

Obama Urged to Support Israel, Address Religious Freedom in Cairo

Christian leaders are urging President Obama to address religious liberty and show clear support for Israel during his much-anticipated speech to the Muslim world on Thursday.

Open Doors, an international organization that supports persecuted Christians worldwide, called on the president to challenge Muslim-dominated nations such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Somalia that outlaw conversion or intimidate Christian converts into keeping their faith secret when he speaks in Cairo, Egypt.

"America is perceived, especially in the Muslim world, as representative of Christianity," said Paul Estabrooks, minister-at-large for Open Doors. "I think, frankly, they expect him to speak out about the rights of religious minorities in their countries. Even though I agree he would need to do it very diplomatically and carefully because he isn't in a position to tell them how to run their country, certainly he can speak out on behalf of the Christian community, for our brothers and sisters in those lands."

Thanks in part to the influence of satellite TV, Christianity is growing dramatically in the Muslim world. In Iran, official estimates number Christians at roughly 300,000, though missionaries say the true count is several times higher. As a result of that growth, persecution has increased. (Read "When Muslims Find Jesus.")

"We are not against Muslims; we are not anti-Islam," Estabrooks said. "We just want to be in a position to say to them, 'Our brothers and sisters should have the same human rights that your people have in our country.'"

Christian observers also want to see the president show clear support for Israel. During a Monday interview with National Public Radio, Obama provoked some criticism when he said the U.S. has not been as "honest" as it should be with Israel "about the fact that the current direction, the current trajectory in the region, is profoundly negative-not only for Israeli interests but also U.S. interests."

He also raised eyebrows when he called on Israel to put a freeze on settlements in the West Bank as part of Mideast peace negotiations. Leaders at the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ) said Obama's comments left many Israelis and Christian Zionists scratching their heads.

"There's a little concern that the weight of the problem is being placed in the wrong direction and a little bit of concern that Israel is being expected to rush forward into some kind of peace agreements with entities that don't even believe that she exists," said ICEJ Executive Director Malcolm Hedding. "I think Christians in general are concerned about that, and Israelis in general are concerned that this whole initiative spells a shift in Israeli-American relations."

David Parsons, media director for the ICEJ, said until most Israelis have had a positive view of Obama, but there has been more skepticism lately. "Over the past month or two the level of concern about whether Israel doesn't enjoy the same priority in Washington has really grown to what I call unprecedented numbers for an American president," Parsons said. "The majority of Israelis today do not know if they can call Obama pro-Israel."

Hedding said the challenges in the Middle East cannot be reduced to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "We are hoping that he understands the Middle East conflict in a broader concept than just linking it entirely to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Hedding said. "There is a wider problem that has to be faced up to in terms of radical Islamic

terrorism and conflict than just Israel and Palestinians. ... We don't think 9/11 took place because of anything happening with Israel and the Palestinians."

Author Mark Gabriel, a native Egyptian and former Muslim imam who endured death threats for converting to Christianity, said building bridges with the Islamic world at Israel's expense would be counterproductive.

"He cannot just sympathize with the Arab Muslims and just try to build a bridge," said Gabriel, author of several books on Islamic terrorism, including *Culture Clash: Islam's War on the West*. "He has to be clear as the president of the United States where he is standing in all of this. Where he stands in his faith and his beliefs, where he's standing in the relationship between Israel and the United States, where he's standing in his responsibility in ... promoting justice and defending religious freedom. He has to make that clear."

In the Muslim world, Gabriel said, Obama remains a curiosity. Many view him as a follower of Islam because his father was a Muslim, though radical Muslims would view him as apostate.

Gabriel said Obama has a unique opportunity to influence secular Muslims in particular, who he said want to be free from dictatorial regimes.

"Radical Islam is working against the desires and the dreams of these secular Muslims," Gabriel said. "They need to hear him speaking about freedom because they are so oppressed by their dictator regimes. They need to hear from him about justice because many of them feel that America really is treating Arabs in a totally different way than [it is] treating Israel. They need to hear from him about equality because half of the population of the Islamic world is [female], and women's rights continue to be violated by the culture and the faith and teaching of Islam."

A recent Gallup Poll found that one in four Egyptians now

approves of the U.S. leadership-a dramatic increase from just 6 percent in 2008. But Gabriel said it will take more than Obama's charisma to change the Muslim world's perception of America.

"I think the people in the Arabic world, they need really to hear that America loves them and that America cares about them and ... that America really [does] not put Israel and the Jews above them," he said. "That America puts them in the same level and in the same mind as the way she looks at Israel and the Jewish people.

"When Arabs hear that, they will start to believe and really have the confidence that America is a land of freedom, it's a land of justice and equality. So they're going to get the message that the dictators in the Islamic world ... try to poison their ears that America is the great satan, and that image is going to be changed."