Obama’s Middle East trip: Lessons from Bill Clinton

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Al-Arabiya (Opinion)
March 14, 2013 - 12:00am
http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/2013/03/14/Obama-s-Middle-East-trip-Lesson...

U.S. President Barack Obama has set low expectations for his upcoming trip to the Middle East, which seems devoid of any peace initiative or strategy for negotiations. Tactically, however, the trip will re-introduce Obama in a Clintonesque fashion as he tries to build credibility among Israelis, and get directly involved with the Palestinians.

The trip, according to sources familiar with the planning, was Obama’s idea early in his second term. Starting Wednesday, it will take him for the first time as President to Israel, with a brief visit to the West Bank and a final stop in Jordan. Prompting the trip is a realization from Obama that his first term’s peace efforts have failed and that the status quo, if ignored, will ultimately lead to the collapse of the two state solution.

The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have been stalled since September of 2010, and the administration has no clear strategy how to move forward. In his meeting with Arab Americans ahead of the visit, Obama indicated according to Al-Arabiya “that since the Israeli government has not been willing to make concessions, there is no point in pushing (for negotiations) right now.” The Israeli Prime minister Benyamin Netanyahu ignored calls from the U.S. administration and has continued to expand illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

A Charm Offensive

The Obama visit cements a new approach to peacemaking, very different from that of 2009 where early calls for Settlement freeze were made from the White House. Instead, Obama is
going back to the Bill Clinton playbook, and starting off by building his credibility with the Israeli public. It is fair to say that the U.S. President is viewed with suspicion among many Israelis, who preferred by a margin of 57 to 22% his former opponent Republican candidate Mitt Romney to reach the White House last November (Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University poll). Also, 28% find Obama to be pro-Palestinian and 18% to be pro-Israeli (Jpost/Smith poll). These numbers did not help Obama in pressuring Netanyahu in the last four years, and the U.S. President was outplayed by the Israeli Prime Minister who instead used Congress to help make the Obama administration abandon its calls for Settlement freeze. Netanyahu also enthusiastically welcomed the Romneys to Israel last July.

Similar to Obama, Clinton had to deal with Netanyahu between 1996 and 1999, and found him to be untrustworthy. According to former Envoy Dennis Ross’ memoir “The missing peace”, Clinton complained after one of his meetings with Bibi saying: “He thinks he is the superpower and we are here to do whatever he requires”. In 2011, Clinton also accused Netanyahu of “killing the peace process”. Unlike Obama, however, Clinton, by establishing trust and credibility among Israelis, was able to outlast and outmanoeuvre Netanyahu. The former President visited Israel four times during his Presidency, and is among most admired world leaders by Israelis.

Obama’s itinerary follows Clinton’s model in hosting events largely aimed at shining his image in the Jewish state. The trip will include visits to Israel’s Holocaust memorial, the graves of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, and Yitzhak Rabin, the former Israeli prime minister who was assassinated by a Jewish extremist. Obama also plans to deliver a speech at an Israeli university.

**Strengthening the Palestinian Leadership**

Obama’s short trip to the West Bank (5 hours) will take him to separate meetings with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. Some media reports indicated that Obama will visit the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem. The church was recognized recently by the UNESCO as a world heritage site, right after accepting Palestine as a legitimate member in the organization.

Obama will need to mend fences with Abbas. Those relations have taken a hit after the Palestinian leader snubbed Obama’s requests, and went ahead with the U.N. bid for Statehood, granting Palestine a non-observer state seat last November. While the bid gave Abbas a boost, it was short lived and overshadowed by second Gaza war. The Palestinian president now trails Hamas’ leader Ismail Haniyeh 48 to 45% in a Presidential race poll conducted last December (Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research).

The U.S., however, cannot afford either losing Abbas or the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. Obama will be releasing 500 million dollars in U.S. funds for the PA, and Abbas will push the issue of the pre-Oslo accord prisoners to be released from Israeli jails before any negotiations are resumed. Obama can establish a strong relationship with Abbas, who is more dependent on the US after the Arab spring. Bill Clinton, despite lot of criticism from the right, worked closely with former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. They signed the Oslo accords in 1993, and were very close to a final status agreement in 2000.

Obama’s trip offers a good opportunity to “talk directly to the Israeli people”, something he
tried with the Arab world in his Cairo speech in 2009. As with Cairo though, absent of robust follow up and a clear working strategy, this trip will be another picture perfect moment in the decades long conflict.