

Will Obama Stand With Israel During Visit?

President Barack Obama's trip to Israel this week will shine the spotlight on relations, as well as several regional and global issues in which Israel is directly or indirectly involved.

His visit will be full of symbolism, and hopefully, substance. Some of the topics he will no doubt discuss include Iran, Turkey, Syria and the Palestinians.

Regarding the threat of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, Israel is clearly on the front line, but the risk is global. The Israeli and U.S. timetables to prevent this seem to be out of sync. But whatever the case, we can expect Obama to reiterate that he has "Israel's back."

The problem is that so many don't believe him, and it's been necessary for Obama to state this time and again. Saying it in Jerusalem may or may not make a difference to reassure Israel or deter Iran.

Turkey has become a regional thorn in the side of just about everyone, though it's widely believed that Obama has good relations with Turkey's Islamist president. Over the past few years, Turkey has become openly and progressively aggressive and hostile to Israel. They have complicated matters elsewhere too as they try to flex their muscle regionally and globally.

The Turkish stand against the Assad regime in Syria and support for the rebels is well intentioned, but even there, Turkey can't escape blaming Israel for something it has nothing to do with.

Regarding Syria, three years of increased fighting leaves Israel in a precarious place. The threat of Assad using the

huge arsenal of chemical and biological weapons he has is a "hail Mary" to attack Israel and unite forces following an Israeli retaliation. Or, if the weapons fall into the hands of the Islamic extremists there or in Lebanon, who wouldn't think twice about using them against Israel?

And then there's the perennial Holy Grail, peace with the Palestinians. More on that shortly.

Obama's trip will also be full of symbolism both for the things he will do, and the things he will not do:

His plans include a stop at Israel's national Holocaust memorial, which is in line with the thesis he presented during his 2009 Cairo speech that the Jewish people deserved a state because of the Holocaust. But it does not include a stop at the Western Wall or the remaining foundation of the Temple, the most holy site in all Judaism.

Obama will speak in a convention hall to which dignitaries and university students have been invited, minus students from Ariel university because it is in the West Bank—despite the fact that at least several hundred of its students are Arabs. He will not address Israel's Knesset (parliament), supposedly because *that* may be too political.

Obama will also visit Bethlehem, hopefully bringing support to the endangered Christian minority, but will probably only hear the approved Palestinian Authority (PA) party line. He probably will not interact with Christians whose lives are threatened daily or who are not officially recognized by the PA because they don't espouse the PA narrative.

Obama will also visit Ramallah, seat of the PA government. A big question remains as to whether he'll lay a wreath at the grave of past PA president, PLO founder and terrorist hall of fame icon, Yasser Arafat. Not to do so would be an affront to the Palestinians. To do so would send a horrible message to the rest of the world that terrorism is a legitimate means to

an end, whether that end is simply to establish a Palestinian state or to delegitimize and destroy the Jewish State.

Back to the Holy Grail, peace with the Palestinians. All the spin plays down any expectations of Obama ushering in a breakthrough. In order to move forward on this, Obama must skillfully backtrack from the barriers he put up. While Israelis and our Arab neighbors don't agree on many things, there is one thing for which there is interesting common agreement. That is Obama's stance vis-à-vis construction in the West Bank—biblical Judea and Samaria—that raised the bar and is a (if not *the*) prime obstacle preventing negotiations, much less any progress to peace.

While George Washington is famed for the legend of taking responsibility in chopping down a cherry tree, many Israelis and Palestinians say that Obama is responsible for pushing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas high into a different tree, and then pulling away the ladder.

In the spirit of taking responsibility, a recent *Jerusalem Post* editorial said it clearly:

"... the deadlock in talks is in no small part due to a major policy blunder Obama made ... demanding an Israeli construction freeze not just in settlements in Judea and Samaria, but in consensus east Jerusalem neighborhoods. ... Obama hardened the Palestinian stance.

The Palestinians could not, after all ... demand anything less than what a U.S. president had demanded, even if in the past Palestinians had (negotiated) without the precondition of a building freeze. Obama's predecessors understood that settlements are a derivative issue—if we and the Palestinians settle borders, the settlement issue can also be solved.

Obama must admit his failure. Instead of pressing Israel to freeze construction, the U.S. president should insist that the Palestinians sit at the negotiating table without

preconditions.”

The question is whether Obama can bring a ladder tall enough to help extricate Abbas down from the tree from which into he was shoved and ease his intransigence.

A visit to Jerusalem in any circumstance is not something taken lightly. Recognizing this, in December 1917, on the heels of their victory in World War I, British General Allenby dismounted his horse and entered Jerusalem on foot out of respect and humility.

Hopefully, President Obama will understand this, be able to straddle the thin lines properly and diplomatically, not make further mistakes that threaten Israel and push us further from peace. Hopefully, he will make it clear that, under all circumstances, the U.S. stands with Israel without hesitation or any ambiguity.

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