

Beautiful and sweet words not enough

Iqbal Singh Sevea,
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In his eagerly awaited speech to 'the Muslim world', United States President Barack Obama called for a new beginning in relations between the United States and the Muslim world.

His many references to his personal interactions with Muslims as well as his frequent quotations of the Quran, coupled with his disarming charm, will build on his already considerable personal appeal in Muslim communities. His reconciliatory tone and rejection of the 'clash of civilisations' paradigm, will go some distance in correcting perceptions about the US in large parts of the Muslim world.

However, many will question if they will truly see a reorientation in America's approach. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may well have pre-empted the mood of large parts of the Muslim world when he stated that 'beautiful and sweet words' in themselves will not be sufficient and that words need to be followed by a perceptible change in US policy.

Mr Obama himself warned against assuming that a single speech could erase years of mistrust. Yet many were looking to his speech for new policy outlines. While he was refreshingly open in discussing the issues that need to be confronted, he provided few answers as to how these challenges were to be met.

The lack of definite plans in his speech hints that he may not be able to escape the legacy of US policy towards the Muslim world. This is especially so with regard to three major issues that he addressed in his speech: the Israel-Palestine crisis, democratisation and violent extremism.

Mr Obama's honest reflections on the plight of Palestinians and his reassertion of the 'two state solution' will be widely welcomed. Many will also welcome the fact that an American president was openly critical of aspects of Israeli policy. Also noteworthy was that Mr Obama directly addressed Hamas, indicating that the organisation could find a place at the negotiating table if it forsook violence and recognised Israel's right to exist.

But it is unclear how far Mr Obama will be able to push Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the 'two state solution' and on Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. While it is easy to be swept away by the optimism he generated, it is important to note that Mr Obama is not the first American president to express support for the 'two state solution' or to oppose the expansion of the settlements. His far less eloquent predecessor, Mr George W. Bush, had called for the establishment of a Palestinian state and officially used terms such as 'squalor' and, more controversially, 'occupation' to describe the state of ordinary Palestinians.

In actuality, Mr Obama seems to have maintained some level of ambiguity with regard to the settlements. It was not clear from his speech if he was calling for a stop to their further expansion or trying to delegitimise all settlements. Washington has traditionally maintained an ambiguous position on the issue. Significantly, Mr Netanyahu's government only recently rejected a call by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the settlements to be disbanded.

On the issue of democracy, Mr Obama stressed America's commitment to encouraging the development of more representative forms of governance in the Muslim world. He was careful, however, to distance himself from Mr Bush's 'regime change' rhetoric. But the fact

that he visited only Saudi Arabia and Egypt during this trip - both strong allies of America, both not known for their democratic structures - indicates that the US continues to prize strong allies over democratic allies.

Indeed, in an interview with BBC days before his trip, Mr Obama had refused to label the Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak as an authoritarian leader and had repeated the language of previous American administrations in describing him as a strong ally. This raises concerns that as America continues its 'war against terror', its primary concern will continue to be stability rather than democracy.

Finally, the need to fight violent extremism may well entail more of the same with regard to America's policy in the Muslim world and may overshadow the other issues Mr Obama raised.

His administration's strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan is telling in this regard. The grouping together of both countries as 'AfPak' reflects the fact that America's primary concern continues to be the defeat of Islamist extremism and that matters specific to the two countries are secondary. Mr Obama's comment that extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the central reason for US presence in the former will not be welcomed in Pakistan. Opinion there holds that it is US pressure on the Pakistani government and the US targeting of militants within Pakistani territory, that has compromised Pakistan's ability to take on militancy within its borders.

Mr Obama's speech will win hearts and raise expectations. The question now is whether or not there will be action to back up the rhetoric.

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