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Muslims in U.S.: Speech hit 'right notes'

Media Mention of Ziad Asali in USA Today - June 5, 2009 - 12:00am

http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-06-04-speechUS_N.htm [1]

President Obama's call for Arabs, Israelis and Americans to abandon their suspicions and work together for a more secure future was welcomed more enthusiastically by Muslims on this side of the world than by Jews who expressed concerns about his support for the Palestinian cause.

"He hit the right notes with the right tone," said Ziad Asali, president of the American Task Force on Palestine. "He gave the big picture in a speech that takes the high moral ground. It takes courage to say the things that are not exactly what your audience wants to hear."

His pointed comments about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict drew the harshest reactions here. Calling the bond between the United States and Israel "unbreakable," Obama called on Israel to recognize the need for a Palestinian state and stop illegal settlements in the West Bank, which Palestinians claim as part of their homeland. He denounced the violence against Israel and called on Palestinians to end attacks.

Ibtisam Ibrahim, a Palestinian who is director of Arab Studies at American University, said Obama may have offended some Arabs by emphasizing the strong relationship between the United States and Israel. "It sounded like he was speaking in an Israeli university," Ibrahim said. "We know about the special relationship, and there's no argument about it. We need to hear more about how we're going to end the conflict."

Some Jews were rankled by the president's comments regarding Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said the speech was troubling because it marked a shift from the Bush administration, which was more concerned with ensuring Israel's security. "The reality is that settlements are not an obstacle to peace," Brooks said. "This administration is changing the focus of peace efforts. ? You have to stop the barrage of missiles and rockets coming into Israel."

Mordechai Yitzhaky, owner of Katz Kosher Super Market in Rockville, Md., called the president's speech a disaster for the Jewish community. "He never mentioned the Israelis' burden over the last 50 years," Yitzhaky said. "He only talked about what the Israelis are supposed to do to make the Palestinians' lives easier. ? A lot of Jewish people in the U.S. voted for him. I think a lot of them will be very disappointed."

Rabbi Michael Beals of the Congregation of Beth Shalom in Wilmington, Del., said Obama wrongly made it appear as if Israel and the United States disagreed over settlements. "He made an issue out of something that's not an issue," Beals said. "It was, 'Look, we're getting tough on Israel.' "

Others who advocate a separate nation for Palestinians praised Obama's approach. "You have to end the blame game," said Jeremy Ben-Ami, executive director of J Street, a pro-Israel lobby that supports a two-state solution. "That kind of finger-pointing and blame game will not allow you to move forward."

Muslims across the country said the speech was a strong overture to the Arab world by a president who has credibility because of his personal experiences with Islam. Obama noted that his middle name is Hussein, his father was Muslim and he lived for several years in Indonesia, which has a predominantly Muslim population.

"He looks like a lot of people in the Middle East. His middle name is like many people in the Middle East," said Yahya Mossa Basha of Detroit, which has one of the largest populations of Arabs in the USA. "No one doubts his intentions."

Other Arabs said the speech laid the groundwork for the United States to establish a better relationship with Muslims here and abroad. "We are a growing minority, and we are misunderstood and misrepresented," said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "The president is helping to undo and break down stereotypes of Muslims and also break down stereotypes of Americans."

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