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Analysis: Iran, Palestinian talks, Netanyahu ties to dominate Obama trip to Israel

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Three goals will dominate President Barack Obama's coming visit to Israel, his first as president: Convincing Israel and its leadership he means what he says about stopping Iran from building a nuclear weapon, mending a deeply troubled relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and, in return, enticing Israel back to negotiations with the Palestinians.

Some of the cosmic stars of diplomacy and Middle East reality are lining up to make the visit a success. Others are not. Whatever the outcome, the visit that will also take Obama to the West Bank and Jordan will mark a significant step by the president deeper into a problem that has bedeviled American leaders for decades. Managing expectations, therefore, is essential in the remaining two weeks before Obama sets off on his mission.

Palestinian and Iranian issues dominated Obama's remarks in a White House briefing with representatives of major U.S. Jewish organizations on Thursday. The president said it would be premature to take a grand peace plan, according to a person at the session who requested anonymity to detail the private remarks. The person said Obama planned to tell Israelis that just wanting peace was not enough, but would ask what hard steps are they were willing to take.

On Iran and attempts to sidetrack its nuclear program, Obama said Tehran must be left with sufficient face-saving room to accept a diplomatic solution. The president said he was not "going to do extra chest-beating in public" during the visit to Israel just to convince people he is tough, according to the person at the meeting. .

He left the talking on that issue earlier in the week to Vice President Joe Biden, who spoke the

Washington gathering of American Israel Public Affairs Committee, America's most powerful pro-Israel lobbying organization.

"The president of the United States cannot and does not bluff," Biden told the group when he turned to U.S. vows to keep Iran from obtaining an atomic bomb. "President Barack Obama is not bluffing."

Israel views a nuclear armed Iran as a threat to its existence, and Netanyahu has hinted at launching a pre-emptive military strike on the Islamic Republic to set back its nuclear program. Tehran has already enriched enough uranium to 20 percent purity for the country, should it decided to do so, to quickly move toward levels needed for a bomb.

Obama says he won't let that happen, declaring that a U.S. military attack would be possible should negotiations with Iran fail. Netanyahu, however, needs reassuring. That showed in his words to the same AIPAC conference addressed by Biden.

"From the bottom of my heart and the clarity of my brain, words alone will not stop Iran," the Israeli leader said, reinforcing his contention that negotiations with Tehran and damaging international sanctions may not stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power. The Iranians say they are only trying to refine sufficient uranium as fuel for power generation and medical research.

Netanyahu, thus, will want more public reassurances from Washington.

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