

An Opening for a New Narrative in U.S.-Muslim World Relations

Daniel Byman and Benjamin Wittes analyze in detail military and law enforcement actions to counter terrorism. The next presidential administration will also have to make complementary efforts to dry up support for terrorists within the local populations where they operate.

The Obama administration sought to do just that in its early outreach to Muslim communities around the globe. In his inaugural address, the new president declared: “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.” He granted his first foreign television interview to Al Arabiya, the pan-Arab television network. On his first foreign trip, he addressed the Turkish parliament, where he praised that country’s success in building a “strong, vibrant, secular democracy.” Further, he declared that “the United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam” and went on to describe partnership with the Muslim world as “critical not just in rolling back the violent ideologies that people of all faiths reject, but also to strengthen opportunity for all its people.”

The impetus behind the administration’s efforts was clear. Al Qaeda feeds upon a narrative popular in the Arab and broader Muslim worlds that asserts that the all-powerful

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United States, rather than using its immense resources to uplift the condition of Muslims, has become yet another imperial power intent on occupying Muslim lands and on killing innocent Muslims. While only a small fraction of the world's 1.4 billion Muslims agree with al Qaeda's violent methods—which have made Muslims their primary victims—many more are sympathetic to its arguments. The administration sought nothing less than to shatter the al Qaeda narrative by presenting an America that no longer played to type.

The centerpiece of Obama's outreach to the Muslim world was his Cairo speech of June 2009. Calling for "a new beginning" between the United States and Muslims around the globe, he outlined ways they might work together to combat violent extremism, reduce the threat from nuclear weapons, advance democracy, enhance the role of women, and promote economic development in Muslim-majority countries. From the perspective of Muslim audiences, however, the most striking aspect of the speech was his discussion of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Seeking to signal that he would be different from past U.S. presidents, Obama called for a halt to the construction of Israeli settlements. That line garnered thunderous applause, but unfortunately became the litmus test by which many Muslim audiences have judged U.S. policy since. The president was unable to get the Israeli government to agree to a complete settlement freeze, and direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians eventually ground to a halt. On the issue that means the most to many Muslims when it comes to the United States—Palestine—Obama failed to deliver.

The Cairo speech spawned a flurry of activity within the administration to make good on Obama's promises of partnership, which were intended as a complement to its other counterterrorism efforts. For a young administration that did not have all its foreign policy team yet in place and was grappling simultaneously with an economic crisis, it proved a difficult undertaking. The effort had to be coordinated across a number of federal agencies and initially lacked funding. Some valuable initiatives were launched: world-class scientists were sent to the region as science envoys, an entrepreneurship summit was convened by the White House, and regional centers of excellence in science and technology were established. But as compelling as the idea was, true partnerships in development between citizens in Muslim-majority countries and the United States proved difficult to organize and sustain, particularly by a government bureaucracy. Few of the Cairo initiatives have yet had the kind of impact or visibility to make a difference at the level of politics.

The excitement generated in some quarters by the Cairo speech soon turned to disappointment that Obama's soaring rhetoric was not matched by concrete actions. Available public opinion data suggest that many Muslim-majority societies had slightly more favorable views of the United States following Obama's election and the speech, but that this positive feeling dissipated over time. At the same time, al Qaeda's popularity continued to wane—a phenomenon that began soon after 9/11 and may have less to do with changes in U.S. policy or personnel than with the tremendous bloodshed wrought by the terrorist organization.

Then along came the Arab Spring. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt upended the status quo, at least in the Arab Middle East. While over the near term al Qaeda may benefit operationally from the instability generated by these popular revolts, from a public relations standpoint they were a disaster for the organization, showing as they did that violence was not necessary to effect meaningful political change.

The Arab Spring has created an opening for the United States to rewrite the narrative about itself in the region and thereby further marginalize al Qaeda. The United States now has the chance to “stand squarely on the side of those reaching for their rights,” as President Obama proclaimed it would in a May 2011 speech at the State Department. At times, however, his administration has been too hesitant to throw its support behind popular movements in the region, out of concern about the consequences for long-standing U.S. interests like the free flow of oil and Israel's security.

Whoever captures the presidency in 2012 will inherit these same challenges, which necessarily operate alongside the ones that Wittes and Byman describe. Al Qaeda is on the defensive but not defeated. Its popularity has fallen in most Muslim-majority countries. People power is now viewed as a more promising path to political change than suicide bombings. But the future of the Arab Spring remains uncertain. The United States has a profound interest in seeing these democratic experiments succeed, just as it does in improved governance and greater economic opportunities for citizens in the rest of the Muslim world. To the extent that the United States can be seen as a meaningful partner in building such a future, it will help engender greater trust, where trust has long been lacking, and remove any remaining reservoirs of support for al Qaeda.