



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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Obama to Visit Israel in Spring

Murdoch Sorry for Israel Cartoon

Rupert Murdoch has offered a “major apology” for a “grotesque” cartoon in his newspaper, the Sunday Times, that had sparked claims of anti-Semitism. Mr. Murdoch said: “Gerald Scarfe has never reflected the opinions of the Sunday Times. Nevertheless, we owe a major apology for the grotesque, offensive cartoon.”



The political cartoon, which was published on Holocaust Memorial Day, shows Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu holding a trowel and carries the lines: “Israeli elections. Will cementing peace continue?”

Jewish community leaders said they were disturbed by parallels they saw between the red-tinged drawing and historical anti-Semitic propaganda. The Board of Deputies of British Jews said it had lodged a complaint with the Press Complaints Commission.

The deputies said in a statement that the depiction of a Jewish leader using blood for mortar “is shockingly reminiscent of the blood libel imagery more usually found in parts of the virulently anti-Semitic Arab press.”

In a statement, the paper’s acting editor, Martin Ivens, said that insulting the memory of Holocaust victims or invoking blood libel was “the last thing I or anyone connected with the Sunday Times would countenance.” “The paper has long written strongly in defense of Israel and its security concerns, as have I as a columnist,” he said. [SundaySun]



President Barack Obama plans to visit Israel, the West Bank and Jordan this spring, the White House has announced, raising the prospects of a new U.S. push to restart long-stalled Israel-Palestinian peace efforts.

Obama’s trip, his first to Israel since taking office, signaled that he intends to make the volatile Middle East - where Iran remains locked in a nuclear standoff with the West and Syria is caught up in a bloody civil war - a top priority in his second term.

While the White House gave no exact dates for the trip, Israel’s Channel 10 television station cited unnamed sources in Washington saying Obama would start his visit on March 20.

The choice of Israel, for Obama’s first foreign travel since his January 21 inauguration will give the president and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a chance to try to repair their notoriously fractious relationship. Their dealings have been especially testy over the past year because of differences over how to best confront Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Netanyahu is now occupied with forging a new governing coalition after center-left challengers made surprising gains in January’s elections, something that Obama’s aides believe could strengthen his hand with the hawkish prime minister.

But with Israel and the Palestinians deeply at odds over how to resume negotiations that broke down more than two years ago, any new U.S. peace effort would face major obstacles.

Obama and Netanyahu discussed the president’s coming trip in a January 28 telephone call, the White House and the Israeli prime minister’s office said.

“The start of the president’s second term and the formation of a new Israeli government offer the opportunity to reaffirm the deep and enduring bonds between the United States and Israel and to discuss the way forward on a broad range of issues of mutual concern, including Iran and Syria,” the White House said.

Netanyahu’s office said only that the leaders had discussed a visit

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Israel's UN envoy: If Mali is on France's Doorstep, Gaza is in our Living Room



Israel's ambassador to the United Nations has compared France's military intervention in northern Africa with Israel's fight against Islamic terrorism from Gaza.

"France's foreign minister said that his country was fighting to prevent the creation of an Islamist terrorist enclave 'at the doorstep of France and Europe.' If Mali is on France's doorstep, Gaza is in Israel's living room," Ron Prosor said at the UN Security Council's monthly open debate on the Middle East.

"Make no mistakes: France's principled stand should be commended. We only ask that France and all the countries who are supporting its principled stand today, support Israel tomorrow when we fight Islamic terrorism on our borders."

Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed his support for France's intervention in the African nation, during which French warplanes conducted air strikes against Islamist rebels, linked to al-Qaeda, in the country's north.

"While there are countries for which the threat of terrorism is thousands of kilometers away from the homes of their citizens, we in Israel are familiar with the threat of global terrorism from up close," Netanyahu told French President Francois Hollande. "For us it is only a few hundred meters away from our homes." [Times of Israel]

Israel to Open Exhibit on King Herod

The Israel Museum in Jerusalem said it will open what it calls the world's first exhibition devoted to the architectural legacy of biblical King Herod, the Jewish proxy monarch who ruled Jerusalem and the Holy Land under Roman occupation two millennia ago. The display includes the reconstructed tomb and sarcophagus of one of antiquity's most notable and despised figures, curators say.

About 30 tons of artifacts -- including hundreds of tiny shattered shards pieced back together -- are going on display. Museum director James Snyder said the exhibit, "Herod the Great," is the museum's largest and most expensive archaeological project to date.

Herod was vilified in the New Testament as a blood-thirsty tyrant who massacred Bethlehem's male children to try to prevent the prophesied birth of Jesus. He is also said to have murdered his wife and sons.

Herod was also revered for his ambitious building projects, including his lavish desert palaces and an expansion of the Second Jewish Temple complex in Jerusalem. The Western Wall, today the holiest site where Jews are permitted to pray, was a retaining wall for the compound. The museum exhibit also features a reconstructed throne room from one of Herod's palaces in Jericho, and a full-sized replica of Herod's theater viewing room at the Herodion, incorporating detailed fresco wall paintings and other decorative elements that museum staff collected on site. [AP]

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timed for after a new Israeli coalition takes shape.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said Obama would also visit the West Bank to meet Palestinian leaders and travel to Jordan, which has suffered fallout from the Syrian conflict. Jordan's King Abdullah, a key U.S. ally who will likely meet Obama, has been a player in past U.S.-led Middle East peace initiatives.

Obama's itinerary suggests that his administration may be preparing a new peace bid. Word of the coming trip followed calls by incoming U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stressing the U.S. commitment to peacemaking.

Obama's early efforts to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace talks fell apart amid mutual acrimony in 2010, followed by accelerated Israeli housing construction in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem - land the Palestinians claim for a future state.

Obama was reluctant to pressure Netanyahu during the 2012 U.S. election campaign for fear of undercutting support among Jewish voters and other pro-Israel constituencies. Now that he no longer faces re-election constraints,

he may be ready to take a tougher tack despite the likelihood of drawing fire from Republicans who have questioned his commitment to Israel.

Israel's Channel 10 said Obama's visit would focus on restarting peace talks, but White House officials would not confirm that. Also expected to be high on the agenda would be Obama's efforts to convince Netanyahu to hold off on any attack on Iran's nuclear sites. Obama's tensions with Netanyahu have been aggravated by Netanyahu's demands for U.S. "red lines" on Iran's nuclear program - something the president has resisted, though he has insisted military options are on the table if sanctions and diplomacy fail.

Netanyahu has insisted he will stick to the red line laid down in September, when he told the United Nations that Tehran should not have enough enriched uranium to make even a single warhead. He gave a rough deadline of summer 2013.

Obama visited Israel as a presidential candidate in 2008 but drew Republican criticism for not traveling there in his first term. His Republican predecessor, former President George W. Bush, also waited until his second term to go to Israel. [Reuters]