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The Cairo Speech: A Quick Analysis [1]

Some early analyses of President Obama's historic address to the Muslim world in Cairo today have noted that some of Obama's professions of unity with the Muslim world merely echo words President Bush said after 9/11. The implication is that deeds, not words, matter.

Words can have remarkable power, in and of themselves. President Bush could say similar words to Obama – but when he also spoke about "crusades," or about posses that would bring back Osama bin Laden "dead or alive," it struck many Muslims as though he was just having too much fun with his new "war of terror," to use Borat's term.

Obama's words exceeded those of Bush in eloquence and balance and strategy. He could show a distinct appreciation for Muslim culture, even and especially within the American democratic experiment, which allowed him to challenge Muslims to move to a better place. The same applies to his sense of balance within the Middle East. Balance, in fact, is a defining aspect of Obama's rhetoric and temperament.

Obama showed resolve and courage, in the minds of his audience, by addressing one of the great controversies of the day:

> The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.

The applause from the audience then positioned it for the balancing act, which was to receive this news from Obama:

> America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable… Threatening Israel with destruction -- or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews -- is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve.

Obama also was able to say, in heartfelt fashion:

> Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition. I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia, where devout Christians worshipped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country.

That allowed him to then say that Muslims need *more* of that spirit now. "Among some Muslims," he noted, "there's a disturbing tendency to measure one's own faith by the rejection of somebody else's faith."
In that, and in his discussion of the battle against extremists, he showed great emotional intelligence, appealing directly to Islamic principles to convince the audience of the need for a better way:

> Indeed, none of us should tolerate these extremists. They have killed in many countries. They have killed people of different faiths -- but more than any other, they have killed Muslims. Their actions are irreconcilable with the rights of human beings, the progress of nations, and with Islam.
>
> The Holy Koran teaches that whoever kills an innocent is as -- it is as if he has killed all mankind. (Applause.) And the Holy Koran also says whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind. (Applause.) The enduring faith of over a billion people is so much bigger than the narrow hatred of a few. Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism -- it is an important part of promoting peace.

Similarly, he appealed skillfully to higher principles as it relates to the Palestinian plight:

> Palestinians must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and it does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the center of America's founding.

Thousands of experts and pols and pundits weighed in recently with their suggestions for what Obama should say. It is a sign of our good fortune, even within crises, that we are able to witness an American president with the rhetorical and strategic skill to top all their best counsel.