



Policy Brief

President Obama's Speech in Cairo A new climate of hope on the world scene Özdem Sanberk

Will President Obama's speech in Cairo prove to have been a historic turning point in relations between the Islamic world and the United States? There is no doubt that the President himself sincerely intended it to be. And it is easy to see why. The antagonism between the USA and substantial sections of world Muslim opinion, particularly in the Arab Middle East and Iran, is one of the biggest challenges faced by US foreign policy, a clear threat to world peace. But can things change while the USA is closely aligned with Israel? How ?

Divided opinions

Opinion in the American foreign policy establishment is sharply divided over this issue. One school of thought sees radical political Islam as a threat which cannot be defused and can only be countered by confrontation. Another however believes that the US and the West can and should work with moderate Islam.

President Obama has made it clear that he belongs to this second school. His first major international visit was to Turkey: a NATO member-country and industrial democracy, led by a democratically elected conservative government. In his speech to the Turkish parliament, the president stressed that the USA is "not at war" with Islam and never will be. Less than two months he has given the same message to the Arab world in his Cairo speech.

A different president

Barrack Hussein Obama is a very new kind of

American president one who spent some of his formative years outside the USA and indeed from a non-Western and non-Christian societies. He understands the world and its realities more fully than his predecessors did, but he also went on to scale such heights of American society as Columbia and Harvard Universities. The president has quickly show that he is indeed a highly intelligent man with great capacity for originality and attention to detail and reality. Though some quarters in Israel and with a substantial minority of American public opinion distrusts him, in the most of the world he is seen as an idealist and a man of principle. But will he be able to achieve his goals? In other words, will well-intentioned policies have the desired outcome?

Middle East

The Arab-Israeli dispute, Iraq, and Iran are all intractable and potentially explosive issues. Even when peace lies with in easy grasp, it may

get turned. Former President Clinton very nearly reached a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, only to have it turned down by the two sides over the status of Jerusalem.

Since the 1990 things have got very much worse in the Middle East, partly because of hardening attitudes on both sides in the Arab Israeli dispute and of course also because of the tragic consequences of President Bush's decision to invade and occupy Iraq.

Reactions

In his speech to the Egyptian Parliament, Obama signaled that he is a new sort of American with a new sort of approach. He had already shown with his visit to Ankara that he wants detente between Islam and the western world and will go as far as he can to achieve it. Among American rightwing circles and in Israel there is dislike and distrust of this approach--fearing that it will mean one-sided concessions and the strengthening of Muslim militants. Obama is seen as an "appeaser".

Reaction in the Arab world seems to be mixed. The question which is being asked is "what can he actually do in practice?" For it certainly is true that the President is not repudiating the policies of his immediate predecessor, so much as building upon them and redirecting them. George W. Bush also favoured a two state solution in

Israel and Palestine.

Barrack Obama has amplified this and speaks more strongly about turning it into a reality. But can America should next force the Israelis to submit to a deal. If there is to be real Arab-Israeli detente, both sides have to work and be creative. Of course the road to success cannot be as simple as that. Is there any way out of this deadlock?

Turkey's role

Turkey under the Foreign Policy direction of Mr Ahmet Davutoğlu may be a real player in the region. In fact over the last few years Turkish diplomacy has focused increasingly on the Arab and Islamic world. Turkey has no interest in any of the territorial issues in the Arab world. In that sense it is an outsider. But it does want stability and prosperity among its southern neighbours. Can Turkey act as a complementary regional force for cooperation and dialogue? The answer to that may depend on the closer cooperation between Turkey and the United States and in particular on the personal rapport and confidence that arises between Prof. Davutoglu and Mrs. Clinton. There are some encouraging signs that a good working relationship is being created. It must be of course a real partnership. But the weakening of Turkey's bilateral ties with Israel may be a serious problem. On the other hand let's not forget that Turkey's role in the region is no longer mainly an intermediary. There are other likely areas where Turkey and the US can work together to help change the Middle East for the better:

Iraq is an obvious one. For a post-occupation Iraq to be stable and prosperous, Turkey and other regional powers will have to give the government there practical support in a number of ways to see Iraq does not collapse into chaos or worse. The work of doing this has been anticipated by Messr. Gul and Erdoğan in regional meetings since 2002-2003 and these regional initiatives proved to be very useful. The same regional links and contacts can be used to activate the dialogue with the US and to institutionalise regional cooperation.

Iran

At this point we have to consider the role of

Iran, where President Ahmedinejad is poised for his second term in office, and so likely to remain outside such cooperation? The possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear power is deeply risky and highly destabilising for the region, including for Turkey and particularly the Gulf. But it does not seem inclined to make a public reversal on this point. So informal contacts may be the only way forward. Here again Turkey, which has good bilateral relations with Iran, may be able to act as a channel.

Economy

There are other projects in the Arab world which Turkey has been working on which may be relevant to a new generation of Obama-inspired regional initiatives for peace. Poverty and economic backwardness in the Arab world are widely regarded as the main sources of its instability and proneness to extremist radicalism. Turkey's Union of Chambers (the TOBB) projects for build industrial zones in the poorer regions in the Middle East may represent a practical way of helping trigger industrialisation in Arab countries and raising incomes.

Af/Pac

Afghanistan and Pakistan are another critical area where Turkey is already playing a constructive role as Minister of Foreign Affairs Prof. Davutoğlu's recent visit in the region shows. This is an area where Turkey and the United States have converging interests and the stakes are high for the peace and security both for the region and the rest of the world.

Tone down

Will there be a breakthrough? No one can tell but on past form probably not. President Obama cannot succeed single-handed and present signs suggest he will not gain the political support he needs, both at home and in the Mus-

lim world, to achieve big successes especially in the Middle East. But he can perhaps tone down the conflict between the Islamic world and the West in many places across the world, from Indonesia westwards and encourage cooperation and understanding. That in itself will be a worthwhile achievement.

Europe

Turkey's candidacy for the EU is relevant to all these considerations -- and it is natural that the President raised it in his first overseas trip in April. Turkey is being rejected essentially because it is Muslim. Of course Turkey has to demonstrate that it is effectively accelerating its the move towards deeper liberal democracy based on freedom of speech, freedom of press and gender equality and the European Union's attitude is a rebuff to Muslim citizens in the existing EU. Not just Muslims, but Africans and Asians generally see the Merkel/Sarkozy exclusion of Turkey as a kind of racism and Orientalism. So perhaps the United States and, those in Europe who are friendly to the Turkish application, and Turkey itself should foster dialogue and cooperation to speed up the accession process. Obama no doubt understands that the application is in suspended animation at the moment and that a possible rupture, if it is not properly tackled in the years ahead by all parties, would create a new Western-Muslim rift with long-term consequences.

Opportunity

President Obama and his policies represent a new climate of hope on the world scene. So people of good will should be trying to encourage dialogue and information to find ways of translating the Presidents fine speeches into practical reality. We should not be foolishly optimistic but we should seize our chances-- because this is an opportunity and there may never be one like it again.

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Özdem Sanberk is a member of the High Advisory Board at the Global Political Trends Center. Graduating from Lycée de Galatasaray and the Faculty of Law at Istanbul University, Özdem Sanberk has served for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in various positions - at the Turkish Embassies in Madrid, Amman, Bonn and Paris. He was also appointed to different offices at the Permanent OECD and UNESCO Representation. Between the years 1985 - 1987, he was the Foreign Policy Chief Advisor to the then Prime Minister Turgut Özal. From 1987 to 1991, he served as Ambassador to the European Union in Brussels, from 1991 to 1995 as a permanent undersecretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, and as the Turkish Ambassador to the United Kingdom in London between 1995 and 2000. Ambassador Sanberk retired in 2000 from his post at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and has been the Director of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) until September 2003. He is one of the well known public intellectuals in Turkey whose views are frequently called upon by various circles.

Özdem Sanberk

Emekli Büyükelçi, Eski Dışişleri Bakanlığı Müsteşarı

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