

Time to heal rifts and for a new beginning

By Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

PARTNER the United States to narrow the divide between the Muslim world and the West, writes MOHAMED JAWHAR HASSAN.

PRESIDENT Barack Obama's speeches at his inauguration in January, in Ankara in April and in Cairo earlier this month portend a sea change in US policy towards the Muslim world.

Even if the speeches are thus far more aspiration than action, the changes they promise are profound after the extremes to which the United States went under President George W. Bush. If deed follows word it could mark a turning point in relations between the Muslim world and the West.

During the Bush presidency the so-called Global War on Terror that was perceived as an assault on the Muslim world in general, the invasion of Iraq and US policy on the Palestinian problem that was perceived as heavily biased towards Israel alienated the Muslim world from the West. Words like "Islamic terrorists" and "jihadis" were popular in discourse and literature. The US had an aversion to discuss "root causes" linked to Palestine and the invasion of Iraq. Instead the threat posed by al-Qaeda and other Muslim and Arab militant movements was projected as a problem internal to the Muslim community, a struggle between moderates and extremists, rather than opposition to perceived US policies. Talk of "preemptive strike", "regime change" and the aggressive promotion of democracy in the Middle East under the "forward strategy of freedom" further strained relations.

Refreshingly, these words and policies are absent in the Obama speeches. Instead the emphasis is on "partnership", "common humanity", "mutual interest", "mutual respect", and on the need to open hearts to each other.

A more balanced approach to the Palestinian problem is evident. There is a genuine attempt to understand and sympathise with the plight and suffering of the Palestinians even as the fears of Israelis are recognised, too.

To quote the president: "So let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own."

Obama also clearly declares: "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. The construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop."

For the first time, too, an American president recognises that Iran's hostility towards the United States began with "the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government" in which the United States played a role.

On democracy he departs from the neocon-inspired policy of aggressive democracy promotion and regime change. Obama emphasises: "So let me be

clear: No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other", even as he carefully asserts: "America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them. And we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments - provided they govern with respect for all their people."

At the same time, Obama does not hesitate to speak for certain values that progressive Muslims everywhere embrace but that is in sad deficit in parts of the Muslim world - democracy, religious freedom, equal rights for women including the right to education, and economic development.

The new US policy also appears to give much greater weight to focused cooperation and assistance to the Muslim-majority countries. Education exchange programmes and scholarships are to be increased; a corps of business volunteers to partner with Muslim counterparts will be launched; a Summit on Entrepreneurship to deepen business ties will be held; and a new fund to support technological development is to be established.

This is the America that the world admires, and beside which many nations pale in comparison.

I have no doubt that Obama is fully committed to translating word into deed. He has already exerted pressure on Binyamin Netanyahu to recognise a Palestinian state (with partial success) and he has refrained from intruding overly into the current post-election unrest in Iran.

Many Muslims though, especially those in the Middle East and central Asia who have been a victim of decades if not centuries of Western domination, colonisation, exploitation, occupation and prejudice, are sceptical. They welcome the pledges, but also prefer to wait and see.

Certainly, Obama could have gone further in his speeches. When he said that "we have to confront violent extremism in all its forms", he could have noted that they are not only those who killed innocent men, women and children on 9/11. They are also those who killed thousands of innocent men, women and children in Lebanon in July 2006 and in Gaza in January this year, and deliberately destroyed hospitals, schools and homes. There are "violent extremists" in uniform, too, and they cause great human suffering.

America is also not the ideal country to preach against violence and counsel non-violent behaviour, for it has resorted to overwhelming force too often. And on nuclear weapons, Obama could also have mentioned, besides Iran, another country that is already a nuclear weapon state 200 times over.

Progress from a "new beginning" between the US and the Muslim world will ultimately hinge upon how the Palestinian problem is managed. No other issue divides the Muslim world and the West as much. The US has to truly become an honest broker and neutral mediator.

For this to happen it must become an ally and friend not only of Israel but also of Palestine as well. Every Palestinian life has to be regarded as precious as an Israeli's. One Israeli soldier held captive in Gaza cannot be more valuable than 8,000 Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

It will also be helpful if the US uses its veto less, votes with the international community in the United Nations General Assembly and demands full implementation of all UN resolutions on Palestine, with sanctions imposed on whichever party that violates them. Israel needs to be called upon to not only stop building new illegal settlements but to dismantle all settlements and end occupation or face serious sanctions.

Notwithstanding these thoughts and expectations however, it would be

in its own interest for the Muslim world to recognise the giant step forward that the United States has taken with Obama, and reciprocate in the same earnest spirit.

Countries like Malaysia - complimented for its human progress in the Cairo speech - need to work with the United States to close the divide. Malaysia and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) countries must work out their response to Obama's initiatives on the volunteer corps, the Summit on Entrepreneurship and the technology fund.

A coordinated response that integrates other programmes under the UN Millennium Development Goals and OIC and Islamic Development Bank strategic development plans is urgently needed.

This is a time to heal rifts and, yes, embark on a "new beginning".

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