

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Obama Tries Again in the Arab World ^[1]

DUBAI --- Take a look at Barack Obama's 2009 speech in Cairo. It was beautifully written and radiated good intentions. The U.S. government relied heavily on new media tools to disseminate it throughout the Arab world and beyond. Arab opinion of Obama improved significantly; and then it dropped like a rock.

The reason? The beautiful words were seen to have been built on air, not on a foundation of policy. Arabs are a tough audience. They've heard it all before: blueprints, roadmaps, promises about this and that. And yet nothing ever seemed to change...until they took matters into their own hands.

This is my fourth trip this year to the Middle East, and it is an exciting place to be. The triumphs of democracy in Tunisia and Egypt, and the ongoing struggles in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere have energized people here, especially the young. They are intent on shaping their own destiny and are rightly wary of the United States, which for so long embraced and protected the despised old order.

This means President Obama has a steep hill to climb as he tries to "reset" the U.S.-Arab relationship. Here are some issues he should address forcefully:

- Above all else, Israel-Palestine. If there ever was a time to move things along, this is it. Correctly or not, most Arabs see Israel as a U.S. client-state and assume the United States can strongly influence Israeli policy. Obama must make clear, publicly and privately, that Israel must move forward now. With the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in jeopardy, with Syria in disarray, and with much other turmoil and transition in the region, Israel must move promptly or find itself at the mercy of events it cannot control. Given Israel's dependence on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of its security, Obama should use his leverage to insist that Israel recognize the legitimacy of a Palestinian state, renew its treaty commitments with Egypt, and offer economic and other assistance to the new Arab regimes. (Israel's work in desalination, for instance, offers the opportunity for meaningful "water diplomacy.") He must also press Arab leaders to be realistic and accept Israel as a neighbor. An important goal would be the opening of diplomatic relations between Israel and all the Arab states within the next three years.

- Propose a Marshall Plan for the underdeveloped nations of the Arab world. Jobs, housing, education, and health care mean much more to people than do high-sounding promises. Although receiving little attention so far, the United States has recently made billions of dollars in economic development assistance available to Arab states transitioning toward democracy. Special emphasis has been placed on fostering entrepreneurship, which is essential if economies are to develop, and private-sector investment in the region. As with the original Marshall plan in the 1940s, the impetus for development must come from the aid recipients themselves, with the U.S. providing financial muscle. Pulling current and future U.S. aid programs into one identifiable initiative would let the Arab public know that the United States is offering more than words in support of their new beginning.
- Along these lines, ensure that American public diplomacy is less about advertising and more about service. Ever since the initial response to the 9/11 attacks, American public diplomacy strategists have spent too much time on “Aren’t we wonderful?” campaigns. In the Arab world, people simply don’t care about such self-serving pronouncements. Anything that does not relate directly to their own lives is wasted effort. The State Department has been emphasizing the importance of educational and cultural exchanges, which are valuable tools. If he emphasizes these three principal topics, President Obama will have a chance to achieve a significant breakthrough in American relations with the Arab world. There remains a residual respect for American culture, technology, education, and resources. Almost every Arab college student I talk with speaks about her or his desire to come to the United States for graduate school, and those who have already studied in America are almost always more friendly and sophisticated in their attitude about the United States.

This is the generation that has been in the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Sanaa, Manama, and elsewhere, trying to build a new Arab world. These are the people President Obama should address. They carry America’s hopes in the region as well as their own. They are the future.
