

Obama says wants to connect directly to Israelis

In meeting with Jewish leaders at White House, president lists goals for upcoming Israel visit, says will not deliver 'grand peace plan' but will urge sides to enter into dialogue

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WASHINGTON - US President Barack Obama said Thursday that his upcoming trip to Israel will serve to illustrate the United States' unshakable commitment to Israel in the backdrop of the turmoil in the Middle East.

The visit will also provide him with an opportunity to send Iran a message that the US will not back out of its commitment to prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons.

The president noted that he will pressure Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to enter into dialogue but stressed he will not introduce a "grand peace plan" during the visit, but rather in another six to 12 months.

Obama hosted leaders of major American Jewish organizations at the White House on Thursday and noted four main goals for his visit. The primary goal, he said, was to reiterate Washington's "unshakable support" for Israel.

The second was to stand by Israel in the wake of challenges in the Middle East, the third to send a clear message to Iran that all options are on the table and the fourth was to find a just solution to the Palestinian issue.

Obama stressed that Israel's long-term security was wrapped up in the Israel-Palestinian peace but criticized the Palestinians for avoiding direct talks. The president stressed that both sides must take the peace process seriously but admitted he did not have any major strategy to resolving the conflict.

He underscored that the trip is an opportunity for him to speak directly to the Israeli people and noted that he will give an address at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem in front of a large audience of mainly students. Obama suggested he would urge the Palestinians to take steps to advance peace during his visit to Ramallah.

The president answered a total of 12 questions including one on Iran. He remarked that while the US and Israel have some disagreements on the issue the larger gaps are within Israel – between the Defense Ministry and the IDF and Prime Minister's Office.

Referring to the Palestinians, Obama said that they lack strong leadership and expressed support of internal reconciliation as long as there is a consensus on peace and the two-state solution. Netanyahu and Abbas should not strive to weaken each other, he added, explaining that both sides need strong partners to make peace.

The president further noted that Secretary of State John Kerry had sent Turkey a very strong message following Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's statements about Zionism.

Ankara had demanded "too heavy a price" from Israel, he noted, which leaves the two nations unable to solve their problems. He nevertheless stressed that the US will continue to try to advance a solution to the diplomatic crisis.