

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 94 (October 2020)

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November 2020

In the month leading up to the US elections, players in the Middle East sought to consolidate their achievements. Russia and Iran tried to affect the election results and nullify US influence in the region, Turkey solidified its achievements in the Mediterranean and Syria, Iraq tried to understand the obscure US intentions regarding its continued presence there, Lebanon entered into maritime border negotiations with Israel without having to make any concessions and even slightly easing US pressure. Iran was hoping for a Biden victory, whereas Saudi Arabia was perhaps rooting for Trump's re-election. Official Israel was mum ahead of the elections, but did not prepare for a possible Biden victory. Nonetheless, despite the US-led normalization process between Israel and several Arab states, the sun still appears to be setting over US policy in the region, which will never be the same.

In a geo-strategic configuration somewhat reminiscent of the 1914 German-British conflict that led to a world war between a veteran power (the UK) and a rising one (Germany), a similar conflict is currently under way between a veteran and new power. The incoming US administration will have to deal with [a return of superpower rivalry](#) given a possible US-China clash, even war in the coming decades, and the US will have to decide whether to cede its predominance in Southeast Asia. Biden appears to understand this well, as reflected in his article ["Why America Must Lead Again"](#) laying out his commitments as President, among them preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, stopping support for the destructive Saudi war in Yemen, and maintaining the "ironclad" US commitment to Israel's defense. These are among his proposed measures to "pick up the pieces" of the destruction he believes Trump has wrought, wasting the assets bequeathed to him by the Obama-Biden Administration.

However, the US under Trump has scored a 3:1 victory in the Middle East against Russia, as veteran Israeli analyst Ron Ben-Yishai [explains](#), citing the administration's role in stabilizing the region, a proposal to [defund Centcom](#) given the end of its mission to defend oil fields and routes, and the decline of terrorism. According to a *Business Insider* survey, only 13 percent of Americans believe Washington should defend Saudi Arabia if it comes under threat. Respected historian Walter Russell Mead presented polling data (by Arab-American pollster Zogby) from 17 Arab states indicating [an improvement in the US standing](#) in the region from 35 percent support in 2018 to 56 percent following the US-sponsored Israel-Emirates agreements.

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Should the Democrats come to power, [domestic issues will be the administration's first test](#) given the racial and social unrest in America. A Democratic administration is expected to adopt a pragmatic foreign policy. Democratic Senator Coons, whose name has been mentioned for the Secretary of State position, says a return to bipartisan foreign policy is possible. Biden will not be a Trump-like isolationist nor an Obama-style ideologue. Ambassador Phil Gordon, mentioned as a possible high-ranking national security official in a Biden administration, [argues that the US gets drawn](#) into involvement in the Middle East without sufficient information or assessments. He believes the US will continue to face challenges and temptations to boost its engagement in the area, but should resist them. On the other hand, [a second Trump term](#) would consolidate the change he has wrought and deepen internal divisions within the US. It would also signal its (former) allies, including those in the Middle East that they are on their own.

American Jewry - In [a seminal article](#), Tablet Magazine editor and former New York Times writer Bari Weiss warns the American Jewish community against being swept up in the blindness toward American liberalism hijacked by anti-Semitic forces destroying the foundations of a free society. This trend trivializes situations and espouses the relativity of values and facts, since narrative is the only thing that counts, she writes. Some proponents of this view argue, for example, that the Holocaust was nothing more than an incident in which “whites killed whites”. Weiss urges Jews “not to be shocked” when a rising left-wing Democratic politician, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (known as AOC) [boycotts a Rabin commemoration event](#) because it allegedly expresses support of Israeli occupation and racism, and refuses to meet with certain American-Jewish organizations. Ironically, the first American Muslim to serve in Congress, the incumbent Attorney General of Minnesota Keith Ellison willingly stepped in to replace AOC at the event. The [Senate also honored Rabin in a display of bipartisan consensus](#). [Findings by the Anti-Defamation League](#) indicate that 30 Jewish lawmakers have received some 6,000 hate tweets.

The Abraham Accords - Both houses of Congress welcomed the Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Congressman Schneider of Illinois, and Senate Foreign Relations Minority Leader Menendez, asked to temper the resolution of support due to the legal requirement to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge in the Middle East. The issue was probably raised at a Washington meeting between Israeli Defense Minister Gantz and Defense Secretary Esper. The US, Israel and the Emirates announced the founding of the [Abraham Fund](#) for the implementation of the commitment included in the signed normalization agreements, and Trump remarked that additional states were standing in line to make peace with Israel. In this regard, Secretary Pompeo named Sudan, which was in the process of being [removed from the US list of terror supporting states](#) and agreed to pay 335 million USD in compensation to terror victims.

In an October 15 conversation at the Washington Institute, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan said [security must be ensured for both Israelis and Palestinians](#) and an agreement between them is the key to regional stability. He added that Saudi dialogue with Israel would only come following an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian people. The Minister confirmed that the Abraham Accords had contributed to promoting peace by removing Israel's annexation plan from the agenda. He stressed that the “maximum pressure” US policy on Iran had been successful and that Iran must choose the path of peace. Despite the Saudi Minister's remarks, the Palestinians are being left behind. Walter Russell Mead claims they have lost their standing in light of the latest developments. ZOOM, which has

become the leading communications platform in the pandemic era, prevented the participation of Laila Khaled in recent events in San Francisco and Hawaii.

Lebanon and Syria - Lebanon and Israel have a long history of unfulfilled agreements, starting with the 1949 Armistice Agreements and all the way to unsuccessful efforts to reach understandings on Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon that culminated in a unilateral pullout in the year 2000. The neighbors have not reached any agreements over the past two decades. [The US declared the start](#) of Israeli-Lebanese negotiations on marking their maritime borders, but differing perceptions emerged at the outset on October 14. The Lebanese claimed that Israel (and the US) views the talks as a precursor to a diplomatic process. They accused Israel of trying to steal lands said the talks were largely military in nature. It therefore dispatched only military officers to the talks and repelled US pressure for a photo-op. The US representative Schenker noted that these were early days and promised Lebanese President Aoun that the US would continue to back the border marking process. Former US Ambassador to Lebanon Feltman (who also served as Deputy UN Secretary General) believes [the Lebanese agreed to the talks](#) with Israel both because of the potential exploitation of natural resources and because the US made clear the importance it attributes to them. Along with a certain Lebanese sense of relief over the easing of US economic pressure, Lebanon has been blocking the bank accounts of top Syrians fearing US pressure under the Caesar Act. Schenker stressed that the US would continue to apply pressure over corruption of senior Lebanese figures. At the same time, the US is in touch with Lebanon and Syria over missing Americans. The US delegation to the UN revealed that Syria continues to use chemical weapons against its citizens and rivals in the region.

Iran - On October 8, the State Department issued a list of 18 Iranian banks on which sanctions had been imposed over Iran's support for terrorism and nuclear program development. Iran claimed the US was withholding food and medicine from its citizens during the Covid-19 epidemic. Khamenei confirmed in a speech that Iran's economy was under pressure and that its people were experiencing economic hardship due to America's evil actions, and declared that Iran would continue to resist until the policy of "maximum pressure" turns into "maximum blame". With the October 19 expiration of the weapons embargo on Iran, Tehran announced it would upgrade its weaponry, but Pompeo insisted that the US had already restored all the sanctions on Sept. 19, including the ban on weapons sales to Iran.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly, Iran's Foreign Minister accused the US of developing lethal types of weapons and supporting the only nuclear regime in the Middle East (Israel). The Americans noted that the Iranian regime could have freed money for its healthcare system but chose instead to transfer the funds to the Basij (a Revolutionary Guard militia). Meanwhile, the US Justice Department banned 92 web sites of Iran's Revolutionary Guards targeting US domestic policy under the guise of news sites. Ambassador Eliot Abrams, the administration's point person on Iran, held meetings in Germany to coordinate with top British, French and German officials and said the "maximum pressure" would continue even after the US elections because the US must do all it can to prevent Iran from achieving its goals. However, according to [a report](#) by the advocacy organization United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), Iran exports more than one million barrels of oil a day despite the sanctions.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said Iran wields influence over Iraq and that he expects Iran to take positive measures. The Minister also stated that Iraq's secret dialogue with Iran

should be made public and transparent, according to accepted principles. Iran, for its part, encourages jihadists in Iraq to collect intelligence on the presence and activities of the “Zionist-American enemy” in the country, while the US publicly implores various factions to hand over their arms to the central Iraqi regime. At the same time, the Department of Homeland Security in Washington has accused Iran of initiating a mail campaign to terrorize Democratic voters. The Director of National Intelligence also accused Iran (and Russia) of trying to influence the elections by sending e-mails disguised as messages from Trump support groups.

The danger of a military deterioration in Iraq remains relevant should Iran or the US (or Israel) miscalculate, although Iran has avoided attacking key US targets and the US has made do with measured responses. This mutual caution could allow the next US administration to resume a diplomatic process with Iran.

Iraq - Given the ongoing attacks on the US Embassy and other American targets in Iraq, the US continues to advance the idea of shutting down its diplomatic mission there. This, despite [the expected damage to Washington-Baghdad relations](#) and to planned reforms, encouragement of Iranian belligerency and shrinking of local support for a US presence. France has been critical of the embassy closing idea that it views as a message of surrender that would undermine stability there, too. Arab states, too, including Gulf States, are critical of the idea that would also harm the security of their delegations in Iraq. However, Iraq’s Foreign Minister made clear following a talk with Pompeo that the decision in principle to evacuate the embassy was only a reaction to the continued attacks on the facility. The issue of the US presence in Iraq plays a central role in public Iraqi discourse, with continuing calls to harm American forces, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the “Hezbollah Brigades” claiming the “resistance” militias had offered a ceasefire if the militias do not attack and if the government presents a timetable for US withdrawal.

Kuwait - The death of the Emir and the changing of the guard pose an additional challenge for the US in the region given Kuwait’s importance as a grateful ally that allows the Americans to launch attacks from its territory against Iranian targets in Iraq and Syria. The generational shift in the Kuwaiti leadership could also limit the state’s traditional role as a regional arbitrator and mediator aiding the US.

Turkey - [The US expressed regret over Turkey’s announcement](#) that it was resuming gas exploration surveys in areas of the Mediterranean claimed by Greece. The US is concerned that the Turkish policy could raise tensions in the region. Erdogan, for his part, has adopted a “wait and see” stand, hoping for a Biden victory in the belief that it would allow Turkey greater freedom of movement in northeastern Syria.