

## Can Obama broker a Mideast peace deal

By Mathew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Aug. 21 (Xinhua) -- U.S. President Barack Obama is stepping up efforts to broker a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

While critics are skeptical of the president's ability to resolve tensions between the two sides, others said his efforts to jump start the peace process are off to a positive start.

### TALKS WITH MIDEAST HEAVYWEIGHT POSITIVE

Obama met this week with visiting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the White House to discuss a resumption of peace talks in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians.

"There has been movement in the right direction," Obama said, adding "If all sides are willing to move off of the rut that we're in currently, then I think there is an extraordinary opportunity to make real progress. But we're not there yet."

In a joint press conference with the U.S. president, Mubarak expressed his desire to partake in the peace process.

"We are trying and working on this goal, to bring the two parties to sit together and to get something from the Israeli party and ... the Palestinian party," he said, noting that "If we, perhaps, can get them to sit together, we will help."

But some are skeptical of the U.S. president's ability to broker a deal when so many before him - from Presidents Nixon to Clinton - failed to do so.

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Washington D.C.-based CATO Institute, said the burden ultimately rests on the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"A succession of presidents going back to Nixon have tried to broker a peace deal with Israel and its neighbors but it comes down to ... what either side is willing to accept," he said.

"The people in the region have to want to come to an agreement more than outsiders want it for them," he added.

Despite hopes that Obama's popularity in the region will hold sway, "I ultimately don't think it is Obama's personality that is likely to change things," he said.

If a deal is attributable to a U.S. president, it will occur because both parties are convinced that now is the time, he said.

Others, however, said the meeting - the third in three months - was a positive step forward.

Steven A. Cook, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said the visit symbolized a thawing of the chill between United States and Egypt that persisted through the last term of the Bush administration.

"There's an effort on both sides to put the Bush years, which were characterized by mistrust and discord, behind them and to forge a new relationship," Cook said.

"The perception in Egypt that the United States was interfering in Egypt's domestic affairs was something that did not sit well with Egypt's leadership," Cook said, referring to the Bush administration's criticism of Egypt on a number of issues.

#### **EXPECTATION REMAINS MIXED**

But it remains unclear how much progress Obama will make. Despite the cordial tone, Cook said the president did not get what he wanted from the Mubarak meeting - a commitment from Egypt to make or help make an overture to the Israelis.

Indeed, Obama is urging both sides to make reciprocal gestures to overcome the "rut" into which peace talks have fallen. But neither side wants to be the first to budge.

"And the president is stuck in between these two sides that are not willing to go through the door first," he said.

A. Heather Coyne, senior program officer at the center for mediation and conflict resolution at the Washington D.C.-based United States Institute of Peace, believes a solution is possible. But the fact that both sides are divided - Israel governs by coalition and the Palestinians are split between Hamas and Fatah - presents a hurdle, she said.

"On both sides the leaderships are fragmented and that makes it harder for any one group to deliver," she said, adding "Even if they have political will, no one controls all the factions."

And for a deal to work, each party must perceive the current stalemate as harmful to its own interests and believe there is no other option but to talk peace, she said.

"In the past the parties may have believed they could win without compromise," she said. And that is where Obama comes in - to show each party that it is in an untenable situation, she said.

But Obama is off to a good start by tackling the issue early in his

administration, she said. "He is sending all the right signals."

David Pollock, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and former U.S. State Department official, expressed optimism about recent developments.

"I think there are obstacles still ahead but things have taken a turn for the better," he said.

The first is that the United States and Israel are close to an agreement on Israeli settlement freezes, he said.

As a result, the United States and Egypt will be prepared to encourage the Palestinians to drop their objections to renewing peace talks with Israel, he said.

And, while the United States had helped negotiate major Mideast treaties in the past - former U.S. President Jimmy Carter brokered the 1978 peace deal between Israel and Egypt - whether Obama would succeed remained unknown, he said.

"Nobody knows the answer to that question," he said.

### [News Analysis: Obama, Mubarak meeting a positive attempt to heal differences](#)



U. S. President Barack Obama (R) meets with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, U.S., Aug. 18, 2009.

(Xinhua/Zhang Yan)

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by Xinhua writer Zhao Yi

WASHINGTON, Aug. 18 (Xinhua) -- The United States and Egypt, two major players in Middle East issues who have drifted apart in recent

years, pressed the reset button on their relationship in a Tuesday meeting between the two presidents.

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, 81, who has ruled Egypt for 28 years, made his first visit in five years to the U.S. capital to meet with his counterpart Barack Obama, after tensions under former U.S. President George W. Bush. [Full story](#)

### [Obama calls on Arab countries to show goodwill gesture toward Israel](#)



U.S. President Barack Obama (R) meets with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, U.S., Aug. 18, 2009. (Xinhua/Zhang Yan)

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 18 (Xinhua) -- U.S. President Barack Obama on Tuesday praised Israel for "right movement" on Jewish settlement issue and called on the Palestinians and the Arab countries to show peace gesture toward Israel.

"There has been movement in the right direction," Obama said after meeting with his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak in the White House, referring to the reports that the Israeli government had stopped issuing permission for new settlements in the West Bank. [Full story](#)

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