

# Obama's Culturally Transformational Identities and Accommodations toward the Middle East and Islam

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**Abstract:** *This paper uses intercultural identification and accommodation theories. Since Obama became US President on January 20, 2009, he has widely demonstrated a considerable cultural transformation in his thinking toward the Middle East and Islam. Chinese Middle Eastern scholars' perspectives on US policies toward the Middle East and Islam include likely future positive developments by Obama. This paper assesses this transformation during his campaign, in the 2008-09 Gaza crisis bridge issue between the Bush and Obama administrations, with events occurring later, and his June 4, 2009 address in Cairo, Egypt.*

**Key Words:** *Gaza; Islam; Israel; Intercultural Theories; Middle East; Obama; Palestine*

## I. Chinese Scholars' Views of Obama's Policy Goals toward the Middle East and Islam

Huihou An argues that "There are 3 dynamics and 5 attributes for Obama's administration's adjustment in its Middle East policy. The changing Middle East policy highlights shifting the anti-terror battlefield from Iraq to Afghanistan, withdrawing troops from Iraq in a step-by-step manner, taking a positive attitude toward the Palestine-Israel peace talks, striving to initiate a face-to-face dialogue with Iran, and settling international disputes by diplomatic means."<sup>2</sup> An explains these 3 dynamics: First, George W. Bush's Middle East policy had turned out to be a failure in various aspects. Second, the new administration's policy adjustment originates from Obama's new philosophy of liberalism, which is a sharp contrast to Bush's conservative norm. Third, the US comprehensive national power has declined, and the new administration cannot afford the previous erroneous policy. Obama is forced to re-differentiate the urgent and less urgent issues in the Middle East and reorder them.<sup>3</sup> From An's point of view, the adjustment features these attributes: First, the

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<sup>2</sup> Huihou An, "Adjustment of Obama's Middle East Policy and the Trend of the Region's Hot-spot Issues," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Vol.3 No.2, June, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

new administration attaches greater importance to diplomatic and political means, highlighting engagement and dialogue....Second, the new administration tends to coordinate with allies, other big powers, the UN, as well as regional powers, and unilateralism will be confined in its future diplomacy....Third, the new administration endeavors to better its image in the Arab-Islamic world.... Fourth, the US will attach great importance to the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.... Fifth, the new administration strives to spread American democracy, liberty and values steadily. <sup>4</sup>

Weiming Zhao writes: Judging from Obama's campaign speeches and the viewpoints of senior officials of the Obama administration, we may notice the following characteristics of the new policy: highlight multilateral cooperation; emphasize contact and dialogue; advance simultaneously for a comprehensive resolution. These characteristics can also be seen in withdrawing troops from Iraq, deploying more troops in Afghanistan and the US efforts for promoting the Middle East peace process and resolving the nuclear issue in Iran.<sup>5</sup> Zhao argues that "the core of Obama's New Middle East Policy remains unchanged, i.e., consolidating the leading position of the US in the Middle East and safeguarding its interests in this area and yet its ways and means are bound to change. Thus the characteristics of the new policy can be summed up as: first, highlight multilateral cooperation; second, emphasize contact and dialogue; third, advance simultaneously for a comprehensive solution."<sup>6</sup> However, Zhao warns that the new Obama policies are presently untested, with less than a year in office, that a critical issue is solving the Iranian nuclear issue, and that Russian and US interests must be complementary or compromised toward the Middle East and the essential needs of each country. He concludes: "All in all, the Middle East issue will be a severe test for Obama administration. <sup>7</sup>

Weilie Zhu considers Huntington's "clash of civilizations" 1993 article<sup>8</sup>, and his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*<sup>9</sup>. Zhu notes that the article's thesis "is regarded as another most controversial international relation theory after the 'Containment Theory' brought forth by George F. Kennan in the 1940s. It touched almost all the nerves of every civilization at that time..." Zhu stresses that "the Clash of Civilizations theory has played a significant role in guiding the US's global strategy." On the other hand, "while opposing and protesting against

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<sup>4</sup> Huihou An, "Adjustment of Obama's Middle East Policy and the Trend of the Region's Hot-spot Issues," p.4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Weiming Zhao, "The New Middle East Policy of the Obama Administration," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Vol.3 No.2, June, 2009, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.23.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72 No.3, Summer, 1993, pp. 22-49.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*,(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

Huntington's theory, the Islamic world, especially the Arab countries and Iran, have repeatedly called for a dialogue among civilizations." <sup>10</sup> Additionally, Zhu demonstrates that these countries have actively interpreted the Islamic principles such as tolerance, peace, justice and brotherhood, in order to win the understanding and approval from the Western countries. "Despite the differences, contradictions and conflicts among civilizations, we cannot deny the possibilities of intercultural communication, integration and co-prosperity ..." <sup>11</sup>

The Preamble to the United Nations Charter calls on all member states "to affirm faith in fundamental rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors." <sup>12</sup>

## II. Intercultural Theories

Asante, Newmark, and Blake introduced their 1979 *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*<sup>13</sup>, noting that 2 major cultural trends had influenced the developing study of intercultural communication, *cultural dialogue* as a world harmonizing acceptance of the importance of similarities among cultures and a multiculturally interdependent perspective, expressed both in Prosser's *Intercommunication among Nations and Peoples*<sup>14</sup> and his *The Cultural Dialogue*<sup>15</sup>, and that of *cultural criticism* stressing, often in a bipolar fashion cross-culturally critiquing one culture against another, while demonstrating that one culture is often better than the other. The "clash of civilizations" viewpoint is closely related to the "cultural criticism" concept, while "dialogue among civilizations" is more properly connected to "cultural dialogue." Prosser's essay traces the development of intercultural communication and

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<sup>10</sup> Weilie Zhu, "Dialogue among Civilizations: A Close Look at the Greater Middle East Reform," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Vol.1 No.1, September, 2007. pp. 46-54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> "Preamble," *United Nations Charter* (New York: The United Nations, 1945).

<sup>13</sup> Molefi K. Asante, Eileen Newmark, and Cecil Blake, *Handbook of Intercultural Communication* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Michael H. Prosser, *Intercommunication among Nations and Peoples* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Michael H. Prosser, *The Cultural Dialogue* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

the creative tensions in its early development to the present both in North America and China.<sup>16</sup>

Following Zhu's proposal to promote a "dialogue of civilizations" instead of a "clash of civilizations," intercultural communication theories are illustrative in analyzing Obama's personal and policy cultural transformation, with the 2008-09 Gaza crisis as a bridge between the Bush and Obama administrations, Obama's continuing cultural transformation and US policies toward the Middle East and Islam, as well as events after the Gaza crisis, and his June 4, 2009 address in Cairo.

### **A. Intercultural Identity Theories**

William B. Gudykunst<sup>17</sup> explains three intercultural theories related to identity: *identity management theory (IMT)*, *identity negotiation theory*, and *cultural identity theory*.

The *identity management theory* is based on the interpersonal communication competence, which naturally relates to intercultural communication competence (ICC). Cultural and relational identities are central to the *identity management theory*. Because outside forces develop positive or negative stereotypes in intercultural communication competence and face, individuals must work diligently to utilize positive stereotypes and overcome negative ones.

*Identity negotiation theory* demonstrates that individuals negotiate their concept of identity with their own perceptions of their multiple identities and those perceptions of others with whom they communicate. The more secure the individuals' positive self identification, the greater is their own identity coherence and global self-esteem, and the greater their membership in collective esteem, the more resourceful they are when interacting with strangers, who may be positive or negative in their perceptions of the individuals under consideration.

The *cultural identity theory* includes five axioms: 1. the more that norms and meanings differ in discourse, the more intercultural the contact, 2. the more individuals have intercultural communication competence, the better they are able to develop and maintain intercultural relationships, 3. the more that cultural identities differ in the discourse, the more intercultural the contact, 4. the more one person's ascribed cultural identity for the other person matches the other person's avowed cultural identity, the more the intercultural communication competence, 5. linguistic references to cultural

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<sup>16</sup> See Michael H. Prosser, "One World, One Dream: Harmonizing Society through Intercultural Communication: A Prelude to China Intercultural Communication Studies," in Steve J. Kulich and Michael H. Prosser, Eds., *Intercultural Perspectives on Chinese Communication* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> William B. Gudykunst, "Intercultural Communication Theories," in William B. Gudykunst, Ed. *Cross-cultural and Intercultural Communication* (Thousand Oaks, California, Sage, 2003).

identity systematically have important contacts with sociocontextual factors such as participants, type of communication episodes, and topics.

### **B. Intercultural Accommodation or Adaptation Theories**

Gudykunst<sup>18</sup> proposes three theories in intercultural communication focusing on accommodation or adaptation, including 1. *communication accommodation theory (CAT)*, 2. *intercultural adaptation theory*, and 3. *co-cultural theory*. CAT has 4 key aspects: 1. sociohistorical context incorporating relations between the groups having contact and the social norms regarding contact, 2. the communicator's accommodative orientation which tends to perceive encounters with outgroup members in interpersonal terms, intergroup terms, or a combination of the two. 3. the immediacy situation 4. evaluation and future intentions, focusing on the communicators' perceptions of their interlocutors' behavior in the interaction. *Intercultural adaptation theory* is designed to understand how communicators adapt to each other in "purpose-related encounters"; the extent to which the setting affects the invocation of culture-based belief differences, and how the setting favors one or other participants. *The co-cultural theory* is based the concept that social hierarchies in society privilege some groups over others, and specific positions in society provide subjective ways that individual look at the world.

### **III. Obama's Multicultural Identity and Adaptation<sup>19</sup>**

As a self-proclaimed "very unlikely candidate" for the American presidency, Barack Hussein Obama was the son of a white Christian American, but internationally oriented mother, and a Kenyan Muslim father, with a large number of mostly Muslim Kenyan half brothers and sisters, since his father had also two wives in Kenya. In his inaugural presidential address, he specifically identified his Islamic background on his father's side. Moreover, he had lived as a child in Indonesia with his mother and her second Islamic husband as his step father, regularly playing with Islamic children. His first book, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*<sup>20</sup>, details his experience of always having to come to terms with his mixed cultural identity, and recognizing that his own multicultural identity was as a Hawaiian, Kenyan, Indonesian, African-American, and American. It was not until he visited Kenya after his father's death that he met his Kenyan grandmother, his half-brothers and sisters,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Based on the author's extensive viewing of Aljazeera, BBC and other international channels, and regular reading of *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Yahoo Alerts* and *CNN*.

<sup>20</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995, 2004).

and many cousins. In his 2006 *The Audacity of Hope*<sup>21</sup>, he reaffirmed his own culturally mixed white Christian/black Muslim background.

Michiko Kakutani<sup>22</sup> in her review of *The Audacity of Hope*, analyzes the underlying meaning of the first book: as a sense of what it was like to grow up straddling America's color lines: the sense of knowing two worlds and belonging to neither, the sense of having to forge an identity of his own. Speaking about *The Audacity of Hope*, she writes: "Enough of the narrative voice in this volume is recognizably similar to the one in *Dreams from My Father*, an elastic, personable voice that is capable of accommodating everything from dense discussions of foreign policy to streetwise reminiscences, incisive comments on constitutional law to New-Agey personal asides... [he] has instead internalized all those roles, embracing rather than shrugging off whatever contradictions they might have produced."

Obama was forced, first by Hilary Clinton in the spring 2008 primary elections and then in the general election by the McCain/Palin campaign to create enduring and new identities for himself after charges by his opponents, both members of the campaigns and by individual and sometimes hostile voters, of being too inexperienced to become president, to "paling around with terrorists," and to being "other," (implicitly that he was an Arab or a Muslim) to counter the explicit claims that possibly he was a Muslim, or an Arab, or a socialist, and implicitly, as an African-American and therefore a member of a co-cultural or inferior outgroup and subsequently untrustworthy to lead the US as the first black [biracial] president. In the autumn 2008 campaign, a McCain supporter said to McCain, "I don't trust him. I hear that he is an Arab." McCain responded, "No ma'am, he is not an Arab; he is a Christian and a good person." McCain did not say, "but, if he were an Arab, he still would be a good person," and thereby implied that there was something wrong with Obama possibly being an Arab or a Muslim. Palin argued that Obama perhaps was not a "real" American, but somehow an "other" or a "foreigner" seeking the presidency.

One area in which Obama did less well in his attempt at a multicultural identity was in the campaign's early benign neglect of the 8 million American Arabs and Muslims. Nonetheless, they overwhelmingly supported him in the general campaign and gave him a very high percentage of their vote. While seeking to identify himself co-culturally with various ethnic groups such as the Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians, his early general election campaign made very little substantial efforts to reach out to the American Arab and Muslim community. In fact, in an early campaign appearance, two women wearing traditional Muslim veils were asked to move out of

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<sup>21</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Books of the Times: Obama's Foursquare Politics, With a Dab of Dijon," *New York Times*, October 17, 2006.

the range of the cameras. Immediately after the rally, Obama's staff discovered the attempt to move them and got their names. Obama called them personally to apologize, demonstrating his willingness to accept this part of his identity. After that incident, Obama started to make closer cultural identity associations with the American Arab and Muslim communities.

Implicitly utilizing the identity and accommodation theories during the 2008 general election, despite various racist and xenophobic attacks on him, Obama remained calm, increasingly accommodating and adapting to all of the charges and changing circumstances. He used his own co-cultural status to draw in large levels of electoral support by African-Americans, Latinos and Hispanics, the young and often new voters, many independent and some Republican voters and later American Arab and Muslim voters.

Bush's first Secretary of State, Colin Powell, identified Obama as an internationally "transformational figure" in the final days of the general campaign, which aided him greatly in being conceived as an outstanding candidate. Powell's stark disappointment in the McCain campaign and sharp criticism of McCain's choice of Palin as his running mate had a serious deleterious effect on the respectability of the McCain/Palin campaign, while very strongly reinforcing Obama as a candidate recognized both nationally and internationally as a "transformational figure" whom both Americans and those in other countries could work well with. Powell further argued that the election of Obama could help restore the tarnished identity of the American government over the 8 years of the Bush presidency of which he had been an integral part in Bush's first 4 years.

Obama's 3 measured and calm nationally and internationally broadcast debates with McCain also reflected his even approach to international issues and the financial crisis when McCain became perceived as inconsistent and constantly changing his own cultural persona. Obama's decision not to attack Palin directly as another outgroup member in terms of a co-cultural setting for a woman being a candidate for vice president worked to Obama's increasing popular and Electoral College votes. He won 52% of the popular vote to 47% for McCain, supported by 97% of the African-American vote, 67% of the Hispanic vote, more than half of the Roman Catholic vote, most of the American Arab and Muslim vote and more support for him among women, than men. He received 365 Electoral College delegates versus 162 for McCain. Not only did his slate win an executive "landslide," but the Democrats in the US Senate and House of Representatives gained impressive victories as well.

Three of the most important reasons for Americans to vote for Obama appear to have included his ongoing campaign statements that he would withdraw US troops from Iraq in 16 months, his proposed tax reductions for 95% of Americans, and his

convincing argument that he could reform health care better than McCain. Obama readjusted his campaign as necessary, and adapted to new national and international situations but without changing his own personality in the election.

Obama's historic victory was celebrated throughout the world. Overcoming many challenges related to these intercultural theories, Obama assumed office on January 20, 2009 with a near mandate for change. He had even forced McCain to argue that his own election would bring about change from his fellow Republican President George W. Bush whom he had mostly supported for 8 years. Obama's frequent campaign references to Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Monument made a very powerful impression throughout the campaign and on the 200,000 participants at his November 4<sup>th</sup> victory speech in Grant Park, Chicago. Millions around the world held large celebrations in honor of his victory including in many Middle Eastern, Asian, and African countries.

In his January 20, 2009 inaugural swearing in ceremony by the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, with his hand on the Bible which had been used by Lincoln in his inaugural speech, Obama deliberately identified himself as Barack **Hussein** Obama, thus acknowledging both Christian and Islamic roots.

#### **IV. The 2008-09 Gaza Crisis**

##### **A. Bridging the Bush and Obama Administration Policies on the Israel-Palestinian Situation<sup>23</sup>**

President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Secretary of State Rice all claimed repeatedly that it was the fault of Hamas for launching the rockets into southern Israel, and that Israel had the right to self-defense. Indeed, the Bush administration remained almost entirely passive in the whole crisis situation, despite the fact that his November, 2007 Annapolis Summit on the Israel-Palestinian situation had led him to visit the region twice, claiming that moving toward a peaceful solution and two-state agreement before the end of his term of office were both his major priorities. In his January 16, 2009 13 minute farewell speech to the nation,<sup>24</sup> President Bush said that many people might not agree with his decisions, but that he made these decisions with the best interests of the US at heart, and that under his leadership there had been no terrorist attacks against the US since 2001, while Iraq had been moved from a brutal dictatorship to an emerging democracy. He made no comments about Israel,

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<sup>23</sup> See Note 19.

<sup>24</sup> George W. Bush, "Farewell Address to the Nation," Washington, D.C. White House Briefing Room, December 16, 2008.



Palestine, or the continuing Gaza crisis. President-Elect Obama remained entirely mute about the crisis, indicating that there was only one president at a time, and his time had not yet arrived.

Although the US had sponsored UN Security Council resolution 1860, calling for an immediate cease fire, in the vote, Rice abstained, leaving the vote 14 in favor and the US abstention. The UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to condemn Israel's siege in Gaza, "for flouting of international law in its aggressive attacks," although it had only symbolic importance. UN Secretary General Ban-ki Moon strongly condemned the attacks, and traveled to Israel and the West Bank to seek an immediate ceasefire, and while personally in Gaza, he also strongly condemned the bombing of the UN facilities there.

Nearly 400 US House of Representatives members voted on a nonbinding resolution supporting the Israeli right of self defense, thus accepting Bush's passive position on the crisis. In an Israeli poll, 90% agreed that Israel was taking the right action in its attacks on Gaza (as a matter of self-defense). At a January, 2009 summit of world leaders in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sharik (excluding members of the Bush administration; Tony Blair as the EU envoy to the Middle East; Israeli Prime Minister Olmert; and Hamas leaders), many speakers urged the EU and US to become reinvolved in solving the crisis, but all talked in the words of Mouin Rabbani of the *Middle East Review*,<sup>25</sup> about the situation as a humanitarian crisis, without speaking of the root cause of the conflict—the occupation of Palestinian territories since the 1967 Six Day War. Rabbani, "speechless," said that this war, more than any event in the Middle East in the last 10 years, had turned the word "peace" into a dirty word. What Palestinians needed immediately was humanitarian aid, he claimed, but in the long term they wanted self-determination and a safe and secure Palestinian state living at peace with Israel. Rabbani was not only critical of Israel, but also of the Middle Eastern leaders and permanent members of the UN Security Council, all waiting expectantly to see how Obama's Middle East policies would change (or not change) from those of the outgoing Bush administration.

### **B. Developments Related to Israel/Palestine after the Crisis<sup>26</sup>**

When Benjamin Netanyahu became the Israeli Prime Minister, for the second time after more than 10 years, on February 20, 2009, he initially declined to directly support the two-state solution, but said that he would make every effort to allow the Palestinian people to live in peace and for Israel to live peacefully with the

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<sup>25</sup> Mouin Rabbani, Interview on Aljazeera, January 16, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> See Note 19.

surrounding Arab world. He especially emphasized the danger of the uranium enrichment being undertaken by Iran. Ultranationalist Avigdor Lieberman, who had angered many inside Israel and in the Arab world by his inflammatory rhetoric toward the Israeli Arabs, in becoming the new Foreign Minister, declared that previous treaties entered by Israel in terms of the two state solution, were not necessarily still in effect. Opposition leader and former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who had won the February, 2009 slim majority election vote, but was not invited by President Shimon Peres to form the new government, in an angry speech following Netanyahu's acceptance speech, argued that Israel must continue the "roadmap for peace including the two-state solution." She announced publicly, declining to join the coalition: "I want to lead Israel in a way I believe in, to advance a peace process based on two states for two peoples."

For his inaugural address on March 31, 2009, Netanyahu emphasized: "Israel has always, and today more than ever, strives to reach full peace with the entire Arab and Muslim world, and today that yearning is supported by a joint interest of Israel and the Arab states against the fanatical obstacle that threatens us all... I say to the Palestinian leadership that if you really want peace we can achieve peace. We can achieve peace by three parallel tracks, economic, security and diplomatic with the Palestinian Authority." At the same time, he insisted that the Palestinian Authority must demonstrate itself as a genuine partner in fighting against terrorism in all of its forms.<sup>27</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI visited Israel and the occupied West Bank (but not Gaza) in May 2009, strongly criticizing both those who denied the Holocaust, and the indiscriminate killing of Gazan civilians, as well as of innocent Israeli citizens, while calling on both governments to embrace peace and to move toward the two-state solution. Benedict branded the West Bank separation fence a symbol of stalemate against the establishment of a peaceful two-state solution and called for the wall to be torn down and urged also an end of the Israeli blockade against Gaza.<sup>28</sup>

Responding to Netanyahu's Inaugural address and ongoing statements, President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority declared: "We will threaten a complete freeze in relations with Israel. We will not deal with the Israeli government unless it accepts a two-state solution and accepts to halt settlements and to respect past accords."

On May 30, 2009, Amre Moussa, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, demanded, as both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton had earlier done in their White House meeting with Netanyahu, that Israel must immediately end its settlement construction in the West Bank, as it would make it impossible to set up an

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, "Inaugural Address," Aljazeera, May 19, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Statement on Israel and Palestine," Rome, *The Holy See*. May, 2009.

independent Palestinian State with Israeli settlers constantly encroaching on Palestinian territories.

UN investigators on June 1, 2009 began considering possible Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity during Israel's three-week offensive against Gaza. Israeli officials denied the investigation's objectivity, citing alleged anti-Israel bias by Ban-Ki Moon and the UN agency sponsoring the probe. On June 2, 2009, Ban-Ki Moon renewed his call for Israeli cooperation with the UN investigation team, for which the government of Israel has so far refused publicly to cooperate.

Jackson Diehl's August 23, 2009 *Washington Post* essay predicts that at the UN General Assembly opening in late September, Obama "aims to announce the opening of a new negotiating process between Israelis and Palestinians, along with 'confidence building' steps by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and a number of Arab governments,... he will probably lay out at least a partial vision of the two-state settlement that all sides now say they support, and the course that negotiations should take."<sup>29</sup>

## **V. President Obama's June 4, 2009 address in Cairo<sup>30</sup>**

In his first major very positively received presidential address to the Muslim world in Ankara, Turkey on April 10, 2009, Obama announced the end of the previous American government (Bush) rhetoric about "the axis of evil." His tense encounter with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in Washington on May 20 gave a clear notice to the American-Israeli allies that his government would provide a more balanced view than the Bush government toward both the Israeli government, remaining "as an unbreakable friendship" while Palestine's 60 years of "unbearable suffering" under Israeli occupation could not be tolerated.

*New York Time* columnist, Thomas Freedman,<sup>31</sup> held a 20 minute phone interview with President Obama on June 2, 2009, reporting that Obama said:

There are a lot of Arab countries more concerned about Iran developing a nuclear weapon than the 'threat' from Israel, but won't admit it." There are a lot of Israelis, "who recognize that their current path is unsustainable, and they need to make some tough choices on settlements to achieve a two-state solution – that is in their long-term interest – but not enough folks are willing to recognize that publicly. There are a lot of Palestinians who "recognize that the constant incitement and negative rhetoric with respect to Israel" has not delivered a single "benefit to their

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<sup>29</sup> Jackson Diehl, "A Mideast Test for President Do-Everything," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2009, p. A19.

<sup>30</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President 'On a New Beginning,'" Washington, D.C., White House Briefing Room, June 4, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Friedman, "Obama in Cairo," *New York Times*, June 3, 2009.

people and had they taken a more constructive approach and sought the moral high ground” they would be much better off today – but they won’t say it aloud. There are a lot of Arab states that have not been particularly helpful to the Palestinian cause beyond a bunch of demagoguery,” and when it comes to “ponying up” money to actually help the Palestinian people, they are “not forthcoming.”

On June 3, 2009, meeting with King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia, Obama stated that inherently he could not visit the Middle East without first coming to the location where Islam was founded, thereby identifying himself as a friend of the Muslim world, while accommodating to the premier importance in American foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. Before his Cairo address, at the more than 100 year old University of Cairo in cooperation with al-Azhar, a major center for the study of Islam, he made personal identification and accommodation connections with various Islamic and Jewish scholars, leaders of several Middle Eastern governments and religious leaders, seeking their advice.

Beginning his address with “Asslaamu Alaykum,” the traditional Islamic greeting, “Peace be with you,” and quoting frequently from the *Qu’ran*, the Jewish Torah, and the Christian Bible, Obama emphasized the mutual need to recognize the common ground supporting western and eastern dialogue. He noted that for several centuries there had been Western and Middle Eastern coexistence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars, colonialism and the Cold War, all of which had left Middle Eastern and Islamic countries feeling highly marginalized. He stated that the sweep of sudden change toward modernity and globalization had left many Muslims feeling that western values were strongly hostile to Islamic traditions. He called for respectful dialogue, and a willingness to listen to each other for a better mutual understanding, and a common search for justice and progress, tolerance and dignity, thus implicitly challenging some arguments in Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* as well as the previous Bush policies toward the Middle East and Islam, but in contrast supporting a “dialogue among civilizations”

His seven part speech identified the causes of the west and east tensions as: first, violent extremism; second, conflicts between Israel and Palestine and the Arab world; third, shared rights and responsibilities of nations on nuclear weapons; fourth, democratic governments through the will of the people; fifth, religious freedom; sixth, women’s rights, and 7 economic development and opportunities. He emphasized that Palestinians must abandon violence and that Hamas has responsibilities to stop the rocket attacks against Israeli cities, but that Israel must also stop constructing settlements in the West Bank. He forcefully stressed the existence of Palestine as a present reality, rather than as a future prospect as the Bush administration had done. Additionally, he urged Arab states to recognize that Saudi Arabia’s expansive peace

initiative in 2002 must be considered as only a beginning and not an ending, despite the earlier unwillingness of the Israeli government to accept the terms offered. He argued again that while the US commitment to Israel was “unbreakable,” the suffering of the Palestinians for the last 60 years was “intolerable,” and that progress for the two-state solution included Israel stopping its settlements construction under the banner of “natural evolution,” Hamas and the Palestinian Authority agreeing to a unity government, and all Arab states recognizing the legitimacy of Israel’s existence as a first step of cooperation on their part toward creating an informed and productive dialogue. Specifically, he called on the Hamas leadership to eschew violence, “as violence is a dead end” while Israel must take progressive steps to end the sixty year occupation of Palestine. He emphasized that regional development and global opportunities must coexist as essential aspects of human progress.

Obama recognized the US dual responsibility to help forge a better future for Iraq and to leave Iraq in a timely manner to the Iraqis, as well as to assist the Afghans to defeat the Taliban. He reaffirmed this first step in the American contributions toward Middle Eastern peace and stability, and American friendship for the Islamic world, and particularly between Israel and Palestine. He committed himself to develop a two-state solution, with peace, justice, tolerance, and mutual respect for the Palestinians and Israelis. Generally, his efforts to identify himself interculturally with the Middle Eastern and Islamic world were well received in the US, Europe, and the Middle East.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Gudykunst argues that both the intercultural identity and accommodation/adaptation theories can be studied both qualitatively and quantitatively. With a broad qualitative analysis based on these theories, we can note that Obama’s outreach to the Muslim and Islamic world has increasingly demonstrated their practicality and that as Colin Powell has asserted, he potentially can be a culturally and internationally transformational figure. So far, he appears to be reshaping the US reputation throughout many parts of the world. His Cairo address represents a harmony between tradition and progress. Obama’s major goals for the address included a better mutual understanding, a common search for justice and progress, and tolerance and dignity. Nonetheless, he also strongly argued that an overwhelming emphasis on the negative differences between Middle Eastern and Western cultures could lead to empowering those who sow hatred rather than peace and creating difficult tensions between the different societies.