

Obama shifts tactics on Muslim outreach: Changes greeted with hope and skepticism

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Nearly a year after President Obama told an audience in Cairo that America wanted a “new beginning” with the Muslim world, evidence of that policy shift has, in recent months, become hard to ignore.

The Obama administration is revising national security guidelines, and officials have also reversed three-month-old guidelines that singled out passengers on flights arriving from 13 Muslim countries, as well as Cuba, for mandatory screening.

Controversial scholar Tariq Ramadan entered the U.S. for the first time in six years after being barred by the Bush administration, and the Obama administration has dispatched American Nobel Prize winners to advise Muslim scientists, economists and other professionals on how to improve their research and better manage their institutions. At the end of April, federal officials planned to host some 500 mainly Muslim business people for intensive seminars on entrepreneurship.

“There’s a lot going on but not a lot being told,” said Qamar-ul Huda, a senior officer at the Religion and Peace making Program at the United States Institute for Peace, an independent nonpartisan institute chartered by Congress. “Many Muslims are not aware of what’s happening, and that needs to be addressed.”

Many analysts say tangible benefits to U.S. foreign policy and security are already visible, such as increased U.S.-Pakistani cooperation that has resulted in the capture or killing of an unprecedented number of high-level Taliban leaders.

In June, President Obama will have another chance to win over Muslims when he visits Indonesia, the southeast Asian nation where he spent part of his childhood and which has the world’s largest Muslim population.

Still, analysts say the long-term battle for Muslim hearts and minds is just beginning. They caution that it will take time to win over people in societies plagued by unemployment, corruption and social malaise—much less those who are more aware of U.S. troops in Afghanistan than of business seminars in Washington.

Obama and other administration officials stopped using terms like *Islamic extremism* shortly after taking office and are now purging *Islamic radicalism* and other terms deemed inflammatory to Muslims from the National Security Strategy policy document.

“It’s offensive to everyday Muslims who don’t like their religion tied to extremism,” Huda said. While not yet finalized, the new language will target terrorism groups rather than use general terms that connect terrorism to Islam.

While Bush was criticized heavily in the Muslim world for using terms like *Islamofascism*, changes started being made while he was still in office. In 2008, the National Counterterrorism Center produced a document called “Words That Work and Words That Don’t: A Guide for Counterterrorism Communication,” which recommends that government agencies and officials avoid characterizing al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups as *Islamic* or *Muslim* because those terms could “unintentionally legitimize” their tactics.

In January, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lifted the 2004 revocation of Ramadan’s visa. Barring Ramadan had undermined America’s credibility as a beacon of democracy, critics said. “It made it harder to sell democracy in the Muslim world,” said Asma Afsaruddin, an Islamic studies professor at Indiana University who was teaching at Notre Dame when Ramadan was barred.

Many Muslims have welcomed the changes and shift in tone. Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, called the new White House vocabulary “another step toward respectful and effective outreach to Muslims at home and abroad.”

Awad also said: “We hope this positive change in language will lead to policies that will deal more effectively with important issues such as peace with justice in the Middle East and withdrawal of our nation’s forces from Iraq and Afghanistan.”

For Muslims in the Islamic world, the changes have been greeted with hope but also skepticism, especially as Obama has increased the U.S. military presence in

Afghanistan and Israeli-Palestinian peace talks remain stalled.

“Many Muslims see this as an important harbinger of things to come. The fact that Obama stops using terms like *Islamic terrorist* shows a big change in mind-set. Muslims notice that he’s not generalizing about them,” said Afsaruddin. But, she added, “Skeptics would say people are still dying in Afghanistan, and that the Palestinians are not any better off. It’s a valid criticism, but it’s too early to give up hope.”

Ramadan, a Swiss scholar who has been critical of U.S. foreign policy, has used his new freedom to tell *New York Magazine* in an interview that he believes Obama has shown he knows how to communicate with Muslims, but not much else.

“Obama has the vision and the words, but does he have the power? This is problematic,” Ramadan said. “It seems he is limited.” –Omar Sacirbey, *Religion News Service*