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# Changing the Discourse: First Step toward Changing the Policy?

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President Barack Obama's much-anticipated Cairo speech reflected a significant shift away from the ideological framework of militarism and unilateralism that shaped the Bush administration's war-based policy towards the Arab and Muslim worlds. His "not Bush" focus was perhaps most sharply evident in his public denunciation of the Iraq War as a "war of choice." Obama's call for a "new beginning" based on "the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition" was followed by a move to shift the official U.S. discourse towards something closer to internationalism - particularly by pointing to parallels between historical (and some contemporary) grievances and treating them as equivalent. This included his reference to the U.S. "role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government" along with Iran's "role in acts of hostage-taking and violence against U.S. troops and civilians."

Certainly, the equivalences were limited. Equating Palestinians and Israelis as "two peoples with legitimate aspirations, each with a painful history..." doesn't reflect the reality that Israel is an occupying power with specific obligations under the Geneva Convention, while Palestinians living under occupation are a protected population under international law. But in the context of decades of U.S. privileging of Israelis as the only ones who have suffered, equating the two was a major step forward.

As expected, Obama focused first on the historic contributions of Arabs and Muslims to global civilization and to U.S. culture and history. His articulation of U.S. policy - and particularly U.S. active obligations - on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were addressed only in broad strokes, although there was more detail regarding Iran.

The shift in discourse, away from justifying reckless imperial hubris, unilateralism and militarism and towards a more cooperative and potentially even internationalist approach was potent. The actual policy shifts were much smaller. It remains the work of mobilized people across the U.S. - starting with the millions who mobilized to build a movement capable of electing Barack Hussein Obama as President - to turn that new language into new policies - reversing the escalation and moving towards ending Obama's war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, ending the occupation of Iraq immediately rather than years from now, ending U.S. military aid to Israel and creating a policy based on an end to occupation and equality for all, launching new negotiations with Iran not based on military threats, implementing U.S. nuclear disarmament obligations, and more.

That's the next step.

### **The Wars**

Obama began by framing Washington's regional wars in the context of "violent extremism." He pointed to Iraq as a reminder of the need to "use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems," though he undercut that claim with the added "whenever possible." He did reiterate the claim that the "we pursue no bases, and no claim on their territory or resources" in Iraq, and that the U.S. will honor the agreement with Iraq "to remove combat troops from Iraqi cities by July, and to remove all of our troops from Iraq by 2012."

But on Afghanistan, Obama's own war, he continued to claim that "Afghanistan demonstrates America's goals," and that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan "because of necessity." He claimed "we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan" and "we seek no military bases there." But he went on that the U.S. troops are there because there are "violent extremists in Afghanistan and now Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can." This was a clear statement of intention to remain occupying or militarily engaged in those countries for a long time to come. As an after-thought, Obama added that "military power alone is not going to solve the problems" and bragged of a plan to invest \$1.5 billion a year in Pakistan for schools and hospitals and refugee assistance, and that the U.S. is "providing more than \$2.8 billion to help Afghans develop their economy." That claim might have had legitimacy if it

reflected more than a tiny pittance of the current \$97 billion of war-funding the Obama administration has requested for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars just through September.

### Israel-Palestine

Obama began with a reassertion of the "unbreakable" bond between the U.S. and Israel. He traced the history of Jewish persecution "around the world," but despite his focus here on the Islamic world, made no mention of the history of Jews finding refuge and welcome in Muslim lands during some of the worst periods of anti-Semitism. (He did refer to Islam's "proud tradition of tolerance ... in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition" but did not mention Islam's protection of Jews.)

And on settlements, he said that the U.S. "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." Although he did not specifically refer to ending so-called "natural growth" in the settlements, the reference to "earlier agreements" was clearly designed to remind the audience of Israel's 2003 agreement to freeze all settlement expansion including "natural growth."

Obama's overall language was stronger than that of any earlier U.S. president: Israel "must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's." His description of Palestinian suffering went beyond earlier U.S. accounts, including references to 60 years of "the pain of dislocation" and "the displacement brought about by Israel's founding." And he described the Palestinians' situation as "intolerable." His definition of the "legitimate Palestinian aspiration," however, was limited to "dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own," and despite the reference to Palestinian refugees and 60 years of dislocation, he did not mention the right of return.

Obama mentioned Israel's obligations only as statements - "Israel must also live up to its obligation..." "Israel must acknowledge," etc. He did not, in the crucial weakness of the speech, make any U.S. commitment to insuring that compliance - such as conditioning all or even part of the \$3 billion annual U.S. military aid to Israel on a complete settlement freeze or other adherence to other aspects of U.S. or international law.

Similarly, regarding the Arab peace initiative, Obama ignored the reality that the initiative's starting point - a complete Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders - has never been implemented. Instead he demanded that the Arab states "must recognize that the Arab Peace Initiative was an important beginning, but not the end of their responsibilities." He called on them to "help the Palestinian people develop the institutions that will sustain their state, to recognize Israel's legitimacy, and to choose progress over a self-defeating focus on the past," as if it were a Palestinian choice, rather than the consequence of continuing Israeli occupation and apartheid, that make creation of a Palestinian state impossible.

Obama did move the discourse significantly by his linking the Palestinian struggle to that of the U.S. civil rights movement and those in South Africa. While Obama referred only to the non-violent nature of those struggles, and didn't explicitly describe the Palestinian struggle for human rights as a civil rights or anti-apartheid struggle, those parallels are now part of the U.S. framework for understanding the fight for Palestinian rights. This gives new legitimacy to the anti-apartheid and "BDS" (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) movements that shape the global civil society mobilizations in support of Palestinian equality.

### Iran

The Iran discussion was perhaps the most significant in actual policy terms. Obama again turned to his pattern of equivalence, describing the U.S. "role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government" and Iran's

role in "acts of hostage-taking and violence against U.S. troops and civilians." While that's hardly an equal comparison, for a U.S. president to take full responsibility for the overthrow of a government and link it to Iran's later actions, is a huge step forward.

And on the prospects for diplomacy, Obama used language that parallels almost word-for-word the way Iran intellectuals, diplomats and government officials describe what Iran is looking for in future negotiations: "we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect." That commitment to respect, and the lack of a preliminary demand for what Iran must acquiesce to, could be the hallmark of a potential new diplomatic process. He didn't, unfortunately, call for a regional peace conference, involving all countries in the region including Iran, to replace his current call for Arab governments to join the U.S. and Israel in a regional anti-Iran alliance.

Importantly, Obama did restate the U.S. commitment "to seek a world in which no nations hold nuclear weapons." And he stated officially that "any nation - including Iran - should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty." Unfortunately, Obama simultaneously indicated an old-style unilateralist super-power approach to U.S. and international obligations to that treaty (NPT). He described the "core of the treaty" as the commitments of those nations wanting access to peaceful nuclear power not to seek nuclear weapons - Article IV of the NPT. But he made no mention of the reciprocal and at least equally (if not more) important Article VI - which requires the recognized nuclear weapons states - including the United States - to move towards comprehensive nuclear disarmament. So Obama's own commitment to "seeking" nuclear abolition is not linked to recognition of an actual treaty obligation to end Washington's own nuclear arsenal.

He also didn't call for a Middle East-wide nuclear weapons-free and weapons of mass destruction-free zone, as called for in the U.S.-backed Article 14 of Security Council resolution 687 that ended the 1991 Gulf War. Such a call would have included the need to disarm Israel's dangerous 100-300 high-density nuclear weapons, and at least tacitly recognized the destabilizing impact that nuclear arsenal in fomenting a Middle East nuclear arms race.

### **Democracy**

Obama took an important step in acknowledging that the war in Iraq, and specifically the Bush administration's claim that it was a war "for democracy" had undermined the U.S. claim of supporting democracy. He said "no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other."

He went on to say that the U.S. "would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election" and that "we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments - provided they govern with respect for all their people." Good positions - but ones that ignore the reality of continuing U.S. positions in the Arab world in particular. Certainly the January 2006 Palestinian election - deemed "free and fair" by U.S. and European monitors - that brought Hamas to majority power in the elected parliament was not "welcomed" by the United States. And just in recent days, Vice-President Joe Biden told Lebanon directly that future U.S. support would depend on the outcome of their forthcoming election - an unmistakable reference to U.S. intentions of cutting aid if Hezbollah, already the second-largest party in Lebanon's parliament, achieves greater elected power. (In this, the Obama administration is channeling President George H.W. Bush's position in 1990 regarding Nicaragua - telling the population that if they voted for the Sandinistas they would face years of continuing war, while a victory for the U.S.-backed opposition would lead to new economic assistance. The popular Sandinistas were roundly defeated.)

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