

MIDDLE EAST

# Obama Seeks to Pave Way to Mideast Deal After He Leaves Office

By **MARK LANDLER** MARCH 8, 2016

WASHINGTON — President Obama, resigned to his failure to broker a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, is looking past his time in office and weighing a plan that would preserve at least the principle of a two-state solution for his successor to pursue.

The White House is debating whether the president should lay down the outlines of an agreement, several officials said, perhaps through a resolution at the United Nations Security Council or in a presidential speech. The objective would not be to revive direct negotiations — almost nobody believes that is likely now — but to enshrine the proposals Secretary of State John Kerry made during his last failed effort at peacemaking in 2014.

A Security Council resolution, officials said, would give enduring legitimacy to the compromises that Mr. Kerry hammered out in private between the two sides, and build broad international support for a series of proposed solutions that could provide the framework for a future Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

These deliberations, which have been percolating for several months, have rattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and could lead to further tension between him and the president in a relationship that has already been marked by bitter rifts.

Mr. Netanyahu on Monday declined an invitation to meet with Mr. Obama on March 18 in Washington, ostensibly because he did not want to get drawn into the volatile presidential election. In fact, several officials said, Mr. Netanyahu did not want to meet with Mr. Obama without having sealed the terms of a new pact on American military aid. The 10-year agreement, potentially worth more than \$40 billion, is viewed as a way to compensate Israel for the Iran nuclear deal. But negotiations have run into snags, these people said, and Mr. Netanyahu did not want to risk leaving an Oval Office meeting empty-handed.

An even deeper potential source of friction between the leaders, officials said, stems from the possibility that Mr. Obama will make a last foray into peacemaking. In whatever form that would take, the purpose would be to show a way of resolving all the central issues that divide the two sides, from the borders of a Palestinian state to Israel's security and the political status of Jerusalem.

"Obama and Kerry are looking at the very real likelihood that the two-state solution could die on their watch," said Martin S. Indyk, who served as the special envoy for Israel-Palestinian peace negotiations under Mr. Kerry in 2013 and 2014. "Having tried everything else, I think they feel a responsibility, above all to Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state, to preserve the principles of a two-state solution."

After months of intensive talks, Mr. Kerry failed to break a deadlock on the so-called final-status issues between Mr. Netanyahu and the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. Mr. Netanyahu has since won re-election with a government that is even more hard-line on these issues than his last one. During that campaign, the prime minister disavowed his support for the two-state solution. Mr. Abbas's position, meanwhile, has been eroded by months of violent attacks by Palestinians on Israeli Jews.

Adding to the urgency of the debate, officials said, is a mounting American concern that a continued expansion of Jewish settlements in a swath of territory in the West Bank known as Area C will soon make a geographically and politically viable Palestinian state impossible.

Middle East peace initiatives have long had appeal for late-term presidents. Ronald Reagan opened a dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization during his final months in office. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both made last-ditch attempts to broker peace deals in their last years in office. Any new effort by Mr. Obama would bear a host of uncertain political ramifications in an election year.

While the Democratic front-runner, Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state, has declared that she would pursue a peace accord as president, she might not welcome having to take a position on a Security Council resolution that is viewed as putting pressure on Israel. Republicans could seize on a diplomatic overture to throw their support behind Israel, though the party's current front-runner, Donald J. Trump, has pledged to take a neutral stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet all these qualms, officials said, could take a back seat to Mr. Obama's frustration about his failure in the peace process and its impact on his legacy, particularly as a president who once made an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement a centerpiece of his diplomacy.

"There will be a great temptation to do something in the final year," said Aaron David Miller, a vice president at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "For a president who came out faster and more aggressively on the Middle East than any of his predecessors, there is a gnawing sense of incompleteness and perhaps even failure."

Among the questions the White House is considering is how long to wait. Deferring action until after the November election would ease the political pressure on the Democratic nominee. But it would shorten the time to build international support for a resolution.

In Jerusalem, Israeli officials refused to comment on any possible moves by Mr. Obama. But they reiterated their long-held position that the only way to reach any agreement with the Palestinians was through bilateral negotiations, not international organizations.

Ehud Yaari, a prominent Israeli analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said Mr. Netanyahu was probably less concerned about the possible publication of parameters by the administration or a Security Council resolution than about what, if any, mechanism would be proposed for propelling the peace process forward.

"It would be one more U.N.S.C. resolution," Mr. Yaari said, adding that the wording would "not necessarily be negative" for Israel. Washington's policies are well known, he said, adding, "Obama is not going to produce something dramatically different," he said. "The question is what mechanism is to be introduced. That is the major issue."

Mr. Indyk agreed that a Security Council resolution need not be punitive for Israel. It would most likely be modeled on a United Nations resolution adopted after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which called for Israeli forces to withdraw from occupied territories and for the establishment of a lasting peace.

The latest contretemps between Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Obama showed how little trust they have for each other. After articles appeared in the Israeli news media that the president had not offered the prime minister a date for a meeting, the White House issued a statement that pointedly rebuffed that claim.

Hours later, Mr. Netanyahu's office issued a statement in which it said the whole thing was a misunderstanding. The prime minister, the statement said, was looking forward to a visit Wednesday by Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. "and discussing how we can meet the many challenges facing the region."

While the negotiations over the military aid package were complex, American officials expressed confidence they would be resolved soon. Next week, Israel's defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, is scheduled to meet Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter at the Pentagon. "We're in the kind of final stages of talking," said the deputy defense secretary, Bob Work.

Isabel Kershner contributed reporting from Jerusalem, Helene Cooper from Washington, and Michael S. Schmidt from Norfolk, Va.

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A version of this article appears in print on March 9, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Obama Seeks a Way to Save Mideast Goals.