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Guarded Optimism in the Arab World

Towards Obama's Call for a "New Beginning between the United States and Muslims" in Cairo

A review of Arab journalists' responses by

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President Barack Obama's call for a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims" on June 4th 2009 resonated deeply throughout much of the Middle East, drawing both praise and criticism. The speech held at Cairo University and co-sponsored by Azhar University, the main centre of Sunni Islamic learning in the world, was the main event of his regional tour and signified a major break with the rhetoric of the previous administration. Obama, who appeared to be well prepared and sincere in his intentions, showed that he was very much aware of the tension in the relationship between the U.S. and the Arab and Muslim world, and that it revolves around 3 concerns, the Palestinian question, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and the U.S.' attitude towards Islam. This stood in stark contrast to the Bush Administration's approach of "those who are not with us are against us", its emphasis on the "international war against terrorism", and its policies based on a neo-conservative outlook towards the region.

Much of the Arab media, especially those of "moderate states", were full of praise for the speech, and pro-government and state-sponsored newspapers devoted their main headlines, editorials and key opinion pieces to the analysis of its contents and its implications for regional politics. Newspapers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which tend to adopt the official government line, rushed to emphasize the strength of their "strategic" relationship with the U.S., as well as their pivotal role in the region. Critical remarks however, were also voiced, especially the question how this new rhetoric will translate into concrete changes on the ground.

The Arab Press on Obama's Speech

The Arab world's most widely read daily, *Al-Hayat* newspaper, gave the speech very upbeat coverage, calling it a major foreign policy statement and not just a public relations exercise containing empty promises.

Lead articles in **Egypt's newspapers**, adopting a nationalist tone, highlighted Obama's decision to make his 'historic' speech from Cairo as proof of

Egypt's significance in the Arab region and of the strength of relations between the U.S. and Egypt. The *Al-Ahram* daily for example touted "*the depth of the strategic relationship between the two countries, their mutual consensus, and the U.S.' trust in Egypt's important role in supporting peace and stability in the Middle East.*"¹

Saudi papers underlined Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia and his meeting with King Abdallah, which they emphasized took place before his trip to Cairo, as evidence of the deep ties between the two countries.²

The Lebanese press' response to the speech was more muted, largely because parliamentary elections were three days away and columnists were busy analyzing their possible outcome. As columnist Rosana Bu Monsef noted in the pro-Western *An-Nahar* newspaper, one of Lebanon's major dailies, Lebanese were so preoccupied with the parliamentary elections that Obama's speech did not receive much attention, and nor have the Lebanese taken stock yet of the speech's importance.³ *As-Safir*, Lebanon's other major and most balanced daily, took a more skeptical tone, considering the speech as little more than a public relations exercise and an attempt to positively market the new American administration to the Arab and Muslim world.⁴

In **Syria**, there seemed to be a near blackout of the speech. There was no official comment on it, Syrian newspapers did not cover the speech the

¹ Mohamad Amin Al Masri, "The Mubarak-Obama summit reflects the deep strategic relations between Egypt and the U.S" *Al-Ahram Newspaper* June 5 2009, issue no. 44741.

² "Meeting between Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines and Obama takes place for over two and a half hours." *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* June 5 2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=522076&issueno=11147>

³ Rosana Bu Monsef, "Obama's new beginning lacks a road map." *An-Nahar Newspaper* June 6 2009, issue no. 24716.

⁴ "Obama speaks to the Arab world with honeyed words: Jews have the right to a nation and our ties with Israel will not be cut." *As-Safir* newspaper June 6 2009, <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=1252&articleId=596&ChannelId=28869>

next day, nor did state television transmit it. However, Syrian political analyst Sami Moubayed, commenting in *Asia Times* on June 6th, observed that Syrians watched the speech on private Syrian satellite channels and there were “*smiling faces at a realization that something was changing – fast – in Washington D.C.*”⁵ Moubayed, adopting a semi-official stance, says that while Syrians are willing to give Obama the benefit of the doubt, they want to see his good intentions translated into policies such as the reduction of U.S. sanctions against Syria, removing Syria from the State Department's List of State Sponsors of Terrorism, and sending an ambassador to Damascus (the post has been vacant since 2005). Moubayed also underlined Syria's role in the region and the “*many common objectives in Iraq, like disarming militias, combating al Qaeda, supporting the political process and helping maintain a united Iraq.*”⁶ On June 9th, a couple of days after the speech, two opinion pieces appeared in the state-sponsored *Al-Baath* newspaper by Abeer Abdo⁷ and Mohamad Sawwan⁸ which were skeptical of Obama's ability to impose any conditions or restrictions on Israel and its right-wing government.

Curiously, the speech did not receive much coverage in the **Iraqi press**. Iraqi commentators mainly reiterated their primary concern being Obama's renewed pledge to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraqi cities by the end of the month and to remove all U.S. military posts before 2012.

⁵ Sami Moubayed, “The audacity of hope, from Cairo.” *Asia Times*, June 6 2009,

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KF06Ak01.html.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Abeer Abdo, “Is Obama serious about a just settlement in the region?” *Al-Baath Newspaper* June 6 2009 issue no. 13690,

<http://www.albaath.news.sy/user/?id=584&a=53489>

⁸ Mohammad Sawwan, “The Arab political scene – and Obama's new ideas.” *Al-Baath Newspaper* June 6 2009 issue no. 13690,

<http://www.albaath.news.sy/user/?id=584&a=53691>

Reality Check: The Palestinian Question

Obama's remarks on the Palestinian question stood in the centre of most analysis in the Arab press. The fact that Obama chose Saudi Arabia and Egypt as his first Middle East stops, and not Israel, the U.S.' closest ally in the region, was construed by many regional observers as a sign of Obama's genuine intentions towards solving the region's issues and the multiple rifts between the U.S. and the Arab world.⁹ Obama's decision to address the Arab-Israeli conflict early on in his presidency (instead of turning to it towards the end of his term, as did his predecessors George Bush and Bill Clinton, whose efforts to reach a solution were ultimately frustrated), was taken as an indication of his determination.¹⁰

Obama's speech, according to *Al-Hayat* correspondent Raghida Dergham, demonstrated his unwillingness to play the blame game favored by his predecessors who always pointed an accusatory finger at Palestinian leaders for any setbacks or failures in the peace process. She suggests that this new approach to the Middle East opens up the possibility of pressuring Israel without the U.S. rushing to defend it as was its wont in the past. She also contends that the American administration might not be willing to automatically protect Israel at the United Nations Security Council if it continues to violate international law. Dergham even speculates on the possibility of a U.S. freeze on financial aid to Israel especially if the U.S. senses that Israel's actions are threatening U.S. national security. Interestingly, the writer urges Arab states not to interfere in U.S. – Israeli relations and states that it is more in their interests to comply with U.S. wishes.¹¹

⁹ See Talal Awkal, “America's credibility is at stake.” *Al-Ayyam Newspaper* June 6 2009, <http://www.al-ayyam.ps/znews/site/template/article.aspx?did=113452&Date=6/4/2009>

¹⁰ “Tributes to Obama's conciliatory speech to the Muslim world.” *Al-Quds Newspaper* June 5 2009, <http://www.alquds.com/node/166026>

¹¹ Raghida Dergham, “It is in Arabs' and Muslims' interests to build a partnership with the United States and Obama.” *Al-Hayat Newspaper* June 5 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/24169>

The Saudi-financed *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, which is largely hostile to Hamas and Iran, urged Arabs to support the principles outlined in Obama's speech by uniting behind the Palestinian Authority and President Mahmoud Abbas and rejecting Hamas and Iranian interference in Arab affairs.¹² The newspaper also focused Obama's comments on Iran's nuclear ambitions and the threat they pose to Arabs. Jordan's pro-government newspapers (*Al-Rai* and *Al-Dostour*) welcomed the speech as a new beginning, and stressed Jordan and King Abdallah's role in intensifying efforts to support the rights of the Palestinian people in establishing a Palestinian state. *Al-Ghad* newspaper, which tends towards a more independent line, however took a more pragmatic and critical approach to Obama's speech, maintaining in its lead article that it did not "fulfill the hopes of the Arab street."¹³

The Palestinian press was rather cautious towards the speech, adopting a wait-and-see approach with regard to whether its principles will translate to concrete action on the ground.

Popular Palestinian daily *Al-Quds* was cautiously optimistic towards Obama's speech, calling it a "message of tough love to Arabs."¹⁴ Ali Jarbawi stresses in the joint Israeli - Palestinian newsletter *bitterlemons* that the speech contained many examples of Obama's intention to be frank and even-handed:

"He unequivocally called for a Palestinian state and used the word 'Palestine' - something that previous US presidents have avoided. In addition to repeating his demand for an end to the settlement enterprise, he stopped short of supporting the concept of a Jewish state, preferring the term 'Jewish homeland'. He effectively called upon Palestinians to pursue

*peaceful resistance, whilst equating their struggle for rights and freedom to that of black Americans and South Africans. There was even an acknowledgement of Hamas' legitimacy as a representative of the Palestinian people. And he didn't use the word 'terrorism' - not once in 6,000 words lasting 56 minutes. These are not coincidences or missteps. This president and his speechwriters are well aware of the novelty of these messages coming from the US leadership, and they are cognizant of the disquiet they will cause among the Israeli political and military leadership and the settler communities."*¹⁵

Others adopted a more critical stance. As Talal Awkal notes in *Al-Ayyam* (Palestine), Obama failed to address key issues vital to the Palestinian people, such as the right of Palestinian refugees to return, the borders of the Palestinian state and the separation wall in the West Bank. It will be difficult, according to Awkal, for the Palestinian people to easily forgive the U.S.'s historical steadfast support of Israel's crimes against them. He asks whether the shift in U.S. policy also implied a more evenhanded approach towards Palestinians and Israelis, and whether the U.S. would separate its interests in the international community from those of Israel.¹⁶

Palestinian and some Arab dailies also concentrated on the Israeli reaction to the speech, especially its negative effect on the settlers as a cautionary note against overstating the significance of the rift between Obama and Netanyahu. With regard to the settlements, *Al-Ghad's* Jamil Nimri (Jordan), reflecting a common view, writes that it was not enough for Obama to reiterate his call on Israel to stop building settlements, and wonders whether the American president was willing to take more concrete actions against Israel over the issue.¹⁷ Abeer Abdo in the Syrian *Al-Baath* newspaper deals with the issue of the settlements extensively, stating that a freeze on settlements is not enough. She

¹² Radwan Sayed, "What do Arabs want from Obama... and what does Obama want from Arabs?" *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* June 5 2009,

<http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=522093&issueno=11147>

¹³ "Obama calls for a new beginning with Arabs and Muslims and Arabs ask Washington for concrete actions." *Al-Ghad Newspaper* June 5 2009,

<http://www.alghad.jo/index.php?news=424044>.

¹⁴ Talal Awkal, "America's credibility is at stake."

¹⁵ Ali Jarbawi, "A breeze of change", *bitterlemons*, June 8 2009, Edition 22, www.bitterlemons.org

¹⁶ Talal Awkal, "America's credibility is at stake."

¹⁷ Jamil Nimri, "A speech for a new page in history."

Al-Ghad Newspaper June 5 2009,

<http://www.alghad.jo/index.php?article=13358>

contends that if Obama wants to show that he is serious about an independent Palestinian state, he should call for the complete dismantling of all Israeli settlements in the West Bank.¹⁸

Obama was also criticized for not dealing equally with the two sides on the issue of violence. Many writers noted that, although he did not churn out the hard-line maxim "Israel has the right to defend itself", Obama did not outwardly criticize Israel for its use of unjustified use of violence. Obama asked Palestinians to renounce armed resistance and emulate the African-American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s which acted through political action and not violence, while not explicitly asking Israel to do the same. According to many, Obama's speech revealed continued U.S. bias towards Israel in the region, despite Obama's conciliatory words to Arabs and Muslims. *An-Nahar's* Rosana Bu Monsef writes that by defining the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel as cultural and historical, Obama seemed to be placing the U.S. and Israel on one side, and the Islamic world on another, thus almost confirming his adherence to the "clash of civilizations" approach.¹⁹

A New Attitude towards Islam? Praise and Indignation

Common themes in Arab newspapers were Obama's Muslim background which contributed to his deep knowledge of Islamic culture as opposed to George Bush's "cowboy logic" and his confusion of Islam with terrorism.²⁰ Analysts also praised him for his declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of all monotheistic religions, and his implicit assurances that it will not be Israel's capital. Saudi Arabia's dailies were highly positive, focusing on Obama's Muslim background, and

extensively quoting his comments on his childhood in Indonesia and his citations from the Qoran. Kuwaiti coverage of the speech as well was full of praise for Obama's oratory skills, especially his citing of Qoranic verses. Kuwaiti newspapers emphasized his full name "Barack Hussein Obama", drawing attention to his Muslim background. The *Al-Qabas* daily chose to emphasize his tolerance and acceptance of the *hijab* (the Muslim head scarf) in the West, which it interpreted as indirect criticism of French policies towards the *hijab*.²¹ Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's donning of the head scarf in the Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo also received (almost gleeful) coverage in the main Kuwaiti newspapers.

The speech was also portrayed as a threat to both Islamic extremism and hardliners (Arabs, Israelis and Iranians). Mohammad Yaghi in *Al-Ayyam* newspaper (Palestine) notes that Al-Qaeda is most likely threatened by Obama's more astute and intelligent approach to the Muslim world: "His reconciliatory words and ability to win over the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims, may succeed in strengthening moderate Arabs, and persuading many Muslims to abandon extremist groups by weakening the pretexts for their existence."²² Interestingly, *Al-Hayat* columnist Ghassan Charbel describes Obama as a "perplexing" visitor who effectively demonstrated the charm and attractiveness of the "Great Satan" [the common reference to the U.S. by extremists].²³

Syrian analyst Moubayed writes in *Asia Times*: "*Although Obama made no reference to Syria in his speech, he did speak about willing to sit down and speak to Iran, with no preconditions. He spoke about Palestinian statehood, which was warmly received on the Arab street, particularly in*

¹⁸ Abeer Abdo, "Is Obama serious about a just settlement in the region?"

¹⁹ Rosana Bu Monsef, "Obama's new beginning lacks a road map."

²⁰ Mohammad Yaghi, "Reading Obama's speech: conciliatory language bordering on an apology." June 5 2009, <http://www.al-ayyam.ps/znews/site/template/article.aspx?did=113539&date=6/5/2009>

²¹ "Obama to Muslims: a new beginning." *Al-Qabas Newspaper*, June 5 2009, <http://alqabas.com.kw/Article.aspx?id=506382&date=05062009>

²² Mohammad Yaghi, "Reading Obama's speech: conciliatory language bordering on an apology."

²³ Ghassan Charbel "The perplexing visitor." *Al-Hayat newspaper* June 5 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/24240>

Syria. His praise of Israel was not new - and was even expected, by ordinary Arabs. It was used as a pretext, however, by Osama bin Laden to dismiss the US president hours before the speech was delivered, accusing him of being no different from Bush." On an optimistic note he adds *"Certainly more people were listening to Obama in Syria and the Arab world than those who paid any attention to Bin Laden."*²⁴

In an article titled "Goodbye September 11th", Kuwait's *Al-Qabas* newspaper argues that Obama's speech closed the chapter on the September 11th events, and would serve to weaken the foundations of Islamic fundamentalism (and in particular the ideology preached by Usama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri) and depriving it of its main punching bag, the United States.²⁵ The Palestinian *Al-Ayyam's* Mohammad Yaghi notes that Obama has adopted a more restricted definition of the "war on terrorism" in line with the vast majority of Muslims, as not being against Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic organizations that do not have links with Al-Qaeda, in contrast to the indiscriminate use of the term by the previous administration.²⁶

More critical remarks appeared in a couple of articles. Nabil Abdel Fattah, columnist for the Egyptian *Al-Ahram* newspaper, reflects the indignation felt by some towards Obama's 'lecturing' tone. Rather defensively, he writes: *"Does the Egyptian nation require lessons in democracy and political and religious reform from the centers of wisdom and political education in Washington?"*²⁷ He adds that freedom of speech, equality, citizenship, and political liberalism were all conceptions formulated by important thinkers in Islamic jurisprudence since the foundation of the

modern Egyptian state, and in particular, scrutinizes Obama's conception of the West as the "imperialist Us" vis-à-vis the "Islamic Other".

In the only elaborate Lebanese response, Rami G. Khouri praises Obama in the *Daily Star* for perceiving the Middle East not as it is depicted by "Fox Television, Israeli zealots [and] neoconservative simpletons" but as a region with its complexities and grievances towards the West. Khouri however also criticized the speech for its "lingering hollowness" and its failure to provide a concrete indication of whether it will be followed up by practical policy implementation. He writes: *"The core weakness of Obama's speech and approach was his continuing confusion between religion and politics. He eloquently spoke of the place of Islam and Muslims in American society and history and his own life story - which is impressive, but totally irrelevant. We who know and love both societies also know that Islam and America are soul brothers, a religion and a country deeply linked through values and faith. Obama wasted our time and his own in preaching on this. He would have done better to focus on the policy issues causing tensions between US policy and many Muslims. Here, we need action, not just fine rhetoric. However, it sure was nice to hear positive, sensitive, comprehensive rhetoric for a change."*

Khouri concludes *"The fact that almost every fine principle articulated by Obama in Cairo was contradicted by harsh American policies throughout the region should not detract from the importance of his visit or the potential power of the ideas in his speech,"* and advises *"So let's now put away the Bible and Koran classes, and get down to the tough business of forging better policies. Obama's gesture deserves return gestures of equal magnitude from Arabs, Iranians, others in the Islamic world, as well as from the Israelis [...]"*²⁸

²⁴ Sami Moubayad, "The audacity of hope, from Cairo."

²⁵ "Goodbye September 11th." *Al Qabas Newspaper* June 5 2009, <http://92.52.88.82/alqabas/Article.aspx?id=506385%20&date=05062009>.

²⁶ Mohammad Yaghi, "Reading Obama's speech: conciliatory language bordering on an apology."

²⁷ Nabil Abdel Fattah, "Obama's speech on Egypt and Islam." *Al-Ahram Newspaper* June 5 2009, issue no. 44741.

²⁸ Rami G. Khouri, "A bold speech, but hollow in some areas." *The Daily Star Newspaper* June 6 2009, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=102733

A Glimpse into the Arab Blogosphere

Interestingly, it was only the Arab bloggers who delved into the issue of democracy, which was one of the main points addressed by Obama. The Arab online blog scene (mostly young adults) delivered a harsh verdict on the speech.

Egyptian blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy, in an op-ed in the *New York Times* a day before the speech criticized the visit as a “clear endorsement of President Hosni Mubarak, the ailing 81-year old dictator who has ruled with martial law, secret police and torture chambers.” Away from the glossy public relations image of Obama’s ‘historic’ appeal to the Islamic world, el-Hamalawy reveals in a sober note, that an Al-Azhar student Kareem Amer “is languishing in prison after university officials reported his ‘infidel, un-Islamic; views to the government, earning him a four-year sentence in 2007.”²⁹

On Twitter (online social networking and blogging service) there was a real time debate on the speech, and many denounced Obama for quoting the Quran (common expressions used were “cheesy” and “patronizing”) and for bias towards Israel (a typical comment being: “Same old Holocaust justification for Israel. Dude, it wasn’t us, it was Germany.”)³⁰

Asaad Abu-Khalil, writing in his *Angry Arab Blog* severely criticizes Obama for failing to break from the rhetoric of previous administrations: “It was compiled together from various different elements that were contained in speeches of US presidents before, including speeches by none other than George W. Bush.” Abu-Khalil, like el-Hamalawy slams the choice of Al-Azhar as the sponsor of the event, because under “American puppets, Sadat and Mubarak, Al-Azhar became a force of

obscurantism, fanaticism, misogyny, religious intolerance, and violence.”

Will Words be followed by Deeds?

All in all, the Arab press acknowledged Obama’s display of depth in understanding and use of language that together marked a clear departure from the approach of the previous administration.

In *bitterlemons*, Ghassan Khatib writes “Political ideology, and the September 11 events, led the previous administration to deal with problems in the region - including “terrorism” - as solely technical, and related to security and the military. This approach produced superficial and wrong-headed diagnoses and treatments, and deepened negative attitudes in the region toward the American government. Obama’s speech went much deeper than others in diagnosing regional problems, referring, for example, to the negative impact of globalization in the region, which has swept in western cultural domination and all the resulting negative social and economic implications. This nod, together with prescriptions for improving and investing in education and women’s issues, shows a level of understanding that the people of the region are not used to in American rhetoric.”³¹

Many papers noted that the new U.S approach to the region appears to be more participatory, and willing to engage countries in the region, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular, as well as Turkey in devising solutions to the Arab region’s multiple crises. As Al-Ayyam’s Rajab Abu Sarya (Palestine) ponders, “is the United States evolving its foreign policy towards the region from mere crisis management (or “creative chaos”) to actual solutions?”³²

²⁹ Hossam el-Hamalawy, “Right Time, Wrong Place.” *New York Times* June 3rd 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/opinion/03alHamalawy.html?_r=1

³⁰ For a detailed summary of the commentary on Twitter, see: <http://arabist.net/arabawy/2009/06/06/egyptians-on-twitter-unimpressed-with-obama-speech/>

³¹ Ghassan Khatib, “Waiting expectantly”, *bitterlemons*, June 8 2009, Edition 22, www.bitterlemons.org

³² Rajab Abu Sarya, “Obama: from managing the crisis to solving it.” *Al-Ayyam* Newspaper June 5 2009, <http://www.al-ayyam.ps/znews/site/template/article.aspx?did=113538&Date=6/5/2009>

However cautionary notes were also sounded. Samih Moaytah in Jordan's *Al-Ghad* newspaper quite pragmatically warns that Arabs should not portray the change in U.S. foreign policy as revolutionary and nor should they treat Obama as a savior: "*U.S. foreign policy is not shaped by Obama's feelings, but by his country's national interest, and we should always keep in mind the power of the Zionist lobby in Israel and its influence on U.S. foreign policy.*"

Under the title "One man is not enough!", Moaytah calls on Arabs not treat Obama as a "Saladin" who would ride into the region to solve their problems, reminding that Arab states also bore a responsibility towards solving the main conflicts of the region.³³ Egypt's *Al-Gomhuria*, adopting a similar line in its main editorial, notes that although the speech offered an opportunity for Arab states to move forward on many issues in their region, it would not be given to them on a "gold platter".³⁴

The most common word used to describe Obama's speech in newspapers across the region was "honeyed" or "sugary", which reflected the common verdict across the Arab World from both Obama's supporters and detractors that the principles outlined in Obama's speech have to be backed up by action. In other words, Obama will be judged on what he achieves on the ground rather than by his skilled oratory. As one columnist ponders: "*Does the American president have magic solutions behind the mask of language?*"³⁵

³³ Nader Rantisi, "One man is not enough!, *Al-Ghad* Newspaper June 5 2009, <http://www.alghad.jo/?article=13356>

³⁴ "Let's close the pages of the past." *Al-Gomhuria* Newspaper June 5 2009, <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/algomhuria/today/columns/detail00.asp>

³⁵ Nabil Abdel Fattah, "Obama's speech on Egypt and Islam." *Al-Ahram Newspaper* June 5 2009, issue no. 44741.