

OBAMA'S AMERICAN DREAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Jerusalem Post -- June 5 2009

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President Barack Obama's Cairo speech was first and foremost an affirmation of the American dream, both in terms of his own story, and also of the broader national ethos. History, he told his Arab and Moslem audience, was an obstacle to be overcome, and no differences were too great to prevent understanding and cooperation to achieve common objectives. Obama preached the virtues of freedom, religious tolerance, including for persecuted Copts in Egypt, and equal educational opportunities for women – all major problems in Arab societies.

This optimism was also an integral part of his framework for ending the long and violent Arab-Israeli conflict, based on the "land for peace" formula. Here, Obama is on shaky ground. After the lofty words that accompanied the Oslo process ended in mass terror, Israelis are less willing to assume that the gap between rhetoric and reality can be overcome in a few years. The American president may believe that he has articulated the principles of mutual acceptance that "everyone knows to be true", but this is a stretch. His "everyone" ignores the army of propagandists that promote the anti-Israel narrative, label every act of self-defense as a "war crime" and "human rights violation", and reject the right of Jewish self-determination. The call for Hamas – the Palestinian branch of the extremist Moslem Brotherhood -- to act responsibly to "put an end to violence" and "recognize Israel's right to exist" is extremely far fetched, even for Obama. Hamas belongs in the first part of the speech, which focused on confronting "violent extremism in all of its forms", including Al Qaida and the Taliban.

In promoting his peace plan, including the demand for a freeze in Israeli settlements, Obama has imagined a false and highly dangerous symmetry. Israelis are far more vulnerable to American pressure than the Palestinian leaders (Hamas and Fatah) or the dictatorships that control Egypt or Syria. No Israeli leader can afford to ignore or reject American coercion, particularly as Iran continues efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. But if Netanyahu accepts Obama's demands, with little or no change in the hatred, violence, and rejectionism on the Arab side, the "land for peace" exchange will fail, and Israel will have neither.

The call for developing the Arab Peace Initiative further, “to recognize Israel’s legitimacy; and to choose progress over a self-defeating focus on the past” also needs to be translated quickly into concrete action. Every speech that trashes Israel delivered by an Egyptian, Saudi , Syrian or Palestinian official, whether in the United Nations, a university campus, a mosque or church, fuels the conflict. The same is true for editorials in official newspapers, and for television series based on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion that have become so popular. Maps that omit the word “Israel” have the same result. All of these insults were ignored by the Clinton peace team during the Oslo process – will the Obama administration do any better?

To succeed in this extremely complex political design, Obama will need much more than eloquent speeches and “courage to make a new beginning”. The fundamental reforms of Arab and Moslem countries are necessary to end the social, political and economic gridlock, and remove the support for violent extremists and rejectionists – including Hamas, a weakened-but still-functioning-PLO, and Hezbollah. And Iran must be stopped short of the atomic finish line. The skepticism resulting from history of unfulfilled promises is not simply an obstacle to be overcome – it is also an important reflection of the lessons that have been learned at great cost, particularly for the Jewish people. Obama’s American optimism is refreshing, but it is a long way from Middle Eastern realities.