

## Community Organizer-in-Chief

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President Obama's much heralded first trip to a Muslim majority country is a critical opportunity to build bridges with the Muslim world. During his visit, the president is scheduled to have a roundtable discussion with students in Istanbul, where he will likely talk about cultural understanding and respect for Islam, themes addressed during his interview with Al Arabiya and his New Year message to the Iranian people.

Obama will miss an incredible opportunity if he fails to emphasize the importance of nonviolent constructive political participation before this attentive young audience.

Young people across the Muslim world, like millions of others, were inspired by his historic election victory last year. Obama should seize this opportunity and candidly share observations from the campaign trail on how he inspired a new generation of civil society activists in the United States to mobilize and play a constructive, positive and peaceful role in politics.

The lessons from the 2008 campaign abound.

The hard fought Democratic primary proved in fact to be democratic as every state primary and caucus – and just about every voter – mattered and millions of citizens had their say in determining the party's nominee. Obama, an underdog in fundraising and organization, built a grassroots structure from the ground up that would eventually propel him to victory.

In terms of policy, Obama was willing to have serious discussions with the American people on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the emerging economic storm. His Philadelphia speech on race relations in the United States will be a teaching tool for years to come in classrooms across America.

Obama's effort to include citizens through innovative uses of the internet as well as a sharp focus on expanding the political map to campaign in more parts of the country gave rise to expanded democracy in the United States.

Finally, credit is also due to John McCain. His concession speech on election night should be required reading for all aspiring politicians in

emerging democracies unfamiliar with the term "loyal opposition."

In its early days, the Administration has been noticeably muted about democracy building abroad. This is not surprising given the "Freedom Agenda" hangover from the Bush Administration. Yet, leading democracy scholar Thomas Carothers recently noted that all modern presidents have come into office with little or no compunction towards promoting democracy yet all end up democracy promoters of different shades soon into their tenures. So while the president has been relatively silent on this issue, he seems inclined in this direction given his history of civic engagement and community organizing in the United States.

The president's roundtable with students will be watched closely by young people throughout the Muslim world, many of whom are at a loss for inspirational political role models who do not resort to violence. The President should not demur from sharing campaign stories from 2008, a good year in America's democratic experiment. Obama is America's best messenger for democracy promotion, a message that can be delivered subtly and with fitting nuance.

The time for grand presidential proclamations calling for a freedom agenda has passed for now. A December Gallup poll across the Middle East found overwhelming majorities that did not think that the United States was serious about promoting democracy in the region. But this does not mean that the United States can or should no longer support freedom. And there are anecdotal indications that opinions in the region are flexible – the Obama mantra "Change We Can Believe In" was actually adopted by some Egyptian civil society organizations who sought to advance their goals based on the winning slogan. On the whole though, thoughtful and long-term work needs to be done at the grassroots level to rebuild trust in the United States and revitalize respect for the principles enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights. Sounds like a job for an experienced community organizer.

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