The president who holds Israel's fate in the palm of his hand

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The question of who Israel’s prime minister will be is usually an important one. But as far as Israel's national security is concerned, the question is becoming less and less important. The reason for this is not a happy one.

In recent months, while we were busy here with the issue of universal draft, Israel lost quite a bit of its ability to chart its own strategic future. During the rainy winter of the elections, while everyone was asking where the money is, Iran reached the verge of the immunity zone. Within a short time the question of whether Israel continues to be a major regional power will cease being an Israeli question and become an American question. It will not be the sovereign prime minister of sovereign Israel who decides whether we remain sovereign over ourselves, but rather the president of the United States.

In sum, Israel’s ability to live a half-normal life in this abnormal place is based on Dimona’s monopoly. About a decade ago it emerged that Iran was very tangibly threatening that monopoly. From 2002 to 2008, Israel hoped that some unseen hand would lift the Iranian threat over its future. The unseen hand was indeed brave, creative and almost genius-like, but the task was too great for it. And so from 2009 to 2012, Israel threatened to stop the Iranian threat by itself. But in these very days, Israel’s counter-threat is dissipating and losing its strength. As a result, for the first time in its history, Israel will soon have to place its fate in the hands of others. The Israelis will not decide whether to be or not to be? President Barack Obama [2] will decide.

The new situation highlights what has happened here in recent years. Looking back, it is clear
that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (3) and Defense Minister Ehud Barak (4) were right when they said 2012 would be a fateful year. Looking back, it is clear that Netanyahu and Barak were unable to obtain the result they wanted out of that year. After they created a great international drama, the international community turned its back on them. After they created a great Israeli drama, most Israelis turned their backs on them. Although their analysis of the situation was correct, Netanyahu and Barak were unable to stop Iran during the last period of time that Israel could still do so.

The new situation also highlights what will happen in the coming years: In a few months, Israel’s period of independence in the realm of security will come to an end. The ball will then immediately move to the White House court. Israel will cease to be relevant. Netanyahu will cease to be relevant. Even the Israel Defense Forces will cease to be relevant. The president of the United States will be the person who holds Israel’s security in his hands. If he decides to pay the high price of stopping Iran, Israel will flourish. If he decides to forgo the effort, Israel will decline. Obama will for all intents and purposes head Israel’s 33rd government.

Over the past four years Israel has done its best to become the object of Obama’s loathing. It did not grant his wish for a courageous move vis-a-vis the Palestinians; it acquiesced only partially and temporarily to his request to freeze the settlements; senior Israeli officials showed sympathy for his rivals and created the impression that they wanted his downfall. And yet, people say in Washington, Obama insists on being Israel’s friend. He identifies with the basic Jewish story of slavery to freedom; he treats kindly the enlightened Israeli story of Amos Oz, David Grossman and Haaretz. As he gave Israel the security of Iron Dome, he would be glad to give it a strategic iron dome.

And so he is coming here next week: to redress the errors he made in his first term and to turn over a new leaf in relations with a people who are deeply suspicious of him. And indeed, this short, bustling visit will be different than any that preceded it. This time it will be the visit of an American president who holds the fate of the Jewish state in the palm of his hand.