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**The Need for an Israeli-American Dialogue
in Light of the "America First" Strategy**

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On December 18, 2017, President Donald Trump presented the latest United States National Security Strategy. The document defines the administration's world view on national security, and sketches the main guiding principles for its implementation. Significantly, the document combines policy on domestic matters with foreign policy, in the framework of the "America First" strategy that President Trump promoted during his election campaign.

While the National Security Strategy does not present a coherent and organized strategy for action, it indicates the need for an American-Israeli dialogue in order to formulate a strategy for coordinated security policy in the Middle East.

The main principles: According to the US National Security Strategy of 2017, the international arena is marked by competition between the United States and three different sets of threats: one comes from the "revisionist" powers – China and Russia; the second comes from the "rogue" states of Iran and North Korea; and the third derives from jihadist terror groups, such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. In order to win this competition, the United States must defend its citizens and the assets within its borders and promote its interests throughout the world, building on cooperation and strengthened alliances with regional actors who share US interests and values. Contrary to what has been claimed by some of Trump's critics, this is not an isolationist strategy, but is actually the product of the US desire to influence the international political system, based on an understanding that this is an American interest that stems from its historic role. Nor is this a strategy that promotes war or the use of force, but in fact aspires to achieve stability by reinforcing and projecting US power to its global network of allies.

Strategy for the Middle East: Regarding the Middle East, the National Security Strategy refers to three central threats: the entrenchment of terror organizations and the export of terror to the rest of the world; Iranian expansion in the region, including support for terror and subversion; and threats to the stability of the global energy economy. The document stresses that the United States does not intend to withdraw from the Middle East or reduce its presence in the region. In other words, President Trump does not plan to continue the "pivot" from the Middle East to East Asia, the strategy promoted by President Obama. In

addition, the document states that American policy will not include an attempt to impose democratic reforms on regimes in the region, as was tried under President George W. Bush. However, the United States will support regimes that decide to promote independent reforms, and in this context, it explicitly mentions Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

According to the document, the current administration rejects the assessment of previous administrations that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a main obstacle to peace in the Middle East. On the contrary, it repeats President Trump's assessment that Iran is the main cause of regional instability and is decidedly not part of the solution to the regional problems. In fact, the document adopts Israeli arguments. At the same time, it clarifies that the solution to the Iranian threat will be in the framework of a coalition that will present a broad united front and create a regional balance of power against Iran, and thereby establish stability in the Middle East. According to the document, such a coalition should be based on cooperation between the Sunni Gulf states and include cooperation with Israel. However, these conditions are far from realization, and it is hard to see how they might be fulfilled in the near future.

Implications for Israel: The National Security Strategy enables the Israeli leadership to assess the opportunities and challenges derived from the American world view and the ensuing Middle East policy. First, the document reveals gaps in the American strategy, and does not describe specific steps to convert the administration's declared strategy into coherent policy. Thus, one source of concern is that the presented approach may not be fully translated into action, and as a result, Iran will be allowed to broaden its influence in the region further without much interference. This gap will likely be examined in the talks between the various branches of the administration, including on the subject of policies to be adopted based on the document's principles, particularly in the field of military strategy. This suggests that in the short term Israel might in fact influence the formation of American policy.

That is why it is crucial that Israel maintain a close, frequent dialogue with the United States. Discussions in the framework of this dialogue can help draft a coordinated American-Israeli strategy against Iran that will ensure the implementation of the principles described in the National Security Strategy, while also protecting Israeli interests. This joint strategy should include agreement between Washington and Jerusalem that focuses on the principles for coordinated action in the event of various Iranian breaches of the JCPOA (to which Israel is not a party). Such a "parallel agreement" should guarantee Israel's independent ability, as a last resort, to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. Issues regarding intelligence efforts, parameters for improving the nuclear treaty, and the Iranian missile program should also be included in the understandings. In addition, Israel and the United States must coordinate their moves against Iranian threats that are not linked

to the nuclear program – particularly the proliferation of terror and weapons in the Middle East, and growing Iranian influence in Syria.

The American response to the Iranian threat as outlined in the National Security Strategy is described in defensive terms: the objective is to neutralize Iranian activity, mainly through a united front to create a regional balance of power. In other words, it focuses on curbing Iran and containing the damage it causes, and on cooperating with the pro-American players in the region as a precondition for achieving these objectives. But in fact, this approach leaves Israel at the forefront of the struggle against Iran, since the ability to establish a broad regional front depends on the ability of the Gulf states to cooperate precisely at a time when tension between them is growing in view of aggressive attempts by the Saudi royal household to force its policy on the other Gulf states. Moreover, in the absence of any progress in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians, the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, are expected to show extremely limited, if any, willingness to deepen cooperation with Israel. Therefore, the American-Israeli dialogue must include an examination of alternatives for joint action, assuming an inability to implement the idea of a regional anti-Iranian front.

Another gap in the American strategy document is the failure to prioritize among the various arenas. There is a concern that notwithstanding the administration's aspiration not to divert too much attention and resources from the Middle East to Asia, it will in fact do so – due to the growing threat from China, Asia's rising economic importance, and the nuclear threat from North Korea. Against this background, Israel must examine the impact of various scenarios on American resolve to implement its policy objectives in the Middle East and share its conclusions from this exercise with the US when discussing strategic coordination.

Finally, the National Security Strategy does not refer to the key role that Russia has achieved in Syria and its growing influence throughout the Middle East. This issue is critical in the context of American-Israeli coordination: while Russia is described as a strategic rival of the US, working against US interests, the Israeli leadership must maintain close coordination with Moscow due to its presence in Syria, the potential for escalation between Israel and Russia over Syria, and the chance of gaining Russian help to curb Iranian activity in Syria. Therefore, the American-Israeli dialogue must include reference to this trilateral dynamic, and focus on coordinating expectations between Jerusalem and Washington regarding policy in Syria, and in particular on creating mechanisms that can convince Russia to use its influence to limit Iranian activity in the region.