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**Israel and the United States:
An Opportunity to Strengthen the Special Relationship**

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Although foreign policy in general and US-Israel relations in particular did not feature as a significant issue that tipped the scales in the 2016 US presidential election, there is much interest in Israel regarding Donald Trump's impending entry into the White House and the future impact of his administration on Israel's national security.

In contrast to previous US administrations, which promoted defined, clear agendas during their election campaigns, the elected leader lacks a formulated or unified policy regarding the Middle East. President-elect Trump has not announced his foreign policy team: his Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Advisor. Furthermore, like many before him, Trump stands to realize that sitting in the Oval Office is different from stumping on the campaign trail.

Tensions and contradictions marked some of the foreign policy positions articulated by Trump during the campaign. Most prominent in this context is his promise to bolster US military power and be much more assertive than his predecessor was against America's adversaries, versus his isolationist positions and his declared intentions to reduce the US commitment to NATO and cooperate with Russia. It is unclear how these apparently contradictory aims will ultimately be bridged by the new administration, and this makes it difficult to draw conclusions regarding the new administration's foreign policy in the global arena in general and in the Middle East in particular.

Trump's precise policy vis-à-vis Israel is likewise difficult to define. During his campaign, he committed himself to pro-Israeli positions, which was welcome music to Jerusalem's ears. However, he also made problematic statements regarding the issue of foreign aid to US allies, and declared that he would be neutral regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It therefore makes little sense to attribute great importance to what is ostensibly known, or not yet known, about the incoming administration's Middle East policy. What is clear, however, is that Trump's very election, and the formation of the administration that will ultimately work with him, reflects change more than it does continuity. Under these circumstances, Israel now has the opportunity to begin a new chapter in its relations with the US under a new president and with a new administration; Israel can try to influence the new administration's Middle East policy and

assume a central and valuable role. Thus with regard to the next chapter in Israel's relations with the United States, it is important to emphasize the foundation for continuity.

A sturdy foundation of shared values and interests has long been the basis of US-Israel relations. However, the most important area in which change is necessary is the sense of trust between the respective leaders, which was severely damaged during the concurrent terms of US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Therefore, when Prime Minister Netanyahu is invited to the White House in the coming months, he would do well to attempt to reach understandings with the new president regarding six fundamental issues: one concerns the working relations between the two countries; four relate to US policy in the Middle East; and a final issue has to do with strengthening the United States' fundamental support of Israel's security. The understandings that are reached regarding these six issues will constitute the basis for strengthening the special relationship and the strategic alliance between the two countries.

First is the need to reestablish the mutual sense of trust between the US administration and the Israeli government. The goal should be for President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu – as a basis for coordination and as a means of preventing surprises – to convey to one another the supreme interests of their respective nations; the issues that are important to them; and their red lines. To ensure the effectiveness of this dialogue for coordinating efforts and advancing core issues, it will be important to reestablish the intimate relationship between the US president and the Israeli prime minister, to agree on the manner of regular communication and who will conduct it, and the “back channels” through which new ideas will be examined. At the same time, in Israel's renewed dialogue with the US administration, it is imperative that Israel not be identified as a “Republican issue.” Against the background of the political divisions in the United States that dominated the election campaign, Prime Minister Netanyahu displayed appropriate neutrality, and Israel must strive to reestablish itself as a bi-partisan American issue. In other words, Israel must remain outside the divisions between the Republican and Democratic parties.

The first strategic issue that the Prime Minister should raise with the incoming President is the role of US leadership in the Middle East. During Obama's terms in office, the United States pursued a foreign policy that was perceived by its allies and its enemies alike as overly cautious and averse to tough measures and decisive responses when red lines were crossed. This policy damaged the United States relationship with almost all its allies in the Middle East, created a vacuum and encouraged the rise of Islamic regimes, facilitated the empowerment of Iran, failed to counter Russia's return to the region, and, as a result of its policies, facilitated the rise of the Islamic State. Now, along with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, Israel is eager to see a more resolute US policy in the Middle East. The United States is the only party with the ability to contain and stop Iran's aspiration and march toward hegemony in the region, deal effectively with the Islamic State, and contain Erdogan's neo-Ottoman aspirations. Israel's good relations

with Egypt and Jordan, overlapping interests with Saudi Arabia, and renewed relations with Turkey can all serve as a foundation for a strong US-led Middle East alliance that will be able to contend more effectively with the challenges these states face – most notably, Iran and the Iranian-led axis, Salafi jihadist terrorism, and Moscow’s support for Israel’s leading enemies – Iran and Hezbollah – in order to strengthen its position in Syria.

This Israeli position may encounter American isolationist leanings with regard to the Middle East, although it would be difficult to imagine Trump continuing the “disengagement from the Middle East” practices of his predecessor. Rather, Trump is likely to discover that “even if you are not interested in the Middle East, the Middle East is interested in you.” This is where Israel has an opportunity to cultivate a dialogue about the threats to the United States fed by the policies that created a vacuum in the region. At the same time, it would be imprudent on Israel’s part to encourage Washington toward involvement that the US does not regard as advancing American interests.

The most important strategic issue that must be dealt with is Iran. Iran poses the greatest threat to Israel in the long term, and a nuclear armed Iran poses a threat to the United States and to world peace. It is important that the incoming president reinforce Obama’s promise that he would never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. The nuclear agreement with Iran reached by the Obama administration is highly problematic, but it is unlikely that a Trump administration would withdraw from it – particularly since in the short term, the alternatives are far more problematic. The agreement becomes highly dangerous in the long term, when it will position Iran legitimately on the nuclear capability threshold with a broad, advanced nuclear program. It would therefore be advisable for Israel, in dialogue with the new administration, to underscore once again the dangers of the agreement and prepare means to mitigate them.

The bottom line is the need to intensify US-Israeli cooperation in light of the ongoing Iranian threat. An effort should be made to conclude a parallel US-Israeli agreement that reflects the two countries’ mutual understandings and commitments regarding the achievement of a significant reduction in the dangers posed by the nuclear agreement, as well as joint measures to contend with its serious long term implications and significantly strengthen long term Israeli security. Full intelligence coordination must resume in order to facilitate both the identification of Iranian violations of the agreement and formulation of a joint plan to deal with them. It will also be important for Israel to try to reach an agreement whereby the United States would provide Israel with all the operational capabilities necessary to take action against Iran – in the event that all other alternatives for halting Iran’s progress toward completing its nuclear program have been exhausted. Finally, it will be necessary to engage the Trump administration in a dialogue regarding responses to provocative Iranian action aimed at achieving hegemony in the Middle East that is not covered by the nuclear agreement, such as subversive activity and terrorism, the development of ballistic missiles in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, and

the launching of missiles against American maritime vessels (for example, by means of the Houthi proxy in Yemen). In this context, the Trump administration may be firmer with Iran than the Obama administration, which hesitated to take action in an effort to avoid risking the nuclear agreement.

The third strategic issue, which is of great urgency on the regional level, is the crisis in Syria. The ongoing civil war in Syria has already cost approximately half a million lives, left two million wounded, and created 10 million refugees. It is the most violent conflict on record in the twenty-first century and has created the heaviest humanitarian crisis of the era. It has had repercussions throughout the region, sent terrorism and masses of refugees to Europe, and prompted US and Russian intervention involving both countries' air forces and special forces. This last development poses the risk of an unintentional and uncontrollable escalation.

How the United States and its allies, inside and outside the region, can shape a different strategy against Russia and Iran – both of which support the murderous Assad regime – must be analyzed. The creation of humanitarian corridors in Syrian territory, the declaration of no-fly zones, and the use of limited force against Syrian air force helicopters (from which barrel bombs are dropped indiscriminately on civilians in markets, schools, and hospitals) are some steps that could help change the policy of the Assad regime and its supporters regarding the fighting. Therefore, it is in Israel's interest to launch the uphill battle to convince the Trump administration that Russian activity in Syria strengthens Israel's leading enemies: Iran and Hezbollah. It will be important to reach an understanding with the Trump administration that Iran and Hezbollah must not be allowed to establish themselves or a terrorist infrastructure on the Golan Heights. It will also be important for the United States and Israel to work together to find a way of extricating themselves from the problematic "Assad (along with Iran and Hezbollah) or ISIS" equation declaimed by the Russians, who has operated primarily against moderate opposition forces in Syria. It will be necessary to strive to leverage the incoming US president's declared willingness to reach agreements with Putin on a global level to ensure that American concessions to Russia – if decided upon as part of an effort to reduce tensions between the superpowers – will not be implemented in the Middle East context, and motivate Russia to contribute to the effort to conclude the crisis in Syria and establish a transitional government that is representative of all the ethnic groups in the divided country, but without Assad.

A fourth strategic issue is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The change of administrations in the United States may offer an opportunity to assess new paradigms for progress between Israel and the Palestinians and integration of the pragmatic Arab states into the process. In other words, while a final status agreement is beyond reach at the current time, two-state solution remains a viable goal for the future. A well thought out and effective process in this direction led by the United States could promote an understanding among the Palestinian leadership and public that they will be unable to impose an agreement on Israel that is consistent with their parameters

alone. This in turn could persuade them to abandon the refusal to engage in negotiations and interim agreements that they have espoused in recent years. A necessary initial step in this context would be a renewal of the understanding articulated in Bush's 2004 letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (which was ignored by both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu). Such an agreement would significantly reduce the tension surrounding the issue of the settlements, which has poisoned US-Israel relations over the past eight years. In this context, it is important to work with the outgoing administration to prevent Security Council resolutions regarding plans for an Israeli-Palestinian permanent agreement that are formulated without coordination with the Israeli government and against its policy, as this would leave Israel with no negotiating cards for the future.

Finally, ensuring the security of Israel is a fundamental component of US-Israel relations and should therefore be affirmed and bolstered. The United States commitment to Israel's security is an important element of Israeli deterrence. The multi-year aid received from the United States supports the Israeli economy's ability to contend with the country's exceptional security expenditures. Prime Minister Netanyahu would do well to try to adjust the portion of the recently concluded agreement that stipulates a reduction in offshore procurement, and also to increase the support for rocket and missile defense projects for the Israeli home front. It will also be important to discuss the political and security support that Israel expects from the United States in the event of future clashes with Hezbollah and Hamas and to coordinate expectations on this matter. Preserving the qualitative military edge (QME) in weapon systems and validating understandings regarding the strategic abilities that are attributed to Israel are issues of central importance to the quantitative asymmetry between Israel and its enemies.

The incoming president will have a dramatic influence on the direction in which the United States develops and moves in the coming years, and as a result, on the trends that emerge in the international arena. This includes the relations between the superpowers – the United States, Russia, and China – in the context of resolving conflicts and guiding international dynamics. Israel must make sure to take care of its small corner of the world for the sake of its own national security, and to work urgently and prudently to rehabilitate and strengthen its relations with its most important ally.

