

Obama's just war speech: Three questions for 'the Middle East in the United States'

Since September 11, region has become a domestic American issue

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Congo, Zimbabwe, North Korea, Sin Kiang and Honduras, are hot spots that have turned or are likely to turn violent. But the Middle East is different in two ways. It is the longest continuously war-ridden area in modern history. And at least since September 11, it has become a domestic American issue. US soldiers continue to die in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the US newly established Department of Homeland Security will be long busy tracking “enemy combatants,” “infiltrators,” and ordinary American citizens ready to take up the cause of radical Islam.

I do not think there is great need to dwell on Obama’s treatment of Islam, which is as wise as it is consensual: Islam is a great religion, and we must avoid turning the fight against extreme militants into a war between religions. Let’s stick to treaties and human rights, and time-honored human values embodied in the US Constitution and other domestic and international charters protecting basic rights. But this is easier said than done, and the common factor of America at war is anti-Western political Islam. The Islamic revolutionaries in the Bin Laden tradition, which is the Sunni visage of Khomeini’s Shiite anti-American legacy, have imposed that religious dimension on the world. Obama may well be right that “no Holy War can ever be a just war,” the problem is how one responds to holy warriors without becoming a holy himself. Reversing the antagonism may well take a generation, if not more, and will in all likelihood get far worse before it gets better.

Rather than Islam at large, it seems to me easier to focus on “the Middle East in the US,” as I recall the title of a great talk of the late Edward Said I hosted at the University of London two decades ago. The Middle East has since the New York massacre become a domestic American issue.

Three central Middle Eastern questions are conjured up by the Nobel speech: How can the US advance democracy and human rights? A major proposal buried in the speech, which Middle Eastern civil society leaders had put forward in September 2004 at the G-8 meeting, is to “empower dissidents.” This was called then “the democratic imperative.” Let’s see how Obama is planning to identify Middle East democrats and support them. Although he mentioned “the hundreds of thousands” of Iranian demonstrators in his speech, Shireen Ebadi has criticized Obama for being far less committed to Iranian fighters for liberty since the Green Revolution started in June. Nor do we see much Obama enthusiasm in supporting democracy in Iraq, arguably the only country in the Middle East where it is making progress.

Then there was also the justice imperative, that is the need to indict and try assassins of non-violent dissidents. Last week, I wrote to both Walid Jumblatt and Saad Hariri against their planned or announced visit to Damascus, because the Assad dynasty is universally considered as responsible for the assassination of their respective fathers,

Kamal Jumblatt in 1977 and Rafik Hariri in 2005. Walid Jumblatt doesn't dispute the fact that his father was murdered on the orders of Hafez Assad. And until the current prosecutor of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon says otherwise, the position of his predecessors Fitzgerald and Mehlis on Syrian high level involvement in Hariri's and scores of other assassinations remains the necessary departing point for Lebanon dealing with Syria. Where does Obama stand on this?

Related to the weakness of Obama's position on Syria's leaders and Iran is the uncritical attitude toward the Saudi system. Hariri was pushed by his Saudi patrons for a demeaning Assad embrace in large part because America appears to have abandoned Lebanese democrats who carried an unprecedented non-violent revolution in 2005 for justice and accountability. The Saudi rulers have fought this message tooth and nail, and they need to be challenged on both their domestic and international policies for continued contempt of human rights and democratic values. Their misuse of oil money over the past six decades was and continues to be for the preservation of an absolute, medieval rule over the peoples of Arabia.

And then there is Israel. Obama has an intriguing depiction in his speech of the "tribal" dimension of the wars between Arabs and Jews. Is it a "tribal conflict," as he suggests, or a war of survival of tiny, democratic Israel against the hordes of Palestinians and other barbarians as generally perceived in America? I have found myself in the midst of an acrimonious controversy, amongst distinguished constitutional scholars, against my verdict on this page two weeks ago that Israel cannot be considered a democracy by universal standards. It would be useful to hear more of Obama's position on the nature of the conflict, and on the nature of the Israeli legal and constitutional system. The solutions sought would be very different, depending on whether the conflict is tribal (Jews against Arabs/Muslims?) or civilizational (Israeli democracy against Arab/Muslim dictatorship?).

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