

Obama and the Muslim World¹

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Abstract

In this paper I situate President Obama's figurative language about the Muslim World in a larger context, one which is based on an analysis of a cognitive map, not only of Obama himself, but of the social network involved in US foreign-policy decision-making. This map was constructed from more than 350 texts of 46 officials, assembled as a "collective mind" of the Obama Administration. I will use this cognitive map to discover links between the central concepts of Obama's approach to the Islamic world, the "basic semantic integrators," and his figurative language. My analysis will show that two of these semantic integrators, THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA, and DIFFERENCE WITH BUSH POLITICS, are clearly reflected in his use of figurative language. I will also discuss some of the challenges that President Obama faces with respect to the Muslim world, where he is attempting to deliver a clear-cut message to multiple audiences who do not share his own cultural, political, and religious traditions.

Basic Semantic Integrators

In 2010 Sergeev and his colleagues at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) conducted an extensive analysis of the central concepts of members of the Obama Administration.² After identifying President Obama's social network, they used cognitive mapping techniques to code and represent graphically the speeches and Congressional testimony of 46 persons who occupied the center of his network. By combining the cognitive maps of each person, they were able to create a representation of the cognitive map of the Obama Administration. Analysis of this representation enabled Sergeev and his colleagues to identify the "*basic semantic integrators*" of the resulting representation, which are both central nodes and metaphorical in nature. These basic semantic integrators are organizing concepts that

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²V. M. Sergeev, E. S. Alexseenkova, A. S. Orlova, E. S. Chimiris, and K. E. Petrov. "Cognitive Map of Scenarios of the World Economic Situation in Middle Term," Center for the Study of Global Problems, International Studies Center, MGIMO University, 2011, forthcoming.

compress fragments of the combined representation into more or less compact structures.

In the section of the cognitive map representation of the Central Region (the Greater Middle East), Sergeev and his colleagues found the basic semantic integrator, THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA. In contrast with Bush, THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA focuses on the elimination of the causes of the problem, and, as a result, it is much more effective and reduces the “brutality” of the Bush Administration. According to the speakers in Obama’s network, this new policy may be attractive and promote the international prestige of the United States.

The basic semantic integrator, THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA, is most actively used in statements related to problems in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as challenges which emerged from the problem of global terrorism. This metaphor appears only rarely, however, in discourses related to nuclear security and the Iranian nuclear problem, and it almost does not exist in discourses related to economic problems. Sergeev and his colleagues concluded from this observation that THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA does not extend to the Iranian nuclear problem, which means that the policy toward the Iranian nuclear problem will not be changed from the policy of the Bush Administration.

The view that Iran is a natural regional leader, whose ambition should be taken into account by American policy, is a complex and non-obvious position that was extracted from the sum of statements of American speakers, such as Dennis Blair, former Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Ross, Special Assistant to President Obama and Senior Director of the Central Region at the National Security Council, and Robert Gates, Former Secretary of Defense. This view reflects the classical realist position that “an enemy of our enemy is our friend.” Because Iran is an enemy of the Taliban, the status and growth of Iranian influence in the region has as a background the natural wish of the state to secure its position, but not Islamic fundamentalism. This view, according to Sergeev and his colleagues, seems to be a semantic fundament for the possibility of an extension of the basic integrator, THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA, to Iranian political discourse, if necessary. Sergeev and his colleagues argue that officials in the Obama Administration almost do not touch on the Iranian problem, because Obama does not know now what to do with Iran.

The third basic semantic integrator is the PROBLEM OF NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS. Key speakers on this topic were Gary Samore, Special Assistant to the President and Coordinator for Arms Control and WMD, Proliferation and Terrorism, Dennis Ross, Thomas Donilon, and Robert Gates. In contrast to the first two integrators, this integrator presupposes not so much the actions and plans, but the preservation of the status quo as embodied in the non-proliferation treaty. The non-

proliferation treaty is a kind of containing factor in the NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA, but all speakers said that the violation of this treaty may be much more costly.

Further analysis revealed one other basic semantic integrator, DIFFERENCE WITH BUSH POLITICS, which appears to be a public refutation of the political views of the Bush Administration. Because President Obama uses the Bush Administration as a negative reference point, it is useful to contrast the Bush view of the Islamic world with that of President Obama.

Figurative Language

Shortly after his inauguration, President Barak Obama signaled a change in US foreign policy toward the Islamic world in an interview on *Al-Arabiya*. In the interview, President Obama focused on the relationship between the United States and Iran. Obama began on a positive note (“Now, the Iranian people are a great people, and the Persian civilization is a great civilization”), but he went on to point out that “Iran has acted in ways that’s not conducive to peace and prosperity in the region...” He ended the interview by repeating a line from his inauguration speech: “If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us.” Thus, for President Obama a HANDSHAKE is a metaphor that has relevance in both business and international relations.

In his interview on *Al-Arabiya*, President Obama promised to “address the Muslim world from a Muslim capital.” Despite the probes of the interviewer, however, the president did not reveal the name of that capital, Cairo.

The Cairo Speech, which President Obama delivered on June 4, 2009, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” was a dramatic meeting with Islam. Almost everything that he said in this speech had an impact that continues to be felt today, because it established a new American paradigm for relating to the Muslim world.

President Obama said that he had come to Cairo to seek “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect.” After stating the goal of his address, the President introduced himself to the audience: “Now part of this conviction is rooted in my own experience. I’m a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims.” The message was simple and effective: I am one of you!

One of the dominant metaphors in President Obama’s Cairo speech is the FAMILY. In a commencement address at the University of Notre Dame on 17 May 2009, he provided a preview of the idea that the WORLD IS A FAMILY: “Despite the growing diversity in the world, including diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief, we

must find a way to live together as one human family.” For President Obama, however, the FAMILY does not consist of Mom and Dad and their two children, but it is more like his own extended family, which is a mixture of different races and religions.³

Less than three weeks later in Cairo, President Obama elaborated the FAMILY metaphor to articulate his vision of the world. The President wants to “focus on the future we seek for our children,” for example, and he imagines “a world where governments serve their citizens, and the rights of all God’s children are respected.”

In his remarks at the World Economic Forum in Doha in February 2010, President Obama moves somewhat from an emotional speech form to a more denotative speech form. This speech is more goal-oriented and business-like than in the Cairo address. For example, he talks in detail about “partnering” on education, economic development, science and technology, and global health. He also paints a more precise picture of the enemy: violent extremism and corruption. For President Obama, knowledge is “the currency of the 21st century.” This KNOWLEDGE IS CURRENCY metaphor also draws attention to the realm of business and finance.

At Doha President Obama is moving from charismatic rhetoric of Cairo, which he mastered to perfection, to a more pragmatic phase of his presidency, where the discourse becomes more difficult, because he is more like “everybody else.” One might argue that he loses his magic in the process: “In Afghanistan and beyond, we are forging partnerships to isolate violent extremists, reduce corruption and to promote good governance and development that improves lives.” For President Bush this was easier, because he had the Image of the Opponent to lean on throughout his presidency.

President Bush and the “Axis of Evil”

In his State of the Union message to Congress on 29 January 2002, President Bush used the expression, the “Axis of Evil,” to include Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.”

Many observers in the United States and Europe were both amused and puzzled by President Bush’s use of the phrase, “Axis of Evil.” Some regarded the phrase as just empty rhetoric that was designed to appeal to domestic audiences in the United States, such as evangelical Christians. Although this phrase may have been an invention of the President’s speech writers, it contains metonymic concepts that are grounded in

³“Remember that each of us, endowed with the dignity possessed by all children of God, has the grace to recognize ourselves in one another; to understand that we all seek the same love of family, the same fulfillment of a life well lived.” Commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame, 17 May 2009.

experience and, like metaphors, “structure not just our language but also our thoughts, attitudes, and actions.”

“North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror.”

Although the use of the word “evil” for flying hijacked aircraft into buildings will strike many people as justified, it is the corollary which is especially dangerous: the assumption that the division of Good and Evil coincides with the division between Us and Them. Consequently, in this dualistic world-view, the United States is a Force for Good, even *the* Force for Good. This means that anything it chooses to do is Good and anything that offends or inconveniences it is Evil.

The important thing about the "evil" component of metaphor is that evil has no specific goal--except to produce evil. As an ontological force “evil” has no interests of its own except the interests related to its destination: that is why all negotiations with “evil” are fruitless. There is no way to make a deal with “evil,” except to include in this deal even a greater evil, not for you but for others. Therefore, the Forces of Evil have to be destroyed totally by the Forces of Good.

Moreover, the absurd unity of such different political forces as Iran and North Korea seem not to be so absurd, if you agree the principle of Unity of Evil. If there is only one evil, all its incarnations are simply the different forms of one force--an argument which is very easy to understand, when you accept the dualistic ontology. Here the ontological changes produced by metaphor are obvious.

Comparison of Bush and Obama

In spite of differences in style and outlook, President Obama and President Bush share the histories of their nation. Both American leaders also make use of religious discourse. President Obama used "a new beginning" three times in Cairo. President Obama's speech in Cairo contains other references to religious texts. Bush's State of the Union Address reflects his strong moralistic outlook.

Nevertheless, the references to “a new beginning” by President Obama and “Evil” by President Bush tell us something about differences in their world views. President Obama used “a new beginning” to make a statement about inclusion. When President Obama speaks to “The Other,” he is a “well-wisher” with an extended hand (HANDSHAKE): “May God's Peace Be Upon You.”

President Bush, on the other hand, used “Evil” to exclude people and distance “The

Other,” “The Axis of Evil speech marked a shift in Bush’s rhetoric from the NATION IS A PERSON conceptual metaphor to a new metaphor: THE USA IS A MORAL LEADER.”

A semiotic analysis of “Islamic” is also revealing. Although the signifier is the same for both presidents, the signified for President Obama is a place where he “heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk,” a place that “has given us majestic arches and soaring spires; timeless poetry and cherished music; elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation.” “Islamic” for President Obama is a sign for a culture with strong traditions that are different from those of the West.

On the other hand, the Islamic world for President Bush is a place that “greeted the fall of tyranny with song and celebration” and consists of “brave men and women” who support “our values.” In other words people in the Islamic world are much like us.

Iran

For Obama, “Iran” is a country that has had a “tumultuous” relationship with the United States, a history that has been a source of tension and mistrust. Although Iran “could lead the world down a hugely dangerous path,” there is still the opportunity to “move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect.” For President Bush, on the other hand, “Iran” is a regime that “pursues” weapons of mass destruction, “exports” terror, and “represses” the hopes of its people for freedom. “Iran” for President Bush is a threat, but for President Obama “Iran” presents an opportunity.

These differences, of course, may reflect contextual factors. In 2002 President Bush was addressing the American people four months after 9/11, while President Obama’s audience was the Muslim world more than seven years later. Furthermore, the concept of “A New Beginning” takes on different meanings, depending on the audience. The implication for the Muslim world is that a better world may emerge. For an audience in the United States, especially a Christian audience, on the other hand, the phrase might suggest being “born again.”

A Shift toward the Establishment

Even before President Obama’s speech in Doha in the middle of February 2010, we can detect a change in his approach to the Muslim world in the direction of the traditional foreign affairs establishment. For example, on 25 June 2009, shortly after President Obama’s speech in Cairo, Dennis Ross joined the National Security Council staff. Ross is often described as having close ties to Israel, and he is a strong opponent of Iran.

By the spring of 2010, President Obama’s speeches sounded more and more similar to the speeches of President Bush: “...unlike a terrorist whose goal is to destroy, our future will be defined by what we build. We have to see that horizon, and to get there we

must pursue a strategy of national renewal and global leadership. We have to build the sources of America's strength and influence, and shape a world that's more peaceful and more prosperous." In this address at West Point on 23 May 2010, he told the cadets that "we have to shape an international order that can meet the challenges of our generation," including "countering violent extremism and insurgency" and "stopping the spread of nuclear weapons."

A few days later the United States gave a "cold shoulder" to the fuel-swap proposal that was brokered by Turkey and Brazil and formally submitted by Iran to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). According to Gary Sick, this was a big opportunity for the United States to negotiate seriously, but President Obama let it go and supported strong sanctions, instead, which has greatly complicated negotiations with Iran.⁴

In early June 2010, after the vote of the UN Security Council to sanction Iran, President Obama asserted that Iran had "failed to live up to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," while "Iran's leaders hide behind outlandish rhetoric..." According to President Obama, Iran is locked in the past: "As I said in Cairo, for decades the Iranian government has defined itself in opposition to my country. But faced with the opportunity to find a new way forward—one that would benefit its own people—the Iranian government has chosen instead to remain a prisoner of the past."⁵ Here President Obama is using structural metaphors that organize one concept in terms of another, such as structural metaphors associated with a journey: "THIS ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE," "OUR RELATIONSHIP IS A DEAD END," and the orientational metaphor, "THE FUTURE IS FORWARD."⁶

Not understood by the traditional foreign policy establishment and deeply involved in promoting his health care initiatives, has President Obama given up on the strategy of "a new beginning," or at least put it on the back burner? In his January 2011 State of the Union Address President Obama promoted American exceptionalism, competition with China and India, efforts to "defeat determined enemies," and "America's moral example [that] must always shine for all who yearn for freedom and justice and dignity." In the wake of the current turmoil in the Middle East, the United States (and President Obama) is not on the "wrong side of history," promoting corrupt and autocratic dictators like Mubarak. Perhaps this IS a new beginning rather than the "end to a new beginning."

The Arab Spring

⁴ Presentation at "The Iran Challenge: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy," Asia Society, 10 February 2011.

⁵ Remarks by the President on United Nations Security Council Resolution on Iran Sanctions," 9 June 2010.

⁶ L. David Richie, **Context and Connection in Metaphor**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 137.

The ARAB SPRING, which began in December 2010 after a street venter in Tunisia set himself on fire at the headquarters of the provincial government, was a rude awakening for President Obama and his administration, because it sparked efforts to achieve a democratic revolution in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. The Arab Spring also gave Obama the opportunity “to mark a new chapter in American diplomacy” and return to THE NEW POLITICS OF OBAMA. In a speech at the US Department of State on 19 May 2011, President Obama recalled his Cairo speech:

And that’s why, two years ago in Cairo, I began to broaden our engagement based upon mutual interests and mutual respect. I believed then—and I believe now—that we have a state not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals. The status quo is not sustainable. Societies held together by fear and repression may offer the illusion of stability for a time, but they are built upon fault lines that will eventually tear asunder.

He went on to pledge in this speech that “after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be.” This statement, of course, is a reflection of another basic semantic integrator, DIFFERENCE WITH BUSH POLITICS. President Obama made this even clearer when he stated, “Our support for these principles [free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders] is not a secondary interest. Today, I want to make it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic, and strategic tools at our disposal.”⁷

Conclusion

One of the challenges that President Obama faces with respect to the Muslim world is to deliver a clear-cut message to multiple audiences who do not share his own cultural, political, and religious traditions. President Bush ignored this challenge, and, as a consequence, found that his message strengthened the rhetorical position of conservatives *vis-à-vis* reformers in Iran.

When President Obama gave his address in Cairo, he was talking to the Muslim world. But he also has to keep in mind American and European audiences, who have different world views and values. This is a big problem for a world leader like President Obama. How do you communicate to audiences abroad and at home without being accused of double talk? Can you talk to all of these audiences simultaneously and run the risk of targeting values, such as “democracy” that are easily “understood” at home but

⁷ President Barak Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa, State Department, Washington, DC, May 19, 2011.

“misunderstood” by audiences abroad? Note that President Obama views democracy as “not a house to be built...but a conversation to be had.”⁸

President Obama faces a similar problem of multiple audiences at home in the United States. His view of the world, and especially his vision of the American role in the world, which he articulated in Cairo, is not well understood by the traditional foreign affairs bureaucracy in Washington. They tend to see the world from a more “realist” perspective, where the United States as “a hegemonic power will assert itself to thwart challengers to system stability.”⁹ High on the list of “challengers,” of course, is Iran.

The Arab Spring, a “season of hope,” has handed President Obama the ability to talk to audiences in the Middle East and North Africa as well as his domestic audience in the United States using the same language and articulating the same values. It has also enabled him to return to a “new beginning” in the Islamic World and begin A JOURNEY, once again.

⁸⁸ Barak Obama, **The Audacity of Hope**, 2006, p. 92.

⁹ Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, "Attribution Theory and Arab Images of the Gulf War," **Political Psychology**, 17, 1996, p. 279.