

"A New Beginning": President Obama's Speech in Cairo



On June 4, 2009, President Barack Obama gave a speech at Cairo University titled "A New Beginning," which was a turning point in US-Muslim diplomatic ties. Obama aimed to alter the relationship between the Islamic world and the West in this speech by highlighting mutual respect and understanding. Obama had promised in his 2008 campaign that he would address Muslims in a Muslim capital during his first few months in office. This speech represented the realization of that pledge. President Obama promised during the 2008 campaign to address Muslims in a significant way during his first few months in office, from a capital city of Muslims. By making good on this pledge, he demonstrated his determination to heal the strained ties that had grown between the US and the Muslim world under the previous administration. ¹

Background

Preliminary rumors circulated about the speech's subject matter and agenda. According to White House officials, Obama will not back down from taking on "tough issues" at the University of Cairo (My Sinchew.com, 2009). The issues Obama was expected to speak about were much anticipated, especially in light of the strained ties with the Muslim world and the Middle East peace process. ²

President Obama held diplomatic talks with important Middle Eastern figures in April and May 2009, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority. Though not much information was initially released, the goal of these discussions was to develop a peace plan for the Middle East. ³

¹ Briefing by White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs' 2009.

² 'My Sinchew.com. "Obama Speech to Offer Personal Commitment to Muslims.'" 2009.

³ 'Obama Embarks on Maiden Visit to the Middle East' 2009

The desire to repair ties with the Muslim world, which were thought to have suffered greatly under George W. Bush's administration, had a role in the decision to hold the address in Egypt. In order to resolve past tensions and pave the way for a new chapter in U.S.-Muslim relations, the speech was carefully timed. ⁴

Context and Preparation

President Obama made major outreach to the Muslim world before to giving the "A New Beginning" speech. Building bridges and creating a pleasant atmosphere between the US and countries with a majority of Muslims was his goal. Al Arabiya, an Arab cable TV network, had his first interview with him as part of this outreach, and he also sent a video greeting to the Iranian government and people for the new year. ⁵

President Obama had significant discussions with important Middle Eastern leaders in the months preceding the address. Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian National Authority, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, and King Abdullah II of Jordan had conversations with him. During these talks, the Israeli-Palestinian issue was discussed, a peace plan for the Middle East was developed, and support for the establishment of a Palestinian state was expressed. ⁶

After assuming office, President Obama made it plain that he supported the establishment of a state for the Palestinian people. He declared that he would negotiate with Iran and that he was against Israeli settlements, highlighting the necessity of resuming peace efforts. "My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy," he said in an interview with Al Arabiya. He also highlighted important topics for collaboration and conversation, such the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and violent extremism. ⁷

Selection of Egypt and Cairo University

The decision to hold the address in Egypt has geopolitical implications. Robert Gibbs, the press secretary for the White House, emphasized that Egypt was chosen because it symbolized "the heart of the Arab world" and was essential to the Middle East peace process. Egypt was an appropriate venue for a speech intended to strengthen U.S. relations with the Muslim world because of its strategic importance as well as its historical and cultural links to the Arab world. ⁸

⁴ 'Obama to Reach Out to Muslims in Egypt Speech' 2009.

⁵ Bobby Gosh. 2009. 'Behind Obama's Speech to the Muslim World'.

⁶ 'The President and King Abdullah on Peace in the Middle East' 2009.

⁷ Phillips Macon. 2009. President to Muslim World: "*Americans are not your enemy*".

⁸ Ross Colvin. 2009. *Obama to reach out to Muslims in Egypt speech*. Reuters.

Alternative destinations were widely rumored before Egypt was confirmed as the hosting country. Amman, Cairo, Istanbul, Jakarta, Rabat, and Amman were among the cities under consideration. The possible effects of each location's selection and the message it might send to the Muslim world were discussed by the media. Obama's administration requested that at least ten Muslim Brotherhood members be permitted to attend the Cairo address, despite significant doubt and protest from individuals such as Mohammed Habib, the deputy leader of the organization. Obama's dedication to diversity and including a wide variety of Muslim views was highlighted by this emphasis.⁵

Obama's Tour and Pre-Speech Events

President Obama took part in a number of important events to prepare for his historic "A New Beginning" speech in Cairo. He visited the Sultan Hassan Mosque and had discussions with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as part of his diplomatic endeavors. Just before giving the speech at Cairo University on June 4, 2009, President Obama met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at Koubbeh Palace in preparation for the event. The leaders pledged to find positive means of bringing about peace and development for the whole region while debating the difficult issue between Israel and the Palestinians. The President's interactions with Egyptian authorities and cultural sites were intended to foster an environment that would be favorable for the powerful address that came next.⁹

The Speech

In his speech titled "A New Beginning," delivered in Cairo on June 4, 2009, President Obama touched on a number of important issues that reflected his vision for better ties between the Islamic world and the West. The lecture addressed a number of important topics:

1. **Call for Improved Relations:** More mutual understanding and better ties between the Islamic world and the West are priorities that President Obama underlined. Commitment to a new age founded on respect and shared interests was the main subject.
2. **Confronting Violent Extremism:** Recognizing the global challenge of violent extremism, Obama called for joint efforts to confront and address this menace.
3. **Addressing the Israeli/Palestinian Dispute:** The President reaffirmed America's alliance with Israel but acknowledged the intolerable statelessness of the Palestinians. He

⁵ 'Behind Obama's Speech to the Muslim World' 2009.

⁹ 'Obama, Mubarak Hold Talks in Cairo', *Voice of America*, p.

recognized their legitimate aspirations for statehood and dignity, positioning both narratives on equal footing.

4. **Mention of Various Issues:** Among the many topics discussed in the address were nuclear weapons, democracy, religious liberty, women's rights, and economic growth. In his speech, Obama articulated his opinions on these subjects and offered a thorough strategy for dealing with the many problems facing the area.

President Obama's speech was a pivotal moment in international diplomacy, reflecting his commitment to fostering understanding and cooperation between different cultures and nations. ¹⁰

Reaction

Al-Qaeda chieftain Osama bin Laden harshly condemned President Obama's Middle East foreign policy before to the president's historic address in Cairo. One day prior to the address, on June 3, 2009, a video was made public by bin Laden in which he said that Obama was only repeating his predecessor's actions of inciting Muslims, creating the conditions for protracted conflicts, and multiplying the seeds of hatred directed against the United States. Furthermore, on June 4, 2009, a few hours prior to Obama's speech, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, gave a lecture. Regarding the upcoming address by the US president, Khamenei said that action was required since sentimental talks would not bring about change; instead, the Middle Eastern countries despise America. ¹¹

International leaders commented on Obama's address as well. The head of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, hailed the speech as outstanding and predicted that it would usher in a new era in U.S.-Muslim ties worldwide. The speech, according to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, marked the beginning of a new era in ties between the US and the Islamic world. The speech was warmly received by the Vatican, which said that it went beyond political platitudes and placed an emphasis on real shared interests in the service of mankind. ¹²

In reaction to Obama's address, opinions within the Muslim community and among Arab pundits differed. Some in the Arab press voiced doubt, but many applauded the speech and hoped it would set the stage for real action. The Daily Star's editor, Rami Khouri, called the address hyperbole and attacked Obama for advocating for human rights while visiting with

¹⁰ 'Addressing Muslim World, Obama Pushes Mideast Peace'. 2009. *The New York Times*, p.

¹¹ Robert Spencer 'Barack Obama's Speech in Cairo a Week On: What's the Verdict?'. 2009. *The Telegraph*, p.

¹² 2009. *San Francisco Chronicle*, p.

authorities who repress them. The fact that Obama's address had no mention of "terrorism" or "terror," which some in the Muslim community saw to mean favorably, was emphasized by Arab pundits.¹³

Political Effects and Legacy

President Obama's "A New Beginning" speech had a discernible impact on political events, notably the Lebanese general election that followed. The speech, emphasizing mutual understanding and peace in the Middle East, contributed to a perceived shift in sentiments. Hezbollah suffered a blow in the Lebanese general election three days following the speech as the pro-Western alliance was notably strengthened. Foreign policy observers recognized that Obama's speech may have had a crucial impact in influencing reformist public opinion during this crucial moment, even if other variables also played a part in the election.¹¹

An important part of the aftermath of Obama's speech was the answer given by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Following the speech, Netanyahu held a special cabinet meeting, demonstrating how Obama's remarks were still being discussed in the corridors of Jerusalem. Subsequently, Netanyahu initially supported a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians in a speech at Bar-Ilan University. This was seen by many as an answer to Obama's demand for peace and an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the Palestinian state. The events hinted to a nuanced and developing discussion on the Middle East peace process between the US and Israel.¹⁴

President Obama expanded on the ideas discussed in his Cairo speech in subsequent talks. He emphasized the value of finding common ground and seeking advancement on November 9, 2010, at the University of Indonesia. In 2011, following the Arab Spring upheavals, the speaker gave another follow-up address with the goal of improving U.S.-Muslim ties worldwide. Although the government received accolades for starting a new chapter, expectations for specific policies and actions to carry out its rhetoric increased.¹⁵

Obama's "A New Beginning" address has left behind a variety of effects. The speech marked a change in U.S. foreign policy with a goal of better ties with the Muslim community. Although it was applauded for its beneficial effects, some contended that the talk needed to be backed up by actual measures. The speech's influence may still be seen in later diplomatic attempts and the ongoing discussion over U.S.-Muslim ties worldwide.¹⁶

¹³ 'Obama's Speech in Indonesia'. 2010. *BBC News*, p.

¹¹ 'Barack Obama's Speech in Cairo a Week On: What's the Verdict?'. 2009. *The Telegraph*, p.

¹⁴ 'PM Netanyahu's Speech at Bar-ilan University'. 2009. *Bar-ilan University*, p.

¹⁵ John Esposito. 2011. 'Obama's Speech: A Good Start, but ... Foreign Policy'.

¹⁶ 'Obama: The College Years'. 2016. *The Atlantic*, p.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the "A New Beginning" address given by President Barack Obama in Cairo on June 4, 2009, represents a turning point in world diplomacy and an honest attempt to change the course of ties between the US and the Muslim world. Obama worked to promote cooperation and build bridges across cultural divides by addressing a broad range of pressing concerns, from geopolitical crises to basic human rights. The speech's global reception, characterized by both praise and critique, underscores the intricate dynamics of Western-Muslim relations. Positive responses from leaders like Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Barak, coupled with observable impacts on subsequent events such as the Lebanese election, highlight the speech's far-reaching consequences. Obama's commitment to ongoing dialogue and engagement, evident in follow-up addresses, underscores the enduring significance of the Cairo speech in fostering understanding and cooperation on the international stage.

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