

Before Muslims, Obama uses family background to urge U.S.-Islam respect: Making a political liability into an asset

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Dogged by persistent but untrue rumors that he is a closet Muslim, Barack Obama's presidential campaign carefully sidestepped questions about his Muslim ancestry. But in Cairo, Egypt, on June 4 Obama quoted the "Holy Qur'an," greeted his audience with the customary "Assalaamu alaykum" and, when speaking of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad in the same breath, said "peace be upon them."

What was once his greatest political liability has been retooled into his greatest asset as Barack Hussein Obama incorporated his own biography into his effort to overhaul America's image in the Muslim world.

"I'm a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims," Obama said in his highly anticipated appeal to the Islamic world.

"As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan [Muslim call to prayer] at the break of dawn and at the fall of dusk," he said. "As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith."

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, who worked on a White House task force to help craft the Cairo speech, said Obama's openness on personal influences was more than the right diplomatic emphasis. "It's also about trying to establish accurately who he really is," he said.

The core of Obama's message was his pledge to "seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world." He spoke mostly about Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan but said he also intends to deal directly with stalemated issues between

Israelis and Palestinians. Americans, he said, “will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspirations for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own.”

America and Islam need not be in competition, Obama said. “Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and dignity of all human beings.”

The audience of 3,000 guests at Cairo University was very receptive, said Dalia Mogahed, executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, who was present at the event. “His very openly, and with great pride, talking about his Muslim background was seen as an incredible gesture,” said Mogahed, a member of the White House’s faith-based advisory council.

The Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations praised Obama’s broad-outlines speech as “comprehensive, balanced and forthright.” In addition, CAIR officials said: “By quoting the Qur’an on issues such as diversity, justice and the sanctity of human life, the president acknowledged Islam’s contributions to universal values.”

Obama’s public recognition of his ties to Islam will no doubt stir up opposition and confusion in certain corners. Fully 11 percent of Americans still think Obama is a Muslim, according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center for People & the Press, and another 35 percent do not know what to make of his religion.

While calling the U.S.-Israel bond “unbreakable,” Obama reiterated his warning to Israelis against building new settlements in Palestinian sectors. The president acknowledged that the radical Hamas organization has some support among Palestinians, but said Hamas has responsibilities “to end violence, recognize past agreements, recognize Israel’s right to exist.”

Some Middle East observers noted that no new initiatives or timelines were proposed by Obama.

A group of 54 U.S. mainline Protestant, evangelical and Catholic leaders praised Obama for making Israeli-Palestinian peace a top priority, but their letter to the president also expressed concern over the “deteriorating situation in the Holy Land,” particularly the plight of the dwindling Palestinian Christian community. *—RNS, other sources*