



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on March 22, 2013

## Obama's Trip to the Middle East

As a message on the [White House website](#) notes about the president's current Middle East trip, from March 20-23: "In the first foreign trip of his second term in office, President Obama is visiting Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan."

Shortly after Air Force One arrived at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport on March 20, Obama stated: "We share a vision of Israel at peace with its neighbors."



Israeli President Shimon Peres welcomed the U.S. president, who was making his first visit to Israel. "A world without America's leadership, without her moral voice, would be a darker world. A world without your friendship, would invite aggression against Israel," said Peres.

Also on hand to welcome Obama was Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who told him: "Thank you for standing by Israel at this time of historic change in the Middle East. Thank you for unequivocally affirming Israel's sovereign right to defend itself by itself against any threat."

Obama and Netanyahu toured a mobile missile battery brought to the airport for Obama's visit. The battery is part of Israel's Iron Dome defense system that protects the nation by intercepting rocket attacks. The United States has provided Israel with hundreds of millions dollars in aid to develop the system.

An [AP report](#) observed that "Obama sparred frequently with Netanyahu over the Palestinian peace process during his first term."

Obama and Netanyahu met with reporters at a [joint press conference](#) at the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem on Wednesday. Netanyahu opened the conference with a statement in which he described "the wide range of issues" he hoped to discuss "that are critical to both our countries. And foremost among these is Iran's relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons."

The prime minister said that his "view is that in order to stop Iran's nuclear programs peacefully, diplomacy and sanctions must be augmented by a clear and credible threat of military action."

Netanyahu also stated that he and Obama had discussed the situation in Syria: "That carnage has already resulted in the deaths of over 70,000 people and the suffering of millions. We also share a determination to prevent the deadly arsenal of weapons within Syria from falling into terrorists' hands."

The third topic that Netanyahu said he wanted to discuss with Obama was "to try to find a way to advance peace between Israelis and Palestinians." The prime minister continued: "I know there have been questions regarding what the policy of the new government will be towards peace with the Palestinians. So let me be clear. Israel remains fully committed to peace and to the solution of two states for two peoples. We extend our hand in peace and in friendship to the Palestinian people."

After Netanyahu and Obama engaged in a little humorous ribbing, the president addressed Netanyahu by his nickname, Bibi, and told the press: "As President, I've ... made it clear America's commitment to the security of the State of Israel is a solemn obligation, and the security of Israel is non-negotiable."



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Obama continued:

As part of our long-term commitment to Israel's security, the Prime Minister and I agreed to begin discussions on extending military assistance to Israel. Our current agreement lasts through 2017, and we've directed our teams to start working on extending it for the years beyond.

I'm also pleased to announce that we will take steps to ensure that there's no interruption of funding for Iron Dome. As a result of decisions that I made last year, Israel will receive approximately \$200 million this fiscal year and we will continue to work with Congress on future funding of Iron Dome. These are further reminders that we will help to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge so that Israel can defend itself, by itself, against any threat.

Obama continued: "We also discussed the way forward to a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians."

The president provided as examples of U.S. activities that his administration asserts will lead to stability in the Middle East:

- "Support[ing] the Egyptian people in their historic transition to democracy...."
- "work[ing] with allies and friends and the Syrian opposition to hasten the end of Assad's rule, to stop the violence against the Syrian people, and begin a transition toward a new government that respects the rights of all its people."
- "prevent[ing] Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."

On Thursday, Obama visited the West Bank, where he participated in a [press conference](#) at the Muqata Presidential Compound in Ramallah with President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority.

Speaking first, Abbas said:

The people of Palestine, Mr. President, who receive you today aspire to attain the simplest rights — the right to freedom, independence and peace, and look forward to that day to come in which they exercise normal and natural life over the land of the state of Palestine — the independent state of Palestine — along the borders of the 4th of June, 1967, with Jerusalem, the "Lady of the Cities," as its capital, alongside the state of Israel.

At the time of Israel's founding, Jerusalem was divided between Israeli-controlled West Jerusalem and Jordanian-controlled East Jerusalem. During the 1967 war, however, after Jordan attacked the western part of the city, Israel counterattacked and gained control of all Jerusalem and annexed the east part of the city. This annexation, however, was not universally recognized and, afterward, 22 of the 24 countries that had previously recognized West Jerusalem as Israel's capital relocated their embassies to Tel Aviv. After Jordan abandoned the West Bank, Palestinians sought to create a new Palestinian state on that territory, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The status of the city remains a key issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Continuing his remarks, Abbas said that the Palestinians "are ready to implement all our commitments and obligations, and to respect the signed agreements and international legitimacy resolutions in order to provide for the requirements of launching the peace process and achieving the two-state solution — Palestine and Israel."

When it was his turn to speak, President Obama stated that "the Palestinian people deserve an end to occupation and the daily indignities that come with it," adding that "Palestinians deserve a state of their own." Obama commended "President Abbas and his Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, for the progress



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that they've made in building the institutions of a Palestinian state," noting that "the United States is a proud partner in these efforts — as the single largest donor of assistance that improves the lives of Palestinians."

Obama said that he had "reaffirmed to President Abbas that the United States remains committed to realizing the vision of two states, which is in the interests of the Palestinian people, and also in the national security interest of Israel, the United States, and the world. We seek an independent, a viable and contiguous Palestinian state as the homeland of the Palestinian people, alongside the Jewish State of Israel — two nations enjoying self-determination, security and peace. "

While in the West Bank, Obama stopped in Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity, built over the traditional birthplace of Jesus. The basilica, control of which is shared by the Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches, is the oldest continuously operating Christian church in the world, having been commissioned in 327 A.D. by the Emperor Constantine and his mother, St. Helena.

Political bodies vying to represent Palestinians include the Palestinian Liberation Organization and its largest political faction, Fatah, the party of Mahmoud Abbas, based in Ramallah, West Bank. The Palestinian Authority is a subsidiary agency of the PLO, created pursuant to the 1993 Oslo accords between the PLO and Israel to administer Palestinian lands in the West Bank and Gaza.

When the radical Hamas party won the PA's legislative elections in 2006, Israel, the United States, Canada, and the European Union (all of which regard Hamas as a terrorist organization) froze all funds to the Palestinian Authority. Hamas has refused to recognize Israel's right to exist, and it has not agreed either to renounce violence or to abide by past agreements.

After the takeover in Gaza by Hamas in June 2007, PA Chairman Abbas dismissed the government and appointed Salam Fayad prime minister to form a new government. The new government claimed authority over all Palestinian territories, but since Hamas retains control of Gaza, Fatah/PA in reality exercises authority only over PA-controlled areas of the West Bank. Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader who was dismissed by Abbas, continues to exercise prime ministerial authority in the Gaza Strip.

[Before leaving Israel](#) on Friday on the next leg of his journey to Jordan, Obama, along with Netanyahu and Peres, laid wreaths at the graves of [Theodor Herzl](#) — the Austro-Hungarian journalist credited with being the founder of modern political Zionism, who died in 1904 — and former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995.

On his final leg of the Middle Eastern trip, Obama flew to Jordan, where King Abdullah II met the president with a band of bagpipers and sword-carrying royal guardsman. The visiting president's motorcade traveled from Queen Alia International Airport in the capital of Amman to al-Hummar Palace.

As was done during Obama's previous visits to Israel and the West Bank, a joint press conference with the U.S. president and King Abdullah was planned.

*Photo of Shimon Peres (second left), President Obama, and Benjamin Netanyahu (right): AP Images*



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