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**President Obama's Speech to the Muslim World  
The African World  
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Let's start with the obvious. President Obama's speech was a remarkable speech for a President of the United States of America. Leaving aside its eloquence, what was striking about it included his use of history; his tackling the Islamophobic distortions of Muslim history that are so prevalent in the USA and Western Europe; his acknowledgement of the fact that the USA overthrew the democratically elected government of Iran; his implied criticism of Bush for the invasion of Iraq; his carefully worded, but equally implied criticism of Israel for its possession of nuclear weapons; his criticism of male supremacy in much of the Muslim world while at the same time acknowledging its existence in the West; and his use of the word "*occupation*" to accurately describe the status of the Palestinian nation under Israeli oppression.

To be honest, there are things Obama laid out that I never expected to hear a US President articulate. In critiquing the speech one must be quite careful to recognize that we ARE discussing a *US President*, and specifically someone who is NOT a leftist by any stretch of the imagination.

Obama set out to repair the tremendous damage that had been done by the Bush administration in the relations of the USA to the Muslim world. This is consistent with his efforts to change the way in which the world perceives the role or potential role of the USA in 21st century world affairs. To that extent the speech was an excellent step.

That said, one must be equally cautious in response. Many commentators have pointed to various weaknesses in the speech. Keeping in mind that it was a President of the USA delivering the speech here are a few concerns:

The problems that the world has with the USA go beyond the activities of the Bush administration, a point that Obama implied or stated in key moments, but needed a bit more depth. There was a continued tendency on the part of the President to suggest that there have been errors on both sides, errors that need to be acknowledged but errors that approach equivalence. This is ahistorical. Whether one wishes to discuss the Crusades - which were initiated by Europe - or discuss the 20th century in which Europe and the USA directly dominated or intervened in the internal affairs of Muslim majority countries, there is no equivalence. Another way of looking at this is to emphasize that this is not about a poor perception of the USA; it is about the history of the USA and its relationship to the Muslim world.

While President Obama has been irrationally attacked by right-wing Zionists for allegedly being anti-Jewish, his comments went out of their way to describe the persecution faced by Jews over thousands of years. While I never expected to hear the President admit to the colonial impulse that resulted in the construction of Israel in the middle of Palestine, his comments on the Israeli settlements call into question only the future construction of settlements rather than the entire settlement project.

The President discussed the importance of democracy in the Middle East, but the reality is that this is not just an issue facing Muslim majority countries. Israel's internal practices are far from democratic when it comes to the Arab minority. But separate from Israel / Palestine, the USA has never been particularly concerned about democracy; it has been concerned with capitalism. This is raised here because the USA has a relativistic view when it comes to matters of democracy. President Obama was speaking in Egypt where President Mubarak has been nothing more than a sophisticated dictator for nearly three decades. It is just that he has been "our" dictator.

Much more can and should be said about the entire text of the speech. What is more critical is to figure out where does one go from here? Specifically, for progressive groups and individuals, what's next?

Some friends on the Left may tend to disagree, but the unusual nature of this moment must be seized upon by progressive forces and built upon. In other words, while President Obama may not - and did not - say everything that we believe needs to be said, nor necessarily said things in the way that we would have, what can happen now is to identify pressure points and to move on them.

Concretely:

Obama is being attacked by the extreme Right. The nature of the attacks is so completely over the top as to be absurd. One particular attack, however, is one we should respond to: the suggestion that a President of the USA should NOT apologize for the activities of the USA around the world. Progressive people should insist that Obama was not only correct but that he should have gone further.

Obama dared to use the term "occupation" to describe the oppression of the Palestinians. Not only should we unite with this, but we should draw out the implications, specifically, that an occupied people have the right to resist; that according to international law, settlements are completely and unquestionably illegal;

and that the USA should not be providing assistance to a government that violates international law.

We should agree that the Iraq invasion was a "war of choice" and as such, the USA needs to withdraw immediately - including all mercenaries and bases - and offer reparations to the Iraqi people.

We must take on President Obama on Afghanistan and Pakistan and show that his policies are creating an even greater disaster.

The easiest thing that can be done now is either to jump for joy over the speech or to dismiss it. Both approaches are misguided. What is necessary, instead, is to draw out the implications of the openings created by President Obama and push the Administration on each of those points. We also have to challenge the Administration when he is completely wrong, e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan.


A breach has been created within the ruling circles and democratic and progressive-minded people need to take advantage of it. If we fail, not only will we miss a tremendous opportunity but we will cede the ground to the irrationalist Right which is out for blood, and not only Obama's.


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