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## Why is Obama Going to Israel?

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Obama does like to take trips to other countries to make it seem like he's involved in foreign affairs and for the family vacations, but though Israel has lots of seaside hotels and some nice beaches, that's probably not the reason here.

In Term 1, Obama kept Israel at arm's length as part of his policy for showing the Muslim world that the United States wasn't really that close to the Jewish State. Staying away from Israel and snubbing Israel's Prime Minister were part of the program and the Hagel and Brennan nominations suggest that the problem is still on.

Why then is Obama undoing all his bad work by paying a visit to Israel?

1. Relevance through international travel is one factor. Pundits have been screaming at him to do something about the conflict and visiting Israel will make him look like he's finally tackling a major international issue.
2. There are few other places in the region he can go.

Relations between the United States and Turkey have been deteriorating over Obama's failure to arm the Syrian rebels and get Turkey into the European Union. But Istanbul is probably one of the few places that Obama can still visit.

Cairo and Tunis would have been safe bets a year ago, but now they're political minefields. Visiting them means endorsing controversial Islamist regimes that are murdering and mutilating protesters. Obama may support their Islamist governments, but the optics are bad. And his visit is sure to touch off even bigger protests, including protests that the authorities may not be able to adequately protect him from. If the Egyptian authorities weren't able to keep Ahmadinejad from getting shoed twice, then a sneaker or a loafer may find its way to Obama's face as well. And the media would have trouble covering that one up.

That leaves the dictatorships he initially condemned. A visit to Saudi Arabia or Kuwait would just highlight the failures of the Arab Spring and the continuing support of the United States for tyranny over democracy... etc.

Even if Obama does make quick controlled visits to Cairo or Tunis or any other Arab Spring country, or longer ones to Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, going to Israel will lessen the optics problem by providing him with political cover and make it harder to read political messages into the trip.

Obama's support for the Arab Spring has isolated the United States and slashed the number of reliable American allies in the region. He may not like Israel much, but he has fewer options in the region than he did before his Cairo speech. And the visit may be obligatory.

3. There's really only one thing that American leaders have wanted from Israel for some time. And that's a final settlement with the Palestinian Authority.

Abbas has made it clear that he won't negotiate with Israel without a long list of pre-conditions. Any visit means pressure on Israel to "return to the negotiations" even if the negotiating table doesn't exist. Still if Obama really wanted to exert that kind of pressure, he would likely have summoned Abbas and Netanyahu to some sort of retreat in the US for enforced negotiations.

If Obama is visiting to push for a final settlement, then it's entirely possible that he is bringing his

own peace plan with him. That would seem to be unlikely, especially with a fresh Secretary of State just on the job, but if he's toting along a plan then it almost certainly came from the Center for American Progress or some other leftie think-tank with stops along the way in Saudi Arabia.

Foreign policy hands on the left have long wanted to revive the Saudi plan. A visit to Israel would allow Obama to pitch it to the Israeli public and his ego might just be big enough to think that a Knesset speech and a high profile media rollout would do the trick.

4. Iran. Again this would be less about directly browbeating Netanyahu and more about using the Israel trip as a forum for assuring Israelis that he has the Iran policy well in hand and that an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program would be unwise and dangerous.

A visit to Israel would give him direct access to Israel's political and media elites. It would give him a great deal of face time on the news and a public forum for selling the snake oil of containment (all options are on the table, especially the option of doing nothing) to Israel's politicians and public.

This is also the sort of plan that would appeal to the Commander of the Permanent Campaign taking his show on the road to another country.

It's hard to know whether Obama is making a serious working visit or another casual stop on his world tour. And yet the former seems more likely than the latter because the trip reverses his earlier policy of keeping Israel at arm's length. If Obama is going to Israel, then it's likely that he wants something.

Alternatively, Obama is using the visit to Israel as a reminder to some of his more obstinate Muslim allies in Cairo and Istanbul that the United States does have other options and that if they fail to behave, he can always reorient American foreign policy back in Israel's direction.

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