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President Obama's Relationship with American Muslims is a Quiet One

Posted By [Wendell Goler](#) On April 27, 2010 @ 2:30 pm In [Afghanistan](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [National Security](#), [White House](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

Monday, nearly 11 months after addressing the Muslim world from Cairo, President Obama delivered a major speech to Muslims in this country. But his audience was a group of entrepreneurs, investors and educators from more than 50 countries where Muslims are a majority of the population. The speech launched a two-day summit aimed at expanding business ties between the U.S. and the Muslim world.

Obama has yet to deliver a major speech to the American Muslim community and yet Muslim leaders in the U.S. say relations with the White House have never been better. At the same time, some conservatives say White House sensitivity to issues that might offend Muslims, is compromising U.S. security.

In Cairo, Obama said "let there be no doubt, Islam is a part of America." But in post 9/11 America it remains a politically sensitive part.

Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., says "the fact is we are fighting terrorism today but terrorism is coming primarily from the Muslim world and the Muslim community."

That kind of thinking makes public White House outreach to American Muslims politically risky, and perhaps for that reason the Obama administration's outreach has been quiet and conducted by the president's aides. But there has been outreach.

James Zogby, of the Arab American Institute, says "the ongoing relationship with the White House is...significantly improved over the 8 years in the Bush administration," during which he says "there was not a single Arab American briefing."

In a February speech at New York University, John Brennan, the president's counterterrorism advisor, said American Muslims have endured "surveillance that has been excessive" and "over-inclusive no-fly lists," among other grievances. Muslim leaders say frequent contact with administration officials is changing that. They point to the relatively short period of time that passengers from 14 Muslim countries were subjected to extra airport scrutiny, following the failed Christmas Day airline bombing attempt.

Still, some of the Obama administration's efforts to avoid offending Muslims have attracted sharp criticism, particularly the decision to drop the Bush administration phrase "war on terror."

Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., one of two Muslim members of Congress, feels the Bush administration approach was too simplistic. Ellison said "You can't just have this mono-statement where you say, 'we denounce terrorism' and rattle our sword." But Lisa Curtis, of the Heritage foundation, says sensitivity constrained the White House response to last November's bloody massacre at Ft. Hood, Texas, when a gunman identified as a Muslim Army Major killed 13 people and wounded 30 more.

"I think there was too much attention given to trying to downplay the fact that this was an act of terrorism." In fact it was two months after the incident before administration officials called it terrorism.

And today, Ct. Senator Joe Lieberman, Chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, announced the administration has failed to provide some of the information his committee has subpoenaed and has provided none of the witnesses he wants to interview, to determine if the shootings could have been prevented.

Ellison also says former President Bush doesn't get enough credit for his outreach to Muslims. He notes Bush launched the tradition of holding Iftar dinners at the White House during Ramadan. Ellison says "in many ways some of the good things he tried to do were overshadowed by Iraq and Afghanistan."

President Bush also named the first American representative to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). President Obama's OIC representative, Rashad Hussain, drew sharp criticism from

conservatives for calling the prosecution of some terror suspects "politically motivated," a comment both Hussain and the White House initially denied.

Zogby believes the U.S. relationship with Muslims at home and abroad has evolved under the Obama administration. He cheers the decision to close the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, though Obama is finding it difficult to actually accomplish. Conservatives almost universally oppose the decision, which they see as a mistaken belief that the "war" on terrorism can be treated as a "criminal matter."

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, goes a step further, accusing the Obama administration of "trying to label some things profiling and off limits that actually have always been good law enforcement practices."

The White House, meanwhile, denies that political sensitivity is keeping the president from making a public outreach to American Muslims.

When asked if Obama feared it would fuel radical internet claims that he's not an American citizen and is hiding Muslim roots, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said "The president has dealt with the crazy Internet rumors for -- for years. I don't think that's deterred anything that he's done in understanding what the right thing is to do for this country."

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