Palestinians Address Obama Directly with Billboard Campaign

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Ramallah, Asharq Al-Awsat—“President Obama, don’t bring your smartphone to Ramallah, you won’t have mobile access to [the] internet. We have no 3G in Palestine!”

This is just one of the huge billboards that have been installed along the main road between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Similar billboards have also been placed strategically around the West Bank, including in front of the provincial headquarters and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. These are all locations where US President Barack Obama is expected to pass by and therefore might encounter a message from the Palestinian people addressing him directly.

Another billboard reads: “President Obama, please make sure to come early to your meeting in Ramallah. It may take you two hours to cross Qalandia checkpoint.”

Palestine’s youth are seeking to address Obama directly, drawing the president’s attention to issues that they believe are far more important than political discussions, namely the daily needs and sufferings of the Palestinian people.

Mahir Alawneh is one of three Palestinian youths who came up with the idea of putting up these unusual billboards. He told Asharq Al-Awsat: “We thought outside of the box, away from conventional means. We want to engage with Obama simply and without using big terms. We want to tell him about the details of our lives.”

He added: “We are telling him that essential needs, which they take for granted, are being forbidden to us.”

Alawneh emphasized that “President Obama once stated that he could dispense with everything, except his Blackberry phone, and we are informing him, if he didn’t already know,
that 3G service is forbidden in Palestine."

He asked, “Why is this permissible across the globe but prohibited for us? We want an answer. Why can everybody else in the world enjoy this and view it as a daily luxury while we are prevented from this?"

Among the dozens of medium-sized billboards installed by the Palestinian youths, three far larger billboards immediately stand out. One has been placed in front of the provincial headquarters where Obama will be staying, while the second is displayed along the Jerusalem-Ramallah road, which the president’s convey is expected to travel along. A third billboard has been installed in front of Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity which Obama is reportedly keen to visit.

Alawneh told Asharq Al-Awsat: “We know that the media will transfer our message to him, but we also want him to see it for himself on the ground.”

Israel continues to refuse to grant the Palestinian Authority the right to establish 3G technology.

Qalandia checkpoint connects Jerusalem and the southern West Bank to Ramallah, and is one of the only means of entry for Palestinians. Palestinian citizens have become used to hour-long delays at the checkpoint, something that Alawneh has described as being “disastrous.”

The Palestinian billboards explicitly refer to the Qalandia checkpoint and the difficulty of passing across here in an attempt to raise awareness of this issue.

Alawneh told Asharq Al-Awsat: “Qalandia is one of the symbols of the daily suffering of the Palestinian people.”

He added, “We wanted to tell Obama that it is our right to expand the Ramallah entrance, and we want to be able to enjoy freedom of travel, live everybody else.”

He emphasized that “we want to inform him [Obama] that the daily benefits that others enjoy represents a source of suffering for us.”

The Palestinians have issued repeated demands to expand the Qalandia checkpoint which is under Israeli control; however Tel Aviv has rebuffed each appeal.

Obama is scheduled to visit Palestine and Israel on the 20th of this month. Obama’s visit to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has been officially confirmed with US Secret Service agents stepping up security plans. It is not yet known just precisely where he will meet with President Abbas.

Obama has said that he will not put forward a new peace deal, but will push for a resumption of the political process. The Palestinians will have a number of preconditions before agreeing to any resumption of talks with the Israelis, including better arms for the Palestinian Authority, prisoner releases, and a settlement freeze, among others.
