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## Hillary Clinton to Embark upon Uphill Mideast Mission

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<http://english.cri.cn/6966/2009/10/29/1821s525797.htm> [1]

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is expected to visit Israel and the West Bank this weekend. This will be her second visit to the region since Barack Obama entered office as U.S. president some 10 months ago.

Coming at a time when relations between Israel and the Palestinians show no outward sign of improvement, analysts see Hillary's visit to be a tough mission and do not expect it to achieve much.

### A NEGATIVE BACKDROP

Since Obama chaired a meeting with Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a month ago, there has been little progress on the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Abbas has been under intense domestic pressure because of his seeming acquiescence in an American demand that he agree to a delay in the United Nations Human Rights Council vote on a report highly critical of Israel's winter military operation in the Gaza Strip.

A poll published at the start of October showed public confidence in Abbas at just 12.1 percent. Support for the Palestinian leader has been on a steady downward trend since he came into office in January 2005.

Daniel Pipes, director of a Middle East forum based in Philadelphia, said the lack of backing for Abbas both among the general public and within his own Fatah party leaves him little room for maneuver in terms of the peace process.

With possible Palestinian elections around the corner, Pipes said that Abbas is now in an even weaker position. Abbas knows that if Fatah is to defeat its main rival Hamas, it will have to attract votes from the middle ground, which requires him to keep the peace process at arm's length.

The date of those elections remains uncertain, as there are increasing signs that this will not happen because of major divisions on the Palestinian political scene. Those divisions also bode ill for the peace process.

All these elements add up to a very negative backdrop to Clinton's arrival, and that is just on the Palestinian side. "I am very pessimistic about the resolution of the conflict through negotiations. It will not happen within the two years that Obama has set," said Pipes.

## CLINTON'S ROLE

Yet Clinton has to put aside any such pessimistic thoughts and focus on her mission for the next few days.

Given that Abbas is currently in a weak position, some Israeli analysts speculated that Clinton will ask Netanyahu to make some goodwill gestures towards the Palestinian leader.

That is just one of the three areas where Clinton and the broader U.S. administration are currently applying pressure, according to Hussein Ibish, a senior fellow with the American Task Force on Palestine, a lobbying group based in Washington.

Washington right now is trying to persuade Israelis, Palestinians and the Arab world "to make even small mutually-reinforcing gestures," said Ibish, while noting that Netanyahu will find it tough to move towards the Palestinians because of internal Israeli political pressure.

One area where Clinton may be able to make progress is in helping the Palestinians to build a governmental infrastructure that will allow it to move in the direction of state building, said Ibish, stressing that this will not replace the diplomatic process, but it will "compliment it."

## CAN CLINTON DELIVER?

Some Washington watchers, including Pipes, cautioned that Clinton is much less of a player in the Middle East than perhaps she would want to be.

On Day Two of Obama's term in office, the president named George Mitchell as his special envoy to the region, giving rise to rumors that Clinton might be sidelined. The emissary, a frequent visitor to this region, is scheduled to arrive in Israel prior to Clinton.

However, Ibish argued that Clinton is still "the hub" of diplomacy. When Obama requested an interim progress report on the Mideast peace process in mid-October, he asked Clinton to take responsibility for it, Ibish noted.

Whether Clinton arrives in the region from a position of strength or weakness, she is not expected to achieve much in the short term. While she may ask Netanyahu to make goodwill gestures in order to help Abbas out, Ibish predicted that her main message will be that the Americans are in this for the long haul.

The Obama administration has said that it wants to resolve the decades-old conflict within two years, but it seems that it is resorting to Plan B, which Ibish said would mean years of work in order to achieve a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

"There's a lot of evidence that they're not surprised that ( Plan A) didn't happen," said Ibish, noting that the U.S. government has signalled an intention to wear down opposition in both

the Palestinian and Israeli arenas.

The key word used now by both Obama and Clinton is "determined" and that will be Clinton's key message to the parties after she arrives in Israel on Saturday night, according to Ibish.

Meanwhile, Pipes said that Clinton will also be very aware of the emerging signs that violence is simmering once again and a protracted stalemate could well lead to further bloodshed.

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