

Obama's speech in Cairo and Bangladesh

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There is a great deal of excitement in the Muslim community to hear what a US President who shares a middle name "Hussein" with the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (sm) has to say in Cairo.

With his Muslim family members and his personification of the American dream, Obama is singularly placed to recast America's relations with Muslims. And he did not fail the expectations of Muslims.

On 4th June, it was extraordinary for an audience in the hall room of Cairo university that a US President commenced his speech with an Islamic salutation "Assalamo Alaikum (Peace be upon you).

Like a professor he has touched on several themes in the speech, namely, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights and economic development and opportunity.

Women's rights & Bangladesh:

As regards women's rights, he cited Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia, Muslim-majority countries that elected women as heads of government. He must have noticed that since 1991, Bangladesh has been ruled by women Prime Ministers. Such precedent is rare in Arab countries where in some countries women are not eligible to vote in the elections.

He said: "Our daughters can contribute just as much to society as our sons and our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity, men and women, to reach the full potential.

Obama spoke for 55-minutes. His address was laced with respect for touchstones of the religion. He said the time had come to "speak the truth" and "seek a new beginning

Respect to Islam:

The moment President Barack Obama extended his Islamic greetings, the Muslims of the whole world was surprised, euphoric and thrilled.

He quoted the Holy Quran: "Be conscious of God and always speak the truth" to underscore his call for a new relationship based on mutual interest and respect.

"As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the *Azaan* (prayer call) at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk," he said. "As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith."

Obama has declared that America has a common cause with Islam and never will be at war with the faith — an overture intently watched by the Muslim world and welcomed in unlikely quarters.

"America and Islam are not exclusive," he said, "and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."

He pledged a "new beginning between the US and Muslims around the world." He urged America and the Islamic world to drop their suspicions of one another and forge new alliances to confront violent extremism and heal religious divides.

Most importantly, in a speech he gave to the Turkish Parliament last April, Obama repeatedly used a word that Muslims were anxious to hear from American leaders: "respect." The word signals an acceptance that mutual respect is the cornerstone of building a new relationship between the West and the Islamic world

Issues in the Middle East:

Obama has made substantial efforts to reach out to the Islamic community and rebuild bridges after the disastrous legacy of his predecessor George W. Bush.

He has signaled a willingness to re-establish diplomatic ties with Iran, has made some comments in sympathy with the Palestinians, and has called for an end to Israel's expansion of settlements in the West Bank. Obama used and spoke of "Palestine", not a "future Palestinian state". This is very significant in political terms.

He referred to Iran by its full name, the Islamic Republic of Iran, said Islamic countries had been victimised by colonialism as well as the Cold War era struggle between the United States and the former Soviet Union.

.The tone - even the vocabulary - he used in the address will have the greatest impact because the golden thread that ran through every paragraph was a simple but a new idea: respect for the Arab and Muslim world..

Muslim's responsibility:

Muslims may take inspiration from Obama's address. But the solution of stark realities and challenges affecting them has to be addressed by the Muslims themselves.

Ignorance has been the worst enemy of Muslims. Muslim majority countries suffer severe social and economic sclerosis because most scholars believe that they pay little attention to educational and scientific development.

It will be the Muslims that will have to bear the burden of making the painful reforms to revitalise the Muslim world with scientific and technological knowledge

Although the Muslim world may control 60% of the world's known oil reserves, its gross GDP stands at \$1,200 billion, a paltry sum compared with Germany's \$3,322 billion and Japan's \$4,383 billion as of 2007.

All the Arab countries are dependent on supply of weapons from Western States including the US. Some suggest that why do the Arab countries not produce or manufacture themselves weapons? They have no shortage of money. Why do they not wish to be self-sufficient in weapons? Did they try to be self-reliant?

Former President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan at a seminar in 2002 expressed critical comments on Islamic community. He stated that the Islamic world was "The poorest, the most illiterate, the most backward, the most unenlightened, the most deprived and the weakest of all the human race."

About the Islamic community, former PM of Malaysia Dr. Mahathir Mohammad at the s OIC Summit in KL in 2003 said: "Some believe that poverty is Islamic, sufferings and being oppressed are Islamic. Some preach that the world is not for us. Ours are the joys of heaven in the afterlife. All we have to do is to perform certain rituals, wear certain garments and put up certain appearance."

Besides the deficit of modern scientific and technological know how, there is another troubling issue facing the Islamic world.. There are at least two groups—supporters of orthodox interpretation of Islam and supporters of moderate and tolerant version of Islam. What is often overlooked is that the Islamic world is in uncertain position at the 21st century.

The strength of the debate between the two groups is likely to determine the future of Islam.. Ultimately Muslims must take responsibility for themselves in bringing Islam back to its true destiny - to be a beacon of hope, progress and leadership for the world..