

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 93 (October 2020)

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*September 2020 saw many achievements for the U.S. administration in the Middle East, first and foremost the "[Abraham Accords](#)" between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. The administration has also worked to bring Sudan and Oman into the agreement, thus far to no avail. The agreements signed are not only a political success but also a personal achievement for President Trump. In another arena, the administration has succeeded in getting the divided and disintegrated Lebanon to agree to mapping negotiations of its shared maritime borders and economic zones with Israel. On the other hand, the administration's tough statements about Iran did not yield any international agreement or any support for activating the snapback mechanism (which re-imposes sanctions that were suspended in the agreement) and left an uncomfortable starting point for the next administration, be it Republican or Democrat.*

Israel, the [UAE](#) and [Bahrain](#) was celebrated with fanfare and glory, and as the Emirates' Foreign Minister [emphasized in the Wall Street Journal](#), his country is ready to participate in building a better future. Despite Kushner's efforts with Bin Salman during a visit to Riyadh, in which he emphasized Saudi Arabia's special role. However, while representatives from Oman and Sudan participated in the ceremony, but no Saudi Arabia's officials did not attend the signing ceremony. The King of Bahrain also emphasized the centrality of Saudi Arabia. Bin Salman would like to make advances with Israel, but there is a controversy over this in the Saudi Royal House, and the Americans understand that as long as King Salman is alive there will probably not be normalization. Therefore, Trump settled for a telephone call during which he thanked to King Salman for opening the skies to flights from Israel. In a conversation with the Emir of Kuwait, Trump noted that 7 or 8 countries will join the agreement, including possibly Iraq - a move that the Americans (but not necessarily the Iraqis) are interested in, as well as Sudan, in return for its removal from the terror list and \$7 billion of aid.

The US is working to secure additional political commitments, including irrelevant ones, in support of the agreement. In this effort, the administration dragged Serbia and Kosovo into committing to open embassies in Jerusalem, a move that has been denied by Serbia. The emerging F-35 deal between the US and the UAE is in fact "candy" for the agreement, and the UAE claims that since they are advancing towards a "warm peace" they are not subject to US legislation requiring that Israel maintain its qualitative military edge. [Netanyahu may have approved](#) (privately) the sale of the planes, and the sale talks are now expected to conclude in December. Apparently, this was the purpose of Gantz's visit to Washington, that entailed [leveraging the "Abraham Accords"](#) to advance common security goals.

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The reactions in Washington to the agreements were mostly positive. [Bret Stephens](#) views the deal as a rare triumph and a personal achievement for Trump. [Tom Friedman](#) argues that the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan were signed because these countries wanted to reclaim lost territories but were not interested in trade, culture and tourism relations with Israel, while the Emirates are mainly interested in these realms and, of course, in intelligence exchange related to the common enemy, Iran. Therefore, these agreements could be stable and could generate economic and technological infrastructure.

**Qatar** - During the strategic dialogue between the US and Qatar, which took place on September 14, the Qatari Foreign Minister noted the strengthening of Qatar and the importance of its relations with the US. He also thanked the US for its support ending the Gulf-Egyptian boycott of Qatar. Pompeo praised Qatar's contribution to stabilizing Gaza, calming somewhat Lebanon and Syria, and halting Iran. He stressed that the US is interested in reopening Qatar's borders and insisted on improving relations between the two countries. Kushner noted that the boycott of Qatar was too long. Qatar, for its part, is critical of the agreements its neighbors have signed with Israel, mainly due to its adversarial relationship with the Emirates. While Washington directed the *Al Jazeera* network to register as a "foreign agent," the State Department official in charge of Gulf state affairs noted that there is openness in Qatar towards Israel. The Russian media reported that Qatar was actively considering normalizing relations with Israel, but this was conditional upon American pressure on the Gulf states to lift the boycott of Qatar.

**The Palestinian context** - In his conversation with Trump, King Salman emphasized Saudi Arabia's desire for a just solution to the Palestinian issue. This is also the case with the other Gulf states. However, Kushner accused the Palestinians of being responsible for their own plight by rejecting any peace plan. According to him, they insist on conveying harsh messages, such as Nabil Shaath's statement that the signing ceremony is a continuation of the Israeli-American conspiracy and a betrayal of the Palestinians. Other conveyors of such messages include Hanan Ashrawi and terrorist Leila Khaled, who was barred from speaking (by Zoom) at the University of San Francisco. But some, such as [Mohammed Dajani](#), see the agreements as an opportunity for Palestinians or an opportunity to [revive the Arab Peace Initiative](#). In the opinion of veteran diplomat [Dennis Ross](#), the Arab world no longer has a real interest in the Palestinian issue. [Ambassador Shapiro and researcher Makovsky](#) recommend that the Palestinians leverage the agreements, as they did in the past with the Egypt and Jordan agreements, since Israel will not want to jeopardize its achievements. Meanwhile, National Security Adviser O'Brien tweeted about US support for the two-state solution.

The Middle East and the presidential election campaign - [Trump addressed the UN General Assembly](#) on September 22 and listed his achievements of defeating ISIS, eliminating Soleimani, abandoning the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and reaching peace agreements between Israel and the Gulf states. A Foreign Affairs analysis tackled the question of how to do more with less in the Middle East. In a [CNN opinion piece](#), [Joe Biden](#) argued that Trump's Iran policy has been a failure. Trump has not been able to mobilize international partners, to extend the embargo or activate the snapback mechanism; thus, Iran has accumulated ten times as much enriched uranium than it had by the end of the Obama-Biden's tenure as well as increased its subversive activities (in so doing, Biden is vindicating Pompeo's claim of Iranian intensification). Nevertheless, "there is a smart way to be tough," Biden argued. He detailed the steps he

would take. These steps would include total commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, return to the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) as a starting point for further negotiations, ordination with the Allies to extend the restrictions, joint activities with the Allies to end conflicts such as in Yemen, relief in all matters relating to the struggle against the Covid-19, vigorous activity in the face of Iranian subversion, close cooperation with Israel so that it can defend itself and continuing the targeted sanctions in the areas of terrorism, human rights and missiles. However, should Iran choose confrontation, Biden has stated that as president he will defend the vital interests of the US, despite his preference for diplomacy.

[Biden also outlined the main points of his policy](#) to J Street donors, focusing on Israel: Beyond his support for reentering the nuclear deal, Biden said Trump wasted the assets he received and endangered Israel by agreeing to allow hostile forces into Syria. Biden stated that he would support the two-state solution, Israel's security as a democracy and the Palestinians' right to a state. As president, Biden has stated he will oppose annexation, return aid to the Palestinians and reopen the consulate in East Jerusalem. According to him, Netanyahu and the Israeli right are not solely responsible for the stalemate in the peace process, as the Palestinians are also not grasping onto the opportunities presented to them. In addition to those within the Democratic Party who praise the administration for achieving an agreement between Israel and the Emirates, there are also voices warning against the US being led [astray by the Emirates](#), as has occurred in the past with Bin Salman.

**Iran** - On September 20, the State Department announced the renewal of sanctions in accordance with US rights under Security Council Resolution 2231 and the snapback mechanism. This is because Iran did not meet its obligations under the JCPOA while the Security Council did not extend the arms embargo, a default that allows Iran to re-purchase conventional weapons starting on October 18. The US has stressed that it expects Council members to abide by the ban on Iran engagement in enrichment or missile development. Failure to implement the nuclear deal brings Iran closer to dangerous nuclear capabilities, as the restrictions will expire in five years' time. In the coming days, the US is expected to announce additional measures to strengthen the implementation and enforcement of sanctions, and maximum pressure policy on the Iranian regime is expected to continue until Iran reaches an agreement with the US. The State Department has made it clear that sanctions will be imposed on all companies that engage with Iran in the production of missiles or nuclear weapons, or try to sell it conventional weapons. Russia has stated in response that Resolution 2231 remains in place and that efforts to implement and maintain the nuclear agreement will continue. Germany, Britain and France, as well as the [EU](#) High Representative for Foreign Affairs, have ruled that the US cannot implement the snapback mechanism after withdrawing from the agreement. French President Macron even said that the US policy of maximum pressure on Iran has failed.

On September 17, the [US Treasury imposed sanctions](#) on Iranian cyber groups, and published a list of companies operating in the field of energy vis-à-vis Iran, as well as [a list](#) of 9,843 Iranians on whom sanctions were imposed. Iran's ambassador to the United Nations condemned Trump's threats and heaped blame upon the US for regional misadventures. This is while Iran continues to promise revenge for the killing of Soleimani, not necessarily by harming the US ambassador to South Africa (as per revelations in the media) but instead by threatening anyone who was involved in the assassination. Iran further boasts that the US does not actually have the ability to harm Iran, because if US forces move closer to Iran they will be endangered, and that measures taken by the US are mere

rhetoric that indicates weakness. Iran also continues to boast of its military capabilities, and performs maneuvers on models of American targets.

**Iraq** - CENTCOM commander announced the evacuation of 3,000 US troops in September, as agreed upon during Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi's visit to Washington. The evacuation is set to commence before the US election to fulfill a Trump campaign promise. However, Pompeo's announcement on September 20 about the evacuation of the American embassy, and his subsequent claim that the US would respond with force to any harm, is related to continued attacks on the embassy and US targets. Iraq criticized Pompeo's announcement and called for the US to reconsider, as the move would send the wrong message. However, it seems that the American decision has already been made and the move will be carried out in the coming months. Muqtada al-Sadr's return to Iraq from Lebanon is a harbinger of increased political pressure on the US presence in Iraq. However, it is possible that the offensive fervor of Iraqi militias against American targets will not take off, as stated in the announcement by the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* militia that, while calling for the withdrawal of the Americans, disapproves of military action against them because it will cause damage to Iraq.

**Lebanon** - The State Department's Counterterrorism Coordinator revealed at an American Jewish Committee meeting that Hezbollah is active in Europe and hoarding ammonium deposits for terrorist attacks. He further stated that Europe should define Hezbollah as a terrorist organization to ensure regional security and the future of Lebanon. Despite Iranian warnings to Lebanon not to negotiate maritime borders with Israel, and despite the obstacles of Lebanese politics, the US has persisted in the matter. The US has made it clear that it is not interested in the identity of the people who will comprise the Lebanese governmental system, but only in the way it functions. The US [Treasury detailed the sanctions](#) on senior Shiite figures in Lebanon, but at the same time, the US hinted at its ability to assist Lebanon in the International Monetary Fund. Hezbollah defied the US, saying the sanctions were like a medal of honor. The bottom line is that the American moves prompted an announcement of the beginning of talks between Lebanon and Israel.

**Syria** - In light of Russia's re-entry into Iraq through partnerships, arms sales and militia contacts, there are fears of friction between US and Russian troops in Syria. Agreements recently signed between the Kurds and an American oil company in the context of Northeast Syria's oil fields — the reason that more than 1,000 American troops remain in Syria — may encourage the Kurds in the northeast of the country, if they were to be implemented.

**China in the Middle East** - A challenge is also developing for the [US vis-à-vis China](#). With the reopening of the port of Haifa, built by a Chinese company, and in light of a possible land route between Haifa and Dubai, American concerns of a Chinese takeover of this geopolitical resource are growing. This has prompted the US to demand related guarantees from Israel. The US is also putting pressure on Israel and other countries to favor American, over Chinese, [5G technology](#). The challenge for the US is not easy due to economic disparities: the UAE's trade with the US in 2018 was 24.5 billion USD, compared to 46.1 billion USD with China. Saudi Arabia's trade with China that year was 63 billion USD, compared to 37.7 billion USD with the US.

**Israel and the Jews** - On the margins of the "Abraham Accords" coverage was the *Washington Post* scoop about "[Netanyahu and the dirty laundry](#)." The coronavirus budget crisis in the 146 Jewish Federations that cover many aid organizations has generated emergency aid from the Jewish Federations Organization in North America (JFNA) in the

amount of 54 million USD. The former director general of the Anti-Defamation League [Abe Foxman said Trump was bad for America](#) and the Jews, that America is weaker and that anti-Semitism has increased (according to a [Guardian poll](#), 23 percent of young Americans think the Holocaust is a myth). In [response, Senator Norm Coleman](#) said that Jews would vote for Trump because of his successes and support for Israel.

**Recommendations for Israel** - An effort must be made to take advantage of the last days of the current Trump administration to advance relations with other actors in the Arab world; It is advisable to conduct an early mapping of personalities and factors that will operate in a possible Biden administration and of staff reports and policy papers currently being written for such a government in research and policy institutes; The necessary resources should be allocated for the reopening of the Israeli Consulate General in Philadelphia, that covers the personal surroundings of Biden and that of his associates.