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**Please Don't Play It Again, Mr. Prime Minister:
On the Recent Obama-Netanyahu Meeting
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Announcements about construction in Jewish settlements in the West Bank and housing units in the greater Jerusalem area before, during, or after meetings between Israeli prime ministers and US presidents have become a pattern in the bilateral relations. The most recent meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama on October 1, 2014 was no exception and only accelerated the erosion in the relations between the two countries.

As US political and military support for Israel is a cornerstone of Israel's security concept, every encounter between the two most senior leaders of the two nations is significant and can potentially influence bilateral activity as well as joint responses to shared regional challenges. In recent years, the agenda of the meetings between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu has remained fixed, dealing with the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian political process, and other developments in the Middle East. Presumably last week's meeting did not deviate from the usual course. However, there has been a change in the urgency attributed to the discussion of each of the topics.

The negotiations underway between Iran and the P5+1 are scheduled to conclude in a few weeks. In his speeches at the UN General Assembly both last year and last week, Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed his firm opinion on the key component of a possible agreement with Iran, namely uranium enrichment. Of the countries negotiating with Iran, the Prime Minister can cast his hopes only on the United States to reduce the gap between his demand for zero enrichment and the percentage of enrichment that will eventually be allowed by the agreement (assuming one is actually signed). If Israel decides to take action against Iran's nuclear facilities – either because the agreement seems to represent a high existential threat to Israel or because Iran violates the agreement without, in Israel's view, being sufficiently penalized – the United States will be the only international entity that can prevent anti-Israeli decisions and resolutions in relevant international forums, first and foremost the UN Security Council, with the ability to cause severe damage to Israel.

So too regarding the Israeli-Palestinian context: senior US officials who were involved in the most recent round of talks between Israel and the Palestinians conducted by Secretary of State John Kerry over the course of nine months did little to hide their assessment that Israel was largely responsible for the negotiations' failure. President Obama has not expressed himself publicly about the failure of the talks, though in public statements made around the time he met with Netanyahu he made it clear that the current state of affairs is not sustainable. These statements imply that the United States will again try to change the status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

Concurrently, the Palestinians, announcing their old-new strategy, have already submitted requests to join various international bodies in order to promote acceptance of the Palestinian state as a regular member. Next month a request will likely be submitted to the Security Council to determine a timetable for Israel's withdrawal to the 1967 borders. In most international forums where new members join on the basis of majority votes of current members, Palestinian membership is nothing more than a potential nuisance. The United States has little influence on the results of those votes. That, however, is not the case in the Security Council. While it is preferable for Israel that seven of the fifteen members of the Security Council do not support the Palestinian move, thereby blocking its membership, should the Palestinians gain the support of nine members, only a veto can prevent the drafting of a resolution. Only one permanent member of the Security Council – the United States – can be expected to cast that veto.

Following deliberations of more than three years, the United States finally decided to use military force in the Middle East. One can debate the reasons it took the United States this long to resort to military power, but from the point of view of many nations in the region it is a positive outcome, one that partly restores their faith in the United States and its willingness to stand alongside them in times of trouble. Some of these nations share Israel's concerns about the spread of militant Islam, whether Shiite or Sunni, through the Middle East. Israel is clearly aware of the risks stemming from the Islamic State's ongoing drive to take over regions in Syria and Iraq, on the one hand, and the deepening hold of organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas over areas they already control, on the other. Renewed US willingness to act both independently and as the leader of a coalition is therefore important to Israel, even though it is capable of confronting the threats posed by those organizations on its own.

Against this background, Israel's conduct before, during, and after Netanyahu's recent visit to the United States seems to conflict with Israel's best interests when it comes to relations between Jerusalem and Washington. Around the time of the meeting between Netanyahu and Obama, news of two housing activities in Jerusalem were reported: continued planning of housing units in a southern portion of the city (in the area known

as Givat Hamatos), and the entrance of dozens of Jewish families into houses bought in the Arab village of Silwan across from the City of David.

The legality of these actions, which is hotly debated between Israel and the international community as well as within Israeli society, is not the subject of this article. Rather, the specific, and quite troubling question here is whether the Israeli Prime Minister has the desire and/or willingness to control various Jewish housing activities and adapt the timing to events on the international arena, so that such activities do not conflict with other Israeli interests and do not embarrass the Prime Minister as he asks the President to act on issues critical – perhaps even existential – to Israel's security. This is the case even if there is no proven linkage between the US position on the Iranian nuclear program and its position on Jewish building in areas of Jerusalem that came under Israeli control only after 1967. It is doubtful that Prime Minister Netanyahu knew about the activities of Elad, the NGO responsible for the purchase of the buildings in Silwan; it is even more doubtful that the minister in Netanyahu's government who appeared on camera in Silwan just before the Prime Minister's meeting with President Obama coordinated his appearance with the Prime Minister.

After a similar incident, when the Israeli government announced construction plans for Ramat Shlomo in north Jerusalem during Vice President Joseph Biden's visit to Israel in March 2010, the decision was made to allow the Prime Minister's office oversight of the process of issuing building permits in so-called sensitive areas. One may assume that Prime Minister Netanyahu did not go out of his way to provoke President Obama at this specific time, when Israel needs his and his country's political support. If so, Israel would be wise to present itself as a country capable of conducting itself more thoughtfully than it did with the behavior evident during Netanyahu's most recent visit to the United States and his meeting with the President. The harsh responses issued by White House and State Department spokespeople leave no room for doubt as to the cumulative damage of Israel's pattern of a construction plan for almost every summit.

