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Most Arabs know this speech will make little difference

I suspect that what the Arab world wants to hear is that Obama will take his soldiers out of Muslim lands

Robert Fisk

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More and more, it looks like the same old melody that Bush's lads used to sing. We're not against the Muslim world. In fact, we are positively for it. We want you to have democracy, up to a point. We love Arab "moderates" and we want to reach out to you and be your friends. Sorry about Iraq. And sorry – again, up to a point – about Afghanistan and we do hope that you understand why we've got to have a little "surge" in Helmand among all those Muslim villages with their paper-thin walls. And yes, we've made mistakes.

Everyone in the world, or so it seems, is waiting to see if this is what Barack Obama sings. I'm not sure, though, that the Arabs are waiting with such enthusiasm as the rest of the world.

I haven't met an Arab in Egypt – or an Arab in Lebanon, for that matter – who really thinks that Obama's "outreach" lecture in Cairo on Thursday is going to make much difference.

They watched him dictate to Bibi Netanyahu – no more settlements, two-state solution – and they saw Bibi contemptuously announce, on the day that Mahmoud Abbas, the most colourless leader in the Arab world, went to the White House, that Israel's colonial project in the West Bank would continue unhindered. So that's that, then.

And please note that Obama has chosen Egypt for his latest address to the Muslims, a country run by an ageing potentate – Hosni Mubarak is 80 – who uses his secret police like a private army to imprison human rights workers, opposition politicians, anyone in fact who challenges the great man's rule. At this point, we won't mention torture. Be sure that this little point is unlikely to get much play in the Obama sermon, just as he surely will not be discussing Saudi Arabia's orgy of head-chopping when he chats to King Abdullah on Wednesday.

So what's new, folks? Arabs, I find, have a very shrewd conception of what goes on in Washington – the lobbying, the power politics, the dressing up of false friendship in Rooseveltian language – even if ordinary Americans do not. They are aware that the "new" America of Obama looks suspiciously like the old one of Bush and his lads and ladies. First, Obama addresses Muslims on Al-Arabiya television. Then he addresses Muslims in Istanbul. Now he wants to address Muslims all over again in Cairo.

I suppose Obama could say: "I promise I will not make any decision until I first consult with you and the Jewish side" along with more promises about being a friend of the Arabs. Only that's exactly what Franklin Roosevelt told King Abdul Aziz on the deck of USS *Quincy* in 1945, so the Arabs have heard that one before. I guess we'll hear about terrorism being as much a danger to Arabs as to Israel – another dull Bush theme – and, Obama being a new President, we might also have a "we shall not let you down" theme.

But for what? I suspect that what the Arab world wants to hear – not their leaders, of course, all of whom would like to have a spanking new US air base on their property – is that Obama will take all his soldiers out of Muslim lands and leave them alone (American aid, doctors, teachers, etc, excepted). But for obvious reasons, Obama can't say that.

He can, and will, surely, try his global-Arab line; that every Arab nation will be involved in the new Middle East peace, a resurrection of the remarkably sane Saudi offer of full Arab recognition of Israel in return for an Israeli return to the 1967 borders in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 242. Obama will be clearing this with King Abdullah on Wednesday, no doubt. And everyone will nod sagely and the newspapers of the Arab dictatorships will solemnly tip their hats to the guy and the *New York Times* will clap vigorously.

And the Israeli government will treat it all with the same amused contempt as Netanyahu treated Obama's demand to stop building Jewish colonies on Arab land and, back home in Washington, Congress will fulminate and maybe Obama will realise, just like the Arab potentates have realised, that beautiful rhetoric and paradise-promises never, ever, win against reality.