

## Obama's Assalam Alaikum

C. Raja Mohan

*Financial Express*, 10 June 2009

Last week in Cairo, the US President spoke directly to the world's Muslims. His invitation for a new conversation between the US and the elites of the Islamic world is likely to resonate for a long time. Here is the essence of what India's political classes need to know about the motivation, context and consequences of Obama's bold initiative.

On the face of it, Obama's twin political priorities are pulling the US out of the current economic mess and getting re-elected in 2012. Yet Obama is also aware that many external developments, especially in the Greater Middle East, could derail his presidency. As he gets America to focus on her internal problems and rebuilding her national strength, Obama wants to reset Washington's relations around the world. If avoiding adventurism is the new virtuous theme of American foreign policy, nowhere is this more important than the Greater Middle East.

Among the many challenges that the US confronts in the region are military occupation in Iraq, the war against the al Qaida and its extremist associates in the Af-Pak region, and a potential military collision with Iran, not to mention the perennial problems of the faltering Arab-Israeli peace process. Obama needs to ease US military burden in the region and prevent the Middle East from rocking the American boat. The purpose of the speech, then, was to create diplomatic room for Washington in the Greater Middle East.

No. The idea that the US and the West are locked in a mortal combat with the Muslim world is a recent myth that gained ground in the Bush years. Ever since Napoleon landed in Egypt claiming to be a Muslim and quoting from the Koran—about 200 odd years before Obama reached Cairo to do something similar—the West has wooed many leading Muslim nations for strategic gain. For example, the British encouraged the Arabs to revolt against Turkish rule in the early years of this century. The Anglo-American alliance with Pakistan Army has been an enduring feature of the Subcontinent.

When secular leaders in the Middle East drifted towards socialism and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, Washington either undermined these regimes (as in Iran of the mid 1950s) or unleashed conservative Islamists against the modern nationalists (as in the Arab world from the late 1960s). Eventually the US promoted Islamic radicalism in the 1980s (to push the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan).

America was not always an unconditional supporter of Israel. When Israel, France and Britain invaded the Suez in 1956, US President Eisenhower supported Egypt. It was only in the last two decades that Presidents Bill Clinton and Bush the younger turned Washington into an uncritical ally of Israel. The way Bush conducted the war on terror after 9/11 deeply alienated the world's Muslims against America. Obama has simply embarked on a long overdue recalibration of US policies in the Greater Middle East.

Identifying seven sources of tension between Muslims and the West, Obama began with an attempt to clean up after Bush's 'great war on terror' and its political debris. Since he took charge of White House, Obama banned the term, "war on terror" from Washington's diplo-speak. In Cairo, he avoided using the terms 'terror' or 'terrorism' even once. By taking away the crusading zeal that Bush gave to US policy after 9/11, Obama hopes to separate the extremists from mainstream Islam.

Further, Obama has put the US on a neutral ground in the Arab-Israeli disputes, promised unconditional talks with Iran, distanced himself from Bush's dream of making the Middle East democratic, called for religious tolerance in the Middle East and Western respect for the rights of Muslims to practice Islam as they saw fit, shifted the debate on women's rights in the Islamic world from the old focus on the veil to education, and offered America's partnership in the economic and technological development of the Muslim world. Obama's respectful tone and sincerity of purpose in the search for reconciliation were perhaps as important as the substance of his Cairo speech.

It could do both. A lot would depend on India getting its act together. On the positive side, a mere change in the atmospherics between the US and the Muslim world liberates India from the recent domestic and external constraints on building solid partnerships with the US and the Middle East at the same time. Recall, how US tensions with Iran became such a major issue in Indian foreign policy during this decade and the mobilisation of Indian Muslims against the rapprochement with the US.

On the negative side, South Block would worry that Obama's new emphasis on Islamic outreach might tilt Washington's South Asia policy in Pakistan's favour.

India's challenge then is to outflank the US and Pakistan by devising a strategic initiative, all of its own, towards the Muslim world in general and the South Asian neighbourhood in particular.