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Obama, Cairo, and Religious Freedom

In his wide-ranging speech yesterday in Cairo, Egypt, President Barack Obama included a remarkably substantive case for religious freedom. He said that religious freedom is not some peculiarly American value but a universal norm affirmed as well by the history and scriptures of Islam. Moreover, it is not just a matter of human rights but of practical necessity; religious freedom, he said, is “central to the ability of peoples to live together.”

The president astutely highlighted how religious freedom in America has benefited the Muslim minority in this country, a fact that has too often been underappreciated in Muslim contexts abroad. He also noted approvingly the trend in America toward collaborations among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in service projects (thus putting the accent on practical action rather than mere interfaith dialogue in the American experience of pluralism). And he was careful to acknowledge that the US record is not perfect.

Obama also addressed candidly the challenges to religious freedom in Muslim contexts abroad but without making clumsy or overbroad generalizations. For starters, despite the news media’s relentless hype of the speech as being addressed to “the Muslim world,” Obama never uttered that phrase. In a few places he spoke of “Muslim-majority countries” but never of “the Muslim world,” a formulation that can inadvertently portray Islam as some sort of social and territorial monolith. Just as there is no such thing as “the Christian world” to which a Muslim political leader could address a speech, the president recognized that a singular “Muslim world” does not exist.

Moreover, Obama did not mince words when describing the challenge. “Among some Muslims,” he said, “there is a disturbing tendency to measure one’s own faith by the rejection of another’s.” However, he also stated that most Muslims support religious freedom and that it is not just non-Muslim minorities who are victimized by the lack of religious freedom in Muslim-majority societies, but Muslims as well.

Obama was courageous to devote so much of the speech to religious freedom, for it is a perennial point

of conflict between the US and governments of many Muslim-majority countries. For example, last month the US Commission on International Religious Freedom issued its annual report. The majority of countries cited for serious problems are ones where Islam is the prevalent faith. Obama risked backlash in some Muslim quarters for raising religious freedom, but it was a wise and indeed necessary risk to take. If religious freedom is an important part of the problem in US relations with Muslim communities internationally, then it is a vital part of the solution.

Among other things, yesterday’s speech represents a promising example of the Obama administration engaging Muslim peoples on religious freedom issues. The challenge, however, is to match words with actions. And on this score the administration’s record to date is rather thin.

What is needed now is a more comprehensive integration—intellectually and institutionally—of religious freedom into the mainstream of US foreign policy. This would not require new legislation so much as strategic vision and political will. Promotion of religious freedom should not be treated as a special-interest humanitarian issue but rather should be integrated into US democracy promotion, education of diplomatic and military personnel, counterterrorism strategy, public diplomacy, and international law.

President Obama has yet to name his appointee for a position critical to any such integration project, namely, the US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. In keeping with his ambitious global engagement of Muslim communities and his rhetorical commitment to religious freedom, the president should make the Ambassador at Large appointment a high priority and should in particular ensure that Muslim Americans with relevant foreign policy expertise and leadership qualities are considered for the post.

—Dennis R. Hoover, Editor

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