The new geopolitics of responsibility in Barack Obama’s Cairo speech

“We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning.”

Barack Hussein Obama (The White House, 2009a)

A new geopolitics of responsibility

The death of Samuel P Huntington on 24 December 2008 preceded the end of the neoconservative administration of George W Bush by just a few weeks. With the two went the idea of a world of clashing civilizations and unavoidable conflict. In its place came President Barack Obama promising a very different vision of foreign policy, one of diplomacy and consensus, rather than the intervention and division typical of the Bush era. The world depicted by Obama is no longer one of exclusive civilizations in historical and unavoidable conflict. Instead, it is defined by nonexclusive cultures with mutual interests and behaving in mutual respect, actively engaging with and depending on each other. In October this change in approach was recognised, remarkably, with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize for Obama’s “extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples” (http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/). The prize comes just eight months into Obama’s presidency, with his new approach to global diplomacy still in its infancy and yet to yield real results.

One of the most important articulations of this new vision was Obama’s speech hosted by Al-Azhar and Cairo Universities on 4 June 2009. In this speech Obama called for a renewal of relations between the United States and the Muslim world, “a new beginning” that apparently breaks with past relations and explicitly rejects Huntington’s “civilizational cartography” (Shapiro, 1998, page 696):

“I have come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.”

This new geopolitical vision is defined by responsibility, a key word occurring eleven times in Obama’s speech. The application of nations’ responsibility within the international community shapes the world that Obama seeks to place the US into: a world where no nation prevails over another, but where there are different degrees of responsibility.

Some wider questions, however, need to be asked: firstly, who defines this responsibility, and who will be perceived as acting responsibly? The parallel between sovereignty and responsibility, as Elden (2006) argues, is increasingly asserted in the way the United Nations conceives new security challenges to the international community, and the relationship between state power and humanitarian obligations. In this frame, sovereignty is no longer conceived as the unchallenged possession of the state for controlling its people, but rather as a process contingent on the state’s service to the people, a process “by which states have duties to uphold and face penalties for failure” (page 17). What actions, then, can be taken in the name of unfulfilled responsibilities, and what are the implications for states’ sovereignty? Finally, in the political practices of the Obama administration, particularly concerning the seven issues composing Obama’s vision for Islam – US relations in the Cairo speech, what is the relationship between rhetoric and action, and between geopolitical silences and spoken truths?
Locating responsibility

“Recognising our common humanity”, Obama said, “is only the beginning of our task.” We have, besides, a responsibility to face our problems, the sources of tension between us, squarely and through partnership. These tensions consist of seven issues, and Obama detailed each one through the rest of his speech: violent extremism, the Arab–Israeli conflict, nuclear weapons, democracy, religious freedom, women’s rights, and economic development.

‘Violent extremism’ represents a clear break from the Bush era discourse of terrorism and the ‘war on terror’. Obama did not use the word ‘terror’ once in his speech, instead referring to “violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security.” Quoting from the Qur’an, Obama emphasized that “Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism—it is an important part of promoting peace.” This was the language of partnership, joint responsibility, and mutual respect and interest that lies at the heart of Obama’s approach to foreign policy.

The first step in practising this new responsibility is to acknowledge and assume responsibility for past wrongs, “to speak the truth as best I [or we] can.” Obama does this through a series of statements unprecedented for a US President. While the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan was a war of “necessity” after the terrorist outrages of 11 September 2001, and one the US remains fully committed to, Obama describes the 2003 invasion of Iraq in very different terms. Iraq was a “war of choice” which, along with the prison at Guantánamo Bay, “led us to act contrary to our traditions and our ideals.” These are strong statements from a US president, taking responsibility for past mistakes and “taking concrete actions to change course.” Obama ordered the withdrawal of American combat troops from Iraq by next year, and will work towards creating “a secure and united Iraq as a partner, and never as a patron.”

Turning to Iran, Obama repeated his call for a renewal of US–Iranian relations, “to overcome decades of mistrust” and “move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect.” To this end, Obama acknowledged the US role in overthrowing the democratically elected government of Iran in 1953, and called on Iran now to define itself by what it is for rather than against. At the same time, Obama restressed America’s absolute opposition to Iran’s acquiring nuclear weapons.

When it came to Israel/Palestine, relatively little has changed in the details of the American position from that of previous administrations. Obama reaffirmed America’s “unbreakable” bond with Israel, while recognizing that the Palestinians “endure the daily humiliations—large and small—that come with occupation.” Ever the diplomat, Obama’s words sounded good to their audience, but were in places carefully ambiguous:

“The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements.

While this sounds like a firm line, was Obama referring to all Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, or only new construction? By “It is time for these settlements to stop”, did he mean stop expanding or stop existing? And how can Obama’s commitment to a two-state solution, and his statement that Jerusalem must be “a secure and lasting home for Jews and Christians and Muslims”, be reconciled with his speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee exactly one year earlier, in which he stated: “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided”?

Obama reasserted the standard American position in favour of a two-state solution, in which each side can live in peace and security. However, the ways in which security is achieved and joint responsibility enacted remain problematic and unquestioned. Obama referred euphemistically to the “continuing humanitarian crisis” in Gaza, glossing over the now two-year-long Israeli blockade and Israel’s intense military bombardment of the
Strip in January. Palestinians, Obama said, must abandon violence as “a dead end” and “focus on what they can build”, a statement that ignored Israel’s destruction of much of the infrastructure of the Palestinian protostate since 2000. Obama called on Hamas to fulfil their responsibilities to the Palestinian people, by ending violence, recognizing past agreements, and recognizing Israel’s right to exist. For Palestinians the relative character of Obama’s new beginning, which can only be made “by keeping in mind what has been written”, raises questions: Whose new beginning is it? And whose written word do we choose to retain?

A few days before important elections in Lebanon, Iran, and Europe, Obama broke with Bush’s crusader-like promotion of democracy by pledging that no system of government can be imposed by one country over another. Nevertheless, he said, the United States remains committed to principles of freedom, justice, transparency, and the rule of law. There was some irony in Obama speaking of democracy while a guest of one of the region’s most undemocratic regimes. These words could have been addressed to Egyptian President Mubarak himself:

“No matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who hold power: you must maintain your power through consent, not coercion... elections alone do not make true democracy.”

Obama went on to call for respect for religious freedom and minorities in the region, he pledged to protect the freedom of Muslims in the West, and stated his support for interfaith dialogue. Finally, he called for greater equality and opportunities for women, and pledged to support economic and technological development in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

In outlining these seven issues, Obama places responsibility within a sphere of political agency that stands between the private and the public realm of international relations. While the official line of foreign policy, he says, promotes a certain procedure, privately other mechanisms might already be at play. In recognizing this, Obama declares that unofficial, less coherent, but somehow truer aspects of the international relations need to be aligned with the official, but often only partially representative, ones:

“America will... say in public what we say in private to Israelis and Palestinians and Arabs.... Privately, many Muslims recognize that Israel will not go away. Likewise, many Israelis recognize the need for a Palestinian state. It is time for us to act on what everyone knows to be true.”

Hence, a more secluded face of politics emerges in the speech, one belonging to the realm of second thoughts, unspoken and unacknowledged political truths kept behind closed doors, away from real politics and their need for discursive consistency. These doors, Obama says, need to be made open, and the way to do this is through a shared sense of responsibility and respect.

In its details, this speech did not contain radical reformulations of US policy. Rather, it set out a new vision for American relations with the Muslim world, a “new beginning” based on mutual respect, cooperation, and responsibility. However, these notions entail a series of geopolitical silences: their problematic aspects and alternative voices need to be emphasized.

A new beginning?

Without doubt, the speech was a great step forward compared with Bush administration narratives about the Muslim world. One of Obama’s most important strategies was to place Islam within America’s national boundaries and history, pointing out that about

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seven million American Muslims enjoy equal opportunities, are free to practise their
religion without prejudice, and culturally enrich the United States with their presence.
In his words, Islam is “a part of America”, and has been since the country’s foundation.
Recognizing the principles of humanity that bind us together is a first but fundamental
step towards the new beginning Obama seeks.

Nevertheless, there was some disagreement among Middle Eastern audiences of the
speech (BBC News, 2009). A spokesman for the Iraqi government praised Obama’s use of
phrases from the Qur’an as “play[ing] a big part in a positive change of picture”, but
stressed “there is a necessity for action.” A spokesman for the Palestinian president
Mahmoud Abbas perceived in the speech “a new and different American policy toward the
Palestinian issue”, while a Hamas spokesman saw Obama’s policy as “no different from
the policy of his predecessor, George W Bush.” Lebanese Hizbullah MP Hassan Fadlallah
echoed these latter sentiments: “The Islamic world does not need moral or political
sermons. It needs a fundamental change in American policy.” The Israeli government
cautiously welcomed Obama’s “important speech” and expressed its hope that it “will
indeed lead to a new era of reconciliation between the Arab and Muslim world and Israel.”
The Yesha Council of Israeli settlers stated that “Hussein Obama gave priority to Arab
lies, which have always been told with determination and daring, at the expense of the
Jewish truth, which has been said in a weak and unconfident voice” (The Guardian
2009).

Engagement with the unprecedented geopolitical contents of the Cairo speech was
not confined to the official realm. A whole range of opinions appeared among popular
audiences in the Arab and Muslim world. While many expressed their enthusiasm at
Obama’s knowledge of and praise for Islam, others felt it all rather patronizing. Rabah
al-Mutawa, a Saudi woman from Riyadh, said: “I challenge any Arab leader to go to the
U.S. or the West and quote the Bible like Obama quoted the Quran” (The Associated
Press, 2009). Facebook blogger Fouad GM wondered whether the speech was just
“an hour-long of Obama patronizing the so co-called ‘Muslim World’.”

No doubt Obama’s charisma can lead to enchantment. His use of Arabic words and
quotations from the Qur’an, his first-hand knowledge of countries such as Indonesia
and Kenya, and his message of mutual understanding led many to think that the
approach was genuine, that the clash of civilizations and era of mistrust was over.
Such a geolinguistic bridge hinting at appreciation of difference and complexity could
easily be viewed as the total opposite of the sweeping ‘axis of evil’ notion of recent
American foreign policy. However, there remains much to do if a new beginning in
relations between the US and the Muslim world can be brought about. On the eve
of the speech, Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan (2009) cautioned that “symbolic acts
and speeches are not enough. What we expect from the new president is effective and
necessary action as well as a change in attitude.”

President Obama’s pledge for a new beginning embeds a further problematic silence,
concerning the translation of responsibility into the practice of foreign policy. Obama
mentions Pakistan, in connection to Afghanistan, as threatened by surging extremism.
While US troops cannot be brought home from Afghanistan until extremism defuses,
Obama shifts attention to the US partnership with Pakistan and Afghanistan in strengthen-
ing the economy, development, and education. This stress, however, silences other
mechanisms of the geopolitics of responsibility and its consequences for territorial sover-
eignty. The case of the US government’s “New Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan”
(The White House, 2009b) exemplifies them. Presented in a different tone from the
harmonious Cairo speech, the policy aims to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat” al Qaeda
and Taliban safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan—especially in the northwestern
emirate of Waziristan and the Swat Valley. This is justified by the humanitarian cause of
preventing violent extremism from overtaking Pakistan’s population and nuclear arsenal.
This ‘just cause’ has drawn a remarkable amount of resources out of the “war of choice” in Iraq and redirected them into Afghanistan (with 17,000 troops already en route), has sponsored training of both countries’ troops and led to the appointment of two special envoys for Afghanistan and Pakistan, which the new strategy considers as “two countries, but one challenge”. Most importantly—although not expressed in the policy document—the strategy entails a series of territorial responses inside Pakistan: the US army attacking targets inside Pakistan using drone planes armed with missiles, piloted from control rooms in the US.\(^2\) The failing international responsibility of the Pakistani government in controlling extremists results, therefore, in a type of territorial response that violates Pakistan’s territorial sovereignty. A contingent form of sovereignty applies to Pakistan: contingent because it is subject to US unilateral denial in the name of international responsibility, the same that marks the ‘new beginning’ in the Cairo speech.

Finally, there remains one last important silence in Obama’s speech: the choice of location. Undoubtedly Cairo with its universities has always been a great centre of Islamic learning, but does the authoritarian Egyptian regime represent the right kind of partner for this ‘new beginning’? While Obama repeated his pledge to close Camp Delta at Guantánamo Bay, he made no mention of Egypt’s complicit role in the covert networks of CIA rendition flights and secret detention centres. While a new kind of discourse was established in Cairo that day, a new geopolitics of responsibility, we still must ask how real is America’s commitment to change from the previous administration’s failings? If it is truly “time for us to act on what everyone knows to be true”, then perhaps Gaza rather than Cairo should have been the location for this speech and the new beginning Obama seeks.

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\(^2\) Begun during the second Bush administration, drone attacks have continued under Obama, building up to thirty attacks since September 2008. They claimed civilian lives alongside those of militants. (Notably, on 23 June 2009, a missile hit a funeral procession killing eighty people, mainly civilians). See also http://www.timesonline.co.uk/itm/news/world/us_and_americas/article5575883.ece