

How Obama lost Muslim hearts and minds

A year after his Cairo Speech to the world of Islam

*Fawaz A. Gerges**



Exactly a year ago, in June 2009, the then-recently installed American president, Barack Obama, made a landmark speech in Cairo symbolically to “reset” US relations with the Muslim world. He eloquently addressed critical challenges facing the US in the Muslim world and rhetorically offered a new paradigm, a new beginning, for managing relations between “America and Islam”. The speech sent a clear message:

I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

A year after President Obama’s historic speech, the reality of his Middle East policy is in sharp contrast to the promising rhetoric and high expectations he raised. Obama's address, coupled with a concerted outreach strategy, made a deep impression among many Arabs and Muslims. They hoped that the young African-American president would seriously confront the challenges facing the region and establish a new relationship with the world of Islam.

Although it is not too late for Obama to close the gap between rhetoric and action, he has, sadly, not taken bold steps to achieve a breakthrough in America's relations with the Muslim world. His foreign policy is more status quo and damage control than transformational. Like their American counterparts, however, Muslims desperately long for real change that they believe in.

Unless Obama takes risks in the Middle East, he might end up leaving a legacy of broken promises and shattered expectations in the region. If these are not addressed effectively, Obama runs the risk of rupturing America’s relationship with the Muslim Middle East further.

A significant part of the Arab and Muslim response to last year’s Cairo speech revealed a sense of optimism, of real change, tempered with instinctual scepticism. There also was a widespread feeling among many Arabs and Muslims that a man with the name Barack Hussein Obama (“Blessed Hussein is with us”) would understand their universe better than his predecessors, would treat them as partners instead of subordinates, and would rectify previous mistakes and misuses of American power.

Obama raised expectations that concrete action would follow. Even movements of defiance and resistance, such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, conceded that what Obama had said represented a breath of fresh air in US foreign policy. But people across the political spectrum stressed that they would assess the policies and actions of the American president, not only his words.

A year later, there is an increasing belief among Arabs and Muslims that Obama has failed to live up to his sweet words. The terminology of the “War on Terror” is no longer in use, but Guantanamo Bay is still open, and Obama has escalated the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere. His Palestinian-Israeli peace drive has reached a deadlock, and Obama lost the first round against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. His promise to free the Palestinians from Israeli military occupation and to help bring about an independent Palestinian state is unlikely to materialise in his first term in the White House.

The US, unlike many of its long-term European allies, particularly Britain and Germany, offered a weak response to Israel’s deadly attack on the Turkish-led Freedom Flotilla which resulted in the killing of nine human rights activists. While the international community expressed legitimate moral outrage at Israel’s deadly raid and called for the lifting of the

punishing blockade of the Gaza Strip and for a multi-national investigation, the US government has attempted to rationalise Israel's indefensible actions, thus undermining President Barack Obama's outreach to Muslims in his landmark speech in Cairo a year ago. At stake is not only Obama's credibility, but also US and Western national security.

The new president has also put the brakes on democracy promotion, and, instead, has embraced America's traditional Middle Eastern and Muslim allies – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Israel – without any regard to their domestic politics and conduct towards their citizens.

Obama's inability to match rhetoric and action has deeply disappointed Arabs and Muslims who had hoped that the young president would transform America's relations with the region, or, at least, would open a new chapter. An increasing number of Arabs and Muslims say that Obama talks the talk, but does not walk the walk, and that his policies are an extension of those of his neo-conservative predecessor, implying that Obama and his policies are a kind of sweetened poison. For them, Obama's rhetoric rings hollow, and is just empty talk. Public opinion polls and surveys do not fully reflect the depth and intensity of disillusionment with Obama. A view that has become entrenched among Muslims is that the US is not genuine about engagement and pays lip service to their hopes, fears, and aspirations.

Obama likely misjudged the complexity of the region and the exuberant political costs associated with a transformational strategy. His promises of genuine engagement and of building a new relationship with Islam's 1.3 billion adherents are no longer taken seriously, a fact that undermines the credibility and efficacy of his foreign policy in the greater Middle East, including undermining his wars against Al-Qaeda, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and his efforts of counterinsurgency in general. Middle Easterners will not buy rhetoric emanating from the White House unless it is accompanied by a concrete shift in US policies toward the region. Obama's outreach to Muslims is at risk because of widely-held perceptions that he either does not mean what he says or cannot deliver on his tall promises.

Obama has implicitly conceded that his Cairo speech was a case of rhetorical overreach. In an interview with Time, the American president surprised his interviewer when pressed on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. "This is just really hard... and if we had anticipated some of these political problems on both sides earlier, we might not have raised expectations as high," he said.

If Obama really wishes to repair the damage wrought by his predecessor and to build a new relationship based on mutual interests and respect, he must have the will and vision to chart a new course of action and invest some of his precious little political capital in resolving festering regional conflicts, particularly the establishment of a viable, independent Palestinian state, and making structural investment in institution building and in civil society.

To do so, Obama's foreign policy team must answer several critical questions. Is Obama willing to take stock of and review American foreign policy towards the greater Middle East, particularly relations between the United States and its regional authoritarian clients? Is he willing structurally to reconsider the traditional US approach which views the region through the prisms of oil, Israel, and terrorism? Is he willing to listen to the fears and aspirations of young Muslims and to take risks to help bring about real change in their societies? Is he willing to invest precious political capital in freeing the presidency from the claws of the lobbyists and special interest groups who have a stranglehold over the country's Middle East policy?

Arabs and Muslims too must realise that Obama does not possess a magical wand and does not bear all the blame for the lack of political progress in the region. Unfortunately, many of them placed high and unreasonable expectations on a new president without considering the complexity of the US foreign policy decision-making process and the reality of American domestic politics. The imperial presidency is powerful but presidents' hands are often constrained by Congress, the foreign policy establishment, domestic politics, the media, public opinion, and advocacy groups. Obama's domestic and foreign policy agenda is crowded, and, on his own, he cannot deliver a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement.

Perhaps a better question on this one year anniversary of Obama's Cairo speech is: what influence can Muslim states exercise in Washington, and what are they willing and able to do to support the desired transformation of relations. Will they be willing to employ their rich assets and present a genuine unified position? If history is a guide, the answer is a resounding "No". If they really want to see meaningful change, then Muslims must lend a helping hand to steer the US foreign policy ship in the right direction. Arabs and Muslims must marshal their assets and resources and play an active role in influencing US foreign policy and bringing about real, lasting change.

*Fawaz A. Gerges is a professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics, London University. He has written extensively on America's relations with the Arab world. Among his books is *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or A Clash of Interests?**