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A New Government in Israel: Circumventing the Expected

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A new Israeli government has yet to be formed and sworn in, but the Israeli and international media have already predicted a collision between Israel and the international community, including the United States. Given the political ideology shared by the potential coalition partners and their approach to the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, that prediction is not hard to make.

Three major issues will dominate Israel's international agenda in the next few years, and certainly until President's Obama departure from the White House in January 2017: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the Iranian nuclear program; and the continued instability in the Middle East and its ramifications for Israel's security.

Although Prime Minister Netanyahu recoiled from the statement whereby he seemed to renege on his commitment to the two-state solution, it is unlikely that the next government will be willing to negotiate a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After the election results were known President Obama called to congratulate Netanyahu on his victory and declared his clear preference for the two-state solution. Obama added, 'We've got to evaluate what other options are available to make sure that we don't see a chaotic situation in the region.' This statement gave rise to speculations that the US is considering a new Security Council resolution that will address key issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or a new version of the 2000 Clinton parameters, based on the efforts of Secretary of State Kerry in 2013-14 to reach a solution. These ideas were already debated within the US administration in the wake of the collapse of the Kerry negotiations and have now resurfaced.

Yet whether or not any of these ideas is adopted, they will almost certainly fail to produce the desired result, as neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians are willing to return to the negotiating table to agree on the framework for these negotiations, and they are certainly unwilling and unable to reach a comprehensive solution to the core issues in the conflict. Therefore, given this anticipated collision between Israel and the international community, in tandem with the failure to produce a change in the situation, the US would

do well to probe with the new government in Israel a plan of action that comprises three different categories of bilateral, Israeli, and Palestinian measures:

- a. Immediate steps, including resumed transfer of Palestinian tax revenues collected by Israel, continued security cooperation, allowance of the continued reconstruction of Gaza, an Israeli halt to construction in the settlements – certainly outside the major settlements blocs, and the suspension of Palestinian unilateral activity against Israel in international institutions.
- b. Bilateral Israeli-Palestinian talks on short and mid-term actions such as Palestinian economic activities in Area C.
- c. Separate discussions on the terms of reference for a comprehensive solution to be held by the US, on behalf of the Quartet, with Israel and the Palestinians.

This plan, if accepted by both Israel and the Palestinians, can be formalized in a Security Council resolution that will call for the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of an agreed-upon two-state solution.

The collision between Israel and the US on Iran occurred even before the final election results became known, and its effects are likely to substantively erode the bilateral relations that have been constructed over more than 50 years. Though not his intention, Prime Minister Netanyahu knowingly irritated President Obama in his speech to the US Congress by openly criticizing the agreement the US is negotiating with Iran. While this criticism is likely to continue, the question remains how Israel and the US, either separately or in concert, react to an agreement or the failure to attain it. If they have not yet done so, the two governments would do well to hold secret talks to address these and other developments such as violations by Iran of an agreement. These discussions will not eliminate Israel's criticisms of the reportedly emerging agreement with Iran, but will help maintain the bilateral cooperation and understandings. Certain understandings between the governments of the US and Israel may require Congressional legislation in a process that can help restore the healthier pattern in which Israel's long term security is a bipartisan concern shared between the White House and the Congress.

The disintegration of the traditional structure of the Middle East poses serious challenges to Israel's long term stability, as it undermines the stability of Israel's neighbors and enables large tracts of the region to become the homeland of Islamist fundamentalist movements whose aim is to replace the state system with the caliphate of yore. This trend poses a threat to US allies in the region and a danger of disrupting the global economic order by endangering the flow of energy from the region and the collapse of states possessing huge financial reserves. This is where the strategic cooperation between primarily the US but also Europe and other global players on the one hand and Israel on the other is invaluable. It is clear that under the current circumstances Israel cannot and should not be part of the coalition that tries to repel ISIS, but in a situation in which

neighborhood stability is under a serious threat, Israel will have to be involved. This calls for an ongoing strategic dialogue independent, if not totally delinked, from the Israeli-Palestinian and the Iranian files.

Prime Minister Netanyahu will have to juxtapose the stability of his future government against the risks involved in pursuing the pre-election political promises of his own party and the other coalition partners. It is recommended that when the coalition charts its future international agenda, the Prime Minister ask to meet the political leadership of the key international actors to conduct a frank discussion on expectations, constraints, and possibilities. This time, his first stop should be Washington – and not necessarily Capitol Hill.

A second important and too often neglected stop should be Brussels, capital of the EU and NATO. Not only is the EU Israel's largest trading partner, but it represents a bloc of states larger than the sum of its own members. Bad winds of boycott, sanctions, and pure anti-Semitism are blowing from what is supposed to be Israel's cultural and economic hinterland. Europe is now in search of solutions to several core issues of identity, substance, and a new pattern for its relations with neighbors, and Israel ought to be part of this process. Finally, the two neighboring capitals of Amman and Cairo must likewise be high on the Prime Minister's itinerary.

