

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 84 (November 2019)

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The American' "maximum pressure" policy towards Iran has yet to succeed; the US policy change regarding settlements, announced by Secretary of State Pompeo, was perceived as a solely cosmetic change (benefiting Netanyahu) as permanent borders will only be determined through negotiations. The mix of the dissipating impact of the elimination of al-Baghdadi, the lack of serious capabilities in Iraq, the flip-flop on Syria, the unexplained delay in transferring funds to Lebanon (that were already approved), and the too-soft approach toward Turkey (after exaggerated toughness in the previous months and accompanied by an internal disagreement in Washington) increases the impact of the American withdrawal from the Middle East and leaves regional actors on their own.

The War on Terror: The American jubilation over the killing of al-Baghdadi is understandable but may still be too early, in view of the successful attacks by the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK), thousands of whose fighters consider al-Baghdadi as the "Vanished Khalifa (Caliph)," show that ISIS still retains significant ability to recover. Throughout the national security community, many estimate that the region's problems remain: Lebanon is collapsing, Iran is taking over Iraq, and Egypt is characterized by chaos, reminiscent of the last days of Mubarak's regime. They argue that western governments, led by the US, must condition any future aid to countries in the region on genuine reforms. Without this, it is still possible that ISIS could return to power. They believe that additional American withdrawals from the Middle East are undesirable. In a post-American age following the failure of the Arab Spring, without an integrating world power in the region, each country acts in service of its own interests. In the lead up to a meeting of the Global Coalition Against ISIS on November 14th, elements of the American agenda have surfaced: how should US leadership be expressed? What should the future map of Syria look like? What should be the fate of ISIS prisoners and fighters seeking to return to the West (as of now there is at least one American ISIS fighter stuck between Turkey and Greece)? Regional issues, including protests in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, human rights issues in Egypt, Libya, and the multi-national force in the Sinai Peninsula, were discussed between the US and its British and French partners.

Israel and the Palestinians: US (and Israeli) efforts to prevent the renewal of UNRWA's mandate at the UN failed, with a majority of 170 in favor, two against, and seven abstaining. Trump's "Deal of the Century," frozen due to the political crisis in Israel, fell into a deep coma this month with Secretary of State Pompeo's announcement of a [change in US policy in relation to Israeli settlements](#), according to which the US does not see Israeli settlements as illegal. This declaration still leaves the final status of the territories to Israeli-Palestinian

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negotiations and is perceived mainly as a campaign gift to Netanyahu. However, in practice, it symbolizes the Trump Administration's move towards adopting a one state solution.

In the political arena, Pompeo's declaration was received with criticism by the Democratic candidates for president and by [107 Democratic members of Congress](#), including Jewish members of Congress (at the initiative of Andy Levin, a Jewish Congressman and descendant of a long line of Jewish members of Congress supportive of Israel). In the American Jewish community, responses were mixed: The Orthodox Union and the Republican Jewish Coalition welcomed the change in policy, while AIPAC clarified that it was not taking a position. Progressive left-wing organizations condemned the change, and J Street defined it as contradicting international law. Concurrently, the State Department [criticized the EU Court of Justice's decision](#) mandating the labelling of settlement products. Legislators condemned the decision and the ranking Democratic member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Senator Menendez, wrote a [strongly worded letter to the Ambassador of the EU](#) in Washington. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the American Jewish Committee also expressed opposition to the decision. Trump, on his part, refused Netanyahu's request to transfer 12 million USD to Palestinian security forces, funding that were previously cut as part of a general cut to the PA that Netanyahu himself had requested. Trump added that if it was truly important to Netanyahu, he should transfer the funds to the Palestinians himself.

Israel's attack on senior members of Islamic Jihad was generally accepted in the US, and after 4 rockets were fired from Syria into Israel on November 19th, presidential candidate Joe Biden defended Israel's right of self-defense, and took pride in the Obama Administration's contribution to the Iron Dome system. He was joined by Trump and the Vice President, as well as most of the Democratic candidates, with the exclusion of Warren and Sanders, who took a more balanced position. Secretary of State Pompeo tweeted that the rocket attack was executed at the behest of Iran, and the State Department sent two senior officials to Israel on November 13th to discuss the security situation (the Administrator of the EPA also visited Israel to attend a conference on water issues).

American Jewry: An FBI report determined that during 2018 16,039 hate crimes were committed, of which 57.8 percent were against Jews (and 14.5 percent against Muslims). The CEO of the Anti-Defamation League demanded that hate crimes and anti-Semitic incidents be reported in the media as "national news." Regarding Israel, the New York Times concluded that while in the past, Democrats took pride in the fact that there was no day-light between them and Israel, today, wide gaps in opinion between Democrats and Israel are perceived as legitimate. This was expressed in the speeches of senior Democrats at the recent J Street Conference, and an [AJC survey](#) demonstrates that most of the American Jewish community has deepened its liberal positions and most likely will not vote for Trump in the 2020 Elections, despite the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem. Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders [proposed strategies for progressive Jews](#) to integrate support of Israel with support for Palestinian rights and the fight against anti-Semitism.

Syria: In Washington there was a feeling of chaos following the administration's retreat from its planned withdrawal in Syria. This was expressed by former Deputy Secretary of Defense and declared hawk [Paul Wolfowitz's op-ed in the New York Times](#). Indeed, two months after Trump's announcement of a coming withdrawal, and as the Russians celebrated their take-over of an American-built airfield next to Kobani, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Miley announced on November 10th that the US would leave between 500 and 600 soldiers

in Syria. Secretary of Defense Esper explained that this was due to the continued fighting against ISIS in cooperation with Kurdish SDF forces, to prevent ISIS from taking over oil fields and transforming them into a source of funding. Due to the worry that the American withdrawal from Syria would affect the situation in Afghanistan and worsen the state of the coalition forces there, Trump made a “Thanksgiving Visit” to his forces in Afghanistan.

Turkey: In response to the House of Representatives’ recognition of the Armenian Genocide, Turkish President Erdoğan considered cancelling his visit to Washington on November 13th. Congress gave him a cold shoulder, and [17 legislators called on Trump to cancel the visit](#), due to the Turkish invasion of Syria, concerns about the S-400 missiles, and ongoing human rights issues. Following news of attacks against Kurds, five senators sent a bipartisan letter to the Secretary of State, calling on him to ensure that Turkey would not stray from its territorial commitments in Syria that were determined in an agreement on October 17th. The ranking Democratic member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations published a list of [“Ten Questions”](#) for Erdoğan, covering his relations with Israel, his relations with Hamas, and including questions about converting the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul into a mosque. This criticism contrasted with leading Republicans, for example, Senator Lindsey Graham (who blocked a resolution in the Senate on the Armenian Genocide, a resolution parallel to the one approved in the House of Representatives).

This intractability is also connected to the obstacles that Turkey has placed on the implementation of NATO policies in the Baltic States and in Poland. These actions are Turkey’s response to Europe’s reluctance to declaring the Kurds as terrorist organizations, and European condemnation of the Turkish invasion of Northern Syria. The Turkish basketball player [and NBA star Enes Kanter](#) sharply criticized Erdoğan on human rights and freedom issues in the Washington Post. The administration prepared to deal with the confrontation between Turkey and countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin on overall relations and the subject of dividing up natural gas reserves, in light of the fact that Turkey did not participate in the “Medusa” naval maneuvers exercise (which included Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt as participants, alongside the US as an observer). The US also participated in the Energy Summit in Athens on October 1st, where Pompeo warned Turkey against “illegal drilling.”

However, Erdoğan, who arrived in Washington with clear goals, can sum up his visit as a success especially in everything connected to relations with the administration. Trump described relations with Turkey as “excellent” and noted that he is a “big fan” of Erdoğan. He described the Turkish President as an important global partner, praised Turkey’s relations with the Kurds, the (fragile) ceasefire in Syria, and Erdoğan’s (insignificant as it was) contribution to efforts in Afghanistan. Trump and the State Department hinted about options for a solution to the S-400 issue, perhaps by refraining from activating the Russian system. Trump also set a far-fetched goal of American-Turkish trade reaching 100 billion USD. In practice, Trump accepted Erdoğan’s positions – and not those of Macron – regarding the Turkish invasion of Northern Syria. Trump and Erdoğan point to a shared struggle against what they call the “deep state.” However, it’s possible that Trump’s soft position toward Erdoğan also relies on “the connection of the three sons-in-law,” between Jared Kushner, the Turkish Economy Minister (Erdoğan’s son-in-law) and the son-in-law of a Turkish business tycoon who plays a senior role in Trump’s financial dealings. Another issue that the US will have to address, and is still beyond the horizon, is [Turkey’s unspoken nuclear aspirations](#); an issue that Erdoğan mentioned in conversations with members of his party (for example, in a [bitter comment](#) that Israel and other powers were allowed to obtain

nuclear capability, but not Turkey). As a result, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), an esteemed organization of scientists founded in 1945 in opposition to nuclear weapons, called for the removal of American nuclear weapons from Incirlik in Turkey.

Iran: On the 40th anniversary of the takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran, the question arises regarding the feasibility of renewing relations between the two countries. Obama failed, and under Trump, this effort is even more difficult as Khamenei is not interested in relations. Iranian aggression toward the US was discussed in depth in a [New York Times article on Iranian intelligence documents](#), which show that Iran took over US intelligence assets from the moment the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011, and that Iran is closely watching pro-American players in Iraq.

Khamenei announced a renewal of enrichment at Fordow, adding that when the signatories of the JCPOA resume their commitments, Iran will cease enrichment. President Rouhani “thanked” the US for facilitating the fourth phase of Iran's withdrawing from the deal. In response, Trump tweeted that “this is a very bad step.” The State Department defined it as a “big step in the wrong direction” and clarified that the “maximum pressure” policy against Iran would continue. Pompeo declared that the world and the region were justifiably worried about the heights of subversion that a nuclear-armed Iran would reach. The US also determined that Iran is still holding hostages and placed [sanctions](#) on 9 people described as close to Khamenei, including those involved in the terrorist attack against the Marines in Beirut in 1983. A reward of 20 million USD was also announced for any contribution to the release of Robert Levinson, an FBI official arrested by Iran. American commentators argued that the [US should stop being patient with Germany](#) and other western countries who maintain practical relations with Iran. However, in the meantime, the US extended a waiver that allows relations with Iran for 25 companies operating with the Iranian nuclear sector, with the excuse that this would allow the supervision and prevention of an Iranian nuclear breakthrough. Representative Liz Cheney was not convinced and proposed legislation that would forbid “civil nuclear projects.”

Iraq: In light of protesters’ accusations that Iran is responsible for the many killings in the country, Soleimani held contacts with pro-Iranian militias to ensure that they would stand behind Prime Minister Adel Abdul al-Mahdi. The US had to clarify its position, and its interests in supporting the protesters, but not too explicitly. Pompeo did so in a statement calling on the Iraqi Government to listen to the people. Criticizing the government in Baghdad, the US Embassy issued a statement mourning the loss of life and those kidnapped in the protests and called for urgent and serious discussions with the public. Under Secretary of Defense John Rood visited Baghdad and Erbil in the context of the coalition against ISIS. He emphasized the importance of US-Iraq relations and condemned the killing and kidnapping of civilians. Meanwhile, Russian soft power is overtaking American soft power in the battle for Iraqi attention – for example, the attraction of Iraqi students to studying in Russia compared with the difficulty in obtaining student visas for Iraqis in the US.

Lebanon: On the day before Thanksgiving, the administration transferred 105 million USD in military aid to Lebanon. This was preceded by an unexplained freeze in funding that had already been approved. This was also despite a tweet from Pompeo on November 5th stating that the people of Lebanon and Iraq want their countries back, and that they’re tired of Iran’s subversion. This crisis led to a great deal of criticism: senior members of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs [wrote a letter to the President and the White](#)

[House Chief of Staff](#), calling the delay “irresponsible.” Jeffrey Feltman* even argued that the [administration had given Iran and Syria a gift](#).

Saudi Arabia: Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Jubeir confirmed that there are backchannel contacts through a “sister country,” through which Saudi Arabia seeks regional stability and security. This emerges from Saudi Arabia’s disappointment with the weak American response to the attack on its oil installations and its frustration regarding Congress’s position toward the Kingdom’s involvement in Yemen. On November 5th, the “Riyadh Agreement” was signed between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, which is meant to lead to calm and an improvement of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Concurrently, Saudi and American Air Forces conducted a joint exercise. In the US, two employees of Twitter were arrested on suspicion of spying on behalf of Saudi Arabia, and a Saudi Arabian human rights activist living in Montreal complained that he was a target of surveillance by those employees.

Egypt: The US Secretaries of State and Defense warned Egypt that if they purchase SU-35 planes they risk sanctions according to an American law preventing purchase of Russian military materials. The US also expressed support for a solution to the commercial crisis in the Ethiopian Nile through a conference between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

Recommendations for Israel: We maintain our recommendation that Israel prepare for the day after the current US administration, strengthen ties with Democrats (while maintaining a special relationship with the Trump Administration), improve relationships with the American Jewish community, and revive the broken Israeli Foreign Service.

Major events in November 2019

Pompeo announces a [change in policy](#) relating to the settlements, and sparks [resistance in Congress](#)

Trump refuses Netanyahu’s request to [transfer funds to the Palestinians](#) and suggests that Israel pay

Trump gives a [warm welcome](#) in the US to Turkish President Erdoğan

The State Department [condemned the European decision](#) on labelling settlement products

The administration [approved military aid to Lebanon](#), which had been frozen for several months

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