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# FEITH: Must-y Cairo rhetoric

**Douglas J. Feith**

## **COMMENTARY:**

With his Cairo speech, President Obama hoped to relieve tensions between Islam and the West, but what light did he cast on those tensions? He focused on terrorism committed in the name of Islam, on the Arab-Israeli conflict and on Iran's nuclear program, but did he signal that he grasped the reason these problems exist and persist?

The speech was unsatisfying in a standard way. It was a "must-y" talk in which the president, instead of addressing problems analytically, merely asserted time and again what other people "must" do. Palestinians "must abandon violence." Israelis "must take concrete steps" to improve life for the Palestinians. The Arab states "must recognize" their responsibilities. Muslims "must" close the fault lines between Sunni and Shia. Mr. Obama used the word more than 30 times.

The problem with "must" is that it kills analysis. A good policy discussion brings forward a sensible set of goals and well-considered assumptions and then weighs the pros and cons of various courses of action that aim to achieve the goals. But the promiscuous use of "must" short-circuits all this.

When Mr. Obama asserts, for example, that " Hamas must put an end to violence, recognize past agreements, and recognize Israel's right to exist," what is he actually saying? Is he predicting that Hamas will do that? Is he saying he thinks Hamas itself sees its interests that way? Is he ordering Hamas to perform, or else? Or else, what? Does he actually think the United States can compel Hamas? These questions are of the essence, but they're blown aside by a gust of "must." Is it

realistic to expect Hamas to become a nonviolent, law-abiding, good neighbor of Israel? Mr. Obama says it "must."

In proclaiming what the Palestinians, Iranians, Israelis and Muslims generally "must" do, Mr. Obama is not elucidating anything about them. He is telling us about himself - his own attitudes, preferences and sense of right and wrong. That's interesting, to be sure, for he is the president of the United States, but it doesn't show understanding of what's driving foreign leaders to act as they do or what the United States can do to influence them.

Of course, it may be that there's more serious thought in the Obama administration's policies than the president chose to reveal in Cairo. It was only a speech, after all.

*(Corrected paragraph:)* But if the president actually does understand the problems of Islam and the West, he would not have said some of the things in his speech. He would not have suggested that the Arab-Israeli conflict is fundamentally about Israeli West Bank settlements or about Israel's denial of the Palestinians' "legitimate aspirations" for a state of their own in the West Bank and Gaza. The notion that Arab objections to the Jewish state are focused narrowly on the territories the Arabs lost to Israel in 1967 is ahistorical in a way that should be obvious: The conflict predated the 1967 war, or there would not have been a 1967 war, let alone the Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49.

The Arab cause against Israel and Zionism is rooted in religious and nationalistic principles. It's far more than a hodgepodge of practical grievances about boundary lines, settlements and refugees. It's been a century-long war based on the conviction that all the land governed by the Jews in Palestine - including Israel within its pre-1967 boundaries - is Arab land.

The Oslo peace process imploded in 2000 for essentially the same reason that peace initiatives failed decade after decade since World War I: Even Palestinian leaders willing for tactical reasons to negotiate political deals with Israel have been unwilling to abandon the idea that all of Palestine belongs to the Arabs and no Jewish state can achieve legitimacy there in their eyes.

If Mr. Obama thinks the conflict is less than a principled rejection of Israel and Zionism, his diplomacy will strain U.S. relations with Israel without moving the region closer to peace. American pressure on Israel to ban natural growth within existing settlements - that is, to prevent families from adding new bedrooms when they add new children - is sure to remain unconstructive.

Israel's enemies have made a fetish of the settlements because the issue fits within their grander campaign to delegitimize all of Israel as a Jewish settlement on Arab land. The right of Jews to settle in the West Bank is rooted in the same law and history that Zionist leaders invoked in declaring Israel's statehood in 1948. Mr. Obama may not know this, but key parties in the region do. The president's peace policy will have better prospects if he systematically discourages - and does not inadvertently encourage - ongoing efforts to deny Israel's legitimacy.

As for Iran, if Mr. Obama understood the regime's hostility to the United States, his Cairo speech would not have suggested the antagonism derives from the Eisenhower administration's role in the 1953 coup in Iran. That country's theocratic current rulers hardly mourn the overthrown leftist modernizer Mohammed Mosaddegh.

The Iranian regime clerics believe the most basic ideas and institutions of the democratic West - including popular sovereignty, women's rights and the separation of religion and state - insult God's law and God's sovereignty. To assume that the differences between the United States and Iranian regime are merely historical grievances or policy disagreements is as big an error as to ignore the ideological dimension of the U.S. conflicts with fascism, Nazism and communism.

The Cairo speech was an advertisement for Mr. Obama that won praise from many in his audience. But it provided dim illumination and no serious analysis - and, far worse, it exposed superficial thinking by the president about important subjects. In the words of an old political quip: Deep down, it was shallow. It raises the question of whether Mr. Obama can manage major problems that he seems not to understand. The answer is: He must.

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