

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 91 (July 2020)

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*Three months before the US election, the Middle East does not appear to stabilize. Contrary to the "reports of the death of America," among political circles in Washington, it appears that the US must formulate a new foreign policy because [America has still a role to play](#) in the region. Furthermore, in light of the disintegrating of the Middle East, it seems that [the Arab world still needs American support](#), it should be asked how the [world will look like without American leadership](#). The low-intensity confrontation between the US and Russia over various spots in the Middle East, including Syria and Libya, shows the difficulty in achieving calm in the inter-power struggle (unlike, for example, the Armenia-Azerbaijan region, where the US and Russia manage to reach understandings).<sup>1</sup>*

**Iran:** The US-Israeli campaign against the Iranian nuclear program continues, as alleged in the reports about the [series of malfunctions/sabotages in Iranian facilities](#). The explosion at the Natanz nuclear facility on July 2<sup>nd</sup> is attributed to an Israeli action. Kenneth McKenzie, CENTCOM's commander, refrained from referring directly to Natanz and just said that the US is following these events closely and that its recent activities, including the killing of Soleimani, still serve as deterrence vis-à-vis Iran. The US continues its maximum pressure policy toward Iran. Trump's (outgoing) Iran envoy, Brian Hook, met with the IAEA Secretary General to discuss the findings regarding Iranian nuclear activities. During his visit to Qatar on July 26<sup>th</sup> Hook said that no one believed that Iran should have free access to the conventional weapons market, and stressed that the Security Council should extend the arms embargo in October so that conflicts such as in Syria or Yemen would not escalate. US Secretary of State Pompeo revealed that the US extended the list of materials that Iran is not be allowed to use in its nuclear facilities, or military and ballistic missile programs, and that whoever transfers them to Iran is subject to sanctions. In the Senate, Pompeo also added that the US considers Iran an aggressor, rather than a victim, and that since May 2018 the US has cut Iran's oil revenues used for terrorism and nuclear activities by 90 percent. He went on to say that the US has improved, though not completed, its military deployment against Iran. He also called for the renewal of the embargo on Iran, and said that steps should be taken against the Iranian construction sector, which is controlled by the Revolutionary Guards and which promotes the construction of nuclear facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we had to omit a number of important issues, including the role of the US in the negotiations with Egypt and Ethiopia on the issue of the Ethiopian Renaissance dam, and the its role in the conflict in Libya including the disputes between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (both US allies). We will be happy to address these issues in the next issue.

Trump and Putin held a telephone conversation on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, which, according to the Kremlin, also revolved around Iran's nuclear program. Washington was surprised by the reports of the signing of a 25-year trade and military agreement between Iran and China.

However, Iran's apparent enthusiasm for the agreement is contrasted with China's restraint. Iran, which signed a military cooperation agreement with Syria on July 9<sup>th</sup>, designed to infringe on Israel's and the US' freedom of action, underestimates the threat of counter cyber-attacks. On the other hand, Iran demonstrated its operational capabilities as it attacked a fake US carrier and launched missiles at the vicinity of three US bases. Khamenei mocks the American moral collapse in light of the demonstrations on the streets of US cities, while other Iranian officials condemned American criticism of the Sino-Iranian ties. Iran stresses that the agreement with China is not against Trump but it is rather the implementation of an agreement that was signed in the days of President Ahmadinejad. However, it is indeed a counter action against the US since Iran needs 134 billion USD in the coming years and the agreement with China already yielded 11.1 billion USD by the end of 2019. An American federal court has ruled that Iran is responsible for the Khobar attack in 1995, during which 19 Americans were killed, ordering reparations of 879 million USD, to be appropriated from suspended Iranian deposits.

**Annexation, Trump's Plan and Security Relations with Israel:** Even after Netanyahu refrained from carrying out his annexation plans on July 1<sup>st</sup>, the Trump plan was still discussed during a meeting at the White House on July 7<sup>th</sup>. The annexation debate has both internal-American and Israeli-American aspects, as emerges from a [letter against the annexation](#) sent by retired Dovish Israeli Knesset members and diplomats calling on the Democratic party to oppose annexation in its platform<sup>2</sup>. Four progressive legislators wrote that the annexation plan would lead to Apartheid and human rights violations, urging Pompeo to advance a common future for Israelis and Palestinians. Democratic [Senator Van Hollen joined annexation opponents](#) in an article he published (in Hebrew) for the Israeli public. The annexation debate became so toxic among Democrats, that even the leading candidate bidding for chairmanship of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Brad Sherman (Jewish), made it clear that, while he was an passionate supporter of Israel, he was "evidently" one of the [first to oppose the annexation](#). Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle promoted a bipartisan legislation that secures funding for Israeli-Palestinian civic initiatives at a total amount of 50 million USD a year for 5 years. The proposal was positively received by leading lawmakers from both parties in the Senate as well.

Leading thinker Peter Beinart had publicly [abandoned](#) the two-state solution [in favor](#) of the single state, while J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami, [called](#) on Democrats to address the occupation in their election platform. However, the [democratic platform](#) remains unchanged in that respect despite the pressure, following a unanimous voting that reflects the positions of the presumptive nominee Biden rather than those of the progressive candidate Sanders. The progressives marked achievements on internal affairs, but they did [not achieve much on issues concerning Israel](#). In contrast, the Republican Party's platform committee omitted references to the two-state solution that were included in previous platforms, while stating that "support for Israel is an expression of Americanism", reiterating that Jerusalem is Israel's eternal and indivisible capital, and that the BDS is an expression of antisemitism. Ten other Republican lawmakers sent a [letter](#) to Pompeo, describing the Democrats' letter as "anti-Semitic" and stating that Israel is a staunch ally of the US while the Palestinians disrupt the peace process. Former adviser Greenblatt has made it clear that Israel has the right to

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<sup>2</sup> The author of this paper was among the letter's signatories.

expand its sovereignty, but that according to the Trump plan it must also allocate territories to a Palestinian state. The media and the public in the US continue to be engaged on the matter. For example, as reflected in a painful column by Hirsh Goodman, who escaped South Africa's apartheid and is unwilling [to live under Israeli annexation](#) or yet in the article by the leading commentators Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, who [called on Israel](#) not to abandon the two-state solution.

Israeli Ministry of Defense hosted the [annual Israeli-US Defense Policy Advisory Group](#) (DPAG). The Congress passed the Defense Authorization Bill, allowing for a military budget of 740 billion USD of which 500 million USD is allocated for American missile-defense cooperation with Israel. The House [Defense Appropriation Committee](#) allocated 3.3 billion USD to Israel, according to the Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries, and 225 million USD in assistance to the West Bank. Another 1.5 billion USD were allocated in security assistance to Jordan, 1.4 billion USD to Egypt as well as 112.5 million USD in civic assistance in addition to another 105 million USD in security assistance to Lebanon. Despite American pressure, Israel did not modify its Haifa Port tender for 580 million USD, while accepting bidders from all countries (including China). The [commander of the US Fifth Fleet](#) does not yet see a threat in the Chinese presence and activity. However, he does think it can become a challenge in the future if China continues to slowly and quietly lay the groundwork to gain advantage, which could change the balance within 15 years.

**The tensions between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus:** In his testimony to the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on the issue of selling the S-400 system from Russia to Turkey, Pompeo said that the US continues to examine appropriate sanctions. The US is also tending to the Turkish-Greek conflict over the demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the islands of Rhodes and Crete, where the Turks intend to conduct drillings while Greece stresses that it will "do whatever it takes" in the face of this threat. The US and Europe support in principle the Greeks and oppose Turkish attempts to set a new maritime border with Libya, in a way that divides the Mediterranean. The State Department has even officially urged Turkey to stop its drilling plans. However, [Turkey is moving away from the West](#) due to the US gradual disengagement and Russia's return to the region. This phenomenon is reflected in Erdogan's accusations that the US is to blame for the Kurdish national awakening and in converting of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul from a museum to a mosque (which the US and the EU deplored). Contrary to the tensions with Turkey, the US is strengthening its relations with Cyprus, and the American Ambassador has announced Washington's intention to train the Cypriote National Guard starting in 2021 under the "Eastern Mediterranean Cooperation on Energy and Security Law" of 2019. At the same time, the Cypriote defense minister announced that the relations with the US were "moving in a new direction," and the US energy giant Chevron had acquired a stake in Noble Energy's natural gas fields in the Mediterranean, for 5 billion USD.

**Turkey, Syria and the Kurds:** The US supports the reconciliation talks between Kurdish factions held in June and early July, but faces a complex challenge as it involves both internal Kurdish talks and talks with Arab-Syrian groups. Senior Syrian US Representative William Roebuck was present at these talks. On the other hand, the US is trying to be careful with Erdogan in Syria, and to create a rift between the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), which it supports, and the PKK, which is recognized in Turkey as a terrorist organization. So far, the Turks were cautious about Idlib but the US needs to take into account that Erdogan can play the intervention card any time and that Turkey has already deployed air defense systems in the region. For the US, the challenge is even greater in light of the deployment

of Russian troops near American areas of influence in the Deir al-Zor region, in coordination with Iran and Syria, who deliberately want to squeeze the US military out of Syria. This in turn may challenge the fragile status quo, if the US indeed does so. Russia (along with China) has campaigned in the UN Security Council to send UN humanitarian aid to Syria in coordination with its partner – Turkey, although the US and European countries fund some 90 percent of the aid while Russia funds only about one percent. At the same time, the US continues to exert pressure on Syria following the [OPCW announcement](#) claiming that Syria used chemical weapons against civilians, and imposed sanctions on four individuals, including Hafez al-Assad, the eldest son of the Syrian president.

**Lebanon (before the Beirut disaster):** In light of the deteriorating situation in the country, Nasrallah announced a policy change on July 7. Until now, the US was "the great devil", he said, but as of now, we would be willing to receive aid from the US and from everyone else except Israel. Although Lebanon is supported by Iran, its economy is collapsing. However, the US refrains from reaching a *détente* with Iran which could potentially save Lebanon's collapsing economy. The US continues to blame Hezbollah's violence for the situation in Lebanon, saying that Hezbollah disregards the interests of Lebanon by carrying out its actions against Israel. However, the commander of CENTCOM promised during his visit to Lebanon that the US would continue to support the Lebanese army. Berri, the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, was due to meet with the US ambassador to discuss the composition of the government, after the US made it clear that it was not interested in a government that includes Hezbollah. Lebanon's ambassador to Washington intended to ask the exclusion of Lebanon from the US "Caesar Act" that imposes restrictions on commodities and agricultural produce from Lebanon. In the meantime, Hezbollah used a road that bypasses border crossings to avoid the trade restrictions imposed by this Act.

**Iraq:** In June, the US declared its intention to reduce its deployment in Iraq and its commitment to provide economic training for Iraq. However, there is still no deadline for the withdrawal of US forces. Meanwhile, the US has completed the deployment of air defense systems in Baghdad's Green Zone. From the Iraqi point of view, the American presence in the country is targeted mainly at Iran (and before that at ISIS). The US presence continues to be a major target for Iranian "maximum pressure" against the US, including in some 100 media channels. However, opinion polls conducted in Iraq show that over the past three years, support for Iran has fallen from 50 percent to 15 percent, while support for the US presence has remained as it was, at around 30 percent. The US should take into account the struggle between the Baghdad government and the "Kata'ib (battalions) Hezbollah" that refuse to accept government authority and sometimes hide behind the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The US relies on a British definition of "Kata'ib Hezbollah" as a terrorist organization in order to encourage similar declarations from more European partners. Washington demonstrates continued support for the Kadhimi administration and the Iraqi legal system and assists the Iraqi police. The US-Iraqi dialogue is expected to continue in August with Kadhimi's planned visit to the US, during which the US financial and military support for Iraq will be discussed. Although the strategic framework agreement between the two countries is intended for the fight against ISIS, the US can use it to train Iraqi forces and for military equipment supply. The agreement also raises the question of the Kurdish region (KRI) and the US encourages both Baghdad and Erbil to cooperate against ISIS and coordinate their oil sales. However, the US (which funds the Peshmerga and trains its factions) is not helpful in resolving the inter-Kurdish clashes, which effectively paralyze the Kurdish parliament and undermine US' ability to take action.

**Recommendations for Israel:** Regardless of the political crisis in Israel, it is advisable to tighten ties with congressional candidates in the various districts, from both parties, as well as try to map out functionaries of a future administration, be they Democrats or Republicans. It is advisable to consult with Jewish leaders whether Israeli leaders should, at some point, comment on the issue of Black Lives Matter, which shocks the US, and even mention that Israel is one of the few countries that mark "Martin Luther King Day". Israel should also express its acceptance of Jewish liberal figures, such as Peter Beinart.