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## **The Trump Administration: Forming a Policy on Settlements?**

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When Donald Trump was elected, much of the Israeli right believed that their dream had come true. Many were persuaded that the new Trump administration would be very friendly toward Israel and would support the policies of the Netanyahu government, both with regard to the Palestinians and with regard to Iran. The sense was that President Trump is surrounded by American Jews who support the settlement enterprise, and there would therefore be an end to the pressure applied by the United States administration to cease or at least limit construction in the settlements. However, the contacts between the Israeli government and the Trump administration regarding the settlements have demonstrated that these expectations were unfounded.

The Trump administration's policy on the settlements, similar to the Obama administration's policy, stems from the desire, shared by both administrations, to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by way of an arrangement. Notwithstanding the perception of the Obama administration among many circles in Israel as being "messianic" and obsessive in its attitude regarding an arrangement with the Palestinians, in fact, Obama himself was not driven to engage or become embroiled in this issue, once it became clear to Obama very early on that both sides were exerting much effort to torpedo any possibility of progress. The efforts to reach an agreement during Obama's tenure were driven by other elements in his administration; particularly noteworthy was the mediation attempt by Secretary of State John Kerry, in 2013-2014. Obama himself played no role in that effort.

However, President Trump has surprised the Israeli government by the intensity of his motivation to promote an Israeli-Palestinian arrangement. The first hint of this was already evident during his election campaign, when Trump referred to an Israeli-Palestinian arrangement as the "ultimate deal" that he would like to close. Trump has repeated this statement on several occasions since, and it appears that this is one foreign policy campaign promise that Trump believes he can keep. It also appears that beside his desire to prove that he can contend successfully with a challenge that his predecessors failed to overcome, President Trump has adopted the basic approach of his foreign policy and security advisors, most of whom have backgrounds in the US Central Command, responsible for the Middle East. On various occasions, CENTCOM commanders, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis, contended that the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a disruptive factor in the efforts to

resolve other conflicts and crises in the Middle East and feeds radicals in the region. This view challenges the repeated claims by the Israeli government that there is no connection between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other crises in the region.

One of President Trump's first decisions was to appoint Jason Greenblatt, a Jewish lawyer, as his delegate in the negotiations. Although Greenblatt was appointed as a chief negotiator with other Middle East countries as well in relation to a variety of issues, at this stage, Greenblatt, who apparently understands the "spirit of his role," is focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump's remark at the press conference during Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit at the White House that he will accept "one state...two states...whatever both parties like" aroused widespread reactions. However, Greenblatt's concrete actions and Trump's agreeing with Egyptian President Fattah el-Sisi with regard to convening a regional summit indicate that elements in the Trump administration and those close to the President clearly believe that the two-state solution is the only solution that can lead to stability, in the Israeli-Palestinian theater and even in the regional arena.

And indeed, over time, it is becoming evident that the current administration's approach toward resolving the conflict is not so different from the approach of the Obama administration. Apparently the Trump administration adopted some of the key positions of the Israeli side, including statements by the administration that it has no intention of replacing the two sides and that they are the ones that need to arrive at an agreement through direct negotiations, and also that regional involvement is critical, inter alia, in terms of support of the Israeli and Palestinian efforts to reach and implement an agreement. In this context, the Trump administration likewise accepted the repeated Israeli statement that the settlements do not pose an impediment to a future agreement, but the Trump administration understands very well that expansion of the settlements and continued construction are detrimental to efforts to reach an agreement. Trump himself explained very frankly, with the simplicity and logic of a real estate broker, that when Israel expands the settlements, it is basically eating away at the remaining territory under negotiation, and it is impossible to reach an agreement in this manner. While in Israel, Greenblatt focused on the need to stop the construction in settlements and reportedly at the outset demanded a total halt in construction, similar to the Obama administration's initial demand. He subsequently agreed with Prime Minister Netanyahu that the Israeli and American governments would conduct special negotiations on containing the construction in settlements. Thus far, the emissary sent to Washington by Prime Minister Netanyahu to discuss this issue has not succeeded in reaching any agreement with the American side.

Nevertheless, and parallel to the failure to reach agreement during the contacts in Washington, Netanyahu took a unilateral step of limiting settlement construction. On March 30, 2017, the political-security cabinet decided to limit construction to within the boundaries of built-up areas in the settlements, and if site conditions do not allow this, then to restrict the expansion to areas abutting the built-up area – to the "side panels" of the built-up area, in the words of coalition

chairman David Bitan. It appears that Netanyahu is trying here to rely on the dialogue between the Israeli government and the George W. Bush administration. Already then Bush made an attempt to demarcate the boundaries of the built-up area and not expand beyond them. Furthermore, it is likely that Netanyahu is taking into account Trump's remark that expansion of the settlements eats away at the territories under negotiation. Yet contrary to the understandings between the Sharon government and the Bush administration about strengthening the settlement blocs at the expense of the isolated outposts, Netanyahu is treating all settlements and outposts similarly. It might be that Netanyahu is lumping them together in order to explain his decision to allocate territory for the construction of a new settlement for the Amona evacuees in the Shiloh Valley deep in Samaria, rather than within the bounds of the settlement blocs. Another interpretation of this course of action is that the initiative derives from Netanyahu's need to keep his promise to the Amona evacuees, which he gave before Trump entered the White House, and from the understanding that at the same time, it is necessary to limit construction in order to avoid a harsh response from the Trump administration.

At this stage, it appears that the Trump administration is not interested in sparking a public confrontation with the Israeli government on the issue of settlement construction. For his part, Netanyahu presumably reached the decision about limiting construction based on the assessment that it might prevent a confrontation with the Trump administration. However, the key question is whether this decision makes further negotiations with the American government on the issue of limiting the construction in settlements superfluous, and whether it could, over time, prevent confrontation between the Israeli government and the administration, even if the style of the confrontation differs from the confrontations with the Obama administration and is kept behind the scenes.

One problem with the cabinet decision is that there is no clear definition of the term "abutting area." It is reasonable to assume that settlement residents and their advocates in the Israeli government will strive to ascribe the widest possible definition to this term, and therefore, construction according to such a definition is likely to trigger a confrontation with the American administration. It is also possible that the moderate response to the cabinet decision by Minister Naftali Bennett and the Bayit Yehudi party reflects their understanding that the decision affords settlers broad maneuvering room for construction. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the deviation caused by the new settlement for Amona evacuees provokes objections from the American administration, and whether the administration will understand the political constraints affecting Netanyahu.

The Trump administration is thus easier for the right wing Israeli government to work with than was the Obama administration, both with regard to continued limited construction in settlements and the apparent lack of objection to construction in Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the way that Netanyahu is handling the contacts with the Trump administration is liable to lead to another missed opportunity to solidify, together with the United States, the idea

that in any solution, the settlement blocs close to the Green Line will be an integral part of the territory of the State of Israel. It is in Israel's interests to sharpen the distinction between settlement blocs and the isolated outposts, but it seems that the Netanyahu government is not heading in this direction, due to the need to define the boundaries of the settlement blocs, and particularly, due to the concern that such a definition, and even any attempt at a delineation, will incur a heavy political price.

