

## **US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 81 (August 2019)**

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**September 2019**

*This month highlighted contradictory US approaches to the Iran issue – ranging from strident, combative rhetoric to feelers (perhaps frightening for Netanyahu) about renewed diplomatic contacts, military activity in Iraq and renewed cooperation with Turkey on the Syrian issue (although the S-400 crisis has not been resolved). Above all, the US diplomatic and political arena was overshadowed by Israel's refusal to allow the visit of two Muslim members of Congress and President Trump's calculated maneuver to drive a wedge between the Democratic Party, US Jewry and Israel.*

**Iran:** In a [USA Today](#) opinion piece, Secretary Pompeo clarified that the "maximum pressure" on Iran was meant to deprive it of the means to support its subverting activities in the region and to bring Khamenei back to the negotiating table. As a result of the pressure, Pompeo wrote, Iran was forced to slash its defense budget by 28 percent and its terrorism budget by 17 percent. "We look forward to the day we can help bring the Iranian people and their neighbors the peace and prosperity they deserve," Pompeo wrote. However, [knowledgeable observers](#) argue that Tehran had adopted a low-cost, asymmetric strategy that does not undercut its operational capabilities. Pompeo took a tough line on Iran and warned that "the clock is ticking" and only 15 months are left to the end of the UN sanctions and weapons embargo, and therefore the pressure should be increased. Trump, on the other hand, reiterated that he does not seek a regime change in Iran, and asked Republican Senators Graham and Paul to advance new negotiations. Paul conveyed an invitation to Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif for talks at the White House (to Graham's irritation), but Zarif retorted he was not authorized to accept such an invitation and that Iran was not interested in yet another photo-op. There were also reported plans for a meeting between the US and Iranian Presidents (perhaps during the UN General Assembly, with French mediation). However, Iranian President Rouhani, who described US sanctions on Zarif as "childish", and threatened that war with Iran would be "the mother of all wars", claimed was he unwilling to hold such a meeting before sanctions are lifted. The Israeli-Iranian escalation could also be weighing on such a thaw. In any case, Prime Minister Netanyahu is supposedly concerned about reports of a possible Iranian-American rapprochement.

Iran has been pressing the European signatories to the nuclear agreement to come up with a formula bypassing American sanctions, threatening to accelerate further its deviation from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement unless its demand is met. Europe had until September 5<sup>th</sup> to formulate a solution, while US diplomacy did not record much success in Europe, as reflected in the [G7 summit](#) held in Biarritz. Contrary to reports, French President Macron did not invite Rouhani to attend, but Foreign Minister Zarif actually showed up.

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**The Gulf States and Saudi Arabia:** The US has been deploying aircrafts carrying cluster bombs that could provide a response to Iranian small boats attacks. However, the commanders of the US aircraft carriers stress that they are there to deter Iran and not to launch hostile acts against it, but Russia is hinting that the US is seeking an excuse to go launch hostilities. The UAE is concerned that it might pay the price of Trump's bombastic rhetoric, and has begun promoting direct dialogue with Iran. According to Iran, the US presence in the Gulf is a source of regional instability. Against the backdrop of attacks in Iraq and reports that the US is promoting cooperation between Israel and the UAE vis-à-vis Iran, Iran is warning countries in the region against Israeli provocation. The US, for its part, is maintaining ambiguity regarding reports of Israeli involvement in bombings of Iraq, which have soured US relations with Baghdad. There seems to be disagreement within the administration on this issue. The Pentagon has determined that Iraq has the right to defend itself against attacks on its soil, while the Secretary of State claimed Israel retains the right of self-defense.

A bipartisan [bill](#) proposed by four senators would prevent the US Export-Import Bank from funding the export of nuclear equipment and technology to Saudi Arabia without tighter American control in order to prevent the Kingdom from developing nuclear weapons capabilities. The US decision to deploy 500 soldiers in Saudi Arabia could supply the jihadists with the hoped-for excuse to justify attacks against US targets – just as the US deployment on holy Saudi territory as a base for its invasion of Kuwait served al-Qaeda at the time. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are facing off in Yemen, while the UAE decision to withdraw its forces from Yemen could undermine US policy in the region. Deputy Saudi Defense Minister Khaled Bin Salman visited Washington in the last week of August to discuss the situation in Yemen against the backdrop of Saudi-Emirati tensions and US support for talks in Oman with the Houthis in order to sever the rebels' link with Iran.

**Turkey:** Tensions between the US and Turkey intensified at the start of the month, continuing the events of July. Erdoğan is threatening to purchase weapons from a third country in light of the US decision to expel Turkey from the F-35 project, and he continues to display confidence that Trump would not allow the relationship to deteriorate over the Turkish-Russian S-400 deal. Erdoğan presents the deal as based on purely economic considerations and claims that other NATO members also bought military equipment from Russia. Nonetheless, Turkey is reported to have accumulated considerable amounts of spare parts for its F-16s in case of an embargo.

The US and Turkey continue to try to establish a demilitarized zone on the Syrian-Turkish border despite disagreements and tensions. US Defense Secretary Esper told reporters after an August 6<sup>th</sup> conversation with his Turkish counterpart that the US was determined to prevent a Turkish incursion into Syria. However, the very next day, the US and Turkey announced the establishment of a joint center on Turkish soil to coordinate and administer a "safe zone" for the Kurds in Syria, as [agreed between the two defense chiefs](#). The center will be built gradually but will be operational immediately. Other than moderating the conflicts among the various Kurdish groups, the center could potentially improve US-Turkish relations. However, for that to happen, both sides must work together on several issues, including improvement of the ties between the PKK and the YPG, strengthening Turkish stability, preventing the return of the Islamic State, and resolution of the tremendous refugee crisis in Turkey (so far over 3.6 million refugees have entered Turkey), not necessarily by moving them to the safe zone in northern Syria as Erdogan would like.

**Lebanon:** Prime Minister Hariri visited Washington in the third week of August, and as emerges from [the joint communique](#), the visit dealt with Lebanon's commitment and US support for the very negotiations over the Lebanese maritime border with Israel. However, despite previous reports that negotiations are due to begin soon, they have not begun. Against this backdrop, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources visited Lebanon, Jordan and Greece during the first week of August. The US was also exposed to domestic Lebanese tensions. The US Embassy in Beirut issued an unusual statement on August 7<sup>th</sup> expressing hope that the June 30<sup>th</sup> shooting attack on the convoy of Lebanon's Minister for Refugee Affairs (a Druse associated with Jumblatt whom the Americans support) that killed two of his bodyguards would not be exploited for political gain. The US has not supported any candidate for the Lebanese presidential elections, but it has urged a fair campaign.

**Trump, the Jews and the banning of two Muslim Congresswomen:** Netanyahu's decision to bar Muslim Congresswomen Omar and Tlaib from Israel sparked harsh criticism, mostly by Democrats (but not only). The criticism was led by Senate Minority leader Schumer (who is Jewish), former Senator and vice presidential candidate Liberman (also Jewish), House Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Hoyer. US Presidential candidates Biden, Warren, Sanders and others joined in. Israeli Ambassador to the US Dermer and US Ambassador to Israel Friedman are being blamed, and the Democratic Party is threatening to examine their conduct and accusing them of responsibility for the crisis. Democratic lawmakers are calling for retribution against Israel for its "criminal" move, including hints of re-examining annual US aid to Israel. Republican Senator Rubio also criticized the Israeli decision that also generated [strong tensions within the Jewish community](#).

Jewish organizations, among them the [American Jewish Committee](#) and the Anti-Defamation League, and even [AIPAC](#), criticized the Israeli government decision. This is a serious deepening of the current rift, underscoring the general image of Israel as a society retreating from enlightenment, promoting racist politicians, evading the Western Wall deal that it proposed, discriminating against non-Orthodox Jews and unambiguously backing a controversial US President. Leading New York Times columnist Friedman opined, "[if you think Trump is helping Israel, you're a fool](#)". Meanwhile, two leading figures in the US national security community, [Eisenstaedt and Ross](#), urged Israel to resist Trump's politicization of the special relationship. Israel should be concerned not only about US lawmakers from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, but also about those representing the party's mainstream who are being [swept up by progressive sympathies](#).

Trump, on the other hand, welcomed Israel's move given his desire to drive a wedge between Democrats and American Jewry. He lashed out at Jewish Americans who vote for Democrats, accusing them of [great disloyalty](#) in remarks that sparked fury in the Jewish community; its whiff of anti-Semitism even resulted in condemnation by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). Ambassador Friedman also [issued a statement](#) supporting the Israeli move as part of the anti-BDS campaign.

Tlaib initially accepted Israel's decision to grant her entry on humanitarian grounds to visit her 90-year-old Palestinian grandmother, and she even [committed in a letter](#) to Interior Minister Deri not to engage in anti-Israel boycotting during her visit. However, what at first appeared a wise Israeli move, served Tlaib to direct additional criticism at Israel and to present herself as a values-driven lawmaker who does not sacrifice her principles. At a joint news conference with Omar, Tlaib explained that she would not agree to visit Israel under

restrictions; she would come for a family visit but only if she were allowed, as an American lawmaker, to examine what Israel does with the US aid it receives. Nonetheless, and despite the BDS achievement, American Palestinian activists are frustrated with their inability to infiltrate the Washington bubble even as the State Department is erasing the Palestinian Authority from its web site. BDS founder Omar Barghouti tried to explain why Americans should support the movement, but his is naturally a controversial voice. Ramallah is not making it easy for its friends in the US, when Palestinian President Abbas refuses to meet with Republican lawmakers and informs Democrats that he will not accept US mediation.

**The Trump plan:** Netanyahu's announced plan to build 700 housing units for Palestinians was designed to help Trumps' envoy Kushner sell the emerging US plan to Arab states during a round of visits in early August. Reports surfaced during the month of a possible conference to be chaired by Trump on the eve of the Israeli elections, but the idea was quickly dropped. The administration signaled that it would unveil the plan only after the Israeli elections, but that was before the resignation of envoy Jason Greenblatt in early September that raises questions about the next steps. Meanwhile, columnist Tom Friedman declared that [the plan was doomed to fail](#) because none of the sides was truly committed to the two-state solution. In his view, Netanyahu is not the only one at fault, the administration, the Palestinians and virtually all the actors are to blame. Twenty-one members of the Knesset's Land of Israel Caucus [sent a letter](#) to Congress, claiming that the two-state idea was more dangerous than BDS. In a counter measure, 25 former senior Israeli security officials wrote to leading House members [expressing support](#) for the two-state solution.

**Israel-US relations:** Against the backdrop of the banned visits by Reps. Tlaib and Omar, the visit of 39 freshmen Democratic members of Congress to Israel went off as planned. A week later, 31 Republican lawmakers visited. Both delegations traveled to Israel under the auspices of AIPAC. At the same time, there is concern over the future of small and medium-sized Israeli defense firms in light of the expected 2024 implementation of [the agreement signed in the waning days of the Obama Administration](#) phasing out the amount of US Foreign Military Funding that can be spent on production in Israel. This could result in the loss of as many as 22,000 jobs and the transfer of production from Israel to the US. In Alaska, Israel and the US carried out a [successful test launch](#) of the new Arrow 3 interceptor, a joint project signaling that Israel has completed its missile defense array (with an emphasis vis-à-vis Iran). The US also plans to buy two Iron Dome batteries, initially to examine their applicability and adaptability to American needs.

In parallel, the US continues to press Israel to set up an Israeli monitoring mechanism of its links with China. The move is so significant that China's ambassador to Israel penned an opinion piece in *The Marker* claiming there is nothing to fear from Chinese theft of know-how or a Chinese takeover. Israel finds itself [caught in the middle](#) between China and the US, and has chosen to act more or less according to the Five Eyes rules (the intelligence alliance comprised of the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). US concern about China is regional, also manifesting itself in reservations about an August 5<sup>th</sup> China-Egypt agreement on building a container port in Abu-Qir. The concerns stem from possible implications for US-Egypt relations, China's intelligence gathering capabilities, the possible Chinese use of the Suez Canal and abuse of Egypt's special standing in the region to advance Chinese interests.

**Recommendations for Israel:** Regardless of the Knesset election results, we adhere to our recommendation to preserve Israel's bipartisan relationship with American political leaders. Whoever wins the elections, should first immediately contact the American Jewish leadership and the heads of the Democratic party (in light of the erosion in party support of Israel), while maintaining Israel's intimate ties with the administration that is expected to control the White House for at least another year.

#### Key developments in August 2019

*Israel denies entry to US Congresswomen Omar and Tlaib*

*Trump peace plan expected to be published after Israel's elections*

*Trump makes offensive comment about US Jews*

*France tries to mediate between US and Iran at the G7 summit*

*US, Turkey implement Syria safe zone; disputes persist*

*US drops Palestinian Authority from State Department web site*