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Obama's Empty Words

If you think Israelis doubt the American president's commitment to peace, try talking to some Palestinians.

BY DALIA HATUQA

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RAMALLAH, West Bank — As a general strike paralyzes the West Bank, President Barack Obama's recent visit to the region is a distant memory. "Since Obama left, nothing has changed except for the worse. Settlements have continued to grow, and today we buried another

Palestinian," said Issa Amro, a Hebron-based leader of an activism group called Youth Against Settlements.

Share on twitterTwitterShare on redditRedditinShare+More... In Ramallah, Obama **told Palestinians** that they "deserve an end to occupation and the daily indignities that come with it." But in the wake of the American president's departure, the Israeli crackdown has only worsened. The strike was called to protest the death of Maysara Abu Hamdiyeh, a cancer-stricken Palestinian **who died** in an Israeli jail cell on April 2. In the ensuing protests over Abu Hamdiyeh's death, Israeli soldiers **shot dead** two Palestinian youths in the West Bank. The disparity between Obama's words and the reality on the ground is not lost on Palestinians. While the president's Middle East trip may still be hailed as a diplomatic success in Washington, it is viewed in the West Bank with a mixture of apathy, skepticism, and outright hostility. In Ramallah, the de facto administrative capital of the West Bank, posters of the American president were doused with black paint prior to his arrival. In Bethlehem, some of the U.S. flags hung the night before he visited the Church of the Nativity were burned.

Four years ago in Cairo, Obama made a promise to the Arab and Muslim worlds that he would implement a drastic change in their relations with the United States -- and Palestinians listened carefully. "I thought that a black president, whose ancestors suffered under the reigns of slavery, would come to understand our pain," Amro said. "He did not address our suffering and it became obvious soon enough that the object of his visit was to lend support to the Israelis."

Amro's views are widely held among the Palestinian public. According to **a new poll** by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Obama's trip actually harmed his reputation among Palestinians: Twenty-nine percent of respondents said their feelings for the president changed for the worse, while only 8 percent said they had a more positive view of the president. The survey also found widespread pessimism about the peace process, with 55 percent of respondents saying they believed the United States would fail at reviving the stalled talks. Such gloom is the product of decades of dashed hopes. The 20-year long peace process has only delivered Palestinians an autonomous governance structure in the Palestinian Authority (PA), which further entrenched the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Settlements still haunt the political and geographic landscape, with the number of approvals for new units **skyrocketing** in 2012 by 300 percent compared with the previous two years, according to the Israeli settlement watchdog Peace Now. Palestinians have watched as construction continued **almost unabated** ever since Obama took office, with pro forma international condemnations doing very little to put an end to Israel's gradual takeover of West Bank land.

Meanwhile, the economy in the occupied territories continues to limp along, dependent upon dwindling international aid and tax monies withheld by Israel. Political stagnation and financial setbacks led to the **largest domestic protests** ever seen in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which at times were **beaten back** by U.S.-trained Palestinian security forces.

Obama's trip was punctuated by the usual stops a state visit to Israel entails -- Yad Vashem, Mount Herzl, and an Iron Dome missile battery. But his remarks regarding the peace process were anything but ordinary. "Let's not put the cart before the horse," said the U.S. president during his visit's first press event. "If the only way to even begin the conversations is that we get everything right at the outset ... then we're never going to get to the broader issue."

Many Palestinians took that comment to be a reversal of Obama's earlier position.

"When Obama was first elected, he made it clear that settlement building had to stop before we can go back to the negotiating table with the Israelis," said Tami Rafidi, a Fatah member who ran in the most recent local elections. "During his trip he basically told us to forget that position and to go back to talks even as settlements destroyed whatever is left of the two-state solution."

It is this bleak political atmosphere that set the tone for Obama's visit to the West Bank. The day before Air Force One touched down at Ben Gurion Airport, young Palestinians took to the streets of Ramallah, moving toward the presidential compound where Obama was due to meet Abbas the next day. They carried posters that played on his campaign slogans: "Obama: You promised hope and change, you gave us colonies and apartheid."

Looking to capitalize on the president's African-American heritage, Palestinians made various nods to the civil rights movement during demonstrations. In the West Bank city of Hebron, a handful of Palestinians, including Amro, **donned masks** bearing the faces of Obama and Martin Luther King Jr. while they marched towards Shuhada Street, a segregated area of the city that has been off-limits to Palestinians since 1994, after a settler killed Palestinian worshippers at the nearby Ibrahimi Mosque. The protesters, who were clad in T-shirts bearing King's famous words, "I have a dream," were eventually arrested by Israeli security forces.

Abbas himself even presented Obama with **an awkward portrait** of the American president with Abraham Lincoln, hoping the analogy between the abolition of slavery and the Palestinians' current plight would sink in.

Though Obama paid lip service to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the trip's focus seemed to be on other pressing issues: Syria, Iran, and Turkey. From the outset, Palestinians had no illusions as to why -- out of 50 hours spent between Israel and the West Bank -- less than four were allocated to talking and interacting with Palestinians.

"Obama's trip was merely a PR stunt to put him squarely in the Israel supporters camp," said Sam Bahour, a notable Palestinian-American entrepreneur. "Some might say he was trying to position himself to make a bold step towards peace in the future; I don't buy it. I think the U.S. took sides on this conflict a long time ago, 11 minutes after Israel was created, to be exact. Why would this president change that?"

However, Obama's repeated demands for Palestinians to "recognize that Israel will be a Jewish state" still cause consternation in this community. Such a step would mean shredding the Palestinian right of return to their ancestral homes across the Green Line. Obama is well aware that so far, no Palestinian leader has had enough political clout to do this -- though in official negotiating documents leaked in 2011, it was revealed that PLO negotiators **acknowledged** Israel as a Jewish state and largely disregarded Palestinian claims to the right of return. Abbas himself came close to going public about forgoing this right in **an interview** with Israel's Channel 2 late last year, but quickly backtracked after sparking an uproar.

Even if Obama does manage to get the Palestinians and Israelis back to the negotiating table, don't expect the skepticism in the West Bank to dissipate overnight.

"Talking the talk is great, but it doesn't move reality to a better place," Bahour said. "It's high time we recognized that maybe we are looking [for an interlocutor] in the wrong place."

As spring descends upon the Palestinian territories, Obama's tour did little to soothe the Palestinian public's unease. Instead, his time spent attempting to rally the old cast of characters behind one more ill-fated attempt at peace only worked to deepen the sense of frustration -- and perhaps resignation -- reigning over the West Bank today.