

What should President Obama say to Muslims?

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

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February 23, 2009

President Obama's election sent positive signals to Muslim communities worldwide on the values of the American society, the possibility of change, and the opportunities for opening a new chapter in the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. Obama's expected speech to Muslim audiences later this spring can help direct the enthusiasm that many Muslims felt after his election.

KEY POINTS

- Obama got off to a good start, and actions during the first month of his presidency have surpassed expectations. Promising an end to torture, closing CIA interrogation sites abroad, and moving to close the U.S. military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba have all been important steps and a radical departure from the policies of George W. Bush.
- The venue of Obama's speech is important and will convey U.S. endorsement of the host government. Turkey and Indonesia would be excellent choices in this regard; a venue such as Saudi Arabia would allay concerns that Obama was avoiding the Muslim heartland.
- Obama's principal audience should be Muslim people, not their governments. He should also directly address those who have suffered inadvertently from the U.S. prosecution of the war on terror.
- Muslim scholars need to hear that the United States supports their efforts repudiating the ideological arguments of terrorists, and that the United States respects all religions; political leaders in Muslim-majority countries need to hear that the United States expects them to promote the rule of law, political pluralism, and human rights.
- Obama also needs to reach out to Muslim communities in the West, and let them know that they are valued members of their communities.
- Obama should use the speech to articulate a vision of U.S. policy towards issues of concern to Muslims such as Afghanistan, Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Darfur, Kashmir and Afghanistan. He also needs to articulate what he meant in his inaugural address when he spoke of "seeking a new way based on mutual interest and mutual respect."
- Obama should not overpromise, or portray U.S. values as universal values. He also should de-link economic and political progress, since political progress is beneficial on its own.
- Obama's perceived silence during Israel's Gaza operations did not win him new friends among Muslim publics, but he still has a significant following. For example, young people have been seen in the Middle East wearing Obama T-shirts as a symbol of their desire for change. A major speech to the Muslim world which touches issues of concern could help build upon this sympathy and good will.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Obama's popularity in Muslim communities gives him a unique opportunity to reframe the way Muslims think about their relationships with the United States.
- A successful speech will lay out practical policy steps the United States will take as well as a theoretical framework for cooperation and respect between the United States and Muslim communities.
- A speech that diminishes the polarization between the United States and the Muslim world will aid reformers and help isolate radicals.

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