

Obama Arrives in Israel Amid Low Expectations

President Barack Obama arrived in Israel on Wednesday without any new peace initiative to offer disillusioned Palestinians and facing deep Israeli doubts over his pledge to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran.

Making his first official visit here as president, Obama hopes to use the trip to reset his often fraught relations with both the Israelis and Palestinians in a choreographed three-day stay that is high on symbolism but low on expectations.

He was met at Tel Aviv airport by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli President Shimon Peres after Air Force One stopped next to a huge red carpet laid out down the tarmac.

Obama will hold lengthy talks with Netanyahu later in the day, with the two set to hold a news conference at 8:10 p.m. (2:10 p.m. EDT). He will travel to the occupied West Bank on Thursday to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

U.S. officials say Obama will try to coax the Palestinians and Israelis back to peace talks. He will also seek to reassure Netanyahu he is committed to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear bomb and discuss ways of containing Syria's civil war.

However, the White House has deliberately minimized hopes of any major breakthroughs, a reversal from Obama's first four years in office when aides said he would visit the Jewish state only if he had something concrete to accomplish.

Workers have hung hundreds of U.S. and Israel flags on lamp posts across Jerusalem, as well as banners that boast of "an unbreakable alliance." But the apparent lack of any substantial policy push has bemused many diplomats and

analysts.

"This seems to me to be an ill-scheduled and ill-conceived visit," said Gidi Grinstein, president of the Reut Institute, a Tel Aviv-based think tank.

"On the Iranian situation, Israel and the . don't seem to have anything new to say to each other. On Syria, the Americans don't have a clear outlook, and on the Palestinian issue, they are taking a step back and their hands off."

New Beginnings

With both Obama and Netanyahu just starting new terms and mindful that they will have to work together on volatile issues for years to come, they will be looking to avoid the kind of public confrontation that has marked past encounters.

"To tell the truth, they can't stand one another," a commentator for Israel's Channel 10 television said in a live broadcast from the airport as Air Force One came to a halt.

Signaling the emphasis being placed on symbolic gestures, the U.S. president will inspect an Iron Dome anti-missile battery at Tel Aviv airport before flying up to Jerusalem by helicopter for the start of his official meetings.

The White House has touted the system, which has helped protect Israelis from Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza, as a prime example of Obama's commitment to Israel's security—a message likely to be rammed home during the trip.

Annual U.S. military aid to Israel is put at \$3 billion.

Seeking to connect directly with an often skeptical Israeli public, Obama will make a speech to a group of carefully screened students on Thursday afternoon where he is expected to touch on major topics of concern, including Iran.

Israel and the United States agree that Iran should never get

a nuclear bomb, dismissing Tehran's assertion that its atomic program is peaceful. However, the two allies are at odds over how fast the clock is ticking down on the need for preventative military action should diplomacy fail.

U.S. officials say Obama, the fifth sitting U.S. president to travel to Israel, will urge further patience, with Washington worried that a threatened Israeli unilateral strike might drag the United States into another Middle East war.

Obama, who has said he is coming to listen, will fly by helicopter the short distance between Jerusalem and the West Bank city of Ramallah to meet Abbas, avoiding having to cross the Israeli separation barrier that divides the two entities.

Direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians broke down in 2010 over the issue of Jewish settlement building in the West Bank, and Abbas's allies have expressed bitter disappointment over the lack of fresh U.S. moves.

"It's not a positive visit," said Wasel Abu Yousef, a senior official in the Palestine Liberation Organization, led by Abbas.

In Ramallah on Tuesday, Palestinian police scuffled with scores of demonstrators protesting against Obama's visit.

Although Netanyahu repeated this week that he was ready to make "a historic compromise" to achieve peace, his new cabinet has several pro-settler ministers fervently opposed to halting building on land Palestinians want to establish their state.

Dennis Ross, Obama's former Middle East adviser, said the president was right to tread cautiously when peace prospects were dim and Israelis are more focused on what they see as greater threats presented by Iran and the war in Syria.

"What you don't want to do at a time when there's enormous disbelief on the part of both parties is to do something that

will fail," Ross said.