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Obama's Israel Itinerary Includes Some Standard Stops, but Not Others

Media Mention of Ghaith al-Omari in The New York Times - March 12, 2013 - 11:00pm
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/14/world/middleeast/obamas-israel-itinerary-inclu...> [1]

President Obama [2] plans to visit the Church of the Nativity, but not the Western Wall, when he travels to [Israel](#) [3] next week. He will speak at Jerusalem's convention center, but not before the Knesset, Israel's Parliament. And he will inspect a mobile missile-defense battery, though not one in the field, where they protect Israel from enemy rockets.

These, and a host of other scheduling decisions, have been made by the White House as it seeks to orchestrate every minute of Mr. Obama's first visit to Israel as president. But before he even departs, Mr. Obama is confronting the reality that in a land so freighted with symbolism, any place he chooses to visit, or not visit, can strike a nerve.

Israeli officials have voiced mild disappointment that the president is not addressing the Knesset, while Middle East experts have questioned how he can visit the Church of the Nativity, one of Christianity's most sacred sites, without stopping at the Western Wall, which is holy to Jews, or Al Aqsa Mosque, a holy site for Muslims.

"Any presidential visit to Israel is highly sensitive because Jerusalem is the crucible of three world religions, and everything about the Holy Land is highly symbolic and usually contested," said Martin S. Indyk, a former American ambassador to Israel.

The symbolism is even more central on this trip because the White House is playing down hopes that Mr. Obama will carry with him a new initiative to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Lacking substance, the optics of the president's visit will loom all the larger.

As is the case with every presidential trip, Mr. Obama's itinerary is the product of exhaustive negotiations between the White House and the host government. The visit's brevity — the president will be on the ground in Israel barely 48 hours — and its strict security restrictions meant some ideas were rejected.

Mr. Indyk, now the director of foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, has personal experience with the diplomatic tripwires involved in a presidential visit to Israel. In 1996, he prepped a visit by President [Bill Clinton](#) [4], who was eager to go to all three religious sites.

Mr. Clinton's hopes were dashed when Ehud Olmert, a former Israeli prime minister who was

then mayor of Jerusalem, insisted on accompanying him to Al Aqsa Mosque. That plan was vetoed by the [Palestinian](#) ^[5] authorities who are the mosque's custodians, and Mr. Clinton canceled all three stops.

The White House has not yet released Mr. Obama's schedule, though the details of it were reported by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, based on leaks from Israeli officials. While the White House would not discuss planning, a senior official said the Western Wall, which Mr. Obama visited on a trip to Israel during the 2008 campaign, was not feasible because of the security cordon it would have entailed.

As for the Church of the Nativity, the official said, visiting it is appropriate since the basilica, which dates from 327 A.D. and is believed to be the oldest continuously operating Christian church in the world, has profound meaning for millions of Christians. It also symbolizes the rights of Christian minorities in the Arab world, he said.

Geography plays a part, too: the church is in Bethlehem, in the Palestinian-controlled West Bank. The president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, would most likely play host to Mr. Obama.

"It creates a sense of parity for the Palestinians," said Ghaith al-Omari, the executive director of the [American Task Force on Palestine](#) ^[6]. "It gives the visit a cultural component, rather than simply a couple of closed-door meetings with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah."

For Israelis, there is much to savor in Mr. Obama's itinerary. In addition to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial that is an obligatory stop for every visiting head of state, the president will lay a wreath at the grave of Theodor Herzl, the writer who is considered the father of modern Zionism. He will also visit the Israel Museum, where he will view the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of Hebrew texts that symbolize an ancient link between the Jewish people and the land of Israel.

The White House has opted for Mr. Obama to deliver the major address of his visit at the Jerusalem [International Convention Center](#) ^[7] rather than the Knesset. A senior official said the setting reflected his interest in reaching out to younger Israelis, though given the Knesset's reputation for rambunctious debate, Israeli officials said the White House also worried about Mr. Obama's being heckled.

Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) ^[8] said last week that he hoped to show Mr. Obama a "different Israel" — the high-tech incubator rather than the political minefield. But an Israeli proposal for the president to visit the [Israeli Institute of Technology](#) ^[9], known as Technion, was rejected because it would require a detour to the coastal city of Haifa.

The centerpiece of Mr. Obama's message to Israelis, officials said, will be that he supports Israel, both in its clashes with hostile neighbors and with a nuclear-minded Iran. That makes his inspection of the antimissile system, which is built by Israeli military contractors with American financial support, another of the visit's symbolic moments.

Israeli officials had hoped Mr. Obama would visit a battery in the field, proposing one placed on a hill that overlooks Tel Aviv. But the White House rejected that, citing a lack of time. Instead, two trucks will wheel a battery to Ben-Gurion Airport, where Mr. Obama can inspect it after he climbs out of [Air Force One](#) ^[10].

Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael B. Oren, said he was "very satisfied" with

how the trip was coming together. With Mr. Obama visiting the week before Passover [11], Mr. Oren could not resist comparing the whole exercise to a Seder.

“Everything on the Seder table — from the lamb shank to the parsley to the egg — is rife with symbolism,” he said. “So, too, with every item on the president’s itinerary.”

- Mark Landler

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