

Americans expect little from Obama's Middle East trip

Written by Lesley Clark

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The golden Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Israel, covers the place where it is believed the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. For Jews, the Western Wall, foreground, is one of the holiest sites. □ (Tyrone Beason/Seattle Times/MCT)

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WASHINGTON — Few Americans expect much progress on Middle East peace during President Barack Obama's trip to Israel and the West Bank next week, according to a new McClatchy-Marist poll.

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Just 27 percent of voters think that Obama's visit to the Middle East — his first as president — will help restart negotiations between Israel and Palestinians, while 65 percent think it won't help.

Even Democrats have limited expectations of the trip: Forty-three percent said it might help restart talks, while 47 percent said it was unlikely.

Only 12 percent of Republicans said they thought it might help start talks.

The poll also found that most Americans don't think the trip will do anything either to improve or worsen tension in the region.

Two-thirds said the visit wouldn't make any difference.

The poll results come as the White House downplays expectations for any breakthroughs on peace negotiations during the trip, which will begin with Obama's arrival in Israel on Wednesday.

After visiting Israel, the president will visit the West Bank and Jordan.

Obama has said he isn't arriving with a specific peace plan and the White House has suggested that the trip is largely about communicating with the Israeli public, which views the president warily.

Obama told Israeli television this week that he plans to "directly speak to the Israeli people and talk about our unshakeable commitment to Israel, but also to talk about a shared vision for a more prosperous and peaceful future."

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Though the president made jump-starting peace talks a priority in his first term, the process largely stalled in 2010.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who'll be along on the trip, suggested at his Senate confirmation hearing in January that the U.S. needed to find a "way forward" to an independent Palestinian state existing side by side with Israel, but there's been no movement.

"There's been really no setup that things are warming up, that both sides are eager to move the talks ahead," said Lee Miringoff, the director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion in New York, which conducted the poll last week.

"If anything, people see this as an icebreaker rather than a deal maker."

The low-expectations game might work to Obama's advantage, Miringoff noted, if something substantive is achieved.

"From a political standpoint, if expectations are that low, something positive could be seen as fairly noteworthy," he said.

The poll did find that Americans, regardless of political affiliation, are particularly worried about Iran's nuclear program, with 70 percent saying the regime in Tehran is close or very close to becoming a nuclear threat.

Iran is likely to top Obama's agenda as he tries to convince Israelis that the United States would respond with military force should the administration's preferred course of tough sanctions and diplomacy fail.

Obama told Israeli television that the U.S. community thinks that Iran would need "over a year or so...to actually develop a nuclear weapon, but obviously we don't want to cut it too close."