

The Cairo speech: A new beginning

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President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo was just that—a speech. As commentators at home and abroad pointed out, it will take deeds to give substance to his call for “a new beginning” in relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. But words are powerful, especially when they are used to express the pain and ambiguity of current realities, to acknowledge human sins and shortcomings and to offer a basis for hope.

As he showed in his Philadelphia speech on race during the campaign, Obama has a knack for honestly describing a problem, which itself is refreshing and hopeful. In Cairo he noted that U.S.-Muslim relations have been marked by “years of mistrust,” and he named some Muslim reasons for mistrust: Western “colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a cold war in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations.” He balanced this history with the West's recent experience of violence at the hands of Muslim extremists, which “has led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America . . . but also to human rights.”

Obama was bold enough to acknowledge specific mistakes the U.S. has made in the Muslim world—notably the overthrow in the 1950s of a democratically elected government in Iran. He conveyed humility in other ways as well. In calling for women's rights, for example, he noted that the U.S. has its own struggle to give women full equality. In touting the benefits of globalization, he acknowledged one of its troubling dimensions—that “the Internet and television can bring knowledge and information but also offensive sexuality and mindless violence into the home.”

These details of the historical record might seem obvious, but his voicing of them added credibility to his central theme: that the time is ripe for the U.S. and the Muslim world to move from confrontation to cooperation. On issues of economic development, women's rights, education, religious freedom and peace, Obama repeatedly insisted that common interests provide grounds for cooperation.

For veterans of interfaith dialogue in the West, it is commonplace to hear about how people of different religious faiths share a common desire for peace and concern for human dignity, and about how the deepest resources of faith can be a basis for cooperation. But to hear an American president say these things before a Muslim audience, while honestly admitting the practical problems before us, was more than commonplace. It felt like a new beginning.