

Obama's Mideast Speech

Michael Sean Winters | May. 19, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

President Obama did not break much in the way of new ground in his speech, delivered just now, on the Mideast. But, foreign policy is not a good place to exhibit novelty. He touched all the necessary notes, linking our values and our interests in ways he has before but also in ways that we can't do often enough, especially after two months of Donald Trump running around saying we should have made the Iraqis pay for our invasion of their country. Obama spoke about the need to guarantee religious freedom in the region, specifically mentioning the rights of Coptic Christians in Egypt and, a bit more surprisingly, the rights of Shia in Bahrain. In fact, if there was anything a bit surprising in the speech it was the fact that he mentioned Bahrain explicitly and did not let that country's leaders off the hook for their repressions. That was a pleasant surprise.

I suppose the big news was that the U.S. will model its efforts to assist Tunisia and Egypt on the efforts deployed two decades ago to help the countries of Eastern Europe transition to democracy. Politically, I wish the President had noted how much trade has been produced between the nations of Eastern Europe and the U.S. in the years since the fall of communism to push back against the anti-foreign aid chants that will surely be found on Fox tonight. But, the model is a sound one and the President is right to invoke it.

President Obama's comments on the Arab-Israeli conflict were predictable - as they should be. Nothing either party has done recently warrants any full-scale shift in U.S. policy. The Palestinians have a real opportunity to move towards a comprehensive peace settlement, which has obvious appeal to Israel at this moment as it looks towards a democratized Egypt and the need not to convince only one man, Mubarak, to keep the peace, but the need to convince millions of Egyptian citizens to keep the peace. But, the history of Palestinian politics has been well described as never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Obama should not invest an ounce of his political capital on peace negotiations that are destined to go nowhere.

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