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Obama lays the groundwork to take on Palestinian/Israeli conflict

By Sean Foley

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When President Barack Obama arrived this past week in Saudi Arabia, he took a simple but powerful step toward improving America's strained ties with the Arab and Muslim world: he said "thank you." In response to Saudi King Abdullah's speech lauding his kingdom's relationship with the United States, President Obama responded by saying "shukran," or thank you, in the original language of the Quran, Arabic. In a speech the next day in Cairo, Egypt, Obama cited the teachings of the Quran, noted the daily humiliations endured by the Palestinians and called for a new beginning between Americans and the Muslim world based on common principles and the understanding that they need not be in competition. Together, these actions communicated to Muslims Obama's knowledge of their religion, language and history.

As powerful as President Obama's trip was symbolically, it is important to remember that his predecessor, President George W. Bush, also had symbolic moments that demonstrated his respect for the Muslim world. Within a week of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Bush visited the National Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., and was seen on television without his shoes inside the center's mosque. The video resonated throughout the Muslim world, since it showed his understanding of the proper etiquette in a Muslim house of worship. This act had added credibility because his father, President George H.W. Bush, had refused to guarantee loans for Israel to build settlements in the West Bank in 1991 and Bush had actively sought the support of Muslims and Arabs during the 2000 presidential campaign.

The fact that George W. Bush left office this year as one of the most unpopular figures in the Arab and Muslim world provides a cautionary tale of the limitations of public diplomacy and reiterates the importance of U.S. policies in the Middle East, Asia and Africa to America's relationship with Muslims.

The Obama administration is fully aware of this reality and has already invested considerable diplomatic resources in addressing the most intractable issue facing Washington in the Muslim world, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Obama has appointed a senior envoy to the conflict, met with regional leaders, called on Israel to stop building new settlements and to accept the creation of a Palestinian state. Obama's policies run counter to the views of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli leader is wary of creating a Palestinian state, aims to expand settlements and contends that Iran's nuclear program must be addressed before peace talks can start with the Palestinians.

As Obama seeks a new relationship with Muslims, his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, will be crucial. He is a passionate advocate of Israel, has close family ties to the nation and serves as a bridge to the millions of Jews who voted for Obama in 2008 and strongly support Israel. If Emanuel can convince these voters that Obama's new policies are in both American and Israeli interests, then the president will have the political capital at home necessary to pursue his agenda with the Muslim world. Ironically, the future of America's relations with the Muslim world may rest on the considerable political skills of a man who has spent his career fighting for Israel.