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**Between the “Zone of Immunity” and the “Zone of Trust”:  
US-Israel Relations in Light of Iran’s Continuing Nuclearization**

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There is no doubt that in the March 5, 2012 meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu in Washington, the subject of Iran dominated all other issues on both leaders' agendas. This meeting, the speeches delivered by both leaders at the 2012 AIPAC Policy Conference, and various recent media interviews make it possible to sharpen some ideas regarding the United States-Israel-Iran triangle.

In the most recent comments on Iran made by President Obama in advance of his meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, particularly in his speech at the AIPAC Conference, several points of strategic importance for both the US and Israel were particularly noteworthy. Alongside the two nations' shared concern about Iranian nuclearization, there were also clear differences of opinion about how to stop Iran's problematic defiance and nuclear progress. This essay considers the main emphases to emerge from the leaders' comments and tries to assess their significance, especially for the State of Israel.

**Bilateral Relations between Israel and the United States**

President Obama went out of his way to underscore the close relations that have developed between the US and Israel during his term in office, expressed both on the military-security level and with regard to political and diplomatic issues. The President emphasized the intelligence cooperation between the two nations, the joint military exercises, and America's willingness to provide Israel with advanced weapons, given only to America's closest allies. He stressed America's across-the-board support for Israel in international institutions and organizations, and its many efforts to neutralize criticism and defamation of Israel on the international arena. In this context, he noted America's activity against the Goldstone Report and its positions at the Human Rights Conference and the Durban Conference.

The message projected by these assertions was that Israel must internalize that it has a “true friend” in the White House. Beyond the President's need to attack his rivals in the

2012 presidential race, now gathering steam, these comments may also include a message for Israel in the Iranian context, namely, that the American administration is led by a president with a proven track record of staunch support for Israel. In an interview with *The Atlantic* published a few days before the speech, the President stressed that he has fulfilled all of his commitments to Israel. With regard to a possible strike against Iran, he emphasized, “I don’t bluff.” In other words, Israel can rest assured that as to Iran, the President will not let it down and will act to ensure its security in light of the severe threat it faces.

### **Positions on Iran**

In the context of Iran, the President’s statements were unprecedentedly definitive and resolute, both in formulation and tone. Against all those who would like to present Iran’s nuclearization as “Israel’s problem,” President Obama made it clear that an *Iranian military nuclear capability is contrary to America’s national interests*. In fact, it is an issue that concerns the entire international community. This statement has far reaching significance because it refutes claims among influential circles within the American administration that Israel is bringing tremendous pressure to bear in order to force the US to attack Iran, when it is questionable whether such an attack indeed serves American interests.

In his AIPAC speech, the President defended the policy of engagement he has pursued in dealing with Iran. He claimed, justifiably, that this policy has exposed Iran’s stubbornness and its leadership’s unwillingness to come to any sort of compromise over the nuclear issue. This in turn has enabled the US to enlist the international community to apply severe sanctions against Iran. In this context, the President noted with satisfaction that Russia and China had joined the international struggle against Iran’s nuclearization. At the same time, he chose not to criticize the current position of Russia and China that opposes any sanctions beyond those imposed by the Security Council in the summer of 2010.

In light of some harsh criticism, including in Israel, that has been directed against the policy of engagement due to serious concerns that it might be leading the US to ultimately resign itself to a nuclear Iran, the President stated clearly that *US policy is not a policy of containment* in the Iranian context. Rather, it is a policy of preventing Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon. The US Secretary of Defense repeated this formulation in his speech at the AIPAC Conference and stressed that no one should doubt that if all political and diplomatic efforts to dissuade Iran from continuing its nuclear activity fail, “we will act.”

To the best of our knowledge, there has never before been such expressed determination, formulated in such unequivocal language, regarding the US intention to prevent Iran from attaining military nuclear capabilities. The President warned Iran to make no mistake about America’s resolve.

At the same time, even in these formulations, the President was careful not to completely handcuff himself to any particular strategy on Iran. Obama is well aware of Israel’s demands that there be some practical manifestation of America’s resolute statements that it intends to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons. Israel is insisting that the administration must recognize that Israel’s window of opportunity to handle the Iranian issue is much narrower than America’s, and that therefore the administration must explicitly and unambiguously define the red lines that if crossed by Iran will be considered clear indication that Iran is working to attain nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Israel has demanded that there be a practical definition of the President’s assertion that the US will use all means at its disposal in order to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons; this has not been expressed in public declarations. One cannot discount the possibility, however, that in the face-to-face meetings between the two leaders, Netanyahu heard much more explicit words from Obama.

Openly criticizing the public debate on Iran, the President made it clear that there is “too much loose talk of war.” The President did not mention Israel explicitly, but it appears that his comment was directed first and foremost at the heated debate underway in Israel about Iran. At the same time, it is not inconceivable that the barb was directed at his domestic political rivals who do not pass up any opportunity to attack Obama for his weak policy on Iran. The President contended that “the voices of war” heard in the Iranian context work in Iran’s favor and are raising the price of oil. The security of Israel and the US requires everyone to avoid unnecessary bluster.

Finally, the President stressed that Iran should be clear that Israel has the sovereign right to make decisions on safeguarding its security. Earlier he stressed that “Israel must be able to defend itself – by itself – against any threat.” The President obviously took Netanyahu’s statement in the White House seriously that Israel is “the master of its fate.” This string of phrases uttered by the highest authority in the US administration suggests that the administration is attempting to transmit to Israel that it will not stand in Israel’s way should the latter decide to act on its own. No green light has been given; the administration made it expressly clear that in its opinion an Israeli attack on Iran at this time is not the right move. However, the message may constitute a flashing yellow light if Israel is absolutely convinced it has to “defend itself – by itself.” In this context, another statement by the President – that the administration will always stand alongside Israel in terms of maintaining its security – assumes major importance. There may be a hidden

message here to Israel that it does not have to worry about punitive measures should it decide to act alone against Iran; the administration will continue to support it, no matter what. At the same time, as Netanyahu's plane progressed back to Israel, sharper statements were sounded by Obama against an Israeli attack in the near future, with clear-cut assertions about the potential cost and damage to both Israel and the United States.

Before the Obama-Netanyahu meeting, we suggested that the “zone of trust” between the two leaders should be the decisive element in Israel’s thinking about Iran. Their public statements do not make it possible to say that the “zone of trust” is now dominant in Israeli thinking, though perhaps knowledge of what was said behind closed doors would change this assessment.

