

American

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President Obama Reaches Out to Muslim World

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama, acknowledging that relations between the United States and Muslim communities around the world have been frayed over many years by mistrust and suspicion, says that since becoming president, he has worked to repair those relations and create a path to move beyond differences.

“We can choose to be defined by our differences, and give in to a future of suspicion and mistrust,” Obama said. “Or we can choose to do the hard work of forging common ground, and commit ourselves to the steady pursuit of progress.”

And no matter what setbacks may come, the United States is committed to human progress, Obama added.

Obama addressed Muslim communities across the globe during a speech November 10 at the University of Indonesia in Depok before heading to South Korea, the third stop of his four-nation visit to Asia, to attend the Group of 20 (G20) summit of advanced economies in Seoul. Indonesia will also attend the G20 summit.

The president visited India before arriving November 9 in Jakarta. He is also visiting Japan on his last stop before returning to Washington. He was forced to leave Indonesia a little earlier than planned because of the volcanic ash spewing from Mount Merapi. Two previous trips to Indonesia were postponed because of events in Washington and an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

In his speech, Obama cited Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim nation, as a fast-developing democracy and a tolerant nation. Before his speech, he met privately with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta.

The president’s speech was intended to echo his address to Muslim audiences in June 2009 in Cairo, in which he said that no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust. He acknowledged in Depok that while progress is being made in improving relations, many of the issues that have caused tensions for many years remain to be addressed.

Innocent deaths in the United States, Indonesia and across the world caused by violent extremism are still an ever-present problem, he said. But he repeated his Cairo pledge that the United States “is not, and never will be, at war with Islam,” though extremists have often tried to drive that wedge between the United States and Muslims everywhere.

The violent extremism represented by al-Qaida and its affiliates must be defeated, Obama said. Those who want to build peaceful societies that are prosperous and free must not cede ground to the extremists who seek to destroy progress, he added.

The task of defeating extremism in all its forms is not a task for the United States alone, he said. He cited the progress made in Indonesia in rooting out extremists and combating their violence while building a modern nation.

The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have cost the United States support and trust by many in the global Muslim community, but Obama said there is progress and reason to renew that trust. The work continues, Obama said, in building the capacity of the Afghan government to secure its future. And significant progress has been made in ending the war in Iraq as the Iraqis now have taken full responsibility for their security, he said.

And while there have been many false starts and setbacks to the Middle East peace process, the United States has been persistent in the pursuit of peace and for a solution that has two nations living in peace, side by side, Obama said.

North Korea Must Show Seriousness for Talks to Resume

By Merle Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — North Korea must show “a seriousness of purpose” before nuclear disarmament talks can resume, President Obama says.

If the North Korean regime is prepared to take that step and is willing to completely abandon a nuclear weapons and long-range missile development program, then the international community is prepared to offer substantial economic assistance, Obama said.

“We’re not interested in just going through the motions with the same result,” Obama said at a November 11 press conference in Seoul with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak. “We will continue to look for signals from the North Koreans that they’re serious.”

Obama spoke with reporters after a meeting with the South Korean president on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G20) Summit in Seoul. Begun in 2003, the Six Party Talks — which involve South and North Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States — have focused on persuading North Korea to give up a weapons program in return for political and economic assistance.

Talks ended last year when the international community condemned North Korea for testing a new generation

long-range missiles.

North Korea has been completing the succession of leadership from Kim Jong-Il to his youngest son, and a reduction in tensions may create willingness to resuming the Six-Party negotiations. North Korea has sent signals of a desire to return to the talks.

“President Lee and I have discussed this extensively and our belief is that there will be an appropriate time and place to re-enter into Six-Party Talks,” Obama told reporters.

Lee set South Korea’s requirements for its willingness to resume talks: “North Korea should and must show sincerity towards the Republic of Korea and to assume responsibility for what they did to the Cheonan.” The Cheonan is a South Korea naval destroyer sunk by a North Korean torpedo in March. The attack resulted in the deaths of 46 sailors.

TRADE AGREEMENT

Obama said that he and Lee talked at length about the pending U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and they agreed to continue the talks in Washington and Seoul. Both nations had hoped to resolve final differences during the G20 in Seoul this year, but agreed that it is more important to get the final details correct.

“We have asked our teams to work tirelessly in the coming days and weeks to get this completed,” he told reporters. Part of the agreement involves expanded exports of American automobiles and beef to South Korea.

While in Seoul, Obama also held bilateral talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao, who is coming to Washington early in 2011, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

And during the G20 talks, world leaders are working toward an agreement to reduce global economic imbalances. The United States believes such an agreement is essential to completing recovery from the 2007–2009 recession. Among the issues is setting guidelines for reducing trade imbalances and convincing nations to refrain from devaluing their currencies.

United States Gives \$150 Million to Palestinians

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States has provided an additional \$150 million in direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority to pay down its debt and to continue providing services and security in the West Bank

and Gaza territories.

At a November 10 press briefing, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said that these funds bring direct budget assistance to \$225 million for 2010, and overall support and investment to nearly \$600 million for the year.

“This figure underscores the strong determination of the American people and this administration to stand with our Palestinian friends even during difficult economic times,” Clinton told reporters during a joint videoconference with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

“It will support our work together to expand Palestinians’ access to schools, clinics and clean drinking water in both the West Bank and Gaza,” she said. The assistance will also be used to help pay for modernizing courthouses and police stations, training judges and prosecutors and launching new economic development initiatives, she added.

Strict safeguards have been initiated to ensure that the U.S. budget assistance will be used for the purposes intended, Clinton told reporters.

The United States, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund monitor the use of donor funds in the territories, and there is complete confidence that the Palestinian Authority will provide accountability and openness, she added.

Fayyad thanked the United States for the additional assistance and said that the budget support was what the Palestinian Authority needed the most at the moment as it helps meet the duties, obligations and responsibilities of providing for the Palestinian people.

“It also is highly responsive to our needs in the terms of its timeliness,” Fayyad said. He added that since the inception of the Palestinian Authority over the period 1994 through 2010, the United States has provided \$3.5 billion in assistance.

During the opening of the U.N. General Assembly in September, Fayyad had asked donors for approximately \$500 million to help close a budget deficit this year. On November 4, the European Union gave 20.7 million euros (\$28.5 million).

WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS

Clinton told reporters at the briefing that the United States was “deeply disappointed by the announcement of advance planning for new housing units in sensitive areas of East Jerusalem.”

The announcement, she added, is counterproductive to efforts currently under way to resume stalled peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Clinton is expected to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York on November 11, and the settlements issue is expected to be discussed. The Israelis earlier announced plans to build 1,300 new units in East Jerusalem and 800 more housing units in the West Bank settlement of Ariel.

Nevertheless, Clinton told reporters, the United States will continue to work to resume the talks.

China Pursues Green Energy

By Andrzej Zwaniecki
Staff Writer

Washington – China will aggressively pursue clean energy policies for the foreseeable future, driven mostly by the desire to reduce its dependence on overseas energy supplies, according to U.S. experts.

China's energy industries have been shifting away from small, inefficient coal-fired power plants toward larger, modern and cleaner units, and, with government support, have been investing in renewable energy sources and industries. The government also is phasing in stringent fuel economy standards to reduce petroleum consumption in transportation. Through these and other measures, China is working to reduce its economy's "energy intensity" – the energy consumed per unit of domestic output – by 20 percent between 2005 and the end of 2010. The government also has committed to reducing its carbon intensity – carbon dioxide emissions per unit of the domestic output – by roughly 45 percent from 2005 levels by 2020.

China looks at these goals not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity to build a competitive energy sector for the 21st century, according to Bo Kong, a professor at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. The country will not be able to meet its energy demand, which is projected to nearly double by 2030, with clean energy alone, he said. Thus, China is expected to continue to build coal-fired power plants and acquire foreign oil assets.

But China's leaders believe that, in addition to improving energy security, renewable, nuclear and clean-coal technologies combined with better energy efficiency will help the country improve its natural environment and shift its industries to more value-added exports, Kong said. He and other specialists discussed China's clean energy issues October 26 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

According to a 2009 report from the consulting company McKinsey & Company, China could indeed build a "green economy" and emerge as a global leader in clean energy technologies during the next two decades. In the process, the country could reduce its petroleum imports by up to 40 percent and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by half by 2030, the report says. In 2009, with \$34.6 billion spent, China became the leader among major economies in clean energy investment, according to a 2010 study by the Pew Charitable Trust.

Incomplete reforms of energy markets will make China's achievement of its energy goals more difficult, experts said. A government agency set up to drive these reforms is weak, enforcement of rules lags and powerful oil companies shape energy policies to a large degree, they said.

For China's trading partners, its green energy push creates both new opportunities and the risk of trade frictions. Chinese companies are among top producers of solar photovoltaic panels and wind turbines. U.S. and European producers of clean energy equipment would like to get a piece of China's booming clean energy business but say their efforts are often thwarted. Recently, they complained that overseas producers of wind turbines were excluded from major wind power projects in China and that subsidies provided by the government to Chinese companies put overseas producers at a disadvantage. Chinese officials have rejected the criticism as baseless.

Clean energy subsidies are common across the world, experts say, but market access restrictions are not. Michael Levi of the Council on Foreign Relations said the United States should join forces with the European Union, Brazil, India and other countries affected by the Chinese restrictions to seek free-market access. He said that multilateral pressure has proved more effective in dealing with Beijing than bilateral negotiations. Bilateral efforts should focus on cooperation, Levi said.

Cooperation already is robust, at least in areas where the two countries' strengths are complementary – areas ranging from nuclear energy to fuel-efficient cars, according to Julian Wong of the U.S. Energy Department.

A new, joint U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Center promises to bring the cooperation to a higher level, Wong said. At the center, funded in equal parts by the two governments and with facilities in both countries, U.S. and Chinese researchers will work side by side on projects that include building efficiency, clean coal and clean vehicles.

In Iran, Trying to Make Sense of a Very Different Democracy

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — Hooman Majd is trying to explain Iran to the United States, and he wishes someone would explain the United States to Iran.

Majd, a Western-raised son of a pre-revolution Iranian diplomat, has spent years doing the journalistic equivalent of shuttle diplomacy, traveling between the two countries and writing about their troubled, complicated ties, as well as writing about an Iranian political, social and religious landscape that outsiders find baffling.

“It is almost a necessity to be Iranian to understand, and to be Iranian in order to be comfortable with Iranian life and all of its paradoxes,” he writes in his latest book, *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge*.

The new book is his second attempt between hard covers to demystify Iran. The first, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, sold well and described a society that tolerated and expected dissent, even within a fundamentalist, theocratic state, and that was coping with shifts in social classes. He didn’t imagine that the book would be the last word on Iran, nor did he imagine that the next would have to explain what many in Iran considered a stolen presidential election.

In *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy*, Majd interviews Iranian figures of all stripes — conservative clerics, government ministers, reformist politicians and Jewish activists as well as taxi drivers and chance acquaintances — to explain a pivotal and dramatic moment in modern Iranian history. Until the vote of June 2009 and the declaration that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won re-election by a landslide, he writes, Iranians had trusted their unique system of government, their Islamic republic, to function more or less democratically; and they concluded that for the first time their votes had been stolen.

He does not expect the book to be available in bookstores in Tehran, in any language.

“You can buy Hillary Clinton’s autobiography in Tehran bookstores, in English and in Farsi — both — and that’s OK, but books by an Iranian about Iran, there’s just too much that would have to be censored, that would be uncomfortable for the Ministry of Culture” and Islamic Guidance, which must approve books published for sale in Iran, Majd said in a telephone interview from his hometown of New York City.

The Ayatollah Begs to Differ “doesn’t really have anything

that is that anti-regime, let’s say, but there are hints, and there are certainly criticisms, criticisms that would not be considered kosher,” he added. “I certainly don’t anticipate that this book, which is far more political than the first book, would ever see the light of day in the Persian language.”

Yet Majd’s books stress and document the Iranian people’s support for their form of government, no matter their opinion of Ahmadinejad and the legitimacy of his re-election. By and large, Majd said, reformist candidates and their supporters were not looking for substantial changes in the system that gives a leading Shiite cleric veto power over the directly elected president and parliament as well as command over the military. And even after that supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, endorsed the election results and supported the violent crackdown on dissent that followed, he and the office he occupies remained popular.

Those are things that most Americans, including Iranian Americans, do not understand, Majd said. It has been hard for Americans to get past the image of Iran as the country where U.S. diplomats and officials were held hostage for nearly 15 months at the start of the Iranian Revolution. But Majd said Iran has changed: For one thing, he said that almost all of the people involved in taking the hostages in 1979 supported reform candidates in the election 30 years later.

Iranian attitudes toward the United States also have changed, he said: “There’s a lot of people even on the conservative side who don’t believe that American relations with Iran should be frozen the way they are or that the two countries should be in conflict the way they are.” He argues the “fundamental” issue for the United States is that it must treat Iran — “which is clearly inferior militarily, economically, in so many ways to America from a practical standpoint,” Majd says — as an equal in order to move forward in resolving the differences.

He added that Iranians don’t understand the United States, either: For one thing, conspiracy theories get in the way.

Majd’s books discuss Iranians’ enthusiasm for conspiracy theories generally, in their own society as well as America’s. In the eyes of Iranians, and of many other people in the world, he said, Americans have the “appearance of democracy” and “a lot of social freedoms and political freedom, but at the end of the day, [the conspiracy theory is] the U.S. government is either controlled by corporate interests or controlled by lobby groups, or controlled by Zionists, or whatever they want to call it. ... Those are difficult illusions to shatter.”

“The people in Iran just didn’t believe, in the run-up to

our elections in 2008, that a black man with the middle name of Hussein would be *allowed* to be elected president, that there would be a way that ... 'those interests that control the United States' wouldn't allow that to happen," Majd said. "They would allow democracy to exist, they would allow people to vote, but that there was no way *they* — the so-called *they* — would allow a black man to be president."

Now, with President Obama in office, the conspiracy theorists, rather than believing in the power of the American voter, say he was allowed to become president because he agreed to follow the orders of the so-called "they."

"I think that if Iranians, for example, or people in the Muslim world were able to hear the voices of the average American, the American people who do participate in elections, who do believe in their democracy, they might be pleasantly surprised because those are voices they don't normally hear," Majd said. "They hear the voices of politicians, and they hear the voices of celebrities."

Yet Majd offered some hope that Iran and the United States could resolve their differences, including those concerning the Iranian nuclear program, so long as the Iranian government does not have to lose credibility with its people. "In my opinion, there is a win-win, and we haven't looked hard enough for that formula where it's a win-win: where the Iranians can save face — not just save face but say: 'Look, we protected Iran's independence. We protected its rights. There are areas which ... the Western world has concerns with, and these are areas that we are willing to address without having given up one iota of your rights as the Iranian people.' But there are those areas where Iran can concede, and there have to be areas where the United States has to be able to concede, too. ...

"If somebody asked me what I do know with certainty, what I can say with certainty, it's that not enough effort has been made on either side, on the Iranian side or the American side, to resolve the differences that we have."

Majd said he hopes his books raise interested Americans' understanding of Iran so that differences between the two nations can be resolved. "I'm not a professor or an academic or a foreign-policy expert who says, 'I'm right; this is what it is,'" he said. "I just want people to consider different viewpoints and, certainly when it comes to Iran, to consider where Iranians are coming from, where even this leadership is coming from, why they behave the way they do, why they say the things they do. Because sometimes when you understand the why, it's easier to then deal with that adversary."

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