

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 85 (December 2019)

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The US may believe that its 'maximum pressure' policy against Iran is beginning to bear fruits in the region; however, it (still?) has not succeeded in damaging Iran's backbone. The Turkish challenge has not disappeared, despite Trump's praises for Erdoğan. The post-Khashoggi Saudi Arabia problem (with its implications for Yemen) remains and has even become an important issue in the presidential election campaign. Trump is flip-flopping on the question of American military presence in the region, and his general lack of consistency may have worsened the crisis in Libya, to which Washington has yet to dedicate serious attention. Subsequently, the US meets Russia at every junction in the Middle East, despite the gap in strength between the two powers. With the rise in public anti-Semitic violence in the US, Trump – who wanted to demonstrate his support for the Jewish community (and Israel) – made an 'over-correction' in his public statements but has not taken action to clear the poisonous atmosphere that contributed to recent events.

The US in the Middle East: In a strident [essay in *The Atlantic*](#), William Burns, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and former Deputy Secretary of State, analyzed the American role in the Middle East. In the lead up to the fourth year of Trump's term, his betrayal of the Kurds may have united Republicans and Democrats in strong criticism and opposition. Trump made a mistake, but even worse was the management of "regional policy of magical thinking" argued Burnes. The essay argued that this policy is in contrast with the rational approach of US presidents since the end of the Cold War. The US is still a significant power in the region, but it must realize that its power and capabilities are not as they used to be. The US must replace the failed approach that Trump has pursued, and more realistically prioritize its goals in the region. [A *Washington Post* survey](#) regarding the positions of the fourteen Democratic candidates for president showed that three would be open to having relations with the Assad regime (Bernie Sanders, Tulsi Gabbard, and Andrew Yang), and seven would oppose (others have declined an answer). Eleven candidates intend to return to the Iran Deal, twelve candidates support ending intelligence cooperation with Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and twelve candidates support the Two State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The US image in the region is at a low point. [A survey of public opinion](#) in Lebanon demonstrated that only 31% support US policy (70% oppose) in contrast to 55% that support Russian policy (46% oppose). Most Lebanese recommend that the US downgrade its involvement in the region (71% of Shiites, 48% of Sunnis, and 43% of Christians), while Christians and Sunnis support American activity against ISIS and Iran, in principle. [A similar survey in Jordan](#) showed that only 20% (in contrast to 14% last year) believe that relations with the US are important to Jordan. According to [an additional survey in Saudi Arabia](#), only

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15% of Saudis see the Kingdom's relations with the US as important or very important (in contrast to 73% who believe the opposite). However, in response to the question of what the US should do in the region, most Saudi respondents were divided between the need to increase activity against al-Qaeda (12%), Iran (33%), and Yemen (29%); 23% believe that the US should decrease its presence in the region (in contrast to 12% last year).

US Secretary of Defense Esper announced the completion of the withdrawal of American forces from Northeast Syria, despite the Pentagon's statement in September of a reinforced presence in the region of some 14,000 people. This announcement was later denied, but it was raised again this month. In any event, today the US has a presence of between 60,000 and 80,000 military personnel in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In the framework of the 2020 Budget, 3.3 billion USD were allocated to Israel (in addition to assistance in missile-defense measures in the amount of 500 million USD). The Palestinians were allocated 75 million USD in security assistance and an additional 75 million USD in civil assistance. Jordan – 1.52 billion USD, Egypt – 1.43 billion USD, and Lebanon – 220 million USD.

US-Israel: According to [a Pew Survey](#), Israel is first among nations that see the US as their closest ally with a majority of 82% of Israelis. In this list, Israel is followed by South Korea, Australia, and Canada. Trump's "Deal of the Century" has not appeared on Washington's agenda recently, but former presidential advisor, Jason Greenblatt [argued in an op-ed](#) that the president was right in recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and that regional and international actors opposing Trump's policy are damaging prospects for peace, the Palestinians, and nations in the region. The president himself, [in a letter to Speaker of the House](#) Nancy Pelosi, protested the impeachment process and counted the recognition of Jerusalem and the Golan as part of his achievements.

After the attempt to arrange a meeting between Netanyahu and Pompeo on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Watford was thwarted (apparently by the British, who argued that Israel is not a member of NATO and therefore they could not provide Netanyahu with the necessary security arrangements), the two met in Lisbon. According to Netanyahu, beyond Iran, he raised the subject of the annexation of the Jordan Valley and a mutual defense pact. Pompeo, on the other hand, did not address these subjects in the joint press conference. Trump, in [his enthusiastic speech](#) at the Israeli-American Council Conference in Florida, also refrained from mentioning these issues, (he also did not mention at all his good friend Netanyahu throughout his 45 minutes speech). The [US strongly condemned](#) the International Criminal Court Prosecutor's decision with regard to the investigation of Israel in suspicion of committing war crimes, as an unfair decision. In a [meeting of the National Security Advisors](#) of the US and Israel, which took place on December 18th, they discussed the relations between the two countries, coordination in face of Iranian activity in the region, implications of demonstrations in Iran, and the situation in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Congress reaffirmed its [support of the two-state solution](#), approved the renewal of funding for joint Israeli-Palestinian activity, and passed a proposed resolution in opposition to the annexation of the West Bank.

American Jewry: The Anti-Defamation League announced that in December there were six attacks on Jews in the New York area, including those that took human lives in Monsey and in Jersey City. In light of rising anti-Semitism towards institutions and businesses and in physical and verbal attacks of individual Jews (including on social media), Trump launched what looked like a "love-campaign" towards Israel and Jews. However, In his speech at the IAC on December 8th, Trump condemned those Jews who support the Democratic Party.

Later, he issued an [Executive Order on Combatting Anti-Semitism](#), where he [targeted anti-Semitism](#), specifically at universities. The new order is based on the prohibition of discrimination based on race, national or religious origin, which was anchored in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Leading up to the announcement of the order, there were rumors that the President was about to define Judaism as a nation in addition to a religion. These rumors brought about a concern that it could create a gap between American Jews and their country, and renewed a fascinating debate on the question of [American Jewish identity](#). Most American Jews oppose Trump, but the leadership of Jewish organizations does not usually come out in opposition of a sitting president. This principle of course does not apply to politicians, and thus [18 Jewish lawmakers demanded that the President fire](#) his (Jewish) advisor, Stephen Miller, who expresses positions that they view as supporting “white supremacy.” Biden, the leading democratic candidate, called Netanyahu an “extreme right-wing leader” whose positions “are counterproductive.” In a separate story covering his [positions on Jewish and Israeli issues](#) throughout the years, Biden “corrected” himself and said that while he does not agree with Netanyahu’s positions, he does love him. In a later interview, Biden said that Netanyahu knows how much he criticized his behavior on the Palestinian issue. Stu Eizenstat, an advisor to President Carter and an originator of foreign aid, expressed [strong criticism](#) of the idea of several Democrats to condition aid to Israel on a change in its settlement policy.

Iran: Following many intelligence reports on demonstrations throughout Iran, including some 36,000 pictures and videos, the Administration estimates that the “maximum pressure” policy is succeeding (including in diminishing Iranian influence in the region), and it is weighing increasing sanctions on senior officials in the Iranian regime, due to their infringements of human rights. [Secretary of Defense Esper’s announcement](#) referred to infringements of human rights in two prisons in Iran and determined that the US had located short-range ballistic missile shipments from Iran to Iraq. Additionally, an American vessel captured a shipment of missiles from Iran to the Houthis in Yemen. The US [placed sanctions on transport companies](#) (IRISL shipping lines, the ESAIL shipping company, and the Mahan airline) due to their distribution of components of weapons of mass destruction. Prior to the elimination of Soleimani in January, possibilities for the decline in the security situation and the fear of Iranian missile attacks on ships or American assets were discussed. However, experts estimate that Iranian capabilities, although impressive, do not yet pose a significant threat. Congress passed legislation relating to Syria, called the “[Caesar Act](#)” (which [the president has already signed](#) into a law), according to which, it is possible to prosecute Assad, the Iranians, and perhaps even Russia for war crimes. In legislation related to the 2020 Defense Budget, a section was included that determines that Iran must pay 1.68 billion USD in compensation to families of victims of the attack on the Marines Barracks in Beirut in 1983. On the other hand, the US and Iran exchanged prisoners on December 8th, and Iran even said that it is prepared to conduct additional exchanges. [Dennis Ross proposed](#) that Congress advance positive relations with the people of Iraq and Lebanon, outside of the framework of changing administrations in Washington, in order to provide a solid anchor for relations that is better than any “soft power” or “hard power” that Iran may provide.

Iraq: in the framework of the “Magnitsky Act,”* the US placed sanctions on four senior Iraqi officials who are Iran’s proxies, due to the violent repression of demonstrations and

* The “Magnitsky Act” was enacted in 2012 after the Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky was arrested by Russian authorities and died in custody a year later. The law determines that anyone who was involved in that event or anyone who is involved in a similar case will be prevented from entering the US and that their property and funds in various countries may be confiscated.

corruption. In a visit to Baghdad, Secretary of Defense Esper demanded that Iraq take action against [attacks on American bases](#) (after the attack on the Ayn al-Asad base). The (resigning) Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi responded that the US should not take unilateral action in the matter. Meanwhile, the Administration announced a [28% cut to the American diplomatic corps](#) stationed in Iraq. VP Pence's visit to Erbil on November 23rd, where he talked about the sustainable connection between the Kurdish and American nations, did not help fix Kurdish bitterness. In an unofficial Facebook survey among Kurds in Iraq and Syria, there was [significant disappointment](#) and a feeling a fear following the US announcement of withdrawal.

Lebanon: [The "maximum pressure" on Iran has effects in Lebanon as well](#), including on Hezbollah's flow of finances, its political capabilities to force its preferred prime minister following the resignation of Hariri, as well as on its ability to continue using Lebanese diminishing resources. The US is directly pressuring Lebanon, by [placing sanctions on businessmen](#) who were defined as money launderers benefiting Hezbollah. The US could expand sanctions to include Christian figures who support Hezbollah as well, as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker may have suggested. The US also demonstrated the seriousness of its intentions to do so, by preventing contact with the Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, who is the son-in-law and ally of President Aoun (Aoun himself is close to Hezbollah) and who has his eyes on the presidency. Indeed, the US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and former Ambassador to Lebanon [David Hale, visited Lebanon on December 20th](#) and met with senior politicians, but there was no mentioning in his schedule of a meeting with the Foreign Minister. Hale's visit was primarily intended to accelerate negotiations for the establishment of a new government in Lebanon. He praised the non-violent nature of the demonstrations in Lebanon and urged the security forces to act with restraint.

Turkey: The subject of nuclear weapons positioned in Turkey was not on the agenda of the NATO Summit in Watford. However, it was discussed behind the scenes, in light of worries regarding the fate of weapons positioned in Incirlik Base. Despite the tensions between the US and Turkey, Trump and Erdoğan met on December 11th on the sidelines of the NATO Summit, and Trump piled superlatives on the state of relations between the two countries, and on Turkish operations in the security region in Northern Syria. The Senate followed action by the House of Representatives, and [recognized the Armenian Genocide](#), in a step that was seen in Ankara as an aggravation. Additionally, to Turkey's annoyance, Congress cancelled the weapons embargo on Cyprus that had existed since 1987, and this resolution is expected to receive presidential approval.

Saudi Arabia: The [UN special rapporteur came out against the judgements](#) given in Saudi Arabia which [sentenced to death five Saudis](#) who were convicted in the Khashoggi's murder. She argued that those who are truly guilty still walk free. *Washington Post* columnist [David Ignatius took a similar position](#), and the *Washington Post* itself, where Khashoggi was a columnist, called the [judgements](#) "a mockery of justice." In the absence of clear Saudi answers to the incident, the US did not approve a training program for Saudi intelligence officers. Experts on Saudi Arabia estimate that the judgements will [test US-Saudi relations](#). Nevertheless, Bin Salman's policy limiting the export of Salafi Islam is expected to help relations between the two countries. American cooperation with Saudi Arabia in Yemen continues, and Trump still accepts the Yemeni government as legitimate, even though its leader has long since passed the two-year limit to his term and is now in his fifth year in power. The Senate passed legislation approving the defense budget and the removal of all

sanctions on Bin Salman. However, the legislation mandates that the Director of National Intelligence report to Congress within 30 days on who is responsible for the murder of Khashoggi. On the other hand, most of the Democratic candidates declared that they would end cooperation in Yemen, and Biden took the lead in determining that the Kingdom must pay a price for Khashoggi's assassination and be regarded a "Pariah" state in the international community. He declared that as president, he would stop providing weapons to Saudi Arabia. The incident on the base in Pensacola, where a Saudi trainee killed three Americans, certainly did not help relations. However, in the medium and long term, the US must decide what kind of Saudi Arabia it is dealing with – the one that murders Khashoggi or the one where Bin Salman removes social hurdles and allows women to drive and enter restaurants unaccompanied by men.

Libya: The lack of American consistency has led to [Turkish intervention](#) and a Russian challenge: Ankara supports the official government and recently signed an agreement to determine the maritime economic zone. In contrast, Moscow supports Haftar, including by sending hundreds ["private" groups of fighters](#). After Trump had a phone call in April that appeared to be encouraging Haftar, Washington has begun to wake up to the Russian threat (that is perhaps directed at NATO more than at taking control of Libya). The US has begun to weigh its assets in Arab countries and to see how much it can activate them to shore up the Libyan government, whose stability is important to the region. Washington finds itself on the same side as Ankara, and it remains to be seen how much Haftar would advance Russian interests (and there are reports that he is an [American citizen](#)).

Recommendations for Israel: We maintain our recommendation that even during its political chaos, Israel should prepare for the day after Trump, and strengthen its ties with Democrats (while maintaining relations with Republicans). Israel should demonstrate genuine empathy toward the Jewish community in light of increasing anti-Semitism in the US, and assist it in creating a response to anti-Semitism. I should also act to revive the shattered Israeli Foreign Service and its representatives in the US.

Key December 2019 events

Trump issues an [executive order](#) following anti-Semitic incidents

The House of Representatives [approves a resolution](#) opposing annexation of the West Bank

[Netanyahu and Secretary of State Pompeo meet in Lisbon](#)

Congress [reapproves](#) financing for Israeli-Palestinian activity

[Biden claims](#) that Netanyahu is an extreme right-wing leader who causes damage