

# Getting the Public on His Side

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## Persuading Israelis that he is committed to their security could help President Obama deal with Netanyahu on Iran and the peace track.

**U**S President Barack Obama's upcoming trip to the Middle East has sparked speculation about why he is keen on making such a visit at this time. For one, 2013 is the year in which Obama would like to translate his replenished political capital into hard-won domestic legislative achievements -- particularly in the areas of immigration, gun control, income inequality and climate change.

Obama's advisors may tell him that he will have the remainder of his second term until 2016 to focus on foreign policy and that if he does not score domestic achievements in 2013 while he enjoys renewed political capital, he will be a weaker foreign policy president in his final years. So their advice might be that in the meantime he should focus on the domestic agenda and leave much of the foreign policy to Secretary of State John Kerry.

But there is a Middle East foreign policy issue that cannot wait beyond 2013: Iran and the question of whether there is a diplomatic breakthrough or breakdown. If it is a breakdown, the immediate question would be how this affects Obama's policy of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Will the US attack? Will Israel attack? These weighty questions will test the Obama relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2013 in a way no other issue has since their rocky relationship began in 2009.

In this context, connecting with the Israeli public during his visit can only help Obama in his dealings with the Netanyahu government during this crucial year. The Obama Administration has noticed that on major decisions, Netanyahu is very mindful of domestic public opinion. Netanyahu saw polls on trading Hamas prisoners for Gilad Shalit and went ahead with it despite his opposition to the move; he also acceded to public opposition to a limited apology to Turkey in the aftermath of the *Mavi Marmara* affair, despite a wide array of Israeli security and other officials calling for an apology to improve ties with Ankara.

In short, given the power of public opinion, persuading the Israeli public of his commitment to Israel's security could

significantly help Obama in dealing with Netanyahu over the Iranian issue.

While the Iran issue may be more urgent, Obama could also use his visit to convince the Israeli and Palestinian publics not to give up hope in the pursuit of peace and a two-state solution. Top Obama Administration officials are well aware that Israeli and Palestinian polling demonstrates overall support for a two-state solution, but that each side believes the other is not committed and that therefore it will not happen.

While there is awareness in Washington that the peace issue did not drive the Israeli election campaign, the Lapid vote seems to suggest that Israelis do see progress on the Palestinian issue as a ticket for greater economic normalcy and for avoiding growing isolation and delegitimization.

Obama is aware that the master of outreach to the public when it comes to the Mideast was president Bill Clinton. He was unique among American leaders in being able to persuade Israelis that he was pro-Israeli and Palestinians that he was pro-Palestinian, and there was no contradiction in his ability to project genuine empathy with both sides. Obama hopes to be able to follow suit.

Indeed, it is possible to win public opinion without overtly using the public to score points against the incumbent leadership -- but rather as a constructive force going forward. Israelis tend to want to see American presidents with a multi-tiered identification with Israel, recognizing its historic attachment to the land, its aspirations for peace, its security and economic needs, and the fact that for now the Mideast is not Switzerland and that therefore Israel requires strong ties with the US.

At the moment, however, public opinion among both Israelis and Palestinians is fatigued, skeptical and downright cynical about the intentions of the other side. If these negative trends continue, even the incremental progress Secretary Kerry might attempt during 2013 -- with Obama coming in more extensively at a later date -- will be that much harder.

Indeed, urging both publics not to give up on a two-state solution is more urgent than a specific policy initiative, especially since the Obama Administration does not yet know what sort of coalition will be configured in Israel, nor who will emerge as the key players on the Israeli side. Therefore, it is unlikely that Obama will come with a detailed diplomatic plan at this time. Kerry can always bring more substantial ideas in the coming months when hopefully public opinion on both sides will be more receptive.

Meanwhile Obama could suggest ways of fostering favorable public opinion. For example, Israel has many ways to signal to the Palestinians that it wants to reduce its control in the West Bank even if a grand deal is not likely to be struck anytime soon. The Palestinians can signal as well. Abbas could declare that Israel, as well as the Palestinians, has an ongoing historic connection to the land.

Obama could urge synchronized political messaging, namely a consistent articulation by the leaders of why peace serves their national interest and is not a giveaway to the other side. For Israel, this means saying how peace enables it to be a Jewish nation-state and remain democratic. For Palestinians, it means articulating that continued impasse is likely to bring radicalization, which could destroy the goal of Palestine as a contemporary society with a modern economy. Tone from the top makes a difference.

Another useful message from the Obama visit would be that people who favor coexistence are not penalized. And this should be made crystal clear to the Palestinian public. Indeed, there are rumors that Obama may make an announcement that the US is delivering withheld aid to the Palestinians, just as Israel has resumed revenue transfers. The US needs to find an unmistakable way to make clear that it is providing the aid in appreciation of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's great strides in transparent governance and economic development. The US withheld funds because Abbas went to the UN, deepening the PA financial crisis. However, the Palestinians demonstrated against Fayyad and not Abbas for not receiving their salaries on time, and the prime minister's

popularity declined.

The US has tiptoed around Fayyad for a while, believing strong interaction with him could alienate Abbas. However, it turns out Fayyad is getting all the blame for Abbas's actions. It is time that he gets some credit in the eyes of the Palestinian public, too. One cannot assume that the status quo is sustainable and the PA is there to stay in the West Bank. Indeed, without regular assistance, the PA could collapse. Polling data shows an upsurge of support for Palestinian violence against Israelis, despite explicit public opposition by Abbas and Fayyad. Nobody can say when a third intifada could erupt. But current tensions should be noted and allayed.

Of course, reaching out to both publics should be genuine, demonstrating American commitment to the future of both peoples. This approach could also impact on wider policy goals, enhancing Obama's relationships with Netanyahu, Abbas and Fayyad.

Indeed, when asked recently by a reporter to explain why he keeps going to the public when it comes to the ongoing federal budgetary crisis, Obama indicated that one of the lessons of his first term was that he wants to keep public opinion on his side. The president now seems to realize that solutions do not suddenly appear. Rather, you need to set the public foundation for any policy to give it a good chance for success.

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*Jerusalem Report*

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