

Will Obama Take New Peace Plan to Jerusalem During March Visit?

Officials in Jerusalem believe that U.S. President Barack Obama, who has announced he will visit Israel in mid-March, will arrive with a new peace plan and the demand for a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Obama's itinerary, which includes stops in Ramallah and Amman, suggests that his administration may be preparing a new peace bid. Word of the coming trip followed calls by incoming U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Sunday stressing the U.S. commitment to peacemaking. President Obama's associates have said in recent days that he plans to play a "central role" in shaping U.S. policy in the region.

"Obama is coming to talk about Iran and the peace process with the Palestinians," a senior diplomatic source in Jerusalem told Israel Hayom on Tuesday.

The visit to Israel is expected to take place in March and will be just one stop in a trip to the region. White House spokesman Jay Carney said on Tuesday that no date for the visit had yet been set, but associates of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday that Obama would likely come before Passover, in mid-March, after a government is formed in Israel.

Israel's Channel 10 reported that a visit had been scheduled for March 20.

The choice of Israel, a close U.S. ally, for Obama's first foreign travel since his Jan. 21 inauguration will give the president and Prime Minister Netanyahu a chance to try to

repair their notoriously fractious relationship.

Their dealings have been especially testy over the past year because of differences over how to best confront Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"Obama and Netanyahu agreed to the visit in a telephone conversation a week after elections were held. The two discussed the president visiting Israel after a new government is established, and the two agreed that such a visit would be an important opportunity to emphasize the friendship and strong partnership between Israel and the United States," an official in the Prime Minister's Office said Tuesday.

"Obama is coming to discuss Iran," a senior diplomatic source told Israel Hayom on Tuesday, "along with Syria and the peace process."

Despite the assessment in Jerusalem that Obama will come with a new peace plan, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro, speaking on Army Radio on Wednesday morning, said that no preconditions were set ahead of the visit.

"There are no preconditions and no demands were made. The president is coming to consult with the prime minister, and also to consult with Mahmoud Abbas. He is also going to Jordan. Israel will be his first foreign trip in his second term."

As for the timing of the visit, Shapiro said, "Obama very much respects the political process in Israel and will visit after the new Israeli government is formed and will give it time to form."

Obama's Israel agenda, according to Shapiro, will be Iran's nuclear program, the Syria crisis and Assad's chemical weapons, as well as reviving peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas hopes Obama's forthcoming visit will mark the beginning of a new U.S. policy in the region, a spokesman said on Wednesday.

"President Mahmoud Abbas welcomes the visit of U.S. President Barack Obama to Palestine," Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesman for the Palestinian presidency told AFP on Wednesday.

"We hope that President Obama's visit to the region is the beginning of a new U.S. policy that will lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian lands occupied since 1967, in accordance with the international resolutions," Abu Rudeina said from Cairo.

On Wednesday, Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin (Likud) said that Obama should deliver an address before the Knesset plenum during his visit. "If President Obama wants to talk directly with the people in Israel, the only platform for that is the Knesset," Rivlin said in a statement. "All the world leaders who have come to Israel, including past U.S. presidents and former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, visited the Knesset because they knew this is the people's elected chamber and it is from there that Israel draws its strength as a state and as a democracy."

"The Knesset, as a venue for debates and decision making is the only place where diplomatic initiatives and other consequential programs should be presented; even in the case of heads of states that are considered friends, plans should be presented in the Knesset," Rivlin stated. He further said that should Obama accept the invitation, "the Knesset members would respect the occasion."

The new secretary of state, John Kerry, is also expected to visit Israel in less than two weeks, before Obama's expected visit. Professional teams, including a Secret Service detail, have reportedly already arrived in Israel to prepare for Obama's visit.

Obama's trip will be the first meeting between himself and the prime minister since both were re-elected. At the start of Obama's first term he visited the region and delivered a historically important, but controversial, speech in Cairo. Obama did not come to Israel during that trip, inviting criticism from Republicans, Israelis and American supporters of Israel.

Obama's upcoming trip was a long time in the making. In July, when Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney was hammering Obama on Israel, Obama's campaign said that if he were re-elected, he would visit Israel during his second term.

Israeli political insiders forecast on Tuesday that the U.S. president's visit to Israel could have an impact on the makeup of the coalition and could also lead to American pressure for a new peace plan.

Complicated Relations

The relationship between the Obama administration and the Israeli government under Netanyahu has experienced ups and downs in recent years. In particular, the personal relationship between Obama and Netanyahu has been a fraught one.

But according to Ambassador Shapiro, Netanyahu and Obama speak every few weeks on the phone and have a good working relationship. They met nine times during Obama's first term, deciding that their governments would cooperate on an unprecedented level on security and intelligence.

Following his re-election, U.S. media reported that Obama planned to adopt a less interventionist strategy [dubbed benign neglect] into Israel's affairs, due to the president's frustration with Israeli policy, particularly the recent decision to build 3,000 housing units in E1 between Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim.

It appears that recent developments, especially the results of Israel's elections, have led the White House to reconsider its approach. Many in the Washington were pleased with Yair Lapid's surprise success, viewing it as an opportunity for a new coalition that could advance the peace process. At the same time, Senator John Kerry's appointment as secretary of state may blow new wind into the sails of negotiations, as Kerry appears determined to pursue the issue despite the administration's frustrations.

In his Senate confirmation hearing last week, Kerry said he believes there is a "way forward" on peace talks.

"The window or door on a two-state solution could shut – and that would be disastrous for all concerned," he said. "Perhaps this can be a moment where we can renew some kind of effort to get the parties into a discussion to have a different track than we have been on over the last couple of years."

Over the weekend CNN reported that the new secretary of state could visit the Middle East as early as mid-February. Now, in light of reports of President Obama's expected visit, it is likely that Kerry will lay the groundwork for the president's visit.

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