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Will the United States Attempt to Renew the Political Process after the Israeli Elections?

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In a December 18, 2014 conversation with 28 European ambassadors, US Secretary of State John Kerry asserted that until after the Israeli elections on March 17, 2015, the United States will not allow the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In Kerry's view, insofar as such a resolution would be framed without the input of the Israeli government and would challenge its policies, adoption would only strengthen the elements in the Israeli right opposed to the peace process. Kerry did not rule out some kind of future Security Council intervention in the peace process, but refused to go into detail. His remarks came in advance of the Palestinian Authority's attempts to promote a Security Council resolution recognizing a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and calling for an end to the occupation by 2017. The Palestinians subsequently defied the United States position that the initiative at the Security Council was unacceptable, and on December 30, 2014, submitted their proposed resolution. The resolution, however, failed to muster the required Security Council majority, thus obviating any need for a US veto.

Kerry's statement and the US vote are in line with the administration's Middle East foreign policy principles, as expressed in a speech given at Bar-Ilan University on December 9, 2014 by US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro. In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian political process, the ambassador emphasized that the administration is committed to achieving a settlement based on the two-state vision and that it continues to look for ways to renew the talks, while remaining opposed to unilateral steps on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Nonetheless, the administration feels it is not realistic to expect the talks to be renewed before Israel's coming parliamentary election.

In an aside, the ambassador advised against drawing hasty conclusions from the recent United States midterm elections. His comments, like statements made by Kerry on the political process, were almost certainly meant to express the Obama administration's reservations regarding the widespread sense in international and Israeli circles that United States resolve and effectiveness on the international arena in general and in the Middle

East in particular have weakened, and that this weakness has become more pronounced because of the political divide in the administration's own institutions. The assessment that the President will find it difficult to advance any policy not to Israel's liking relies in part on the fact that the Republicans, with their strong show of support for Israel, now control the Congress, and they will likely not allow the administration to bring all its potential pressure to bear on Israel in an attempt to promote the political process. However, as the ambassador explained, the fact that the administration is working with a Republican Congress does not mean that US foreign policy will be paralyzed, particularly as the US constitution gives the president wide foreign policy latitude.

On December 19, 2014, President Obama signed the United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act, passed by Congress with a decisive bipartisan majority, defining Israel as a "major strategic partner" of the United States. The act includes several practical paragraphs designed to enhance Israel's strategic relations with the United States and its strategic capabilities. Paragraph 3(6) of the act, speaking of strategy and policy, states that "It is the policy of the United States...to support the Government of Israel in its ongoing efforts to reach a negotiated political settlement with the Palestinian people that results in two states living side-by-side in peace and security." This statement again indicates that in tandem with its commitment to strengthen Israeli security and its strategic relations with the United States, the administration is determined to take steps designed to advance its own national interests, including the renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

These various developments suggest that after the Israeli elections, the administration might intensify its efforts to bring the Israelis and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. Moreover, despite President Obama's image as a lame duck, the fact that he is nearing the end of his second and last term in office may actually stir him to expend greater energy to promote an Israeli-Palestinian political settlement, in part through increasing pressure on Israel to soften its positions.

Furthermore, it is not inconceivable that when he brings the weight of his office to bear on the Israeli government to renew talks with the Palestinians – whether, as will be determined by the elections, such a government is led by right wing parties or by parties from the center of the political map – the administration will make use of the "political tsunami" Israel has experienced over the last few months. The growing international recognition of a state of Palestine, especially by governments and parliaments in Europe, reflects the shrinking support for Israel's positions on the Palestinian conflict. It is possible that some members of the US administration *estimate* that the post-election Israeli government will thus be more flexible both on the notion of renewing the talks and on mutually agreeable understandings with the Palestinians, if only to prevent worse tension with the United States and a deepening of the rift between the two countries.