

# Much Rides on Obama's Visit to Israel

 [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/03/18/much\\_rides\\_on\\_obamas\\_visit\\_to\\_israel\\_117493.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/03/18/much_rides_on_obamas_visit_to_israel_117493.html)

By **Peter Berkowitz** - March 18, 2013

TEL AVIV -- Last week, at the annual Herzliya Conference on national security, speculation was rampant about the purpose of Barack Obama's first visit to Israel as president of the United States. One common view was that what the American leader hopes to accomplish upon arriving here on March 20 is to get out of Israel as soon as possible.

Such an ambition would be understandable. In his first term, Obama sought to orchestrate a comprehensive resolution of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This, too, reflected an understandable impulse, even an admirable one. But at best he went about it naively. By putting significant pressure on the Israelis and none on the Palestinians, the president managed to sow distrust in Jerusalem and inflate expectations in Ramallah, a bad recipe for a peace process that demands painful concessions from both sides.

In the winter of 2011, the Obama administration greeted the Arab Spring as the herald of liberty and democracy in the Middle East. Instead, as the Israelis had cautioned, the uprisings of 2011 have proved a destabilizing force in the region. They have been marked by the resurgence of Islamic tradition in contest with modernity, and the reemergence of sectarian and tribal loyalties in competition with the centralizing nation state.

Egypt, the largest and leading Arab state, is in crisis. It has lost control over swaths of its territory in the Sinai Peninsula and in sections of Cairo, its economy is in shambles, and it must import food for tens of millions.

Although President Bashar al-Assad is still hanging on two years after the outbreak of civil war, Syria is collapsing. Lebanon, fragile as always, is increasingly drawn into the Syrian conflict as Assad-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon seeks to protect its protector in Syria. Jordan must deal with an ascendant Muslim Brotherhood even as, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency, 350,000 Syrians have poured across its border. Libya remains fractured. Bahrain is teetering.

Meanwhile, despite unprecedentedly tough American-led sanctions, Iran continues to enrich uranium and process plutonium. In Israel, which is determined to prevent Iran from *acquiring the capability of building* a nuclear weapon, it is widely thought that Iran is months away from crossing that so-called "red" line.

The United States, Obama has insisted, is committed to preventing Iran from *possessing* a nuclear weapon, and will use all options -- including, as a last resort, a military one -- to achieve its goal. However, since preventing Iran from possessing a nuclear weapon is

consistent with allowing Tehran to acquire all the elements for a bomb as long as it doesn't assemble them, the United States draws a red line and operates on a timetable that differ from Israel's.

On top of the lingering tensions and conflicting assessments, there is a widespread perception in Israel -- and throughout the Middle East, in Europe, and in the United States itself -- that the Obama administration aims to reduce the U.S. role in the Middle East. The thinking here is that America encounters no global enemy, as during the Cold War; Obama certainly does not regard Islamic extremism in the way Ronald Reagan regarded Soviet communism. Israelis also worry that the administration is preoccupied with budget battles with Republicans and winning back the House of Representatives in 2014. And, notwithstanding the president's determination to promote clean energy, Israelis are concerned that the hydraulic fracturing revolution, which has already reduced America's direct dependence on Middle East oil, will also lessen American interest in the region.

One can see how, in these circumstances, the Obama team may have concluded that the primary benefits of visiting Israel concern domestic politics. By means of a very public display of solidarity with Israel, the president may hope to silence domestic critics who charge that his decision not to visit Israel during his first term reflects a coldness toward the Jewish state, and to placate domestic supporters who wish to have their confidence in the president's good intentions toward Israel reinforced.

But it is a mistake to believe that U.S. interests would be well-served by diminishing America's role in the Middle East. Important tasks await the president in the region.

At the Herzliya Conference, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro vigorously insisted that the White House viewed the president's impending visit as a chance to build confidence in an already strong relationship and to refine a joint understanding of America's Middle East strategy.

According to Shapiro, Obama -- who will also be meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem and King Abdullah of Jordan in Amman -- will reaffirm the moral bond between the two democracies; underscore America's unbreakable commitment to Israel's security; and advance important foreign policy goals through in-depth discussions about the two countries' shared interests.

The evidence indicates that the Israelis are taking this visit seriously. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who devoted last week to putting finishing touches on his new government, has made clear his intention to focus discussions with the president and his team on Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, the disintegration of Syria, and the stalled peace process with the Palestinians. Netanyahu's staff is working long hours, both to prepare for the substantial discussions and to ensure that all the ceremonial and public aspects of the presidential visit come off without a hitch.

Even in the best case scenario, one should not expect the president's trip to yield dramatic announcements on Iran or Syria. But given the likelihood that a nuclear Iran would trigger an arms race in the Gulf region and thereby further destabilize an area of critical importance to the international economy, one should hope that Netanyahu and Obama make progress behind the scenes.

Progress would consist in improving cooperation on diplomacy, sanctions, and unconventional methods to pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear program. Progress would also involve narrowing the differences between the United States and Israel over the appropriate red line regarding Iran.

When it comes to Syria, among the most important steps that the United States can take is to fortify Jordan. A pro-Western Sunni stronghold bordering Israel, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf of Aqaba, Jordan anchors the region. In the short term, the U.S. should increase foreign aid to help the regime contend with domestic unrest exacerbated by hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Over the long term, Americans would get substantial return on their investment by concentrating on programs to promote the study of English and basic computer competence for all Jordanian children.

The onus in Jerusalem this week is not only on the United States. Netanyahu might seize the opportunity, in the afterglow of Obama's visit, to announce a new Israeli peace initiative.

The majority view in Israel is that the best solution to the conflict with the Palestinians is two states for two peoples, a view Netanyahu himself endorsed in June 2009 in a speech at Bar-Ilan University. But a majority also understands that the sides are too far apart today to reach a final agreement. For example, many Israelis who favor an independent Palestinian state maintain that it must be demilitarized, while many Palestinians who are prepared to accept Israel insist that the Palestinian state, to be a truly sovereign nation, must be free to make those kinds of decisions itself.

The obstacles to a complete and satisfactory peace in the short term are daunting and numerous. They do not, however, obviate the possibility in the short term of taking important steps toward peace.

For starters, Netanyahu should create an occasion to reaffirm his commitment to two states for two peoples and invite the Palestinians and other Arab neighbors to come to the negotiating table, as he did in June 2009 at Bar-Ilan. Only this time, and with the backing of the U.S., Netanyahu should declare that if, within a certain period of time, nothing comes of his offer to negotiate, Israel will carry out a partial though substantial withdrawal from major

Palestinian population centers in the West Bank while securing its control over major Jewish population centers and strategically critical areas beyond the Green Line. Israel, Netanyahu should also emphasize, will continue to seek out every opportunity to pursue direct talks with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors.

Obama's Israel visit is much more than a chance to let bygones be bygones, reestablish his relationship with Netanyahu on sounder footing, and connect with ordinary Israeli citizens. It is also an opportunity to advance vital American national security interests through collaboration with our most dependable ally in the region.

A United States that turns its back on Middle East politics, that takes its eye off the ball in Iran, does little to contain the conflict in Syria, and fails to understand both the importance of a just and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians and the formidable obstacles to achieving it will ensure that down the road it will have to contend with political and humanitarian crises created by a surge of refugees, the proliferation of weapons (including those of mass destruction), and the spread of terrorism in the region and throughout the world.

Hopefully, Obama realizes all this and will be coming to Israel with the understanding that there is no escape for the United States from its responsibilities in the Middle East -- and no substitute for prudent leadership.

*Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [www.PeterBerkowitz.com](http://www.PeterBerkowitz.com) and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*