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What Obama should tell Muslims

By Juan C. Zarate and James K. Glassman | May 27, 2009

WHEN President Obama delivers his much-anticipated address in Cairo next week, he should counter the deadly and pervasive narrative that "the West is at war with Islam" and replace it with a more accurate storyline that offers Muslims both responsibility and pride. The Bush administration's attempts to engender this alternative narrative fell flat - in large measure because, as the American presence in Iraq wore on, Muslims were in no mood to listen to President Bush.

Obama is a different matter. With his Muslim family members and his personification of the American dream, he is uniquely placed to recast the way American power and influence are viewed.

Although he will need to acknowledge what most Muslims believe as US mistakes, an endearing and short-lived mea culpa is not ambitious enough for the task at hand. Instead, the president should shape a new narrative - one that reminds the world of American ideals and challenges Muslim communities to confront conflicts in their midst. While the United States will continue to be a partner against extremism and a supporter of Muslims building better societies, the ultimate outcome will be determined by them, not us.

The president should point to three separate but overlapping struggles:

Religion and terror A small group of violent reactionaries -- led by Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and allied groups - is trying, through horrifying brutality, to bring more than 1 billion Muslims into line with a sweeping totalitarian doctrine, inconsistent with the tenets of Islam. It's up to Muslims to oppose and ostracize the violent extremists in their midst. Growing numbers of them are doing that -- even in Pakistan, where a terrible threat had been widely ignored.

Iran and proxies Along with its proxies Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, Iran is confronting the vast majority of Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. This Iran-vs.-Arab conflict is also part of the Sunni-Shia conflict that is playing out elsewhere, including Iraq, but Iran's threat transcends religion. Regardless of sectarian bent, Muslim communities need to oppose the attempts by Iran and its intelligence services - in particular the Qods Force - to extend Shia extremism and influence throughout the world. Obama should recognize the context in which his speech will be delivered. Articles in the Arab press have expressed concern that the United States is softening its stance toward the Iranian camp and toward the Taliban. Egyptians would welcome a statement that clarifies America's opposition to Iranian domination of the Middle East.

Democracy and human rights Many Arab governments have denied their citizens what Egyptian activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim has called "the infrastructure of democracy": rule of law,

independent judiciary, free media, gender equality, and autonomous civil society. These necessities of liberty are more important than ballots dropped in a box, as we have seen by the actions of the terrorist Hamas regime in Gaza. A widespread criticism among Muslims is that the United States has not pressed authoritarian allies to democratize. For both moral and strategic reasons we have a stake in supporting free societies with accountable governments. The reality of democracies thriving in Muslim societies - like Turkey and Indonesia - is a powerful counterweight to the canard that Islam and political freedom can't coexist. In framing the narrative as a series of struggles within Muslim societies, Obama must also emphasize America's values - concepts of pluralism, freedom, and opportunity that run counter to the extremists' ideology. He should emphasize that the United States won't be a passive bystander in these struggles. We will advance our own ideals and interests - which include promoting a comprehensive two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. Challenging and empowering Muslim communities to take on the three great struggles themselves, with the United States as a constructive partner, is an approach that will overturn the extremists' narrative and help shape a new, honest, and positive storyline - in which Muslims see themselves not as victims but as central protagonists in global struggles for justice. *Juan Zarate, former deputy national security adviser, is senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. James K. Glassman, former undersecretary of state, is president of the World Growth Institute.*