

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 92 (August 2020)

Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah*

September 2020

The month of August, generally known as a slow news month, found the United States deeply engaged with the Gulf States, the horrific Beirut explosion, the Iran threat and other Middle East related issues, such as the Egypt-Ethiopia Nile dispute, the Libya situation and implementation of the Caesar Act vis-à-vis Syria. All of these against the backdrop of a particularly vitriolic election campaign.

The presidential election campaign - The campaign is heating up with each side sowing panic regarding a possible victory of the other side, but a Trump re-election is the greatest concern. Philip Gordon, a senior diplomat in several Democratic administrations, [warns against a second term](#) of an amateur president with a shallow understanding of foreign affairs, who has made bad deals for the US. Kissinger had reportedly [expressed concern](#) about a second Trump term to the secretary general of the French Foreign Ministry, who responded that Europe can barely “contain” Trump. Some Republican circles are asking [whether US foreign policy can survive Trumpism](#). The Democratic chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee [announces contempt proceedings](#) against Secretary of State Pompeo for refusing to hand over requested documents.

Against its better interests, Israel has become an election issue, with both sides using it to goad the other. The surprise winner of the New York 16th District Democratic congressional primaries who beat out Engel, Jamaal Bowman, defines himself as not simply pro-Israel but a staunch Israel supporter; this is typical in many other races. In the Senate, two senators are proposing bipartisan bill “to out” Arab states opposed to normalization with Israel. With the annexation idea de facto abandoned, Joe Biden has included support for Israel and opposition to BDS in the Democratic Party platform, and [reportedly intervened](#) to keep the word “occupation” out of the platform. Palestinian activists, such as pollster Zogbi, have expressed their displeasure.

The Jewish community welcomed Biden’s VP choice of Harris, whose husband is Jewish. A [summary of her positions](#) points to support for a US return to the Iran nuclear agreement, a diplomatic resolution in Afghanistan, and a halt to US support for the “catastrophic” Saudi-led war in Yemen despite the many shared US-Saudi interests. She regards Israel as “a critical ally and friend” and “its security a top priority”. Harris believes Israel should continue to be “Jewish, democratic and secure”, but also that the Palestinians deserve self-rule within the framework of a two-state solution. She has also expressed opposition to annexation and to setting conditions for US aid to Israel. She has avoided, so far, addressing the question of returning the US Embassy to Tel Aviv. At her wedding ceremony, Harris stomped on a

* Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute. He had served, inter alia, as the Deputy Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry, in charge of North America, as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, Consul General in Chicago and as Deputy Head of Mission in Washington, DC.

wine glass (a traditional ending of the Jewish wedding ceremony). She keeps a blue JNF donation box for tree planting in Israel and describes herself as “more AIPAC than J Street”. After Biden’s announcement, Harris said that of all the titles conferred on her, the most meaningful was “Momaleh” by her Jewish family ([see minute 6:11](#) of her comments).

The Jewish Republican Coalition, on the other hand, is appealing to Jewish voters, highlighting Trump’s support of Israel. Former Bush media adviser Fleisher believes Jewish voters could hand Trump a victory in key states. Republicans have launched a [“Wake Up Call”](#) campaign highlighting the impact of the so-called “squad” of four Democratic lawmakers depicted as Muslims hostile to Israel and to American values. Referring to one of them, Rep. Omar, who beat a well-funded rival in Minnesota primaries, Trump said, “How the Hell did she win the primary [...] this horrible woman who hates our country?” Pompeo addressed the Republican Convention from Jerusalem, drawing harsh criticism over his mixing of government business with politics in alleged violation of the 1939 Hatch Act.

Israel and the Emirates - On August 13, Trump announced the “Abraham Accord” for peace between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, saying normalization of ties would include embassies, tourism, direct flights, trade, education and security. He hailed the blow he had dealt Iran with the agreement and praised both states for the courage that led to the historic breakthrough. Presidential adviser Kushner confirmed to journalists that as part of the agreement, Israel had agreed to refrain from annexation without US approval, adding that the US did not intend to give its approval. However, as elections near, it is not out of the question that a desperate Trump could revive the annexation issue if he feels greater evangelical support could improve his prospects (see [FiveThirtyEight project](#) poll), as [Ambassador Shapiro writes](#). Despite skeptical claims, by Republicans too, that the agreement is mainly designed to stem Trump’s polling plunge and Netanyahu’s political failures, officials in Washington, including Trump opponents, [hailed the achievement](#). Biden described it as a “brave and badly-needed act of statesmanship” and pledged that his administration would build on this progress. Pompeo launched a series of visits to Gulf States (including Oman) and Sudan in a bid to bring on board additional states, and Kushner said now was the time for additional states, Saudi Arabia included, to follow the UAE’s example given that Saudi Arabia and Israel “will be able to do a lot of great things together”.

News of the agreement was followed by reports, which Netanyahu denied, that Israel had agreed to the US sale of F-35 Stealth fighters to the Emirates. Despite Netanyahu’s denial of a secret clause in the deal with the UAE, Trump and Kushner said at the outset that an F-35 deal was definitely on the table and that the peace agreement enhances its prospects. National Security Advisor O’Brien emphasized that the US would preserve Israel’s qualitative military edge and that the two states would sign security agreements. The administration’s outgoing Iran coordinator Hook said the states of the region regarded Obama’s signing of the Iran nuclear accord as treason, and only by abandoning the agreement had the US could bring about the rapprochement between Israel and the UAE.

Iran - Despite the support of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and American calls for Europe to take a stand in favor of peace rather than terrorism, [the US failed to convince the UN Security Council](#) to extend the Iran arms embargo. The State Department website stated that the vote paved the way for unlimited Iranian purchases and sales of conventional weapons. According to the US, the Security Council rejected efforts on the part of many states that fear Iranian violence and know its capacity for chaos and destruction. However, the US is committed to continued efforts to prevent the regime from buying and selling

weapons that threaten Europe and the Middle East. The US is citing the snapback option, which supposedly allows it to re-impose sanctions, but Russia, China and the European countries argue that it cannot activate this clause having withdrawn from the nuclear agreement. Even former National Security Advisor [Bolton agrees with them](#), pointing to additional damage – to the US veto power. The US is determined to restore the sanctions on Iran, it has announced their renewal as of Sept. 20 and Trump declared that within a month of his re-election, the Iranians would ask for negotiations with the US. Biden's foreign policy adviser promised a "diplomacy first" policy, but Khamenei clearly does not distinguish between Biden's "soft power" and Trump's "maximum pressure". Iran has been contemptuous of the unprecedented US Security Council defeat, proudly claiming that the US had never been so isolated. Tehran attributed Hook's resignation to the US failure and said his replacement, veteran diplomat Abrams, would also fail.

Iraq - Ahead of the US visit by Iraqi Prime Minister al-Khadhimi, a [Washington Institute policy paper](#) suggested this was the time for the US to prove that Iraq was not only a sideshow to the Iran issue. Centcom Commander McKenzie confirmed that [the US would draw down its deployment](#) in Syria and Iraq, and on August 23, it vacated the al-Taji base used to train Iraqi forces. The State Department announced that some 1,000 troops would be withdrawn from Iraq by October, bringing the US presence to 3,500. This will allow Trump to tell voters that he is keeping his promise to bring US troops home. However, some issues remained unresolved. Al-Khadhimi told reporters that Iraq does not require a massive US presence but rather training to confront clandestine terror cells; the Americans assess that some 2,500 instructors would eventually remain in Iraq. According to a [State Department briefing](#), nine agreements and MOUs were signed during the visit and the US announced an additional 204 million USD in humanitarian aid and 10 million USD for Iraq's elections. This, in addition to US grants totaling 2.4 billion USD since 2014. The [joint communique](#) at the end of the visit also dealt with deepening cooperation on energy, including hooking up Iraq and Kuwait's grid to Saudi Arabia's, reducing energy dependence on Iran. Revolutionary Guard al-Quds force commander Ghaani visited Iraq ahead of al-Khadhimi's trip to Washington to coordinate offensive activity against US targets and undermine the Washington visit. At a US Chamber of Commerce event, al-Khadhimi was asked about corruption in his country, following allegations that [corruption](#) was diverting US funds to terror supporters.

Lebanon - Undersecretary of State Hale visited Lebanon to discuss the demarcation of its maritime border with Israel, express US support following the Beirut port blast and discuss the funds required to rebuild. The US dispatched aid to Lebanon on August 5. Hale said his country expected a credible and transparent investigation of the explosion, with the help of the FBI, and would not accept efforts by the political echelons to evade responsibility for the disaster. The US appears ready to undertake a significant role in Lebanon, taking advantage of the shock to push for broad change, and has already started enforcing the Magnitsky Act against senior Lebanese accused of corruption. Assistant Secretary of State Schenker is expected to discuss reforms and finalize the maritime border markings. Lebanese Parliament Speaker Berri has said the border issue is close to resolution, and Hale reportedly delayed his visit until progress could be reported on the issue. The US is also demanding that Hezbollah reveal its missile stockpiles to UNIFIL, which could force the organization to dismantle them. Hezbollah efforts to buy time have prompted some disagreement between the US and France. France is willing to postpone dealing with the Hezbollah arsenal in order to allow the formation of a new government and completion of the border delineation, but the US seems unwilling to bend. At the same time, discussions were held on extending the UNIFIL mandate against the backdrop of the French-US

differences. The US Embassy claimed Hezbollah was controlling the current government, which should therefore be replaced.

Libya - [According to the US Africa Command](#), the activity of Wagner Group mercenaries run by Russia is delaying agreement between the rival sides. Following a tense year, the US is being forced to work toward agreement between the two groups ruling Libya. The US has called for the resumption of oil production, while [a statement by the US National Security Adviser](#) stressed American neutrality and the “360 degree diplomacy” it has adopted toward the sides. The US cannot abandon Libya now to its fate, torn between Russia and the UAE in the East and Turkey in the West, and will probably continue its involvement in this arena.

Saudi Arabia - Tensions in Washington over the declining health of King Salman are reflected in op-eds [for](#) and [against](#) US protégé Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS). MBS reportedly postponed a visit to Washington during which he was supposed to meet with Netanyahu because news of the planned meeting was leaked. His people were also concerned about protests over the Khashoggi killing. The US is concerned that the Saudis are building nuclear capacity with Chinese help. While the project is intended for civilian use at this point, MBS already said in a 2018 interview (to “60 Minutes”) that if Iran obtains nuclear military capacity, the Saudis would do the same “as soon as possible”. A Saudi opinion poll conducted by the Washington Institute found that 32 percent of Saudis believe the US should focus on blocking Iran, 23 percent believe it should focus on advancing the two-state solution, and 22 percent prefer for the US to help resolve the Yemen crisis.

Turkey - [The State Department condemned](#) Erdoğan’s meeting with the Hamas leadership. If Biden is elected, he will likely try for a reconciliation with Turkey, despite the criticism he voiced at a closed-door January meeting with The New York Times (the contents of which was recently leaked), calling the Turkish leader an autocrat and saying the US should bolster elements seeking to replace him, “only via the electoral process”. Meanwhile, Greek-Turkish tensions have intensified over the gas deposits discovered on the Aegean Sea shelf, with France and Germany siding with Greece and the US describing Turkey’s conduct as provocative.

Recommendations for Israel - Israeli politicians would do well to contact Biden and Harris and brief them and the heads of Congress regarding regional processes. These briefings should be professional and credible. Israel should also adhere to the truth regarding its joint activity with the US (on issues such as the sale of F-35s or annexation).