

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY

**June 5, 2009**

## Addressing Muslims, Obama Pushes Mideast Peace

By [JEFF ZELENY](#) and [ALAN COWELL](#)

CAIRO — In opening a bold overture to the Islamic world on Thursday, [President Obama](#) confronted frictions between Muslims and the West, but he reserved some of his bluntest words for Israel, as he expressed sympathy for the [Palestinians](#) and what he called the “daily humiliations, large and small, that come with occupation.”

While Mr. Obama emphasized that America’s bond with Israel was “unbreakable,” he spoke in equally powerful terms of the Palestinian people, describing their plight as “intolerable” after 60 years of statelessness, and twice referring to “Palestine” in a way that put Palestinians on parallel footing with Israelis.

Mr. Obama’s speech in Cairo, which he called a “timeless city,” was perhaps the riskiest of his presidency, as he used unusually direct language to call for a fresh look at deep divisions, both those between Israel and its neighbors and between the Islamic world and the West. Among his messages was a call for Americans and Muslims to abandon their mutual suspicions and do more to confront violent extremism.

But it was Mr. Obama’s empathetic tone toward the Palestinians that attracted the most attention in the region and around the world. His words left many Palestinians and their Arab supporters jubilant but infuriated some Israelis and American backers of Israel because they saw the speech as elevating the Palestinians to equal status.

Mr. Obama said the bond between the United States and Israel was “based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.”

“On the other hand,” Mr. Obama added, “it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people — Muslims and Christians — have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years, they’ve endured the pain of dislocation.” He said Americans “will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own.”

Mr. Obama seemed to connect with his audience in his 55-minute speech from Cairo University as he quoted repeatedly from the Koran and occasionally sprinkled his remarks with Arabic, even beginning his address with the traditional Arabic greeting “salaam aleikum,” or “peace be upon you.”

In the speech, which was broadcast and translated around the world, Mr. Obama sounded forceful, even scolding at times, as he promoted democracy in [Egypt](#) and women’s rights and acknowledged that the United

States had fallen short of its ideals, particularly in the Iraq war.

He divided his speech into seven sections, standing at the podium like the university professor he was before beginning his political career. Mr. Obama sharply criticized what he called the “disturbing tendency” among some Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites, to “measure one’s own faith by the rejection of somebody else’s faith.”

But while he spoke uncompromisingly of the American fight against [Al Qaeda](#), Mr. Obama never mentioned the words “terrorism” or “terrorist.” That was a departure from the language used by the Bush administration, but one that some Middle East experts suggested reflected a belief by the new administration that overuse had made the words inflammatory.

Still, [Paul D. Wolfowitz](#), a former top Bush administration official who was an architect of the war in Iraq and is a strong supporter of Israel, offered general praise for Mr. Obama’s address.

“I could have used less moral equivalence, but he had to get through to his audience, and it’s in America’s interest for him to get through,” Mr. Wolfowitz said.

Mr. Obama’s remarks will be parsed by Israelis and Palestinians, in part because when previous American presidents have used the word “Palestine,” they have usually done so only in reference to a future Palestinian state, as President [George W. Bush](#) did in March 2002.

“Now Obama is saying ‘Palestine’ is a present reality,” said Robert Malley, director of the Middle East program at the International Crisis Group, and a Middle East negotiator in the Clinton administration.

Mr. Obama’s stark statement that “the United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements” is also likely to be seen as a sharp challenge to Israeli assumptions that existing West Bank settlements will always be allowed to remain.

It was noteworthy that the only Palestinian political group that Mr. Obama specifically mentioned was [Hamas](#), the militant Islamic organization that [won Palestinian legislative elections in 2006](#). Hamas governs Gaza, but is loathed by Israel. Mr. Obama called on Hamas to forswear violence and recognize Israel’s right to exist, but Middle East experts said that his mention was an acknowledgment that Hamas might have become a more important actor than the [Fatah](#) Party, controlled by [Mahmoud Abbas](#), the Palestinian president.

Mr. Obama said, “Hamas does have support among some Palestinians, but they also have to recognize they have responsibilities.”

The president offered few details on how to solve problems around the globe. But he offered up his own biography as a credible connection to his various audiences. His message touched on a lengthy list of challenges, but his appearance here could simply be boiled down to this: Barack Hussein Obama was standing on the podium in this Muslim capital as the American president.

“I consider it part of my responsibility as president of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear,” Mr. Obama said. “But that same principle must apply to Muslim perceptions

of America. Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire.”

Some Muslims were delighted.

“I feel that he spoke to my emotions, and showed a sense of recognition of the dignity of Palestinians,” said Ghaith al-Omari, advocacy director of the American Task Force on Palestine.

Although Mr. Obama strongly condemned those who would deny the Holocaust, many American supporters of Israel said they resented what they viewed as comparing it to the plight of the Palestinians.

“I understand Palestinian suffering, it is terrible,” said [Abraham Foxman](#), the national director of the [Anti-Defamation League](#). “But it is not on the other hand to the Holocaust.”

*Jeff Zeleny reported from Cairo, and Helene Cooper from Washington.*

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)