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Obama Reaches Out To Islamic World With Cairo Speech



(RFE/RL) -- U.S. President Barack Obama has delivered a much-awaited speech at Cairo University in which he called for a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world."

In a speech punctuated by Koranic, Biblical, and Talmudic references and broadcast on major media platforms around the globe, Obama called for mutual understanding, criticized violent extremists and authoritarian leaders, admitted U.S. policy failures in the past, and urged Muslims to look inward at some of their own shortcomings.

He said he had "come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world...based upon mutual interest and mutual respect, and...the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition," Obama said.

"Instead, they overlap, and share common principles -- principles of justice and progress, tolerance, and the dignity of all human beings."

The U.S. president encouraged a break with the past but also sought to ward off any temptation to see his remarks in isolation, noting that "no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust" or answer "all the complex questions that brought us to this point."

"But I am convinced that in order to move forward, we must say openly to each other the things we hold in our hearts and that too often are said only behind closed doors," Obama said. "There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground."

He criticized violent extremists as a "small but potent minority" who exploit historical tensions between the

West and Islam, which has some 1.5 billion adherents around the world.

"So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, and who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity," Obama said. "This cycle of suspicion and discord must end."

Israeli-Palestinian Issue

Obama said America's strong bonds with Israel are "well-known" and "unbreakable" But he also said the situation for the Palestinian people is "intolerable."

He used carefully chosen words on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, urging mutual understanding in Israeli-Arab relations.

"It is easy to point fingers -- for Palestinians to point to the displacement brought about by Israel's founding, and for Israelis to point to the constant hostility and attacks throughout its history from within its borders as well as beyond," Obama said. "But if we see this conflict only from one side or the other, then we will be blind to the truth: the only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security."



Baghdad men watch a live broadcast of Obama's speech from Cairo University.

To reach that goal, Obama said both Israel and the Palestinians need to live up to their obligations under Middle East peace plans.

"Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's," Obama said. "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop."

Obama also made a reference to Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and his threat to "wipe Israel off the map," saying such rhetoric contributes to fear and instability in the Middle East.

"Six million Jews were killed -- more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, ignorant, and hateful," Obama said. "Threatening Israel with destruction -- or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews -- is deeply wrong and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve."

The Broader Middle East

Obama said he recognized that it will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust between Iran and the United States. But rather than remain trapped in the past, he said he wants relations between Tehran and Washington to move forward.

"There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect, but it is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point," Obama said. "This is not simply about America's interests. It is about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path."

Obama said Washington recognizes that military power alone is not going to solve the problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He outlined U.S. plans to invest \$1.5 billion each year during the next five years to help Pakistanis build schools, hospitals, roads, and businesses -- and hundreds of millions of dollars to help people displaced

by fighting there.

He also noted that Washington is providing more than \$2.8 billion to help Afghans develop their economy.

"Make no mistake, we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan. We seek no military bases there," Obama said.

But he added that the threat of international terrorism makes a continued presence necessary.

"We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can," Obama said, "but this is not yet the case."

Obama also said the United States also is not pursuing bases, territorial claims, or resources in Iraq. He said the United States has a dual responsibility to help forge a better future for Iraq and to leave Iraq to Iraqis.

"Although I believe that the Iraqi people are ultimately better off without the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, I also believe that events in Iraq have reminded America of the need to use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems whenever possible," Obama said.

'Freedom To Live As You Choose'

In addition to speaking about what the United States can do to improve relations with the Islamic world, Obama also said that changes are necessary to strengthen democracy in many Muslim-majority countries.

He said the Arab-Israeli conflict has been used to distract the people of Arab nations from other problems. He also said that all who hold governing power must maintain their power through consent rather than coercion, must respect the rights of minorities, and must place the interests of their people above the interests of their political parties.

"All people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal for the people; the freedom to live as you choose," Obama said. "Those are not just American ideals, they are human rights; and that is why we will support them everywhere."

Obama said a woman who is denied an education is denied equality. He said it is no coincidence that countries where women are well-educated are far more likely to be prosperous.

He also pledged that the United States would partner with any Muslim-majority country to support expanded literacy for girls -- and to help young women pursue employment through micro-financing programs.

"Our daughters can contribute just as much to society as our sons," Obama said. "Our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity -- men and women -- to reach their full potential."

Obama also said that Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance, but he said there is a disturbing tendency among some Muslims to "measure one's own faith" by their rejection of another person's faith.

Obama concluded that it is easier to start wars than to end them, and to blame others for problems than to look inward. He said it is easier to see what is different about someone than to find things in common.

But Obama challenged the world to "choose the right path, not just the easy path."

written by RFE/RL correspondent Ron Synovitz in Prague

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