

Obama Makes Appeal to Wary Israeli Public

After nearly four years of often testy relations with Benjamin Netanyahu, U.S. President Barack Obama is about to try a different tack—going over the head of Israel’s prime minister and appealing directly to the Israeli people.

Obama’s first presidential visit to Israel next week, while certainly including meetings with Netanyahu, will focus heavily on resetting his relationship with the country’s wary public as he seeks to reassure them he is committed to their security and has their interests at heart.

All signs are that Obama hopes the strategy will give him more leverage with the right-wing Netanyahu—politically weakened by January’s election in which centrists made surprising gains—to pursue a peaceful resolution with Iran and eventually address the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate.

But it will be no easy task.

Obama faces the challenge of overcoming Israeli suspicions that have lingered since his early days in office when he pressed Netanyahu for a freeze on settlement expansion and launched a short-lived outreach to Tehran, Israel’s arch-foe.

On top of that, Obama—known for his cool, detached public persona—rarely comes across with the kind of “I feel your pain” diplomacy that Bill Clinton used to charm Israelis and Palestinians alike during his presidency.

Even so, some Middle East experts say Obama may be able to take advantage of an opening to build public confidence in Israel, the first foreign destination of his second term.

His visit comes at a time when U.S. and Israeli strategic

concerns seem more closely aligned than they have been in years, with the West's nuclear standoff with Iran at a critical stage and Syria's civil war seen as a threat to regional stability.

"There's no substitute for actually being there," said Dennis Ross, Obama's former Middle East adviser. "It's an opportunity for him to connect with the Israeli psyche."

But there is also the risk of a disconnect.

Many Israelis will be looking to Obama for firmer reassurance of his resolve to do what is deemed necessary, including the use of military force, to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb. Iran denies such ambitions.

The U.S. president does not appear likely, however, to go much further, despite Netanyahu's repeated calls for a stricter U.S. "red line."

Obama, who has insisted he is not bluffing about military action against Iran if all else fails, told American Jewish leaders privately last week he saw little value in extra "chest-beating" just to sound tough, participants said.

The White House believes Israelis have yet to reach a consensus on how to confront Iran, essentially putting on hold, at least for now, Netanyahu's threats of an attack on Tehran's nuclear sites, according to a source familiar with the administration's thinking.

Obama will stress with Netanyahu the need for patience with sanctions and diplomacy, the source said. But U.S. officials also hope a high-profile recommitment to Israel's security can increase public pressure on Netanyahu to avoid aggravating the situation while world powers negotiate with Tehran.

Iran has become the main source of friction in the relationship between Obama and Netanyahu, which Aaron David

Miller, a former Middle East negotiator, called the “most dysfunctional” he has ever seen between an American president and Israeli prime minister.

He believes a thaw is still possible, especially if Obama hits the right notes in Israel. “He needs to say to them, ‘I understand this is a tough neighborhood and you have a dark history. I’m not trivializing your fears.’ This hasn’t been adequately communicated by this administration,” Miller said.

Choreographed Visit

Obama’s decision to skip Israel in 2009 when he went to Cairo, where he offered a “new beginning” with the Muslim world, remains a sore point with many Israelis and they wonder what took him so long to visit. Obama’s Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, also waited until his second term to go there.

“He (Obama) has to speak to the emotions of people because there has been a loss of faith ... in our relations with the United States,” said Itay Bar, a student at Ben-Gurion University, where tickets for a Jerusalem speech by Obama were distributed. Bar was speaking on Israel’s Army Radio.

Obama’s visit is being choreographed to present him as a good friend of Israel. The White House has yet to officially announce the dates, but Israeli media say he will arrive next Wednesday.

Photo opportunities are expected at sites evoking the country’s biblical past, its founding Zionist movement and the Holocaust. Obama could also inspect an Iron Dome missile battery, a system that protected Israel from Hamas rockets during a brief Gaza war in November, Israeli media reports.

But the centerpiece will be Obama’s televised speech to university students, reportedly set for Jerusalem’s convention center, which an aide said would be the president’s chance to “have a conversation with the Israeli people.”

To be sure, Obama has no intention of trying to cut Netanyahu out of the picture. With both leaders starting new terms, they may have come to the realization they are stuck with each other—and this is a chance for a new chapter.

Obama's decision to hold off on any new Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative will prevent the thorny issue from dominating the agenda at a time when negotiating prospects are dim and Israelis are more focused on what many see as a looming existential threat from Iran.

Some Israelis are still likely to bristle if Obama publicly challenges them to take "hard steps" for peace, as he told the American Jewish leaders he would.

Ready to Turn the Page?

Netanyahu, who clinched deals on Thursday for a new coalition government, is on the same page with Obama about making a successful show of the president's trip, which will also include a brief visit to the occupied West Bank to meet Palestinian leaders and a final stop in Jordan.

Obama is looking to counter Republican opponents who accused him during the 2012 campaign of "throwing Israel under the bus."

Netanyahu wants to show Israelis, who like their leaders to be assertive with Washington but not on bad terms with it, that he can still do business with Israel's superpower ally.

Netanyahu made no secret of his preference for Republican challenger Mitt Romney before last year's U.S. election, and some Israelis wonder whether Obama may want to settle scores. But Netanyahu was not alone. A poll in October found Israelis preferred Romney by 57 percent to 22 percent.

Nonetheless, many Israelis regard Obama as a solid ally, especially after Washington backed them in the Hamas conflict

and staunchly opposed recent Palestinian statehood bids at the United Nations.

Some Israeli lawmakers had called on Obama to address the country's parliament. But the Knesset is renowned for eruptions of heckling and shouting. The White House opted to steer clear.

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