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**Israeli-American Strategic Coordination
regarding an Israeli Operation against Iran**

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In his speech at the Saban Forum on December 2, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stressed the need for Israel to work together with the United States to foil the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear project. Panetta's words were expressed in the context of growing concerns in the American administration that Israel is preparing to act independently against Iran in order to foil its nuclear ambitions. When asked recently if Israel would give the US advance notice before taking military action against Iran, Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, answered, "I don't know."

The United States is well aware that Iran continues to labor towards attaining military nuclear capability, and the most recent International Atomic Energy Agency report was unequivocal in this assessment. Clearly, the steps taken in recent years by Western nations in general and the US in particular to deter Iran from continuing to develop its nuclear program have been unsuccessful.

Nor will continued activity against Iran at the current level likely stop Iran from continuing to develop its nuclear capability. Like previous administrations, the Obama administration issues resolute statements about the unacceptability of a nuclear Iran and that all options, including the military option, are still on the table. In practice, however, it seems increasingly clear that the American administration has no real intention of using an overt military option to eliminate the Iranian nuclear program. The practical meaning is that the US prefers to accept a nuclear Iran rather than risk military action against it.

This reality may present Israel with a dilemma in the coming months, whether to accept the possibility of Iran attaining nuclear capability or try to foil this possibility by means of its own independent military action. According Minister of Defense Ehud Barak's testimony, about one year is left for foiling Iran's nuclear program.

If the State of Israel decides to take sole military action against Iran, its first difficult dilemma will concern coordination with the American administration prior to such a

strike. The concrete question is: must Israel request a green light from President Obama's administration for military action against Iran? This question is addressed here only in its political context, under the assumption that at the operational level Israel is capable of realizing the military option against Iran without American approval.

In recent months leading US administration figures have made it clear that the United States is opposed to an Israeli military strike against Iran. This means that should Israel try to clarify either explicitly or implicitly the possibility of receiving any sort of green light from the US for a military operation against Iran, it is almost certain that the answer will be an absolute "no," leaving no room for doubt. President Obama's administration will likely not risk even the hint of being the entity that allowed Israel to understand it had the green light to take military action against Iran.

Israel's request for approval for a military action will need to be presented to the president of the United States himself. Thus, should Israel ask for a green light from the administration and receive a negative answer, its freedom of maneuvering would be severely constrained and the political risk in pursuing the military option would be much greater. It means undertaking an operation with far-reaching strategic implications contrary to the explicit position of Israel's main, perhaps only, ally. Under present circumstances it is hard to see how Israel could benefit from this.

Prime Minister Netanyahu must assume that he will not get a blurred green light for military action as did Prime Minister Levi Eshkol from President Johnson on the eve of the Six Day War. He will certainly not get the clear green light that, according to various sources, Prime Minister Olmert received from President Bush on the eve of the attack on the nuclear installation in Syria. His position would be fairly similar to that of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion on the eve of the Sinai Campaign, when it was clear to him that a military operation against Egypt would meet with a negative American response, or even more similar to Prime Minister Menachem Begin's position on the eve of the bombing of the atomic reactor in Iraq.

At the same time, Israel may assume that should its military action against Iran fail and it finds itself caught up in a widespread regional conflict and facing a massive Iranian response that could severely threaten Israel, the administration would not abandon it as a punitive measure for having dared to act against American wishes for the following key reasons: a) the special relationship that over the years has been formed between the two nations; b) unequivocal declarations by very senior administration officials about the US commitment to Israel's security; c) the fear on the part of the US that the lack of American support would force Israel to make use of "the strategic deterrent force" that Israel, so

America assumes, possesses; d) the awareness that public opinion and Congress would apply massive pressure on the administration not to abandon Israel in its most difficult hour; e) the concern that many voters, including Jews and supporters of Israel, would turn their back on the President in the upcoming election.

The Israeli government must assume that in any case, the American administration would issue statements against any Israeli military operation in Iran. The real nature of the American response, however, would to a large extent be affected by the measure of the Israeli operation's success. Should it be a "clean" strike, i.e., manage to disrupt the Iranian nuclear project severely, not entail heavy losses to either side, and not elicit an exceptional Iranian counter-action, then the US would likely pay lip service to the need to condemn Israel for having embarked on a military action before all political moves against Iran had been tried and found wanting. In practice, the United States would almost certainly be pleased that its job had been done by others. However, should the operation fail, Israel would suffer not only American and international condemnation, but also conceivably punitive steps, perhaps similar to those taken by the Reagan administration after the attack in Iraq.

The response of the American administration will almost certainly also be affected by the conduct of Netanyahu's government before and during the action. If Israel has made, or will make, it clear to the American administration at the most senior level that it is reserving the option to take military action against Iran for the security of its citizens and that it may take action without first informing the administration, the administration's anger would then be limited to the actual operation. In such a situation, Israel would save itself the anger that is liable to stem from a sense that Israel misled the administration. In any case, if it decides to act, Israel will presumably ensure that the American president and administration will be the first to learn of the operation, and will know about it in real time.

