

OBAMA'S MIDDLE EAST SPEECH: APPLAUSE LINES FOR DEMOCRACY

Obama gave an inspirational speech advocating for change in MENA—"Prosperity also requires tearing down walls that stand in the way of progress – the corruption of elites who steal from their people"—that I wish he'd advocate in the US. And after comparing the uprisings in the Middle East to the Civil Rights movement, I found this line particularly powerful:

I would not be standing here today unless past generations turned to the moral force of non-violence as a way to perfect our union.

In addition, there were some key points of utter contradiction, as in this passage:

As for security, every state has the right to self-defense, and Israel must be able to defend itself – by itself – against any threat. Provisions must also be robust enough to prevent a resurgence of terrorism; to stop the infiltration of weapons; and to provide effective border security. The full and phased withdrawal of Israeli military forces should be coordinated with the assumption of Palestinian security responsibility in a sovereign, non-militarized state. [my emphasis]

But I was most intrigued by two subtle details of the delivery of the speech.

First, the audience watching the speech (which I believe was made up of State Department employees, but I'm trying to clarify) clapped just twice before the end of the speech. First, after Obama said this line:

The United States opposes the use of violence and repression against the people of the region.

And after Obama finished this passage:

Bahrain is a long-standing partner, and we are committed to its security. We recognize that Iran has tried to take advantage of the turmoil there, and that the Bahraini government has a legitimate interest in the rule of law. Nevertheless, we have insisted publically and privately that mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain's citizens, and will not make legitimate calls for reform go away. The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail.

This was an audience that gave Obama just two key punctuation marks, pushing the US further for its support of this democracy movement, and very specifically on Bahrain, the place where our engagement has been most hypocritical.

Which also brings us to the other most interesting detail, IMO, about the delivery of the speech. Keep in mind this speech was late, reportedly because of some last minute changes.

Now, before he reached the section on Bahrain, Obama had mentioned just about every other uprising in the region: Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and even Iran. Several of us on Twitter were discussing whether he'd even mention Bahrain, where the Saudis are assisting the government in brutally repressing a largely Shiite uprising.

Which is why it's interesting that Obama stumbled on the beginning words of this passage. This is an observation that @krmaher made too,

on Twitter, suggesting that perhaps the stumble meant he hadn't rehearsed this part of the speech. It's a good point: did Obama stumble, just this once in the entire speech (it's not something Obama does often anyway), because he changed the speech at the last minute to push for change in Bahrain, too? Or because he realized that supporting change in Bahrain, even as the Saudis try to turn it into a proxy war against Iran, was going to be the hardest thing to deliver?