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Arab-Muslim World Wants Obama's Speech in Egypt to Focus on Israeli-Arab Issue

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By Patrick Goodenough, International Editor

(CNSNews.com) – Islamic and Arab governments are hopeful that President Obama's much-anticipated address to Muslims will focus on the Israeli-Arab issue, and judging from the administration's choice of venue and timing, they may not be disappointed.

Obama indicated last December that he hoped to deliver such a speech in a key Islamic capital within his first 100 days in office. He missed that goal, but the White House announced Friday that the president would deliver a major speech "about America's relations with the Muslim world" on June 4, in Egypt.

Confirmation of the plan brought a quick appeal by the Arab League – the body representing the Arab states – for Obama to use the address to explain his policy on the Mideast peace process.

In the broader Islamic world, too, there have been calls for Obama to prioritize the Palestinian issue. Muslim ambassadors met recently in Pakistan to discuss the planned speech, and several stressed the need to address the "root causes" of terrorism, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict high up the list.

"An urgent and just remedy" for the Palestinian issue is required, the Organization of the Islamic Conference told Obama earlier this year.

The administration has stressed its support for a "two-state solution" to the long conflict between Israel and Palestinian Arabs but has not laid down in detail how it envisages moving towards that goal.

Former British prime minister Tony Blair, envoy for the Mideast "Quartet," said last week that "a new framework" for peace efforts, drafted by the U.S., would be unveiled within weeks.

Obama plans to hold separate talks at the White House during May with Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian leaders. Expectations for those meetings were ratcheted up at the weekend by Jordan's King Abdullah, who predicted another war within 18 months if peace negotiations were delayed.

"If there is procrastination by Israel on the two-state solution or there is no clear American vision for how this is going to play out in 2009, then all the tremendous credibility that Obama has worldwide and in this region will evaporate overnight if nothing comes out in May," he told *The Times* of London.

The choice of Egypt as venue for Obama's speech, just weeks after the White House meetings, suggests that the Israeli-Arab issue will feature prominently.

While an important Arab center, Egypt lags behind other countries when it comes to size and influence in the wider Islamic world. When it comes to Arab-Israeli peace efforts, on the other hand, Egypt's role as a mediator

has long been valued by U.S. administrations.

Egypt was the first Arab state to sign a peace agreement with Israel and wields influence with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah faction. President Hosni Mubarak's government has been trying to broker a unity government deal between Fatah and its rival, Hamas.

Although often conflated, the Arab and Islamic worlds are very different. There are more than 50 Islamic-majority states, only 22 of which are Arab states; only around 15 percent of the world's Muslims are Arabs. The most populous Islamic countries are in Asia – Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Muslim minority in India, a majority Hindu state, is more than twice as big as the entire population of Egypt.

Among Arab states, Egypt is the most populous. It also houses a leading Sunni institution, Al-Azhar University, although Saudi Arabia, home to Mecca and Medina and the direction towards which all Muslims bow in prayer, is regarded as the center of Islam. An estimated 10 percent-plus of Muslims are Shia, with the largest populations in Iran, Pakistan and Iraq.

Islam and democracy

In a statement welcoming Obama's choice, the Egyptian government said Egypt "has long been at the center of Islamic intellectual thought. Egypt's long tradition of religious tolerance and diversity embodies the ideals and values of moderate Islam."

The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, an independent panel advising Congress and the administration, says in its 2009 annual report that "serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as nonconforming Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt."

The State Department's latest report on human rights says the Egyptian government's "respect for human rights remained poor, and serious abuses continued in many areas" during 2008.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, in announcing the speech during a press briefing, explained the venue by calling Egypt "a country that in many ways represents the heart of the Arab world."

When asked whether the decision constituted an endorsement for Egyptian government policies, however, he sought to play down the importance of the choice.

"The scope of the speech, the desire for the president to speak, is bigger than where the speech was going to be given or who is the leadership of the country where the speech is given," Gibbs said.

Cato Institute executive vice president David Boaz said Obama should have chosen to deliver the speech in a part of the world where most Muslims live and where Muslims were more successfully integrating Islam and democracy.

"Egypt is a fine place for a speech on the Arab-Israeli conflict," he said. "But in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, or Pakistan he could give a speech on America and the Muslim world surrounded by rival political leaders in a democratic country and by internationally recognized business leaders. It would be good for the president to draw attention to this more moderate version of Islam."

The planned speech in Egypt is the latest in a series of Obama initiatives relating to the Islamic world. He gave his first television interview as president to the Arabic satellite news channel, Al-Arabiya, sent a video message to Iran to mark the Persian new year, Nowruz, and said during a visit to Turkey last month that the U.S. "is not, and will never be, at war with Islam."

Gallup poll tracking during Obama's first 100 days in office found an 85 percent approval rating from American Muslims, slightly higher than from Jews and almost 30 percent higher than from Protestants.

In an Ipsos poll released Sunday, an average of 48 percent of respondents in six key Arab countries gave Obama favorable ratings, ranging from 35 percent in Egypt up to 58 percent in Jordan.

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