

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 96 (December 2020)

Gall Olle Sigler\*

January 2021

*The price tag for Moroccan, Emirati and Sudanese normalization with Israel crystalizes with the passage of aid and immunity to Sudan, the removal of Sudan from the States Sponsors of Terrorism list, the UAE and Morocco arms sales, and the US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Congress approved military aid to Israel and funding for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation efforts. While the Trump administration accelerates its economic and military pressure on Iran, Biden prepares for office, and cautiously elucidates his divergent vision for the US policy towards Iran.*

### A. Israel-US Relations

**1. Funding for Israel in the 2021 defense budget.** Congress [overrode](#) a veto by President Trump to [approve](#) a defense budget for 2021, that provides 3.3 billion USD worth of security assistance to Israel and allocates 500 million USD for collaborative projects with Israel. The provisions pertaining to Israel in the bill largely echo the ten-year [memorandum of understanding](#) signed in 2018. New provisions were [introduced](#) this year that allow the president to exceed, in a non-emergency situation, the current 200 million USD limitation on precision-guided munition exports to Israel and [enable](#) the State Department to form a US-Israel working group on defense technology. The bill also [allotted](#) 12 million USD for medical Israeli-American cooperation addressing Covid-19, and 6 million USD for sustainability projects between Israel, the US and developing countries, over the next three years.

**2. Close security cooperation between Israel and the US.** The US Embassy in Israel reported that Top National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien [convened](#) with PM Netanyahu and Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat in Jerusalem, discussing security matters, the Abraham Accords and other regional issues. During his visit, O'Brien awarded Ben-Shabbat the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service, the highest honorary medal for a non-US citizen.

**3. The US stands with Israel in international institutions.** The US expectedly [voted sweepingly against](#) all five resolutions criticizing Israeli policies in the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly. Despite US objection, the resolutions passed, including condemnations of the occupation of the [Golan Heights](#) and the [West Bank](#).

**4. Despite opposition from officials, Pollard landed in Israel.** Jonathan Pollard, former US Navy intelligence analyst and spy for Israel, was [greeted](#) at Ben Gurion airport by PM Netanyahu 35 years after his arrest. Despite [opposition](#) from the FBI and Pentagon and

---

\* Gall Olle Sigler studies Political Science at Yale University, USA. He is interested in American Middle East policy, nuclear politics, Israeli politics, social reform, international law, bioethics, and more.

Navy officials, the Justice Department announced in November that Pollard had completed his parole, and subsequently was free to relocate to Israel.

## **B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process**

**1. Bi-partisan support for peace and reconciliation projects.** Congress [passed](#) a bi-partisan initiative, as part of the omnibus Covid-19 relief bill, that provides 250 million USD to Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding projects as well as programs to stimulate the Palestinian business sector. The funding will be spread evenly over the next five years and will be expended to facilitate non-governmental peace efforts amid “growing polarization and dehumanization”. The initiative is a result of years-long lobbying efforts by the Alliance for Middle East Peace coalition.

**2. Think tanks and experts try to shape Biden’s Israeli-Palestinian policy.** In the closing weeks of his presidency, Trump does not appear to pursue the “Peace to Prosperity Plan”. President-elect Biden is expected to diverge from Trump’s framework for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and several research institutes crafted proposals to lead Biden’s policy instead. The Center for New American Security [published](#) a comprehensive proposal to rework US posture towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution, that includes recommendations such as reinstating funding to UNRWA, holding Israel accountable for settlement expansion, and urging Israel to designate Area C as Area B. The International Crisis Group, together with the US/Middle East Project, [proposed](#) that Biden focus on human rights, obstacles to the viability of a two-states solution and efforts for Palestinian political renewal. Foreign policy experts Daniel Kurtzer and Aaron David Miller [urged](#) Biden’s administration to prioritize multilateralism as the underpinning for Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

## **C. US and Israel’s Relations with Arab Countries**

**1. Trump recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for normalization with Israel.** The US recognition [deviates](#) from international consensus and a 40-year precedent of neutrality over the disputed status of the region. The move elicited criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike. Senator Inhofe (R-OK) [lamented](#) on the Senate floor that the US has “traded away” the West Saharan people. Rep. Engle (D-NY) expressed concern that such a unilateral decision [undercuts](#) multilateralism and US credibility. The US also approved 1 billion USD in arms sales to Morocco, which [include](#) four MQ-9 Reaper drones and precision guided munitions. The US announced it will [open](#) a consulate in Western Sahara, and is [expected to sign](#) further treaties of economic cooperation with Morocco. Ahead of the joint Israeli-American delegation to congeal the normalization deal in Rabat, the White House delegation headed by senior advisor Kushner [landed](#) in Israel. Kushner averred in a tree-planting ceremony with PM Netanyahu in the capital that the recognition of Jerusalem [revved up](#) peace in the Middle East. When pressed about the likelihood of additional normalization deals, he stated that he was “very hopeful.”

**2. Democrats unsuccessfully challenge UAE arms sale.** The Senate [struck down](#) two resolutions aiming to [block](#) the 23 billion USD arms deal of F-35 aircrafts and Reaper drones to the Emirates. The arms sale is widely viewed as part of the multifaceted agreement between the US and UAE that [includes](#) the latter’s decision to normalize relations with Israel. Republicans supporting the sale argued that Israeli military superiority will not falter as a result. Announcing the State Department’s intention to advance the sale in November,

Pompeo [assured](#) that the deal is “fully consistent” with the US commitment to Israel’s “Qualitative Military Edge”.

### **3. Sudan removed from terrorist sponsors list and receives funding and immunity.**

The US [vowed](#) to remove Sudan from the terrorist sponsors list as part of Sudan’s agreement to normalize relations with Israel, [announced](#) on October 23<sup>rd</sup>. The American failure to expedite the removal, perturbed Sudanese officials, who [posed](#) the end of the year as a deadline to Secretary Pompeo, lest Khartoum backtrack from the nascent normalization. The Sudani ultimatum reflects the precarious economic underpinning of its decision to normalize ties with Israel. In addition to [removing](#) Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism, Congress legislated to [restore](#) Sudan’s sovereign immunity, except for litigations filed by families of 9/11 victims. The bill also [provides](#) Sudan with 700 million USD aid, and an additional 120 million USD towards the payment of its debts to the IMF. Israeli officials reportedly [lobbied](#) lawmakers in Washington to approve the bill, fearing that a failure to grant Sudan immunity will imperil normalization with Sudan and other Arab states.

### **4. Aryeh Lightstone appointed as Special Envoy for Economic Normalization in the Middle East.**

Lightstone, who has been named in November head of the “Abraham Fund”, is also a senior advisor to US Ambassador to Israel Freedman. Secretary Pompeo [proclaimed](#) that Lightstone will “contribute to the speed and efficiency of the normalization process,” as an envoy. The appointment does not [bestow](#) Lightstone with new responsibilities, and will expire with Biden’s inauguration. Lightstone’s selection to lead the “Abraham Fund” prompted [clamorous opposition](#) from numerous Congress Democrats, due to his ties to right-wing Israeli organizations such as “Im Tirtzu”.

## **D. US Middle East Policy**

**1. Simmering tensions between Iran and the US.** Trump has [become](#) more passive in Iran policy to concentrate on his venture to upend the election results. He reportedly [handed over the reins](#) to Secretary Pompeo, conveying that any maneuver that does not “start a World War III” is acceptable when dealing with Iran. The pressure on Iran continues vigorously, as the Department of State [announced](#) new sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps envoy in Yemen, two senior officials in Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, Al-Mustafa international university and four entities facilitating the export of Iranian petrochemical products. Secretary Pompeo [condemned](#) a decision by Iran’s Majles and Guardian Council approving Uranium [enrichment, and suspension](#) of UN inspections of nuclear sites. Pompeo implored allies to eschew rewarding the Iranian regime with “economic appeasement.” For the second time in a month, US Air Force bombers [flew](#) in close proximity to Iranian airspace, demonstrating American military presence. The move came amid heightened alert in the US military, to deter Iran from attacking US troops.

### **2. Biden’s vision for renewed diplomacy towards Iran consternates Israeli officials.**

Biden vowed to revamp American internationalism and re-invest in multilateralism. In an exclusive interview to the New York Times, President-elect Biden [stated](#) that if Iran will comply with the JCPOA, the US will eagerly rejoin the agreement. Reciprocating, Rouhani publicly appealed to Biden for the US to [return](#) to the deal, while emphasising that re-negotiation is off the table. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Milley, who is expected to [retain](#) his position under Biden, [met](#) in Jerusalem with Defense Minister Gantz and IDF Chief of Staff Kochavi, discussing the Iranian threat and other security challenges. As a message to the incoming Biden administration, the Israeli officials stressed the importance of the

economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran. Gantz also emphasized to Milley the significance of US military presence in the region, contrasting Trump's agenda of troop withdrawal and ending "[endless wars](#)".

**3. Rising tensions between Turkey and the US.** The State Department [announced](#) sanctions against the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industry (SSB), as the NATO ally [did not backtrack](#) from its purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems. The sanctions introduce visa restrictions and asset freezes on SSB officials and its president, and a ban on US exports to SSB.

## E. Further Readings

- [Iran is in Syria to Stay](#), *Foreign Affairs*
- [How Arab Ties With Israel Became the Middle East's New Normal](#), *Foreign Policy*
- [A new direction?](#), *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*
- [On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, practical steps are more important than grand visions](#), *Brookings Institution*
- [Submarine Movements on Iran's Doorstep: Military and Legal Implications](#), *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*