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Obama's new approach to Mideast peace: Israel and Palestinians must lead, not the U.S.

Barak Ravid

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For the past month the White House has been lowering expectations regarding U.S. President [Barack Obama](#) [2]'s upcoming visit to [Jerusalem](#) [3] and Ramallah. Among other things, there will be no announcement of a new peace plan, no pressure to renew negotiations, and no attempt to arrange a three-way meeting between the president, Prime Minister-designate [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) [4] and [Palestinian Authority](#) [5] President [Mahmoud Abbas](#) [6].

Senior U.S. administration officials have described the planned private conversations thus: The first will be between Obama and Netanyahu at the Prime Minister's Residence on Balfour Street, on the night of Wednesday March 20; the other, scheduled for the following morning, will be between Obama and Abbas, at the Muqata in Ramallah.

Make no mistake, Obama will tell them (according to officials planning the visit?): I haven't lost interest in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. I'm just as committed to the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the Jewish State of Israel as I was on my first day on the job. Nor has there been any change in my opposition to construction in the [settlements](#) [7].

The U.S. officials say Obama will explain to Netanyahu and Abbas that he still wants to help and be involved in the peace process, but he can't want it more than they do. "The president's message in private talks with Netanyahu and Abbas will be that they have to demonstrate that they are ready for taking action," said a senior official. In that case, the president and

Secretary of State John Kerry [8] will help out. If not, they will deal with other issues.

Obama's new approach indicates a sobering-up regarding America's ability to actually influence what happens between Israel and the Palestinians in the present political and regional situation. A senior U.S. official notes that Obama has realized that the more he pushed and pressured both sides during his first term, the further apart they moved. He says that the old pattern, in which the U.S. pleaded with the Israelis and Palestinians to make progress, simply didn't work.

For the first time in 20 years, the Americans are tired of banging their heads against the wall. They plan to stop pushing as hard as in the past. A renewal of negotiations is no longer their top priority. If the Israelis, the Palestinians or both want to make progress ? they know which phone to call.

The White House believes that reality will dictate the behavior on both sides, even without American pressure. The administration thinks that Israel's growing isolation, international pressure ? especially from the European Union ? the threat of sanctions, and the fear of a third intifada are more likely to influence Netanyahu than a new American peace initiative.

"The Israelis and Palestinians must decide what they want to do, and we'll be happy to help," said a senior U.S. official. "It's true that Secretary of State John Kerry wants to take an active role advancing the peace process, but even he won't turn it into his No. 1 project if he sees there's nobody to talk to."

The secretary of state, who will accompany Obama to Jerusalem and Ramallah, is expected to return to the region within a few weeks, in April. Although very eager to advance the Israeli-Palestinian issue, he is aware that putting Netanyahu and Abbas in the negotiating room would probably not end well. In such a situation, there is greater American openness to new ideas, such as coordinated unilateral steps or interim arrangements.

In the preparatory meetings held by National Security Adviser Yaakov Amidror in Washington in advance of Obama's visit, the situation in Syria [9] was a top priority. The intelligence and military cooperation between Israel and the United States, which has become much closer in the past four years, is reaching a peak now when it comes to keeping track of Syria's chemical weapons arsenals and attempts to deal with the expected fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad in the coming year or so.

During the meeting between Defense Minister Ehud Barak and the new U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel [10] on Tuesday in the Pentagon, Syria was also the central issue. The post-meeting announcement even emphasized that Barak and Hagel had agreed to continue to formulate joint contingency plans to deal with the possibility of Syria leaking chemical weapons to Hezbollah or to jihadist organizations.

One-on-one discussion

Along with the Syrian question, Netanyahu and Obama will also be discussing the Iranian nuclear program [11], especially in their private meeting. This will be Obama and Netanyahu's first opportunity for an in-depth, one-on-one discussion on the subject since their last White House meeting, in March 2012.

Senior U.S. officials claim that in recent months, since Netanyahu's "red line" UN [12] speech last September, the gaps between the White House and the Prime Minister's Office on the

subject of the Iranian nuclear threat have narrowed even further. Amidror is the person chiefly responsible for that. He has developed close working relations with his American counterpart, U.S. National Security Adviser Tom Donilon. The White House considers Amidror a moderating influence on Netanyahu ? or, as one official said, “We sleep better at night when he’s there.”

In Washington, they have the impression that Netanyahu has moderated his statements on the Iranian question somewhat. He talks less about an independent Israeli move against Iran and more about American action. Still, Obama will want to be sure where exactly Netanyahu stands and what his timetable is, and to try and reach some understandings.

On the other hand, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden ? who earlier this week spoke before American Israel Public Affairs Committee delegates in Washington ? and Kerry ? who gave interviews to U.S. television networks ? both hinted at a significant toughening of Obama’s policy toward Iran. In addition to saying that the military option is still on the table, Kerry said Iranian foot-dragging augments the risk of a confrontation.

The U.S. administration feels that President Obama is becoming increasingly ripe for a transition from diplomacy to other actions. Despite the appointments of the dovish Hagel and Kerry, Obama has actually become more hawkish on Iran. His advisers repeatedly emphasize that the president cannot allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons on his watch ? not because of Israel, but because of U.S. interests. The decision on the issue will probably come by the end of 2013.

The Pollard question

Obama’s upcoming visit to Israel has led to a renewed campaign on behalf of Jonathan Pollard ^[13] ?(convicted of espionage and given a life sentence by the Americans in 1987?). Manifestos have been signed, newspapers have mobilized, the Facebook wall of U.S. ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro is full of calls to release the Jewish spy, and local politicians have declared their support.

President Shimon Peres and Netanyahu have made sure to join the festivities. They had their picture taken with Pollard’s wife Esther, and promised on camera that they would raise the subject when meeting Obama. Peres and Netanyahu are well aware that the public campaign will do nothing to advance Pollard’s release. But as the famous Arabic saying has it, you don’t pay a tax on words.

The White House has heard about the manifesto and the administration is aware that the subject will come up in the president’s discussions, but they emphasize that there is no change in their position. “He’s serving a sentence for a serious crime he committed,” a senior U.S. official told me. “[Obama] has no plans for releasing him.”

The U.S. administration is amazed at the public campaign. One official close to the situation explained that when the subject is handled in the media rather than through quiet contacts in closed rooms, any chance of progress is dramatically reduced.

The people involved in the committee for Pollard’s release have good intentions, but their method simply doesn’t work. Despite four years of an intensive public campaign, attempts to release Pollard have not sparked any progress ? perhaps even the opposite. Anyone who wants to release him won’t achieve that via a media campaign. The activists and the Israeli

government would do better to focus on quiet legal and diplomatic channels in order to prepare the ground for a U.S. gesture at a suitable time.

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