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## **The United States and Israel: A Shared Strategy for the Challenges of the Middle East**

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### **Background**

President Obama's upcoming visit to Israel, along with the formation of a new Israeli government, is an opportunity for the United States and Israel to formulate a joint strategy toward the challenges of the Middle East. The two countries view the main trends in the region with concern: Iranian efforts to acquire military nuclear capability continue unabated, and in Syria, the struggle between the Assad regime and opposition forces continues, joined by the concern that strategic weapons could end up in the hands of extremist elements. In addition, there has been no progress on the Palestinian issue, nor has a solution been found to the "crisis of honor" between Israel and Turkey. Political Islam continues to intensify, and the Muslim Brotherhood has tightened its hold in Egypt.

The complex processes underway in the Middle East have affected the policy of the government of Israel, which is working on the assumption that the current period is not suited to initiative or proactive measures. They have also influenced the policy of President Obama, which perceives that along with its domestic issues, the United States has limited power to address world problems in general, and those of the Middle East in particular. Hence, the trend is for the United States to distance itself from the problems of the Middle East, withdraw US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, reject a military option against Iran, and refrain from intervening in Syria.

Nevertheless, moments of decision are approaching when these problems will require intensive treatment; if left ignored, the situation in several theaters could well spiral out of control. Close strategic coordination with the second Obama administration is therefore essential for Israel.

A mapping of interests between the United States and Israel highlights a number of basic common interests as well as conflicting situational interests stemming from different views on how to respond to the challenges. The United States and Israel share an interest in preventing Iran from acquiring military nuclear capability, but they differ on the means to this end. Israel and the United States anticipate that the Assad regime will fall and that

Syria will be cut off from the radical axis led by Iran. Both aspire to strengthen the peace agreement and to maintain the stability of Jordan. Both have accepted the reality of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, and strive to preserve stability and effective governance as well as the peace treaty. Although the United States and Israel do not see eye-to-eye on the ability to promote a permanent settlement with the Palestinians and the regional changes that would result from a solution, the government of Israel is prepared to return to the negotiating table without preconditions.

### **Formulating a Joint Regional Strategy**

The leading recommended principles of a joint Israeli-US regional strategy are:

1. The United States does not disassociate itself from the Middle East, and is committed to prevent the region from falling into the hands of radical Islam.
2. Reinforced bilateral strategic relations, and deepened special defense ties.
3. Full transparency between the leaders; avoidance of steps that surprise the other side.
4. The United States will refrain from challenging the government of Israel with a demand to stop building in Jerusalem, which runs counter to the Israeli consensus. In return, Israel will formulate a restrained policy of construction in settlement blocs only.
5. An ongoing dialogue to determine priorities toward integrated efforts to political, security, diplomatic, economic, and social regional challenges.
6. A common understanding that actions, not words, are what matter in the Middle East, and therefore objectives must be promoted with steadfastness, including a willingness to use force.

On the basis of these principles, it is recommended that an integrated systemic strategic approach be formulated that maps linkages and unintended consequences and allows engagement with several challenges at once.

### ***The first layer: Stopping the Iranian military nuclear program***

President Obama should provide Israel with assurances that he will implement his strategy of prevention and will not slide into a strategy of containment. Confidence building can be based on three elements:

1. Joint planning of the military option, including maintaining the results of a military attack over time.
2. Mutual understandings about a reasonable arrangement with Iran. It appears that Israel will be asked to show flexibility on the issue of Iranian uranium enrichment, as long as any material enriched above 3.5 percent is not stored in Iran.
3. Stepped up sanctions against Iran as long as it procrastinates in the negotiations

***The second layer: The Palestinian arena***

The Prime Minister of Israel must assure President Obama that he will make every effort to jumpstart the political process with the Palestinian Authority. While emphasizing that currently there is little chance of achieving a permanent status agreement, Israel proposes three complementary options: (a) continued pursuit of a permanent settlement, based on a willingness to return to negotiations with no preconditions to discuss all issues; (b) negotiations on transitional arrangements, comprising measured steps toward a permanent settlement with the rule that anything agreed upon will be implemented; (c) barring other options, coordinated unilateralism, i.e., in the absence of a Palestinian partner for a permanent agreement, Israel will shape the situation by itself in accordance with the concept of separation, with a willingness to withdraw from areas in Judea and Samaria and redeploy along the line of the security fence in the Jordan Valley, while maintaining freedom of action for the IDF throughout the West Bank. In tandem, the economic, governance, and security collapse of the PA should be prevented. Gaza will be outside the arrangements as long as Hamas does not accept the three fundamental Quartet conditions.

***The third layer: The day after Assad***

Coordination is needed between Israel, the United States, and the West regarding Syria in the post-Assad regime era. In the immediate term, this involves formulating a joint US-Israeli policy for preventing the use of chemical and biological weapons and preventing the transfer of strategic weapons to Hizbollah and other extremist elements. The greater emphasis should be on neutralizing the influence of Iran and Hizbollah in Syria (cutting Syria off from the radical axis); preventing jihadist elements from taking over the country; and supporting the establishment of a stable, pro-Western government that is committed to internal reconciliation and Syrian unity.

***The fourth layer: Stabilizing the Syrian perimeter***

Given the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom as an anchor of stability in the region and a loyal ally of the United States and Israel, special attention should be paid to its survivability and stability, endangered by its economic weakness. Turkey has a vital role to play in the area and in building a post-Assad Syria. Thus, Israel should respond to the American request and find a formula for apologizing to Turkey. At the same time, a joint American-Jordanian-Turkish effort must be promoted to prevent Iraq from disintegrating or falling under full Iranian influence. Backing is also needed for a Western effort, possibly led by France, to change the internal balance in Lebanon in favor of stabilizing forces that oppose Hizbollah.

***The fifth layer: Egyptian stability and governability in Sinai***

The first goal is to preserve the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and honor the security commitments of the military appendix. The United States should form a coalition of Western states that will assist in reconstructing Egypt's collapsing economy with the following conditions: a commitment by the regime to maintain the peace treaty with Israel, the application of effective governance in Sinai, and effective Egyptian action to stop weapons smuggling to the Gaza Strip. The United States, Israel, and European Union states must help Egypt acquire the tools to deal with the needs of the Bedouin tribes in Sinai and build sources of employment and income to replace smuggling. At the same time, Israel can help the regime in Cairo by providing relief for the Gaza Strip and by implementing and expanding the understandings reached at the end of Operation Pillar of Defense.

**Conclusion**

Since Israel has limited capabilities to deal successfully with a variety of challenges at once, it is essential that it achieve close strategic coordination with the United States. Israel's Prime Minister must take advantage of President Obama's visit to formulate a joint strategy for coping with the challenges of the Middle East based on overlapping interests, and on issues where there is a gap, define the shared objectives so as to map the best course of action and way to deal with the problems. A policy of give and take is needed, with each side respecting the interests of the other and in return, receiving assistance in promoting its vital interests. The basis for this is an ongoing strategic dialogue and maximum openness.

