

# When Barack Meets Bibi

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## What two leaders who see the world quite differently must do to build bridges on Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

**P**resident Obama's journey to Israel this week is actually two visits wrapped into one. The first is a public goodwill mission. The odds are high this will succeed. The second is a policy summit with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Its odds of success are far from certain.

Some of Obama's critics say he is traveling to the Jewish State for the first time in his presidency simply to check a box that has remained empty since he last visited as a candidate in 2008. Obama passed Israel by in the White House, even after he made a landmark speech in Cairo calling for a new relationship with the Muslim world months after the start of his first term.

But there is nothing perfunctory about the trip or its goals -- which involve the very stability of the world's most volatile region and the very future of America's best friend in that part of the world.

The first challenge faced by Obama and Netanyahu will be to repair a personal relationship that was torn by differences over finding a path to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Coming into better sync will be crucial for the two men to jointly address another long-brewing crisis: Iran.

Tehran's suspected quest for a nuclear weapon is likely headed for a breakthrough or breakdown this year. We will soon know whether the Western economic pressure and diplomacy intended to thwart that program have worked or failed.

Troubling signs suggest that the two leaders, while both publicly committed to stop Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon, have staked out different positions on the time remaining to stop the nuclear program.

Netanyahu, understandably concerned that such a weapon in the hands of a homicidal, anti-Semitic regime would pose an existential threat, speaks from a position of profound impatience; he stood before the United Nations last year and drew a line in red to designate the unacceptable uranium enrichment level Iran was rapidly approaching.

By the calendar he drew then, Netanyahu predicted the red line could be crossed by this spring or summer.

Though Obama repeatedly insists he will not allow the mullahs to obtain nuclear weapons, promising he does not bluff, there are questions about how Iran perceives the appointment of Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense. While Obama may have chosen Hagel for unrelated reasons like budget cutting, the former senator is known as someone who believes Iran can be contained even if it develops a nuclear weapon.

Obama's latest statement, in an interview released Thursday, crystallized the gap between Bibi and Barack.

"Right now, we think that it would take over a year or so for Iran to actually develop a nuclear weapon," Obama told Israel's Channel 2.

"But obviously, we don't want to cut it too close. What we are going to do is to continue to engage internationally with Iran."

So by Obama's calendar, the red line might not arrive until next spring -- potentially more than 12 months after Netanyahu's deadline for reckoning at the UN.

The head-to-head and heart-to-heart between the two leaders will come only after a whirlwind tour of the Holy Land by the American President -- one in which Obama is likely to seek the type of visceral connection with the Israeli people that his predecessors, namely Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, achieved.

Obama starts with more goodwill in Israel than many American Jews realize, and every well-choreographed step of his visit is meant to reinforce that strong foundation. At its core, the Israeli public is pro-American. The President will use the visit to the Dead Sea Scrolls to identify with Israel's historic attachment to the land, implicitly refuting Palestinian claims that Israel has no legitimate claims to its place on the map.

He will further underscore that as he lays a wreath at the burial site of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism -- the movement that led Jews back to a homeland in the Middle East.

Obama's visit to the Iron Dome -- the much-heralded missile defense system -- will demonstrate how the U.S.-financed system has proven successful in knocking Hamas rockets out of the sky.

Moreover, Obama's main public speech will be to students who will likely embrace his future-oriented concerns about young Israelis in the 21st century.

It is hard to see how the public portion of the visit does not improve the standing of Obama among ordinary Israelis.

Obama and Netanyahu will meet behind closed doors this Wednesday for an extraordinary four-and-a-half hours (at least) of face time, if one includes the intimate dinner between the leaders at the premier's residence.

Obama will face Netanyahu believing that the Prime Minister does not have Yitzhak Rabin's political vision when it comes to the Palestinians, while Netanyahu sees Obama as lacking John McCain's instinct for intervention in the Mideast.

With both leaders newly reelected amid the knowledge that they will have to deal with the other for years to come, it is doubtful either side will be outright confrontational. However, in the Mideast and elsewhere, cordiality and pointed questions can still go hand in hand.

When I asked one senior official in Jerusalem to describe Israel's agenda for the meeting, he said "Iran, Iran and Iran." This might be a slight exaggeration; Israel is clearly also wondering whether the U.S. is aware that Israel may have to step up attacks against Hezbollah if it seeks to take control of Syria's stockpile of missiles as the regime seems to unravel.

However, Iran is the dominant issue for Netanyahu. His question is whether the current multilateral diplomacy with

Iran can realistically achieve a breakthrough in this regard.

Their differences start with how immediate the threat is. At that famous appearance before the UN last September, Netanyahu literally drew a red line, suggesting that medium-enriched uranium is just a short dash from a weapon -- 30-40 days away from the weapon-grade fuel that is central to Iran building a bomb.

Both sides are likely to debate the red-line issue. Obama may say that a recent undisputed report by the UN's international nuclear watchdog demonstrates that Iran is now diverting away some enriched uranium, which would mean there is more time than Netanyahu expected back in September.

Netanyahu's retort is likely to be that this report vindicates his view that drawing bold red-lines is effective, necessary policy.

The second bridge to cross will be over whether a deal is "partial" or "total." Netanyahu can be expected to strenuously argue that focusing on medium enrichment while leaving Iran's current low-enriched uranium stockpile in place is dangerously incomplete. Even the old centrifuges, let alone the new advanced ones installed by Iran, enable Iran to quickly reach higher levels.

Obama can be expected to try to reassure Netanyahu about the prospects of a partial deal.

But a partial deal will not sit well with Bibi. He will invariably argue that a partial deal will let Iran off the hook. It will mean that a second round deal dealing with the remaining stockpile will likely never come, as it is hard to maintain the unity of the international community on this issue for a long time.

When the issue turns to the Palestinian question, it is likely to be Obama asking most of the questions. Washington has been deeply uncomfortable with Israel's persistent push to engage in settlement activity in the West Bank and has plenty of other reasons to doubt Netanyahu's true commitment to a two-state solution. Especially in light of recent elections that weakened Netanyahu's power base, Obama will want to know Israel's strategy for pressing ahead.

We can expect the President to be far more pointed in private than he has been in public -- asking Netanyahu what he plans to do to make sure the push for peace is not permanently replaced with radicalization and violence.

Obama may be too polite to personalize things, but he could ask about the division within the Israeli cabinet. Does Netanyahu side with a hardline settler like Uri Ariel, who has made clear he will use Israel's Housing Ministry to advance construction of settlements, or does he trust the moderate new Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, who is devoted to a two-state solution? Both Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry will want to know that Livni's appointment as chief negotiator is not merely window dressing.

Granted, Netanyahu's new government will have been sworn in just hours before Obama's arrival, so the paint will not yet be dry on its broad-brush policies.

But Netanyahu can be expected to reassure Obama that he resisted persistent calls from Israel's right in the last two weeks -- calls to have Livni's wings clipped from the outset.

Obama may look for a pledge by Israel only to build settlements in the 5 percent of the West Bank largely adjacent to the old pre-1967 boundary -- where 80 percent of the settlers live -- and not in the remainder 95 percent of the West Bank.

Granted, this will not impress the Palestinians, who want all activity to stop in 100 percent of the land, but it could put constraints on a right-wing Israeli housing minister.

No dramatic statements are expected at the end of the Obama-Netanyahu meeting. However, as each side embarks upon a new term, they will have laid down major markers.

One senior Israeli official told me, “Obama can build trust with Bibi on Iran and Bibi can build trust with Obama on the Palestinian issue.”

If two excellent political communicators do not succeed during their marathon session in getting the other side to pay heed to its top concerns, it could be a long four more years.

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