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Obama seeks to change Muslim perceptions of U.S.

Thu Jun 4, 2009 1:40pm EDT

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By Ross Colvin and David Alexander

CAIRO (Reuters) - President Barack Obama sought to change Muslim perceptions of the United States on Thursday in a speech that urged Arabs and Israelis to declare in public the realities he said they accept in private.

Addressing the world's more than 1 billion Muslims from Cairo, Obama called for a "new beginning" in ties between Washington and the Islamic world in his speech that also tackled grievances over two U.S.-led wars and tensions over Iran.

Some Muslims welcomed Obama's fresh tone after George W. Bush's departure even as others expressed frustration that he failed to outline specific changes to U.S. policy, reflecting skepticism in the region Obama must still overcome.

In his keynote speech, occasionally interrupted by shouts of "we love you," Obama said he did not want U.S. troops to stay in Iraq or Afghanistan forever and offered mutual respect in seeking to resolve differences with long-time foe, Tehran.

"We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world -- tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate," Obama said in the address that included quotes from Islam's holy book, the Koran.

"I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect," he said. "America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition."

"This cycle of suspicion and discord must end," he said.

Highlighting hostility the U.S. leader faces from some quarters, al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, in a message on a website, warned Muslims against alliance with Christians and Jews, saying it would annul their faith.

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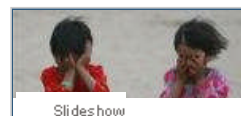
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The supreme leader of Washington's regional arch foe, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said before Obama spoke that America was "deeply hated" and only action, not "slogans," could change that.

The choice of Cairo for the speech underscored Obama's focus on the Middle East, where he faces big foreign policy challenges, from trying to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks to curbing Iran's

nuclear plans that Washington says is to build atomic bombs. Tehran denies any such aims.

His trip included touring a 14th century mosque and the pyramids in the desert on the edge of Cairo. He was seen off at the airport, walking up the red carpet in the t-shirt and trousers he wore while visiting the ancient pharaonic sites.

TWO-STATE SOLUTION

Although the administration tried to lower expectations in recent days about what the speech would accomplish, there were high hopes in the region that he would take a tougher line on Israel and follow up his words with actions.

He offered few specifics on democracy, rule of law and human rights in the Arab world, issues many hoped he would spell out.

"He should have been outspoken about democracy and the universal principles of human rights," said Syrian lawyer Mohannad al-Hassani.

Obama, who wants to build a coalition of Muslim governments to back his diplomatic moves, affirmed his commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying it was in the interest of all concerned parties.

"That is why I intend to personally pursue this outcome with all the patience that the task requires," he said.

He said Palestinians had to abandon violence and urged them to acknowledge Israel's right to exist. He also said Israel should stop building settlements in the West Bank.

"It is time for us to act on what everyone knows to be true," Obama said, adding Washington would "say in public what we say in private" and told others to follow suit.

Palestinian official Nabil Abu Rdainah said: "President Obama's speech is a good start and an important step toward a new American policy."

Israel responded by saying it shared President Obama's hopes for Middle East peace but Israel's security interests remained paramount. The official statement made no mention of Jewish settlements nor Palestinian statehood.

Obama said Iran should have access to peaceful atomic power, but it must adhere to nuclear non-proliferation.

"(This) is about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path," Obama said.

Obama said the United States had no interest in keeping military bases in Afghanistan and said Washington had a responsibility to "leave Iraq to Iraqis" and build a better future for them.

"This speech was very inspiring and I think many people will welcome it, because he tried to be neutral and honest and objective," said Egyptian analyst Khalil al-Anani.

Other reaction was mixed.

"The Islamic world does not need moral or political sermons. It needs a fundamental change in American policy," said MP Hassan Fadlallah of Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Mohamed Habib, deputy leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, said: "It's

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a public relations address more than anything else."

(Additional by Reuters bureaus; Writing by David Alexander and Edmund Blair; Editing by Samia Nakhoul)

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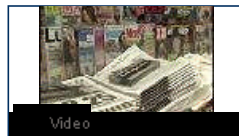
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