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US President offers history, vocabulary lesson Obama gives Americans blueprint for Muslim ties



Many Americans watched Obama's speech addressing the Muslim world on a TV screen in New York's Times Square

BEIRUT (Courtney C. Radsch)

Americans, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, listened with interest to their president's address to the Muslim world Thursday in Cairo in which he reiterated the need for mutual interest and respect between the United States and Muslims that has been a theme throughout his young presidency.

Just a few months into an historic presidency Barack Obama made a bold step and went to Cairo, which he called a "timeless city," leaving behind for a moment the economic crisis and domestic politics to fulfill a promise made nearly two years ago to repair relations with the Muslim world.

"I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition," he said, vowing to forge a "new beginning" for Islam and America to end a cycle of "suspicion and discord."

And he referred specifically to "Palestine" rather than a more generic term while leaving out all mentions of the word "terrorism," a term that became synonymous with anti-Muslim sentiment during his predecessor's term. Americans abroad and at home appeared to welcome the new tone, and likely learned a few new facts and words they did not know before.

Beyond expectations

"I liked the fact that he never talked about the 'Muslim world' but was careful to talk about Muslim communities," Barbara Ibrahim, wife of recently pardoned Egyptian human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, told Al Arabiya. "He came close to an apology about the past eight years of (former President George W.) Bush. But given all cross pressures I think he walked a fine line and did very well."

“Obama went further than I had expected and he was rather bold about democracy and rule of law,” added the dual American-Egyptian citizen, who has lived in Egypt for 34 years, adding that she thought his speech was “direct and sincere.”

Although Obama billed the speech as one directed at Muslims abroad, it was equally a speech to the American public, according to Mohamed Younis, senior analyst at the Washington-based Gallup Center for Muslim Studies.

"The American public overwhelmingly asserts that they think relations between the Muslim world and the west is something important to them but don't understand the situation very well," he told Al Arabiya, referring to surveys done by the center.

"Islam is part of America"

The first black president in the country's history evoked his personal connection to Islam via his Kenyan father and childhood in Indonesia as he sought to connect with the Muslims he was addressing, but also made a statement to America about how identity is multifaceted and diverse.

Many of the words Obama used – azaan, hijab, zakat – were likely unfamiliar to much of his American audience, and his invocation of a verse from the Quran demonstrated that a Christian can find meaning and shared teachings in Islam.

“American Muslims also appreciate the president's statement that ‘Islam is part of America’ and his defense of the right to wear religious attire such as the Islamic headscarf, or hijab,” said Hooper. “By quoting the Quran on issues such as diversity, justice and the sanctity of human life, the president acknowledged Islam's contributions to universal values.

“President Obama's comprehensive, balanced and forthright address covered almost all the bases in terms of issues of concern to Americans, American Muslims and those in Muslim-majority nations. It may serve as a turning point in what have been deteriorating relations between America and the Muslim world,” said Ibrahim Hooper, communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Obama noted in his speech, delivered at Cairo University, that a Muslim country -- Morocco -- was the first country to recognize the newly-formed United States of America in 1796 and the second U.S. president spoke of the tranquility of Islam.

Very well received

Regardless of the controversy among the American left over his initial choice of Egypt for the venue and the signal this sent on human rights and other issues, observers said his speech was received positively.

“It was received extremely well by everyone I've engaged with or spoke to on the ground,” said Younis.

On the policy level Obama made no grand announcements on the Middle East peace plan but did commit himself to working for a resolution, acknowledging the suffering of Palestinians without discounting the historical suffering of Jews during the Holocaust and maintaining clearly that the U.S. shares a strong bond with Israel.

Whether he was successful in changing American discourse and improving relations with the Muslim world remains to be seen in the coming months and years.

“I think you have to consider the goals, first and foremost was to establish a new tone in relations

between the U.S. and the Muslim world. In that respect, I think it was a success," said David Faris, a doctoral candidate who spent several months in Egypt doing research on Arab media and politics. "The symbolism of coming to Cairo, grappling with Arabic, acknowledging Arab and Muslim contributions both to U.S. and world history, these were very, very important pieces of symbolism and rhetoric."

Faris noted that Obama exhibited an "obsessive even-handedness" on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that conceals the bigger obstacle at the moment: Tel Aviv.

"On the other hand, explicitly placing it as a centerpiece on his agenda is no small thing after the conflict was effectively marginalized during the Bush years. I think the speech gives Obama a certain amount of trust and credibility with ordinary Muslims," he said, adding that Obama must still find a way to bridge cultural and policy differences if there is going to be a long-term change.