

COMMENTARY

President Obama in Cairo

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In Cairo on Thursday, President Barack Obama will once again wade into the difficult issue of religion. More than 1 billion listeners around the world will be paying particular attention.

Since day one of his presidency, with his choice of Evangelical pastor Rick Warren to deliver the inaugural invocation, President Obama has dealt with religion.

In Turkey this April, Obama promised a partnership with the Muslim world based on listening and mutual respect, a common rejection of extremist ideology, and a concrete commitment to specific programs in education, health care, trade, and investment.

And in a commencement speech at Notre Dame last month, Obama sought to soothe controversy by appealing to commonalities across religions. He encouraged graduating students to remain firm in their religious beliefs without demonizing those of differing convictions, stressing the universality of the “golden rule.”

He has faced a Muslim world wary that the United States is at war with Islam and a significant percentage of Americans convinced that his stance on abortion is at odds with the will of God.

Each time, President Obama has responded with an emphasis on religion’s potential to unify.

To succeed in Cairo, Obama must combine the reassurances made in Turkey with the open engagement with religion demonstrated at Notre Dame. At South Bend, Obama directly credited Catholic leaders and communities with bringing about social change. By acknowledging the capacity of religious movements to drive development work and religious principles to resolve conflicts, Obama can likewise make significant progress in repairing relations with the Muslim world.

The dangers of the old approaches are clear. Leaving religion out of the analysis results in misunderstanding its often-critical roles in society and politics and fails to harness its potential to contribute to peace and growth. A binary approach to religion—the good versus the bad—has led to misguided efforts to influence Islam’s development through “empowering moderates” and restraining nonviolent, fundamentalist expressions of Islam. While the government’s conceptualization of Islam may have received less media attention than its military invasion of Iraq, it may prove one of the government’s costliest mistakes post-9/11.

Over the past few years, we have seen religion as a misunderstood and neglected element for strengthening policy approaches toward states at risk. In the 2007 CSIS report *Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings*, we recommend steps that could improve how the U.S. government approaches religious issues abroad.

Conceptually, the government must expand beyond a threat-based, Islam-focused analysis of religion and embrace a broader understanding of world religions. The perception that the United States is a Christian nation that favors and discriminates on that basis must also be addressed. At the same time, the State Department should broaden its approach to international religious freedom, prioritizing religious tolerance, and conflict prevention.

Of course, full engagement with religion requires more than rhetoric. Religious expertise should be represented at key levels of the government. The undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs should be responsible for representing religious dimensions at the principals level, and the ambassador-at-large for religious freedom should be present at senior State Department meetings. The geographic bureaus at the State Department should be tasked with expanding religious expertise, and public engagement on this issue should be promoted, perhaps through a national commission or online communities.

Cairo presents an opportunity to set the right tone for religious engagement moving forward. Obama will have a full agenda for this talk including promoting an Israeli-Palestinian solution and encouraging a regional peace that navigates the sensitive relationship with Iran. As he pursues a new kind of partnership with Muslims around the world, he will also need to allow a meaningful role for religion.

Obama's Notre Dame speech was effective because he presented concrete examples of religion working for good. In Turkey, his promises of respect for Islam resonated most when he recognized the positive impact that Muslim communities have had on him personally. In Cairo, Obama should acknowledge not just Islam but religion in general as a global force with the potential to contribute to security, justice, and social and economic well-being. A new focus on changing the U.S. government's approach to religion has infinitely more promise than previous, misguided efforts to change a religion.

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