

# Policy Takeaways from Obama's Visit to Israel and the West Bank

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Brief Analysis

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## The president tilted U.S. policy toward Israel in substantive ways, especially with regard to resuming peace talks with the Palestinians and repairing Israel-Turkish ties.

The main news story of President Obama's Middle East trip was his intensive focus on engineering an emotional reset with both the leadership and people of Israel. His two prepared texts (the speech to Israeli youths at the Jerusalem Convention Center and his toast to President Shimon Peres upon receiving Israel's Medal of Distinction) stand alongside his 2011 UN General Assembly speech as the most powerful endorsements of Zionism ever delivered by an incumbent president -- not just a defense of Israel, but an embrace of its founding ideology.

But the visit was not limited to emotion and outreach -- it also provided a series of important policy takeaways:

- **A shift in U.S. policy on the requirements for resuming Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.** While Washington has been largely silent on this issue since talks last collapsed in 2010, the president firmly aligned himself with Israel's position that they should now proceed, immediately and without precondition. The fact that he aired this view standing next to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas was especially significant.
- **No change on pursuit of a "borders and security first" agreement.** While he chose not to dwell on the details of his preferred approach to Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, the president did reiterate his belief that the most effective way to proceed remains a negotiation over the delineation of borders, which he said would resolve the thorny settlements issue. This harkens back to his May 2011 speech outlining principles for a "borders and security first" approach. By implication, this approach is now likely to dominate U.S. diplomatic efforts, as opposed to focusing on interim arrangements or incremental changes to the current disposition of Israeli and Palestinian control over various West Bank zones.
- **Mutual blurring of U.S.-Israeli disagreement over the timetable of Iran's nuclear progress.** Prior to his trip, the

president stated that Iran would need at least a year to develop a nuclear bomb, an outcome that he has vowed to prevent. This appeared to suggest that diplomacy had much more time than the redline laid down last fall by Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who warned at the time that Iran would cross an unacceptable threshold by spring or summer 2013. When asked about the issue this week, Netanyahu chose to play the warm and polite host, endorsing the president's statement. In reality, they were talking about two totally different issues -- Netanyahu was focusing on the speed of Iran's production of medium-enriched uranium, while Obama was focusing on the speed of Iran's development of a fully operational nuclear weapon. While the details of the private Obama-Netanyahu talks on Iran have not been leaked, U.S.-Israeli disagreement on the appropriate moment for the expiration of diplomacy apparently lives on.

- **Agreement to open talks on an extension of U.S. military aid to Israel.** It is not surprising that the United States will continue to provide Israel with substantial military support. Yet the fact that the administration could announce the opening of talks about long-term provision of U.S. aid at a time of deep budgetary disputes in Washington underscores the depth of bipartisan commitment to Israeli security.
- **Recognition of the contribution Israel makes to U.S. interests.** Amid all the fanfare about the depth of U.S. commitment to Israel's security, it should be noted that President Obama added an entirely new dimension to his recent rhetoric in support of the bilateral relationship when he stated that "innovation" was as important a part of the partnership as "security cooperation." This comes very close to the idea -- so controversial in circles infected with the Walt-Mearsheimer school of thought -- that Israel is actually an asset to, not a ward of, the United States.
- **Projecting continued unease and reluctance about U.S. military involvement in the Syria conflict.** The president's most unsure moment during the visit was his press conference response to a question charging him with inactivity in the face of slaughter in Syria. After explaining the significant financial support the United States has given Syrian refugees and the recognition Washington has extended to the opposition, he fell back on the idea that preventing the massacres is a "world" responsibility, not an American one -- a concept seemingly at odds with the thrust of his comments two days later at Yad Vashem.
- **Contributing to an important thaw in Israeli-Turkish relations.** It is no coincidence that Netanyahu spoke by phone with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan just as President Obama was departing Israel for Jordan, opening the door to a mutual return of ambassadors. Mending ties between the two leaders has long been a U.S. objective. The fact that Obama delivered a highly symbolic (if indirect) rebuke to Erdogan by visiting the tomb of Theodor Herzl -- implicitly endorsing the ideology that the Turkish leader recently called a "crime against humanity" -- almost certainly gave cover for Netanyahu to reach out to Ankara.

## AN EARLY ASSESSMENT

On key issues, then, the president tilted U.S. policy toward Israel in substantive ways, especially with regard to resuming peace talks with the Palestinians and taking steps that facilitated an improvement in Israel-Turkish ties. Whether the shift on how peace talks should begin translates into a shift on how those talks should then proceed remains unclear. The president endorsed the importance of direct negotiations, long an Israeli desideratum, but also urged the people of Israel to pressure their leaders for progress, implying that his host was not sufficiently committed to the objective of peace with the Palestinians. (In this regard, Obama's rhetorical flourish about politicians never taking risks unless prodded by their publics earned applause, but it also turned peace process history on its head. Neither Menachem Begin nor Yitzhak Rabin, for example, faced public pressure to reach agreements with Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization, respectively; rather, each took a major risk and sought to build popular support for his initiative.)

On Iran, the president affirmed his position on prevention with powerful rhetoric but injected no additional measures to strengthen the credible threat of military force that, as Netanyahu said in their press conference, is a

key component of a successful policy.

Beyond these individual issues, the most important takeaway from the president's trip is this: if the basic idea behind visiting Israel was to open the administration's second term on surer footing in terms of U.S.-Israeli relations than what characterized the opening months of the president's first term, he appears to have succeeded.

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