



# BULLETIN

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## Barack Obama's Visit to the Middle East and Importance of Cairo Address of 4 June 2009

by Patrycja Sasnal

*President Barack Obama's visit to the Middle East was aimed at restoring the U.S. image in the Muslim world and creating a positive climate for political initiatives to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Cairo speech demonstrated the intention to change the style of U.S. foreign policy, but its message is thinned out by a lack of proposals for concrete political solutions. Image-boosting measures may produce effects only if coupled with an initiative aimed to resume Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.*

On 3–4 June 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama paid his first official visit to the Middle East. He traveled to Saudi Arabia and Egypt (the two most important Arab allies of the United States) with the high point of the visit provided by an hourly speech at Cairo University, which had been announced as a major public presentation of the administration's new approach to relations with the Muslims.

**Visit in Saudi Arabia.** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the author of the so-called Arab Peace Initiative, endorsed by the Arab League in 2002, which provides for the recognition of Israel by League member states in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the territories it has occupied since the Six-Day War of 1967. A probable aim of the visit for the president, who intends to base his peace proposal on that particular initiative, was to persuade Saudi Arabia to make yet another "good will gesture" towards Israel, as an element motivating the latter to engage in future negotiations. The way in which the president mentioned the initiative in his subsequent Cairo address indicates that he did not receive unequivocal commitments from the Saudis. In the context of announced U.S. talks with Iran, the visit was also intended to assure the Kingdom of the U.S. commitment to guarantee the security of Arab states in the Gulf which may be threatened by Iran's nuclear programme.

**Cairo Address.** The political factor underlying the choice of venue for the speech has been Egypt's importance as the United States' ally in the Middle East, and a country which has already signed peace accords with Israel. The U.S. has sought to improve bilateral relations, much aggravated under the George W. Bush presidency. Culturally, Cairo is the historical capital of the caliphate and the hub of the Arab world. The place and the contents of the speech demonstrate that the priority target group were the Arabs, with the broader Muslim world coming next. The date of the address was not without importance either: the president sought to deliver it prior to the parliamentary election in Lebanon (which was held on 7 June, ending with the victory of the pro-Western coalition) and the presidential election in Iran (12 June).

Obama's speech was marked by a careful choice of words, numerous references to the Quran and deliberately oblique statements. The president spoke about matters of importance for Arab public opinion—such as "occupation," in the context of Israel's policy on the Palestinian territories—something which the U.S. administration has usually avoided. He offered Muslims a "new beginning," to be based on common interests and mutual respect. He listed seven issues to be taken up jointly: violent extremism, Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear weapons, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights and economic development. Speaking about Afghanistan, Obama stressed that 46 countries were engaged in its stabilization, and said that the U.S. did not intend to stay there, but was forced into fighting extremists. He also set the terms for the United States to recognize democratically

elected governments in Muslim countries: these governments have to be peaceful and observe the rule of law (this, in some cases, may lead to the recognition of Islamist governments).

As expected, Obama devoted most space to the Arab-Israeli conflict, although he did not present any concrete proposal for the resumption of peace negotiations. He spoke in favor of a comprehensive solution, i.e. one where Israel reaches agreement also with parties to the conflict other than the Palestinians. He stressed that the solution must involve establishing a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel, and he called on Israel to stop expanding settlements on the occupied territories. These pronouncements ran against the line taken by the Benjamin Netanyahu government, promoting a plan of the Palestinian territories' economic development without Palestinian statehood. Also against Israeli expectations, Obama softened his rhetoric on Iran—mentioning the U.S.-inspired coup in 1953, omitting accusations of support for Hamas and Hezbollah, and repeating a proposal for dialogue without preconditions—in an attempt to provide more favorable conditions for the expected talks with that country. Even though Obama emphasized the unbreakable U.S.-Israeli bonds, and the Israeli government's statement welcomed the Cairo speech, his address included elements confirming a weakening of U.S.-Israel relations observed since the formation of the Netanyahu cabinet.

In Arab countries the speech was received with satisfaction. Worthy of mention is a moderately positive reception of the appeal by representatives of Hamas, which was implicitly recognized by Obama as a representative of some Palestinians. Europe's reactions were positive too, even though the speech did not contain any mention of the European Union's role in the peace process, while indirectly criticizing French legislation banning headscarves in public schools.

**Conclusions.** President Obama's visit to the region, made so early while in office, the choice of Cairo as the venue for a major address, and non-confrontational contents of that address, all testify to the new administration's distancing itself from the policies of President Bush. First, the speech stands in opposition to the Cairo speech by Condoleezza Rice in June 2005, when she called on Arab countries to launch democratic reforms and criticized Saudi Arabia and Egypt for their record in this regard. Second, several times in the speech Obama implicitly denounced the so-called "Bush doctrine"—e.g. imposing a form of government from the outside, reaction to 9/11 contradicting the American ideals, a war of choice in Iraq, as opposed to a war of necessity in Afghanistan—even though he did not apologize for his predecessor's mistakes.

The visit was aimed primarily to go on with the burnishing of U.S. image in the Muslim world (in 2008, only 17% of Middle Eastern respondents in Gallup's poll held high opinion of the United States). This reflects the adopted strategy of smart power in foreign policy, recognizing the importance of the state's image. An intention to strengthen U.S. leadership in the world through dialogue and image improvement was sketched by Obama already in his inaugural address. The Middle East visit, with the "New Beginning" speech, comes as another step in a series involving the first presidential TV interview for Arabic channel al-Arabiya, address to the Iranians on the occasion of Iran's New Year, and a speech to the Turkish Parliament in Ankara. The Cairo appeal is without precedent, confirming the administration's desire to create a positive climate for U.S.-Muslim dialogue. But in the short run, the effects of image-boosting campaigns are hard to verify, and certainly must not constitute the only dimension of U.S. activity.

The Middle East visit and other measures aimed at resuming peace talks (such as Washington meetings with leaders of Israel, Palestinian Autonomy and Jordan) testify to the priority treatment accorded to the Arab-Israeli conflict in President Obama's strategy for the Middle East. But his speech lacked concrete overtures. Apart from a proposal to set up an exchange platform for cultural and economic programmes, no initiative was put forward in respect of the major political issues. And the formula of the speech—a presidential message to followers of one religion—may provoke principal controversy: the president mixed political and religious matters, thus weakening the position of secular parties in Muslim countries, while the religious tone of the speech stood in contrast with the political nature of the problems afflicting U.S. relations with countries in the region.