

Obama should reduce our Mideast presence

June 4, 2009 - 12:06PM

There is probably no great harm in President Barack Obama traveling to Saudi Arabia and Egypt to try to show respect for Islam and to try to moderate the hostile feelings that all too many Muslims harbor toward the United States. By the very fact that his name is Barack Hussein Obama, that he developed familiarity with Muslim beliefs and practices as a child and that he is not George W. Bush, he is almost certain to elicit somewhat warmer emotions.

The very fact that he chose Saudi Arabia and Egypt to visit is mildly troublesome. Those two countries have generally, though not always, been cooperative with the United States, but both are run by authoritarian regimes whose respect for individual rights is virtually undetectable. Many Muslims have long seen the U.S. as bolstering reactionary regimes for its own interests, mainly to do with oil.

Expressing sympathy for democratic or liberalizing forces in the Muslim world while being the guest of two repressive regimes will require great finesse. The president may be able to accomplish it verbally, but will he have much concrete credibility?

It is interesting that President Obama has chosen to invest so much energy into promising progress on a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. That conflict has been like quicksand for U.S. presidents, largely because the public positions and private positions of so many players in the region are profoundly different.

Most Arabs and Muslims pay lip service to the importance of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Beside that fact that both sides are so divided that neither can negotiate credibly, the rulers of Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are lukewarm at best at the prospect of a Palestinian state.

The most concrete grievance most Muslims have with the United States is not that it has failed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, but that the U.S. has a long-term military presence in Muslim countries.

As Christopher Preble, foreign-policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, reminded us, President Obama has inherent credibility on this issue given that he opposed the Iraq war from the beginning. A promise from him that our presence in Iraq and Afghanistan is only temporary is more likely to be believed than a similar promise from former President Bush might have been. If such a promise is not kept, however — and statements from U.S. military leaders suggest long-term planning — the result could be deeper disillusionment.

If President Obama's trip is a precursor to reducing our footprint in that part of the world, it could be constructive. Otherwise, it is likely to be mainly words that raise hopes and are followed by disillusionment.