

*The Commentator*  
February 14, 2013

**Obama's visit won't change Israeli-Palestinian stand-off**  
**Lawrence J. Haas**

President Obama's decision to visit Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan in the coming weeks proves the continuing endurance of certain truths about our recent presidents as well as conventional wisdom about the region.

What it does *not* prove, however, is that he will do any better than his predecessors in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Second-term U.S. presidents invariably start thinking more seriously about their legacy soon after their re-election, and they recognize that their best chance of leaving a mark in the history book may rest with foreign policy, where they can operate largely unimpeded by a nettlesome Congress.

Nowhere have our recent presidents pursued their legacy with greater vigor than in the Middle East – particularly that tiny parcel of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea where Israelis and Palestinians live and over which they and their ancestors have fought for more than a century.

President Clinton brought Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to Camp David in his last year (2000) in search of an historic peace deal, while President George W. Bush pushed a two-state solution in his next-to-last year (2007) at a high-profile U.S. conference in Annapolis.

Longstanding conventional wisdom about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (as propagated by our foreign policy establishment of former diplomats, scholars, and columnists) suggests that only U.S. leadership can reinvigorate the “peace process” – the combination of private negotiations and public cajoling that, somehow, is supposed to convince Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace.

Israeli-Palestinian peace is so important, the conventional wisdom tells us, because it holds the key to solving the region's other vexing problems, from the terrorism of Hezbollah and Hamas to the terror sponsorship of Iran and Syria to the raging hatred of Israel and the United States. (There is, by the way, no tangible evidence to support this “wisdom” – and lots of evidence to discredit it.)

To be sure, presidents often work at Israeli-Palestinian peace during their first terms. Obama focused heavily on the issue soon after taking office as part of his broader regional effort that included outreach to the Arab world and “engagement” with the hostile regimes in Tehran and Damascus.

But, by seeking to display his even-handedness on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the Israel-tilting of his predecessor, Obama sought early concessions from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while asking little of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. That nourished distrust between Washington and Jerusalem, freed Abbas to sit on his hands, and did nothing to advance peace.

But, lest we over-analyze Obama's early missteps, what was true then remains true today: even with a new approach, with better strategies and tactics, Obama will do no better now than he did before in securing Israeli-Palestinian peace. Nor will he do better than his well-intentioned predecessors.

That's because true peace is more than just a tactical halt to bombs and gunfire. True peace rests on a sturdier foundation of harmony between nations, of recognition from each that the other is here to stay.

The prerequisites for Israeli-Palestinian peace simply do not exist – and no visit by an American president will change that reality.

The Palestinian leadership remains divided between the Palestinian Authority, which runs the West Bank, and the terrorist group Hamas, which runs Gaza after evicting the PA in a bloody coup in 2007.

The two sides are talking reconciliation, with Abbas's Fatah faction and Hamas allowing one another to hold rallies in the other's territory, and with Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Maashal holding meetings in an effort to iron out their differences. But Hamas has refused to reconsider its commitment to destroy Israel, leaving the Jewish state with no unified and reasonable leadership with which to negotiate.

Besides, while PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is doing admirable work to build the infrastructure of a viable state, no Palestinian leader is telling Palestinians the hard truth about what must occur for them to secure it – namely, a recognition that Israel is here to stay and that a full right of return for Palestinian refugees is not in the cards.

Indeed, at a public rally in Gaza last month, Abbas praised Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who collaborated with Hitler and sought to impose his own version of the "Final Solution" on the Jews of the Middle East.

On the Israeli side, Netanyahu says that he remains committed to a two-state solution. But Israelis are justifiably skeptical of cutting a deal with the Palestinians that will ensure their safety, and the challenges of coalition government in Israel may put official support for a deal out of reach anyway.

So, Mr. President, enjoy your trip to the Holy Land. Just don't expect to succeed where others have failed.

*Lawrence J. Haas was Communications Director and Press Secretary for Vice President Al Gore. He writes widely about foreign and domestic affairs and is the author of "Sound the Trumpet: The United States and Human Rights Promotion."*