

Obama to the Middle East: Expectations and Implications (Part 1)

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Brief Analysis

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On March 18, 2013, Dennis Ross, David Makovsky, and Michael Singh addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor, served most recently as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the Central Region on the National Security Council staff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks; *Mr. Makovsky and Mr. Singh's remarks were published as PolicyWatch 2052 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/obama-to-the-middle-east-expectations-and-implications-part-2>)*.

The context for President Obama's Middle East trip this week is dramatically different from that of his June 2009 visit. His first trip was largely driven by a set of perceptions that the administration believed were prevalent throughout the region. His decision to deliver a high-profile speech in a Muslim-majority country was in part a response to the notion that the Bush administration had been engaged in a war on Islam, which the president felt would be a continuing source of recruitment for terrorism against the United States. He also hoped to address the belief that Washington had been imposing its policies on the Middle East. Accordingly, he sought to reach out to Muslim countries in his Cairo speech, discussing how his administration's policies would be guided by core American values without forcing those values on the region.

Today's Middle East, characterized by even greater upheaval and uncertainty, offers very different motivations for a presidential visit. For example, one major element of this week's trip is outreach to Israelis, many of whom felt that the message Obama brought to the region in 2009 came at their expense. Despite unprecedented U.S.-Israeli dialogue under his administration -- including a systematic focus on security cooperation and wide-ranging intelligence collaboration -- Israelis tend to believe that the president is insensitive to their concerns. Therefore, he will likely seek to demonstrate the strength of the bilateral relationship through what he says and where he visits, creating emotional connections and acknowledging that he understands the changing context in which Israelis live.

If the president succeeds in making this connection, it could help him shape public perception of his policies on key issues, which in turn might give him more breathing room to pursue those policies. When he talks about his approach to Iran, for instance, it will no longer be an abstraction, but rather a sign that he is serious about the nuclear issue and responsive to Israeli needs. The same logic applies to his handling of the Palestinian issue during the trip.

The Israel visit will have a significant private dimension as well. Despite sometimes-intense debates on certain matters, U.S. and Israeli strategic objectives are the same on almost all regional issues. On Iran, both countries seek prevention; in the West Bank, both have an interest in preventing the collapse of the Palestinian Authority; and on Syria, both hope to prevent total collapse and keep chemical weapons out of jihadist hands.

Given these broad areas of agreement, the discussion of Iran will likely revolve around the meaning of prevention. Israel's main concern thus far has been how much time Washington will allot for diplomacy, and at what point the United States will act. Yet Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is unlikely to try pinning the president down on an exact date for action, in part because he does not want to be pinned down himself. Last September, when Netanyahu warned the UN about Iran accumulating enough 20 percent enriched uranium to make a relatively quick jump to a nuclear weapon, his redline was narrowly defined. Today, that facet of enrichment is the one area in which the Iranians have slowed down. They are not moving slowly on anything else, however, and are introducing new centrifuges that could, if operable, significantly increase enrichment rates.

Regarding the Palestinians, Obama and Netanyahu's conversation will likely be informed by their shared interest in avoiding a power vacuum in the West Bank. To be sure, the president will not be presenting a peace plan, since launching such an initiative at this point is guaranteed to fail. Raising expectations on one side often puts leaders on the other side into a defensive crouch; they become worried that you will ask something of them. Instead, the president should frame discussions of the Palestinian issue in terms of the consequences of inaction. Accordingly, he may ask Netanyahu what Israel can do to keep the situation from deteriorating further.

While in Ramallah, the president will seek to demonstrate compassion for the Palestinians, signaling that while he has not lost interest in making progress toward peace, there are limitations on what can be done at the moment. His private conversations with President Mahmoud Abbas will likely be similar to his discussion with Netanyahu -- he will ask the Palestinian leader what he can do given the current context. He will also point out that the unilateral UN road will not lead to peace with Israel. Regarding Syria, he will ask Abbas what the United States and the international community can do to safeguard the 400,000 Palestinians who still reside in that country and are now in a very vulnerable position.

The president's visit to Jordan will have public and private dimensions as well. On the public side, the mere fact of his presence will send a strong message about Washington's view of the kingdom. In private discussions, however, the focus will be on Syria. Jordan has already taken in 400,000 Syrian refugees, up almost 100,000 from the beginning of this year. If that pace continues, the kingdom could have 700,000 such refugees by June. The influx is already having a significant economic and social impact, becoming increasingly difficult for the government to handle. In addition to addressing the refugee problem, the president should also ask King Abdullah how Washington and Amman can work together to improve governance.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder. ❖

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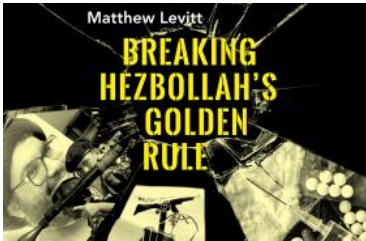
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