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Initiatives to Jumpstart the Israeli-Palestinian Political Process: Chances of Success in the Current Period

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The periodic verbal wrangling between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama, or, more precisely, between their spokespeople, has returned to the headlines. The immediate pretext for the newest exchanges relates to the intended meeting between the two leaders. However, let there be no mistake: there are currently two main, highly interrelated issues on the agenda: United States security aid to Israel and the political process between Israel and its neighbors.

In 2009, two years after the Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries went into effect, Israel began receiving an annual \$3 billion of US defense aid, in addition to other aid programs, including US support for the Iron Dome project. The memorandum covered a period of ten years, and the US and Israeli governments have recently begun negotiations for its renewal and increase. According to some reports, disagreements between the two sides regarding the scope of further security aid have not been resolved, apparently given the US refusal to grant Israel's request to increase the annual sum to \$4 billion.

Concurrently, the *Wall Street Journal* reported – on March 7, 2016, the first day of US Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel – that the US government is considering ways of reviving the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. One idea raised during internal White House discussions was the passage of a UN Security Council resolution that would stipulate guidelines for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These guidelines would relate to the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and land swaps, East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state, recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, and the annulment of the Palestinian refugees' right of return to Israel.

If the report is accurate and the product of a deliberate leak, the timing of the publication can be explained by renewed Israeli-American friction surrounding the scope of US

security aid for the decade beginning in 2019. However, in the context of the current US presidential election campaign, the logic of this coincidence is more elusive. The reported plan will provide all the Republican candidates with ammunition for attacks against the current administration and against Hillary Clinton, who will likely be the Democratic presidential candidate. (Presumably Bernie Sanders, the other Democratic candidate, will also give his blessings to the plan.) Clinton will be forced to issue a response that does not rule out the plan but that also does not welcome the ideas in the article that are attributed to President Obama and his administration. Were the choice left to her, Clinton would likely prefer to avoid the question whether she supports the overall plan, as this would require her, in every debate within the Democratic Party and with the Republican candidates, to address specific elements of the reported plan regarding the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as borders, Jerusalem, and refugees. Instead, she would likely prefer that an initiative for a new detailed Security Council decision be released after November 8, 2016 and before January 20, 2017, when the next president will enter the White House. This is what happened in December 1988, when President Ronald Reagan ostensibly surprised his successor, George H. W. Bush, with his announcement of the US administration's willingness to enter into a dialogue with the PLO. This dialogue subsequently became part of the policy of the new administration, which in 1991 took advantage of the United States' crushing victory in the Gulf War to convene the Madrid Conference, which was attended by the Arab states, the Palestinians, and Israel. This process led indirectly to the Oslo Accords. And while the American role in the Oslo process was still initially minute, and although a new president, Bill Clinton, entered the White House in early 1993, the change implemented by President Reagan in the twilight of his presidency, between the presidential election and the day he left office, played an important role in the peace process.

Perhaps more significant here than the relationship between the content of the *Wall Street Journal* report and both the United States presidential election campaign and the relations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, is the outgoing president's legacy in the realm of foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular. President Obama was not the one who decided to send US military forces into Afghanistan and Iraq, but he was the one who decided on their accelerated withdrawal – albeit, with no visible American accomplishments. He did not spark the onset of the Arab Spring, but it was he who decided that the United States would not use the full force of its power to stop the bloodshed throughout the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. Opinion is divided, including in Israel, regarding the merit and prospects of the settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue, and particularly its expected lifespan. Yet above all, many are critical of President Obama for his mistakes in attempting to further a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which went beyond tactical errors. Many are

also critical of him, and will likely be critical in the future, regarding the passivity he demonstrated on this issue during his second term in office. Could these be the considerations prompting the President or Secretary of State John Kerry to try to revive the political process between Israel and the Palestinians?

If their aim is the resumption of negotiations, it can be assumed that the adoption of a UN Security Council decision will not serve to achieve it and, in fact, under the current circumstances, can be expected to entrench Israel and the Palestinians even further in their refusal to enter into negotiations that do not meet their respective conditions. Adopting a resolution along the lines of what was reported in the American press has advantages, as it sets a clear point of departure for all future negotiations. On the other hand, such a resolution would not effectively safeguard the option of two states, and would leave both sides free to take declarative and practical measures that would thwart negotiations based on the reported framework.

If President Obama has already decided to enter the pages of history as the US president who initiated the Security Council decision regarding an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, it is doubtful whether anything will change his mind on this point. If the issue is still under deliberation, however, it would be appropriate for Israel to advance a political initiative revolving around a number of practical measures and an Israeli declaration. At the same time, Israel must withstand the temptation of using the Republican candidates to goad the President or of sending Hillary Clinton into the fray without arming her with the elements of an initiative.

The components of the Israeli initiative could include:

- a. Willingness to engage in future talks regarding an agreement based on 1967 borders, taking into consideration security and demographic realities as well as the viability of a Palestinian state.
- b. American support for the Israeli demand that one outcome of negotiations be official Palestinian recognition of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.
- c. Willingness within future negotiations to consider political solutions regarding the future of Jerusalem that are consistent with the Jewish people's link and attachment to the city.
- d. Announcement of a freeze in actual building and building plans in the West Bank east of the security fence, and in non-Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem.
- e. Willingness to discuss with the Palestinians their economic plans in Area C.
- f. Willingness to engage in immediate negotiations for new water and energy agreements and full implementation of the existing economic agreements regarding both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Even if it does not place an initiative on the agenda, and certainly if it adopts one or parts of it, Israel should request that the United States not surprise it with a political initiative that has existential implications for Israel. If Israel advances a comprehensive political initiative as proposed here, it will be President Obama (whose successor remains to be chosen, even as it is unclear who will control the Congress) who will need to explain to the American electorate why he ignored the Israeli initiative and instead chose to impose on Israel (and on the Palestinians) a decision that runs counter to the policy of the Israeli government and most Knesset members.

There is little value to the French initiative for restarting the political process, which revolves around convening an international conference prior to the UN General Assembly in September 2016. Technical aspects, and particularly the political objectives of such a conference, would constitute bones of contention even before it meets. Moreover, both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides can be expected to pose preconditions and demand preliminary guarantees before agreeing to take part in the proposed conference, which will reduce its chances of success.

President Obama's outgoing administration is determined to leave behind the outline of the future solution for the political process between Israel and the Palestinians, and is on the threshold of decision regarding which path it will take to implement this intention: a UN Security Council decision or the publication of a special plan, along the lines of the December 2000 parameters advanced by President Clinton (which were also announced in the twilight of the administration, between the presidential elections and George W. Bush's entry into the White House). Under these circumstances, Israel must decide how to best influence the plan so that it is as consistent as possible with its own view of a two-state solution.

