

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 90 (June 2020)

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**July 2020**

*Four months ahead of the presidential elections, Trump's administration is realizing that even if it really wants to pull out of the Middle East, the Middle East is in no rush to let go. It is engaged in rivalry (mostly strategic) with Russia and with China (mostly economic, but tough). Its ambitious Israeli-Palestinian peace plan is going nowhere, and as was the case with previous administrations, it is mired in a series of complex, intertwined issues and inter-power rivalries in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon and cannot chalk up a single real achievement in any one of them.*

**Power competition** - In addition to American efforts to block China, the rivalry with Russia is deepening. Its latest manifestation is the alleged Russian bounty payments to Taliban fighters to kill US soldiers (according to unconfirmed US intelligence claims). The US is also dealing with the consequences of the Russian-Turkish S-400 deal, with Russian penetration into Libya and support for Gen. Haftar in a bid to establish itself as a reliable patron and perhaps, eventually, hook Haftar up with Assad (given Russia's success in Syria). That is why [the US is harshly critical of Russian measures](#) in the Middle Eastern arena.

**China-Israel-US** - In an in-depth review of the history of Israeli-Chinese relations and their complexities, Doug Faith (former Undersecretary of Defense) warns that if Biden wins, [some in his administration will be critical of Israel's robust ties with China, as well as of its policies on the Palestinian issue](#). However, US pressure notwithstanding, [Israel will be hard pressed to limit its relations with China](#) given the extent of their joint projects.

**Jews and Israel** - With increasing anti-Semitic displays in the US, prominent writer Cynthia Ozick [argues](#) that there is a link between anti-Semitic violence and intellectual anti-Semitism, since book burners must first know there are books to burn, which is where the intellectuals come in. The clash within the Democratic Party between progressives and the leadership is also reflected in tensions between Jews and black Americans. [AIPAC's statement denouncing the George Floyd](#) murder and expressing respect for American values received a lukewarm reception and prompted criticism over its delay. This was probably the backdrop for Rep. Eliot Engel's defeat by pro-Palestinian Jamaal Bowman, although Bowman is not openly critical of US-Israel ties; pro-Palestinian activists warn against expecting too much from him on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. As far as they are concerned, suffice it that he beat the pro-Israel Engel. However, Palestinian-American activist Linda Sarsour says that once in Congress, Bowman will have to take orders unquestioningly from "The Squad" (the four progressive Congresswomen, including Muslims

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Omar and Tlaib). Meanwhile, a Washington Post poll found that [two-thirds of Americans believe it is legitimate to express doubt about US ties with Israel](#).

**The Trump Plan and annexation intentions** - [A University of Maryland poll](#) conducted in March 2020 (published in June) found a clear gap between Democrats and Republicans on the Trump Plan. Most Democrats (72 percent) and independents (53 percent) believe the plan is pro-Israel, fails to grant the Palestinians a state and, in effect, perpetuates the occupation. The many geographic options for an Israeli annexation measure ([see map](#)) could point to it being half-baked. Nonetheless, and despite the obstacles (such as the US demand that the Blue and White party agree to the annexation as a pre-condition for an American green light), Trump's support for an idea that was always a political taboo still renders the move acceptable in the Israeli political arena. Despite the disagreement between Ambassador Friedman and Trump's advisor and son-in-law Kushner, no bottom line was reached at the June 23 White House discussions on whether and when to give Netanyahu the nod to annex.

Secretary of State Pompeo adhered to the position that annexation of settlements was up to Israel, while the expectation of a Trump statement in the same vein, at which the White House spokesperson hinted, was not forthcoming eventually. Meanwhile, the disagreement persists in Washington, where even veteran friends of Israel oppose the annexation. Dennis [Ross challenges Netanyahu's Ben-Gurion like approach](#) and points to the many dangers inherent to unilateral annexation. Rob Satloff, too, who describes himself as an ardent Zionist, argues that [annexation makes no sense](#) and fears that unless Trump walks back his annexation approval, it will be too late to undo the diplomatic damage caused by this false hope.

In [an unprecedented opinion column](#) penned for an Israeli Hebrew-language newspaper (*Yediot Ahronoth*), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ambassador to the US warned that Israel must choose between annexation and normalization with the Arab world, adding that annexation would prompt calls to establish one state. Jordan took to the offensive, and the King made it clear to the Americans that he was weighing his response to possible annexation, including the downgrading of agreements with Israel and a complaint to the UN Security Council, although Trump could block the Council's condemnation with a US veto. King Abdullah also appealed to Congress on a video conference call. The Palestinians are pointing to the heavy price of annexation for Israel, which would have to replace the 30,000 Palestinian security forces, while their supporters in Washington argue that Israel will no longer be "Jewish and democratic" if it goes through with annexation. [The PLO issued a comprehensive document](#) entitled "Looming Annexation", while Israel's ambassador to the US [advocated](#) abandoning the two-state illusion in favor of "realistic solutions". In light of the disagreements and emotional responses, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) prepared a detailed, annotated and mapped [40-page document](#) of "Frequently Asked Questions" on the annexation.

In [an interview](#) with "The Arena", the online magazine of the Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy, Biden foreign policy advisor Ambassador Nicholas Burns underscored the existence of bipartisan US support for Israel (which does not exist, de facto), warning that "annexation would be not just unwise, but a huge mistake." Liberal Jewish organizations are sharply critical of the planned move ([see letter](#) by the Reform organization *T'ruah*: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights), as are leading Democrats in Congress. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi expressed "deep concern" about the plan. Senator

Bob Casey [appealed to Israel](#) “in the name of friendship” to choose another path. Many other lawmakers expressed themselves in a similar vein, among them Senators [Bennet](#), Klobuchar, Smith, Booker and others. Sen. Kamala Harris, mentioned as Biden’s possible VP candidate, argued that annexation would cast into doubt “Israel’s commitment to our shared values”, whereas Susan Rice, former Obama Administration Ambassador to the UN, whose name as also come up as a potential Biden running mate, believes annexation would greatly challenge continued bipartisan support of Israel. Senate Minority Leader Schumer, as well as Senators Cardin and Menendez, who describe themselves as “sworn Israel supporters”, along with 115 (and eventually 200) House members led by Majority Leader Hoyer (a prominent Israel friend) [wrote to Netanyahu](#) expressing opposition to annexation.

The (American) debate on (Israeli) annexation also generated anew the issue of US aid for Israel. On the leftist Democratic fringes, Sanders and 13 other lawmakers dubbed annexation “apartheid” and conditioned their future backing for US aid to Israel on the annexation issue. The four progressive lawmakers known as “The Squad” [warned](#) they would place conditions on continued aid to Israel if annexation takes place. [AIPAC responded forcefully](#), claiming conditioning aid would be detrimental to US interests, to Israel’s security and to prospects of a two-state solution, and [launched a campaign](#) against such a move. Whereas Yossi Beilin and former US Ambassador Dan Kurtzer proposed phasing out US assistance and replacing it [with three new pacts](#) that would cement Israel-US relations, including NATO membership, a mutual defense treaty and an R&D agreement.

Republicans, on the other hand, welcomed the Trump peace plan and its implementation, including the imposition of Israeli sovereignty on parts of the West Bank. Reflecting growing inter-party acrimony as the elections draw near, Republican lawmakers expressed criticism of the Obama-Biden Administration’s handling of [UN Resolution 2334](#). Six senators, led by Sen. Cruz, [sent Trump a letter](#) describing his plan as a realistic solution, and supporting the right of a sovereign Israel to make its own decisions. [A letter to Netanyahu signed by 115 Congressional Republicans](#) echoed the sentiment. Nonetheless, [criticism of the annexation as “unnecessary”](#) also emerged on the Republican side.

**Iran** - Despite the US-Iran prisoner swap, the US continues its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. Secretary [Pompeo urged the UN to extend the arms embargo](#) on Iran, and [Special US Iran envoy Brian Hook](#) also urged continued sanctions (during a visit to the UAE) on Iran, making clear that the military option was always on the table. Former US Ambassador to the [UN Nikki Haley claimed the International Monetary Fund was trying to undermine the sanctions](#).

The United States announced the entry into effect of sanctions against the Iranian shipping lines IRISL and E-SAIL (see [issue 85 of January 2020 of this publication](#)) and imposed sanctions on Iran’s metal industry. The US Ambassador to the IAEA in Vienna condemned Iran’s refusal to cooperate with the agency’s inspectors. Despite the food shortage (mostly of grain) resulting from the combination of “maximum pressure” and the Covid-19 pandemic, Teheran reassures Iranians that its national food security is robust, displaying a continued tough line and dismissing [Trump’s proposed negotiations](#) on a new nuclear agreement as “political showboating”. Iranian naval forces have built impressive, decentralized asymmetric capabilities. Their arsenal includes missile and radar systems, fighter jets, and submarines and more, boosting their confidence in ignoring US warnings to keep their distance and periodically harassing US forces. Conservative observers in Washington estimate that three years of “maximum pressure” by the US have failed to yield significant results, but have

caused great suffering in Iran and could ignite [an Iranian “October Surprise” style response that would undermine Trump’s re-election prospects](#) just as it was Jimmy Carter’s political undoing.

Iran is also a campaign issue, and as Nicholas Burns says, “both parties’ representatives understand the need to contain Iran and prevent it becoming a nuclear power, and everyone is concerned about its involvement in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza [...] No matter what party wins the elections [...] the attitude toward Iran as a regional problem will remain unchanged.” Meanwhile the Republican Study Group (RSC), the largest Republican caucus in Congress, has issued [policy recommendations](#) that include withholding aid to all the countries of the Middle East under Iranian control (such as Lebanon), revoking the waivers that allowed Iran to proceed with civilian nuclear projects, and reaffirming the President’s power to authorize (American) military presence in Iraq. The plan also includes ending sanctions waivers allowing Iraq to buy 800 million USD of Iranian oil annually, restoring the snapback option for Iran sanctions, renewing the arms embargo on Iran that expires in October – and imposing US sanctions on states selling weapons to Iran, including China and Russia and on banks funding such deals, in case the UN remains reluctant of an extension. The RSC leadership knows it lacks the required majority for such sweeping legislation, but believes it could pass parts of the plan with support of some Democrats, such as the recently defeated Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Engel. Meanwhile, US allies appear to be doubtful and opposed to a renewed American push at the UN.

**Syria** - On June 17, Trump signed into law the [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#) named for the Syrian military photographer who defected with a trove of 55,000 photos documenting regime atrocities against civilians. The law places a series of demands on President Assad. These include a halt to Syrian-Russian air raids on civilians, consistent humanitarian aid to areas under Iranian or Russian control, release of political prisoners, adherence to international treaties banning the use of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, a safe and dignified return of refugees and launch of a reconciliation process leading to a credible assumption of responsibility. Fulfilling these demands would allow Syria’s return to the international community.

**Lebanon** - The “Caesar Act” also relates to parts of Lebanon under Hezbollah control and sets out conditions for Lebanon to receive the 10 billion USD IMF grant it requests. Nonetheless, Special Representative Jeffrey declared US willingness to extend significant US humanitarian aid to Lebanon against the backdrop of Lebanese concern over proposed US aid cuts and Beirut’s efforts to remind Washington that the US has never placed conditions on its military aid. A Lebanese court banned US Ambassador Dorothy Shea from giving interviews for one year after she attacked Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The ambassador continues to grant interviews, having determined that the injunction against her violates her freedom of speech and has suggested setting aside the regrettable incident and urgently focusing on Lebanon’s dire economic plight.

**Iraq** - The “Caesar Act” also has implications for Iraq stemming from concerns about sanctions on those extending military and monetary aid to the Syrian regime, including armed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria. Iraqi Parliament members have expressed concern about harm to the economic and intelligence cooperation between their country and Syria. The Iraqi-American dialogue held on June 11 (on Zoom) dealt with the issue of continued aid to Iraq to fight ISIS, which despite the blows it has sustained continued to launch sporadic attacks that do not require centralized planning and coordination. This, in light of calls by



Iraqi politicians to pull back the 5,200 American troops from Iraq. US envoy Jeffrey countered that the US would maintain its forces there as long as Iraq wants them and as long as ISIS has not been eliminated.

**Saudi Arabia** - As an expression of the historic-constitutional tensions between the administration and Congress, the Trump Administration [is considering an end](#) to the informal review that has taken place since the 1980s allowing lawmakers from both parties to block weapons sales to foreign governments over humanitarian concerns. Saudi Arabia is a consistent target of congressional reservations over US arms sales. Congress recently delayed the sale of 478 million USD in precision-guided ammunition to the Saudis, and in May 2019, the Secretary of State was forced to declare a “state of emergency” in order to push through a 8.1 billion USD arms deal with Saudi Arabia. That move prompted a review by the State Department’s Inspector General, following which Trump fired him.

**Recommendations for Israel** - Cancel the annexation plan, not before taking measures to maximize the benefits of such a decision in the international arena or at least cutting its losses, and at the same time strengthening ties with the US Jewish community and Democrats. If Biden is elected and the Democrats assume control of both houses of Congress, Israel should make sure to have someone in a leadership position able to forge ties with them based on a previous relationship and past cooperation.