

Obama: 'Peace Must Come to the Holy Land'

U.S. President Barack Obama touched down in Israel at midday on Wednesday in a visit that U.S. officials said was aimed at improving relations with the Israeli public. Upon landing and after stepping out of his plane, Obama's first words to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres were, "It's a lovely day. Great to see you, great to be here ... It's good to get away from Congress."

Peres welcomed the president with the words, "We face the same dangers, we share the same hopes."

As Obama was guided down a receiving line of Israeli politicians, religious leaders and other notables, he lingered when he met Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid, head of Israel's second-largest party, and gave him a hearty handshake. The two had an animated exchange. On Lapid's new political career, Obama said, "My wife always says, 'Be careful what you wish for.'"

Netanyahu, Obama and Peres each delivered a short speech at the airport. "Thank you for standing by Israel at this time of historic change in the Mideast," the prime minister told Obama.

Netanyahu called the visit a "historic moment": "I come here today with a simple message. Thank you," he said. "Baruch haba leyisrael—welcome to Israel. The people of Israel are honored to have you visit."

Netanyahu said he hoped that Obama would "get to see a different side of this tiny land."

"I look forward to working with you over the next four years," Netanyahu, whose relationship with Obama has often been testy,

said.

"Thank you for standing by Israel at this time of historic change in the Middle East," Netanyahu said. "Thank you for unequivocally affirming Israel's sovereign right to defend itself by itself against any threat."

In what many observers describe as a reversal of his Cairo speech four years ago—in which he said that Israel was born from the Holocaust—on the tarmac of Ben-Gurion International Airport, Obama emphasized the historic link of the Jewish people to the Holy Land. Obama stressed the "rebirth" of Israel as the historic Jewish homeland.

He opened his speech with the word "Shalom," earning a round of applause, and then said in Hebrew, "Tov lihiyot shuv ba'aretz" ("It's good to be in Israel again"). This is Obama's third visit, but his first as president.

"We stand together because peace must come to the Holy Land," he said.

"I know that in stepping foot on this land, I walk with you on the historic homeland of the Jewish people. More than 3,000 years ago, the Jewish people lived here, tended the land here, prayed to God here. And after centuries of exile and persecution, unparalleled in the history of man, the founding of the Jewish state of Israel, was a rebirth, a redemption, unlike any in history. Today, the sons of Abraham and the daughters of Sarah are fulfilling the dream of the ages: to be masters of their own fate in their own sovereign state. Just as we have for these past 65 years, the United States is proud to stand with you as your strongest ally and your greatest friend," Obama said.

The U.S. "stands with Israel because it is in our fundamental security interest ... That's why the United States was the very first nation" to recognize Israel 65 years ago.

Economy and Trade Minister Naftali Bennett said Obama's speech was "important because it recognizes the deep historical connection between the people of Israel and the land of Israel."

Obama moved on to visit the Iron Dome anti-missile battery that had been set up at the airport.

"Where do you want to start?" Obama asked IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz.

"Follow the red line," said Gantz, to which Obama joked, "Bibi is always talking about red lines." Obama was referring to Netanyahu's position against the Iranian nuclear drive, and the disagreement with Obama over when a military strike against Iran would become necessary.

"You've done a great job," the president told officers near the missile system. Iron Dome, funded in part by the U.S. budget, intercepted 84 percent of missiles fired at Israel during last November's eight-day conflict with Hamas.

Obama did not come alone. His delegation includes 600 people, who are staying at Jerusalem's King David Hotel. The visit is being secured by 15,000 police officers.

Obama administration officials on Tuesday said that Obama's visit is intended to improve his stature among the Israeli public, in addition to improving relations with Netanyahu.

This is "a very important trip for the president. It's his first trip to Israel since becoming president and the first foreign trip of his second term in office," said Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes.

"We felt like this was an important opportunity for the president to go to the region," Rhodes said.

"There will be a broad agenda for our governments to address

while the president is in Israel, including our efforts to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, the ongoing situation in Syria, the developments in the wider region that pose both opportunities and security challenges, and efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace among the agenda.

"We thought it was very important for him to speak directly to Israelis."

Sources within the White House emphasized that Obama would try to relay the message that the U.S. is 100 percent committed to Israel's security. On Tuesday, White House spokesman Jay Carney said that the decision not to speak at the Knesset was not an omission. Rather, the president's "message will be heard by Israelis who are both members of the Knesset and who are not."

Obama's speech on Thursday to students at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem was meant to relate that message.

Carney said that the president would also meet with Israeli leaders and senior members of the government.

Obama was expected to meet with Netanyahu on Wednesday and hold a work meeting with him focusing on Iran, the civil war in Syria and the deadlocked negotiations with the Palestinians. Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon and Secretary of State John Kerry were also scheduled to take part in the meeting. Kerry arrived in Israel Tuesday night.

Before the meeting, Netanyahu was expected to present the president with a gift: a gold-plated nanochip engraved with the declarations of independence of Israel and the United States. During the day, the U.S. president was also a guest of Israel's president in a festive ceremony featuring Israel's children.

On Wednesday night, Obama is scheduled to have dinner with

Netanyahu and his wife, Sara. Chef Shalom Kadosh has prepared a menu that includes Jerusalem artichoke ravioli, beef filet and a selection of spring vegetables. On Thursday evening, Obama is scheduled to dine in the President's Residence and be presented with a presidential decoration for his unique contribution to Israel's security.

In an interview with CNN on Tuesday, Peres was asked about Netanyahu and Obama's relationship. He replied that the two leaders understood that even if they hailed from different philosophies, they were working toward the same goal.

"When it comes to the goal, there are no differences," he said.

Obama was also scheduled to meet Labor Chairwoman Shelly Yachimovich, even though she has not yet officially assumed the position of opposition leader. Peres is also scheduled to attend the meeting. Throughout the course of Obama's visit, many roads will be closed to traffic, particularly in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Police opened an information hotline for the public.