

COMMENTARY

**The Obama Speech: The Problem of Facts on the Ground**

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The initial debate over President Barack Obama's speech has tended to focus on the details of his rhetoric and on whether he sent exactly the right message to the Muslim world. The consensus seems to be that it was well drafted, gave the right messages, and set the proper stage for further action. Judging by Muslim and Arab reactions, the speech also set the right tone in improving the image of U.S. leadership and in trying to overcome the ideological tensions of the past eight years. Aside from the usual bickering over nuance, the main objection has been that a speech is no substitute for action, and particularly for the specific action any given critic wants the United States or the president to take.

There is a need for the United States to follow up the president's speech with a sustained campaign in terms of public diplomacy, improved cultural exchanges, dialogue, educational exchanges, and all of the efforts that bridge the gap between religions, cultures, and nations. One would hope that the administration is already planning such a campaign, and that it will be far more sophisticated than the ones the Bush administration attempted.

The United States needs to follow up the president's speech by putting an end to its past reliance on ideological statements, calls for the Middle East to become the United States or the West, and overcentralized efforts coming out of Washington. It needs to revitalize its country team efforts and the work of its individual embassies and staff and fund country-by-country programs. It needs patience and dialogue and to focus on working with local reformers to achieve the pace given nations can actually absorb. It needs to provide tailored information campaigns and rebuild the information and exchange programs in each embassy and consulate. It needs to focus on bringing local leaders and journalists to the United States, building up secular and pragmatic education efforts in each country, and educational exchanges.

There is, however, a deeper subtext to the president's speech. He listed virtually every enduring challenge to U.S. interests and the stability of the Middle East. He then made it clear—quite correctly—that there are no easy steps forward to improving the United States' strategic position and that years of effort will be needed to deal with any given case. The fact remains that the Middle East and the threat of extremism cannot be resolved by the best possible rhetoric or dialogue—important as both are. The key problems go far beyond perceptions; the only solutions are to change the facts on the ground.

In the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the search to trade territory for peace has led to decades of trading settlements for terrorism. The United States now needs to fully support the Mitchell plan through what may well be years of patient, painful effort. It needs to stop waiting for each side to advance a workable peace proposal and advance its own solutions, even if these do nothing more than catalyze action by the Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians, and other Arabs. In doing so, the United States needs to make it crystal clear that it will act to ensure Israel's security and that no extremist movement can establish more than dialogue unless it clearly recognizes Israel's right to exist.

At the same time, the United States needs to put real and sustained pressure on Israel to halt all settlements and the creeping exclusion of Arabs in East Jerusalem and allow relief in Gaza. It also needs to seek modifications to the Arab League peace proposal that will take account of the reality that demographics alone make an Arab right of return impractical, and that a rigid return to 1967 is no substitute for peace proposals that take account of the political, economic, and security realities of 2009.

In the case of Iran, the United States should pursue dialogue, an interest section, and every opportunity to find some narrow areas of common interest. It is all too likely, however, that there is no chance of a grand bargain, of halting Iran's nuclear and missile programs, of halting its pressure on Iraq and use of Syria and Hezbollah, and the steady build up of its capabilities for asymmetric warfare. This is likely to force the United States to reshape its military posture in the Gulf and the region, work with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Iraq to strengthen regional defense, seek improved regional missile and air defenses, and possibly consider extended deterrence to make it clear to Iran that any nuclear strike or even sustained nuclear threats would have devastating consequences. Diplomacy would be the best alternative to any military strike on Iran, but the practical alternative may have to be an aggressive effort at containment.

In the case of Iraq, it is becoming clear that the United States will need to do far more than withdraw its forces. It is going to take years of patient aid in developing Iraq's economy, capacity for governance, and rule of law. U.S. efforts will be needed to help Iraq develop its petroleum resources and national income, to obtain foreign investment and improve its industry, and to carry out structural reform of its agricultural sector. U.S. aid to Iraq's security forces will be needed long after the United States withdraws in 2011, and so will U.S. diplomatic efforts to encourage political reconciliation—particularly between Iraq's Arabs and its Kurds. The United States cannot ignore the reality that Iraq is a critical part of energy security, global economic stability, and any effort to contain Iran. It also cannot ignore the reality that Iraq's political problems and economic crisis make winning the peace as difficult as winning the counterinsurgency.

The president has already recognized the need for a sustained effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to deal with the threat that extremism poses to each Arab and Muslim state, the region, the United States, our allies, and the world. In practice, this almost certainly will consume all of his first term and be a continuing effort through his next term if he is reelected. The United States needs to start thinking in terms of a decade, not a few years.

None of this means that President Obama did not make an important beginning, but words must be followed by actions. The president, and every aspect of U.S. policy in the Muslim and Arab worlds, will not be judged by the quality of rhetoric but rather by the facts on the ground.

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