn, depend on whether the Awakening Movement and other elements of the Sunni militias that were co-opted by US forces can be truly integrated into the Iraqi security forces and civil service. The signs are not good, especially as the largely Shi'a security forces of the Iraqi government have been taking strong action against some elements of these militias in recent weeks.

The second issue remains that, whatever President Obama says, will the United States ever withdraw the great majority of its forces from Iraq, given the Persian Gulf's central importance as a location of oil and gas reserves? If the withdrawal still leaves behind some tens of thousands of US troops for many years, the perception of continuing occupation will be very hard to avoid, even under an Obama administration.

Finally, there is the evolution of the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The considerable US troop escalation is now under way, but even more significant is the extent of current Pakistani Army operations in North West Frontier Province and whether these will be extended to the FATA. It is frankly difficult to assess the impact of the recent extensive operations in the Swat Valley because of the absence of an independent media and the heavy reliance on unsubstantiated statements from Army sources. While there are confident claims that Taliban

militias have been defeated, the reality may be much more one of dispersal rather than defeat. That has certainly been the experience in the past.

Furthermore, what is clear is that there have been massive flows of refugees from the areas of fighting, with over two million people displaced. The Pakistani government has been unable to cope with such large numbers of displaced people, many of whom are having to survive in crude camps at a time of excessive summer heat. There is evidence that some of the radical Islamist organisations have been quick to offer medical and other relief, in marked contrast to the government, and this may well stimulate support for such groups. There is therefore the strong possibility that the intensive military operations may appear to achieve short-term results but with the risk of longer-term resentment that aids the position of the radical Islamist militias.

Conclusion

The Cairo speech was ground-breaking and will have a discernable effect in improving US/Arab relations. The longer-term impact will depend partly on the further development of US policy towards Israel and Palestine, and whether Iraq can continue on its uncertain transition to a greater stability. Even more significant, though, will be the developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the coming months. These may well be the factors that influence the longer-term impact of the Cairo speech and they raise many difficult questions for the Obama administration.

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