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## **WHY OBAMA'S CONCEPT OF THE MIDDLE EAST WILL FAIL**

*Barry Rubin*

[\*Israpundit\*](#) (PJ MEDIA), March 17, 2013

To put it plainly, the press briefing supposed to indicate how President Barack Obama's thinks about Israel on the eve of his trip here, is a combination of fantasy and insult. It is likely that the Obama Administration made such statements for show, to persuade the Arabic-speaking world on the eve of Obama's trip that the United States is striving for peace, is not acting like a puppet (or should one say, ally? of Israel) and using its influence to change Israeli policy even as it does nothing of the sort.

As proof that Obama isn't going to do anything, he reportedly told Arab-American leaders before his trip that he wouldn't make some peace initiative because the government in Israel is not ready to make concessions and so there is no point in bringing pressure to bear at this time. I see that as a mixed statement. On one hand, he isn't going to pressure Israel because he knows that to be a waste of time. That's good.

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**Yet the premises on which this argument-as repeated in the public briefing of the media-is based can also be described as believing that what the Arab public really wants is progress toward peace with Israel and that the United States sees the ball as being in Israel's-not the Arabs-court.**

**The other premise is a strange hint that Washington has suddenly realized what Israel has understood since the beginning-that the "Arab Spring" isn't going well. Now it feels the need to explain to Israeli leaders what they have long known, and give bad advice on what to do about it.**

**To show how mainstream Israelis who follow these issues closely see these themes, let's quote how the Ynet reporter who covered the briefing-the respected and nonpartisan Yitzhak Benhorin-summarized what Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said. Here's his lead:**

**"U.S. President Barack Obama will not be bringing a peace plan to Israel, but he will try to convince Prime Minister Benjamin and the Israeli public that after the Arab Spring, Israel cannot depend on autocrats holding everything together in the region.."**

**Here's a president arriving at a moment when Israelis think the region is falling apart, with old autocrats being replaced by new ones and a more hostile environment, and the message is: You shouldn't be complacent that everything is great?**

**Where does this come from? It is the American conception that the "Arab Spring" is a great thing, that old autocrats are falling and will be replaced by more democratic and moderate regimes. That is American; not Israeli thinking.**

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If that theme is based on fantasy, the second theme is insulting. Here is the second paragraph of Benhorin's analysis:

**"The U.S. believes that Israel must show it is serious about its peace efforts. It must convince the general Arab public, if nothing more than to maintain Israel's peace treaty with Egypt."**

**These are Benhorin's words, not Rhodes' exact formulations. But I think Benhorin reads the message properly.**

**Let's begin by discussing the idea that Israel must persuade the Arab public:**

**-The question should be posed as this: When will the Arab public, or Arab governments, show Israel they are serious about peace? In 2009 when Obama sought such assurances and demonstrations he was turned down flat. We know it and he should know it.**

**-How long a list do you want of the times Israel has shown the Arab public that it wants peace seriously?**

**-Do you think the Arab public cares or is going to be persuaded by any such behavior?**

**-Hundreds of Israelis died in the 1993-2000 period in the effort to show the Arab**

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public Israel was serious about peace.

The idea that Israel needs to persuade its neighbors to accept its existence is a line we have heard almost daily since the 1980s or even 1970s. Yet curiously the Arab street pays no attention to the scores of such Israeli gestures and the West soon forgets each one. And indeed Obama has forgotten those that took place during his first term, for example the nine-month-long settlement construction freeze, just as before that were forgotten the Oslo agreement, Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the 2000 Camp David offer (including the offer to redivide Jerusalem!) and many more. [See Footnote, below]

Guess what? If today Israel were to make a huge new concession, six months from now that would be forgotten in the West, which would also forget that there was no considerable Arab response. Israelis know this and so saying this kind of thing about Israel proving its decent intentions can only fall with a cynical thud. Such statements remind Israelis why they are NOT rushing to make new concessions or take new risks.

Note, too, that Western and European promises to give Israel a big reward if Israel takes a big risk or makes a big concession and the Arab side doesn't respond have also been repeatedly broken.

What Obama is in effect saying is "Mr. Netanyahu, tear down that [security, counterterrorist] wall." When he should be saying to the other side: "Mr. Abbas, Mursi, et. al., tear down that wall of hatred against Israel!"

Of course, he won't do so because that would make the Arab leaders and publics mad, not because they want Israel to move faster on peace or seek a better deal but because they don't want peace at all. And the Islamists coming into power have no intention of tearing down the wall. In fact, they are building it higher than

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**ever. And there's nothing-absolutely nothing-Israel can do to change the course of events in that respect.**

**Moreover, in a context where the same point is not made loudly, clearly, and publicly to the Palestinian Authority, the idea that the burden is on Israel to prove its peace credentials is a veiled way of Obama saying-and signaling to his supporters-that Israel is responsible for the failure to achieve peace.**

**The very fact that Obama's visit is not about seeking to impose peace or even to press the issue. But why? The Obama Administration isn't being honest about this. The reason is that the White House knows that such an effort will go nowhere. And it also not because of Netanyahu. After all, how well did six predecessors do in solving this problem? Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Tsipi Livni. Even if one can claim they all tried harder than Netanyahu why did they all fail?**

**While the ideas on the "peace process" show the problem with U.S. thinking on that issue, the idea on the direction being taken by the region shows the wider miasma of fantasy that surrounds U.S. policy.**

**This idea that Israel cannot depend on autocracies to maintain the status quo parallels Obama's view for U.S. policy: that to protect the region's stability, the United States must show its desire for good relations and the fulfillment of Arab and Muslim dreams by helping force out pro-American authoritarian regimes and to substitute for them (anti-American) Islamist authoritarian regimes.**

**Ladies and gentlemen, it is not 1980. Does Israel not understand that the region is already overwhelmingly ruled by autocracies hostile to itself? Here is the list: Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran, in particular. And one can add Tunisia and Turkey were elections do mean**

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something.

**What does Obama intend to convey by this idea? It seems as if he is saying: You better act now while the relatively friendly dictator Bashar al-Assad is running Syria before the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists take power! But that is absurd. How about: You better act now before we pass the window of opportunity of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood regime being eager for comprehensive peace with Israel? You better act fast before Hamas (which rules the Gaza Strip) and Hizballah (which rules Lebanon) change to a more hostile attitude?**

**What better time to make risky concessions than when the security situation is deteriorating and the new rulers of your neighbors are baying for your blood?**

**At any rate, the old autocrats are already gone for all practical purposes. The U.S. idea is an outdated one: Don't depend on being nice to Mubarak because one day he could be overthrown and there will come a pharaoh who knows not Joseph. Thanks, but that's already happened and you helped bring about that problem.**

**Thus, Israel must prove that it is a nice guy to...the Muslim Brotherhood? The nonsense involved is clear when the concept is stated plainly.**

**In Jewish history this concept translates, for example, into saying that the Jews shouldn't put all their eggs in the basket of the Weimar Republic because it had just been overthrown by the Nazis, so the Jews had to prove to them that they wanted good relations. (I apologize for the over-used Nazi reference but it is appropriate to explain the situation.)**

**The problem is that the United States is under the illusion that even the United**

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**States can make friends with Islamist regimes. How all-the-more ridiculous is it to claim that Israel can do so by concessions or gestures? How can anyone with a straight face suggest that if Israel shows progress on negotiations with the Palestinians that regimes which have sworn to wipe it off the map will change their minds?**

**Rhodes added that in particular progress on the peace process required that Israel show Egypt it should keep the peace treaty by making concessions to the Palestinians. Perhaps Egypt should keep the treaty because it is an international agreement it is required to keep. Or that it is in Egypt's interests because Israel and the United States would make Cairo sorry if it abandoned the treaty completely. Notice that only concessions-not toughness, deterrence, or credibility-are a tool to keep treaties.**

**In these circumstances, a phrase often comes to my mind: Just because you are stupid, why should I kill myself?**

**Yes, it is intemperate of me to call these people stupid but they leave me no choice. Who does the Egyptian government support among the Palestinians? Hamas, despite their recent bickering. So how would progress on negotiations with the Palestinian Authority soften Egypt's attitude? Is President Mursi going to say: Wow, that treaty with Israel is worthwhile because there is hope of a deal with the Palestinians that will ensure a non-Islamist government in Palestine and help to guarantee the existence of a Zionist state in the region? Yay!**

**No. He would say that such progress would indicate a betrayal by the PA and make it harder for the Islamist cause to flourish. Hence, any such deal must be stopped. Mr. Rhodes, let me explain. It was Mubarak who perhaps benefited from an advancing peace process; Mursi hates the idea.**



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**Rhodes continued:**

**“I think there’s an opportunity, frankly, for there to be a deeper source of support for peace broadly across the region if there can be progress.”**

**I will give Rhodes the benefit of the doubt by suggesting that he does not believe one word of that sentence.**

**Again, Obama’s trip is not about this issue. Yet by keeping the mythology alive about the state of the conflict the Obama Administration does another disservice to Israeli interests and American understanding of the region.**

**Oh, and let’s not forget something else.**

**Rhodes didn’t say that the PA, whose leaders Obama will also meet, must show Israel that it’s serious about peace. Supposedly, making peace is a one-way street in which the burden is always on Israel. Yet Israel’s behavior is not due to stubbornness, paranoia, or ideology.**

**It is based on experience.**

**Footnotes: Of course I am aware that there have been circumstances in which specific Arab factors were responsive to Israeli concessions. To act Arab leaders-autocrats or otherwise-must believe they can get away with defying Islamists, who will declare anyone wanting to make peace with Israel as enemies of Allah. That was most obviously true of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Mursi’s**

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ideological compatriots killed Sadat. That graphically sums up who is on which side and why Rhodes', and hence the Obama Administration's, formulations are absurd.

*Barry Rubin is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal.*

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**OBAMA AND NETANYAHU HAVE REACHED  
DETENTE IN TIME FOR ISRAEL VISIT**

*Eli Lake*

[The Daily Beast](#), Mar 17, 2013

When President Obama arrives in Israel this week, he will be greeted with a lot of unhappy people. Settlers say they will protest Obama's address to university students because of a U.S. Embassy snub to students from a university in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. The Palestinian Authority's foreign minister wants the U.S. government to coordinate his Jerusalem visit with the Palestinian side. Average Israelis are complaining the visit will make traffic a nightmare in the days before the Passover holiday. And the labor union that represents Israeli diplomats and foreign ministry workers has threatened a strike the week that he is coming, potentially disrupting the protocol for the meetings, the drivers, and the joint

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press appearances.

Welcome to Israel, Mr. President. But for all the pre-trip tumult in Israel, one person who is unlikely to cause Obama any problems is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite the icy personal relationship between the two leaders, Israel and the United States have quietly moved much closer on the issue of Iran's nuclear program. Six months ago, Netanyahu declined repeatedly to assure Obama that he would not attack Iran before the U.S. election. Obama sent a procession of senior officials from his own administration in the summer of 2012 to persuade Netanyahu to hold off.

Today the tension between the two leaders on Iran has diminished, according to U.S. and Israeli officials. No more does Netanyahu hint Israel will take matters into its own hands over Iran's nuclear program. When Vice President Biden announced earlier this year the resumption of negotiations with Iran, Netanyahu's government offered no public criticism. Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, the director of military intelligence for the Israel Defense Forces, told the annual conference here at Herzliya that he assesses "Iran's nuclear program is advancing slower than they planned."

That should be good news for Obama. Speaking this week to Israel's *Channel 2*, the only Israeli news channel to get an exclusive interview with him, the president reiterated that all options were on the table. But he also seemed to imply he would rather come to Israel as a tourist. He told the news channel he wished he could "sit at a cafe and just hang out, wear a mustache, wander through Tel Aviv, meet with students at a university in an informal setting."

During his visit, Obama also will attend a state dinner where one of the guests will be the first Miss Israel of African descent. He intends to address the nation's students in Jerusalem. He will lay a wreath on the grave site of Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, and he will tour the Israel Museum. He'll visit the

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**Church of the Nativity, but he will not visit the remains of the outer wall of the second Jewish temple or, for that matter, al-Aqsa Mosque.**

**Diplomatically, though, the big news is that Obama and Netanyahu will not antagonize each other. Obama last week told Jewish leaders, according to two sources in the meeting, that he would not be bringing a peace plan to Israel but that he may present a peace proposal later this year if the opportunity arose.**

**The prime minister at first agreed to freeze some construction of buildings at settlements, but he did not continue the freeze after 2010, when Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas declined to start formal negotiations with Israel.**

**Netanyahu, for his part, has backed away from his Iran red line. Speaking at the Herzliya conference last week, U.S. Ambassador Dan Shapiro said, "There has been a very rigorous exchange between the analysts and the experts that have informed the policy and public utterances between the two leaders."**

**"The process of the intelligence picture getting closer has been going on for some time," said Shmuel Bar, the director of studies for the Institute of Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center at Herzliya and a former senior Israeli intelligence official.**

**Netanyahu's implicit threat to attack Iran was withdrawn at the end of September. At a speech before the U.N. General Assembly, he presented a graphic of a cartoon-style bomb with a red line right before the fuse marked 90 percent. The U.N. address and the cartoonish graphic signaled the Israeli prime minister would not be attacking Iran before the election, according to U.S. and Israeli officials. A spoof of the cartoon with an actor dressed as the Israeli leader is now a popular billboard hawking a cell-phone plan.**

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The speech signaled a significant change for the Israeli government on the trigger, or “red line,” for attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities. For much of 2012, Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, the Israeli defense minister at the time, said the red line for attacking Iran would be based on preventing Iran from installing the advanced centrifuges in the underground facility discovered by U.S. intelligence in 2009 known as Fordow.

Netanyahu’s U.N. address made clear that his new red line would be based on how much uranium Iran enriched to 20 percent purity. The highly enriched uranium needed for a weapon is easier to produce from stock material enriched to 20 percent as opposed to the lower enriched uranium at around 3.5 percent.

Israeli experts today say the exact amount of 20 percent enriched uranium to produce a bomb is around 250 kilograms. The latest report from the International Atomic Energy Agency says Iran has enriched more than 250 kilograms of uranium to 20 percent levels, but much of this material has been diverted to metal rods and other kinds of storage that would not be suitable for bomb making. “The Iranians understand our red line, and for now they are respecting it,” said one former senior Israeli diplomat. Kochavi told the Herzliya conference that “Iran is making sure not to cross any international red lines because the survival of the regime is the biggest priority.”

Barak, who stepped down this month as defense minister, acknowledged at the end of October that Iran had begun diverting the uranium enriched to 20 percent levels, a factor he said led Israel to conclude it had more time before a potential attack on the facilities.

The diversion has given Western diplomats a second chance at negotiations with Iran. As Obama prepares for his trip to Israel, Netanyahu for now appears to be giving those negotiations the time they would need.

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## **WHY ON EARTH IS OBAMA GOING TO ISRAEL?**

**Alex Joffe**

[Times of Israel](#), March 12, 2013

**Why exactly is President Obama going to Israel? A variety of theories have been advanced as to why he is making the trip now and what might be accomplished. Some have suggested that Obama needs to reassure Israel, to hold their hands and tell them that the US-Israeli relationship is special. This suggests that Obama cares about Israeli feelings, at least in the sense that positive sentiments advance policy goals, and that Israelis might be thus comforted by his presence. But the record of bad relations between Obama and Netanyahu is too long, and the fact that Obama is on record saying that Israelis don't know what is best for them, whereas he does, has mitigated whatever good vibrations he might spread now.**

**Others have suggested that Obama is going to take advantage of the unique circumstances of weakness in the Arab world in order to force progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations. But the Palestinian Authority is again engaged in fruitless reconciliation talks with Hamas and has accused Israel of sabotaging those talks with back channel contacts with Hamas. It has also orchestrated violent protests against Israel in advance of Obama's trip to create a price tag for its cooperation. The idea that Obama holds a strong hand falls short.**

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**Still others believe the visit is a kind of reset, an opportunity to rebuild relations badly damaged by the misstep of forcing Israel to adopt a construction freeze that was neither asked for nor reciprocated by Palestinians, as a condition for resuming negotiations. Given the appointment of Chuck Hagel to be Secretary of Defense, despite revelations regarding his peculiarly obsessive hostility towards Israel and near indifference towards other issues, this rings particularly hollow.**

**On the whole, the timing of the visit is so inauspicious as to arouse suspicion that a change of American policy is indeed in the making. Consider the Middle East scene today. The Egyptian military is making veiled threats against the American-supported Muslim Brotherhood Morsi government. The civil war in Syria is spreading into Lebanon. The threat of an Islamist takeover in Jordan has never been greater. And Iran, with the help of North Korea, inches ever closer to a nuclear weapon.**

**Nothing suggests the administration changing its policies on these realities. The US Government continues to support Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in supplying the increasingly Islamist dominated rebels in Syria, and now will provide non-lethal aid directly. No meaningful pressure has been exerted on Egypt to change course, to push economic reforms or lessen growing repression against Christians and liberals. Jordan is, as ever, almost completely off the American radar. And while the sanctions policy against Iran has hurt the middle and lower classes, it has only increased the regime's belligerence. The idea that Obama is coming to Israel to inform it of significant policy changes is the most far-fetched interpretation of all.**

**So why now? The simplest explanation may be the best; that in his second term Obama has less to lose and will at least gain a badly needed American PR boost by finally going, and that, in the absence of overt embarrassments, the trip will be deemed a success.**

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**Based on the administration's habit of doubling down on bad calls, chances are that the news Obama is bringing is a commitment to more of the same. A trip half way around the world for those reasons will undramatic as it is unproductive, and for that reason we should expect the trip to be couched in terms of "unprecedented security cooperation" between Israel and the US, and "being on the same page about Iran." Photo-ops and talking past one another will be the norm. The stage has been set by the announcement that the US will keep funding joint development of anti-missile programs regardless of sequestration budget cutbacks. But the question of what might be accomplished remains.**

**But at another level the visit is dangerous. For one thing it will inevitably expose just how out of sync the US is with Israel as well as the region. The bad chemistry between Obama and Netanyahu will produce awkward body language when they meet. American spokesmen will visibly dance around unwanted questions regarding Hamas and Hezbollah, or Muslim antisemitism. The famously aggressive Israeli press will analyze Obama's every move and every word, as will the Palestinian press. And despite carefully stage-managed meetings with selected groups, groups of Israelis and Palestinians are likely to loudly protest, causing embarrassment all around.**

**But the real impact of the Obama visit to Israel will not be in Israel but rather in Arab and Muslim countries. After all, it is in those countries that Obama has arguably (and if popularity polls are to be believed, unsuccessfully) invested the most political capital, and it is there that his trip to Israel will create the most disappointment and resentment. The 'Arab Street' will want to see overt confrontation between Israel and the US and will be disappointed when it doesn't appear. More nuanced observers in those societies will assume other forms of American pressure on Israel, because they desire it, and then will be disappointed when evidence does not quickly appear. And virtually all local observers, especially in government ministries and official media, will obsess over the visit as a welcome respite from the situations in Syria and Egypt. The near tragic element of Obama's visit and its timing then is that it plays directly into the region's traditional use of Israel as a weapon of mass distraction.**



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Obama's visit, by virtue of being routine and ill-timed has the potential to feed the region's worst instincts. Disappointment with Obama will quickly turn to the default setting of blaming Israel. Is that Obama's true goal, a back handed form of incitement? Probably not. Nothing in the Obama' administration's international dealings suggests this level of sophistication; its manufacture of resentment is generally reserved only for the Republican Party. But that will be one of its effects and it will, in all probability, set back the cause of peace, and that of addressing the region's other issues.

*Alex Joffe is a historian and archaeologist; He is a Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow of the Middle East Forum*

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### On Topic

[Out of the Box, Obama: Sarah Hornik, Mar. 15, 2013](#)—If our soon-to-arrive visitor, US President Barack Obama, truly fancies himself the harbinger of new tidings to this region - as he has tirelessly promoted himself in the past - then it's high time for him to take the truly bold tack and think out of the box.

[Where Obama's Visiting in Israel, Where He isn't, and Why: Raphael Ahren, Times of Israel, March 18, 2013](#)—Yad Vashem but not the Knesset, the Church of the Nativity but not the Western Wall, the Israel Museum but not Masada. In a visit as high-profile as US President Barack Obama's Wednesday-to-Friday stay in Israel, every stop on the itinerary is laden with political significance. So, too, every location left out.

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**Obama, Israel and the Ides of March: Barry Strauss, *Real Clear World*, Mar. 15, 2013—It's just as well that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu managed to reach a coalition deal with his political rivals ahead of this weekend's deadline. The tough world of Israeli politics has enough metaphorical daggers already without adding the shadow of the Ides of March. Still, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finalizes a new governing coalition, he could do worse than remember the lesson of the Ides.**

**Oren: Obama Itinerary Shows Support for Zionism: Tovah Lazaroff, *Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 16, 2013—US President Barack Obama's itinerary shows his deep commitment to Zionism and to Israel as a Jewish state that is historically rooted in this region, Israel's Ambassador to the US Michael Oren told Channel 2 on Saturday night during its Meet the Press program. "This will be Obama's first trip outside the United States in his second term. Out of more than 190 countries around the world, he chose to come to us," said Oren.**

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