

Reflections by Comrade Fidel

OBAMA'S SPEECH IN CAIRO

On Thursday the 4th of June, at the Islamic University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, Obama gave a speech of special interest to those of us who are closely following his political actions given the enormous might of the superpower he leads. I cite his very own words to indicate what I think are the basic ideas he expressed, thus summarizing his speech to save time. Not only do we have to know that he spoke but also what he said.

“We meet at a time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the World...”

“The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of coexistence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars.

“...colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations.”

“Violent extremists have exploited these tensions ...”

“...has led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights..”

“I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect ...”

“...they overlap, and share common principles — principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.”

“...but no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust, nor can I answer in the time that I have this afternoon all the complex questions that brought us to this point.

“As the Holy Quran tells us, "Be conscious of God and speak always the truth.””

“I'm a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and at the fall of dusk. As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith..”

“It was Islam — at places like Al-Azhar — that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment”.

“...And since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States. They have fought in our wars, they have served in our government, they have stood for civil rights, ...”

“And I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear.”

“...America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire.”

“The dream of opportunity for all people has not come true for everyone in America, ...”

“Words alone cannot meet the needs of our people..”

“When a new flu infects one human being, all are at risk.”

“When one nation pursues a nuclear weapon, the risk of nuclear attack rises for all nations.”

“...any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail.”

“In Ankara, I made clear that America is not — and never will be — at war with Islam.”

“...we reject the same thing that people of all faiths reject: the killing of innocent men, women and children.”

“...there's still some who would question or even justify the events of 9/11.”

“The victims were innocent men, women and children from America ...”

“...Now, make no mistake: We do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan. We see no military — we seek no military bases there. It is agonizing for America to lose our young men and women. It is costly and politically difficult to continue this conflict. We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan, and now Pakistan, determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can.”

“The Holy Quran teaches that whoever kills an innocent is as — it is as if he has killed all mankind. And the Holy Quran also says whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind.”

“Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq was a war of choice that provoked strong differences in my country and around the world.”

“...I also believe that events in Iraq have reminded America of the need to use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems whenever possible.”

“Today, America has a dual responsibility: to help Iraq forge a better future — and to leave Iraq to Iraqis.

“I have made it clear to the Iraqi people — (applause) — I have made it clear to the Iraqi people that we pursue no bases, and no claim on their territory or resources.

“Iraq's sovereignty is its own. And that's why I ordered the removal of our combat brigades by next August.”

“...remove combat troops from Iraqi cities by July, and to remove all of our troops from Iraq by 2012.”

“Nine-eleven was an enormous trauma to our country.”

“...in some cases, it led us to act contrary to our traditions and our ideals.”

“I have unequivocally prohibited the use of torture by the United States, and I have ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed by early next year.”

“...America will defend itself, respectful of the sovereignty of nations and the rule of law”

“The second major source of tension that we need to discuss is the situation between Israelis, Palestinians and the Arab world.”

“America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable.”

“On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people — Muslims and Christians — have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years they've endured the pain of dislocation.”

“Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead.”

“So let there be no doubt: The situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own.”

“...two peoples with legitimate aspirations, each with a painful history that makes compromise elusive.”

“It's easy to point fingers — for Palestinians to point to the displacement brought about by Israel's founding, and for Israelis to point to the constant hostility and attacks throughout its history from within its borders as well as beyond.”

“...if we see this conflict only from one side or the other, then we will be blind to the truth.”

“The only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security.”

“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.”

“ Hamas must put an end to violence, recognize past agreements, recognize Israel's right to exist.”

“...Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's. 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.”

“And Israel must also live up to its obligation to ensure that Palestinians can live and work and develop their society.”

“Progress in the daily lives of the Palestinian people must be a critical part of a road to peace, and Israel must take concrete steps to enable such progress.”

“The Arab-Israeli conflict should no longer be used to distract the people of Arab nations from other problems.”

“The third source of tension is our shared interest in the rights and responsibilities of nations on nuclear weapons.”

“In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government.”

“Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has played a role in acts of hostage-taking and violence against U.S. troops and civilians.”

“Rather than remain trapped in the past, I've made it clear to Iran's leaders and people that my country is prepared to move forward. The question now is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build.”

“I recognize it will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude and resolve. There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect.”

“I understand those who protest that some countries have weapons that others do not. No single nation should pick and choose which nation holds nuclear weapons. And that's why I strongly reaffirmed America's commitment to seek a world in which no nations hold nuclear weapons.”

“...any nation — including Iran — should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

In these three first topics of his speech we find the basic objective of his trip to that Islamic University of Egypt. One cannot blame the new president of the United States for the situation created in the Middle East. It is obvious that he wants to find an exit from the colossal mess created there by his predecessors and by the very development of events over the last 100 years.

Not even Obama could imagine when he was working in the black communities of Chicago that the terrible effects of a financial crisis would combine with the factors that made his election as president in a strongly racist society possible.

He takes office at an exceptionally complex time for his country and the world. He is trying to resolve problems that he perhaps considers to be simpler than they really are. Centuries of colonial and capitalist exploitation have given way to a world where a handful of overdeveloped rich countries coexist with another handful of immensely poor countries that provide raw materials and labor force. If you add China and India, two truly emerging nations, the struggle for natural resources and markets make up an entirely new situation on the planet where human survival itself has yet to be solved.

Obama's African roots, his humble background and his amazing ascent awaken hope in many who like shipwreck victims try to hold on to a piece of wood in the middle of the storm.

His statement that “any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail” is correct; or when he declares that “people of all faiths reject the killing of innocent men, women and children” or when he reaffirms to the world his opposition to the use of torture. Generally speaking, several of his abovementioned statements are theoretically correct; he clearly perceives the need for all countries, with no exceptions of course, to give up nuclear weapons. Well-known and influential personalities in the US see this as a great danger, as technology and science generalize access to radioactive material and ways of using it, even in small amounts.

It is still early to pass judgment on his degree of commitment to the ideas he presents, and up to which point he stands firm in sustaining, for example, the proposal of looking for a peace agreement built on fair bases, with guarantees for all the states in the Middle East.

The current president's main difficulty lies in the fact that the principles he is advocating contradict the policy the superpower has pursued for almost seven decades, from the end of the last battles of World War II in August of 1945. I put aside at this moment the aggressive and expansionist policy it applied on the peoples of Latin America, especially Cuba, when it was still far from being the most powerful nation in the world.

Each one of the norms advocated by Obama in Cairo contradicts the interventions and the wars promoted by the United States. The first of them was the famous Cold War which he mentions in his speech, unleashed by the government of his country. Ideological differences with the USSR do not justify the hostility towards that state which contributed more than 25 million lives in the war against Nazism. Obama would not be remembering in these days the 65th anniversary of the Normandy landings and the liberation of Europe if it were not for the blood of the Soviet troops. Those who freed the survivors of the famous Osviecim concentration camp were Soviet army soldiers. The world was unaware of what was happening there even though quite a few among Western official circles knew the facts. How millions of Jewish children, women and old people were atrociously murdered, and millions of Russian children, women and old people lost their lives as a result of the brutal Nazi invasion in a quest for living space. The West granted concessions to Hitler and conspired to launch him and they finally pushed him to occupy and colonize Slavic lands. During World War II, the Soviets were US allies, not enemies.

They dropped and tested the effects of two nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two defenseless cities. Those who perished there were mainly Japanese children, women and old people.

If one were to analyze the wars promoted, supported or waged by the United States in China, Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, among the millions of people who died, many were children, women and old people.

The colonial wars of France and Portugal after W.W. II had the support of the United States; the coups and interventions in Central America, Panama, Santo Domingo, Grenada, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Peru and Argentina were all promoted and supported by the United States.

Israel was not a nuclear power. The creation of a state in territory from which the Jews were driven into an exodus by the Roman Empire 2000 years ago was supported in good faith by the USSR as well as other countries in the world. At the triumph of the Cuban Revolution we had relations with that state for more than a decade until its wars of conquest over the Palestinians and other Arab peoples led us to sever them. Total respect for religion and Jewish religious activities has been maintained without any sort of interruption.

The US never opposed Israeli conquest of Arab territories, nor did it protest the terrorist methods used against the Palestinians. On the contrary, it created a nuclear power there, one of the most advanced in the world, in the heart of Arab and Muslim territory, creating in the Middle East one of the planet's most dangerous places.

The superpower also used Israel to supply nuclear weapons to the armies of apartheid in South Africa, to be used against Cuban troops which alongside Angolan and Namibian forces were defending the Peoples' Republic of Angola. These are fairly recent events which the current US president surely knows about. Thus we are not foreign to the aggression and the danger the Israeli nuclear potential represents for peace.

After the three initial points of his speech in Cairo, Obama starts philosophizing and lecturing about US foreign policy:

“The fourth issue that I will address is democracy”, he said.

“So let me be clear: No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other.”

“America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election.”

“But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; ...”

“These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.”

“The fifth issue that we must address together is religious freedom.”

“Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance ... I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia, where devout Christians worshiped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country.”

“Among some Muslims, there's a disturbing tendency to measure one's own faith by the rejection of somebody else's faith.”

“...fault lines must be closed among Muslims, as well, as the divisions between Sunni and Shia have led to tragic violence, particularly in Iraq.”

“...it is important for Western countries to avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit — for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear. We can't disguise hostility toward any religion behind the pretence of liberalism.”

“I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal, but I do believe that a woman who is denied an education is denied equality. And it is no coincidence that countries where women are well educated are far more likely to be prosperous.”

“...the struggle for women's equality continues in many aspects of American life, and in countries around the world.”

“I am convinced that our daughters can contribute just as much to society as our sons. Our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity — men and women — to reach their full potential.”

“The Internet and television can bring knowledge and information, but also offensive sexuality and mindless violence into the home. Trade can bring new wealth and opportunities, but also huge disruptions and change in communities.”

“...invest in online learning for teachers and children around the world; and create a new online network, so a young person in Kansas can communicate instantly with a young person in Cairo.”

“...we have a responsibility to join together on behalf of the world that we seek — a world where extremists no longer threaten our people, and American troops have come home; a world where Israelis and Palestinians are each secure in a state of their own, and nuclear energy is used for peaceful purposes ...”

“That is the world we seek. But we can only achieve it together.”

“It's easier to start wars than to end them.”

“that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us
 “We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written.

“The Holy Quran tells us: "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another."

The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace."

The Holy Bible tells us: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." (Applause.)

The people of the world can live together in peace.”

As you can see, tackling the fourth topic in his speech at Al-Azhar University Obama stumbles into a contradiction. After beginning his words with a maxim as is his custom, stating that:

“No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other”, a principle in the Charter of the United Nations as a fundamental element of international law, he immediately contradicts himself with a declaration of faith that turns the United States into the supreme judge over democratic values and human rights.

Then he refers to subjects related to economic development and equal opportunities. He makes promises to the Arab world; he points out advantages and contradictions. It would really appear to be a public relations campaign carried out by the United States with the Muslim countries; in any case, this is better than threatening to destroy them with bombs.

At the end of the speech there is quite a mix of subjects.

If one takes into account the length of the speech, without using paper, the number of lapses is negligible as compared with his predecessor who used to make a mistake in every paragraph. He is a very good communicator.

I tend to observe historical, political and religious ceremonies with interest.

This one at Al-Azhar University seemed to be to be an unreal scene. Not even Pope Benedict XVI had declared such ecumenical phrases as Obama did. For a second I imagined the pious Muslim, Catholic, Christian or Jew, or someone from any other religion, listening to the president in the spacious hall of Al-Azhar University. At a certain moment I couldn't tell whether he was in a Catholic cathedral, a Christian church, a mosque or a synagogue.

He left early for Germany. For three days he toured politically significant sites. He participated and spoke at commemorative ceremonies. He visited museums, received his family and dined at famous restaurants. He has an impressive working capacity. Some time will go by before we see anything like it again.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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