

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 82 (September 2019)

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[Calls to impeach the President](#) pushed aside defense and foreign policy issues this month. Since the firing of National Security Adviser John Bolton, the United States has been wavering between willingness for rapprochement with Iran and even a Presidential summit - and reaction to the attack on the Saudi refineries. Trump's peace plan has yet to be unveiled, and given the political chaos in Israel, there is no knowing when it will be. Other issues did not draw much attention.

Israel and the Palestinians: The Trump Administration did not divulge its peace plan in September despite expectations of its unveiling following the Israel elections. Secretary of State Pompeo still insisted the presentation would occur "within weeks". *The New York Times* described Netanyahu's September 10 declaration of his intention to annex parts of the West Bank as an election ploy, while the State Department [announced](#) its position on the issue remained unchanged. [A poll among West Bank Palestinians](#) indicated a certain openness among younger Palestinians to American ideas and measures. Less than one-third rejected any US idea out of hand, 22 percent wanted more US aid and two-thirds wanted the US to push Arab states for increased support. The resignation of envoy Jason Greenblatt led to a downgrading of the Presidential peace team. His replacement, Avi Berkowitz, an aide to Jared Kushner, is perceived as a personal assistant. However, those who have worked alongside Berkowitz (such as Prof. Alan Dershowitz) attest to his creativity and expertise. After a farewell visit to Israel and meeting with Netanyahu, Greenblatt explained in a [CNN opinion piece](#) that he had decided to return to his family and business and was confident in the team he was leaving behind. Greenblatt was sharply critical of the Palestinian allegiance to Hamas and Islamic Jihad and of these organizations' refusal to address their people's hopes for a better life. Greenblatt hinted that he might remain on board until after presentation of the Trump plan.

Israel-US Defense Treaty: On September 14, Trump and Netanyahu discussed such an option, which former US Ambassador Dan Shapiro dubbed a cheap pre-election ploy. However, such talk had been in the air in the past. In April 2019, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham [told](#) the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) that he supports a mutual defense pact, and that his July 2019 visit to Israel would examine security needs. However, despite some good intentions, such an agreement could tie Israel's hands given that its tactical rationale is not always acceptable to Washington. A treaty could also encounter difficult questions during its Senate ratification hearings, especially on the part of critical Democrats, for example regarding the treaties to which Israel is not a signatory (such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the NPT), or the treaty's geographic application given Israel's lack of

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formal borders. Such a treaty could also include limitations on Israeli R&D that competes with US companies. In principle, Israel could also be asked to commit forces to distant US military operations. On the other hand, the existing security cooperation is excellent and does not require a contractual manifestation.

Israel in Domestic US Politics: Democratic candidates did not mention Israel during the presidential debates. However, ahead of the Israeli elections, there was some discussion of the direction Israel would take given the declining US-based liberal world order. Neo-liberal historian Robert Kagan [argued](#) that Israel was established as part of that world order and wondered how Israel, whose “foreign policy has been trending in a decidedly anti-liberal direction” would fare without the support of the liberal club led by the US. Israel [has also been accused](#) of planting listening devices in Washington, an accusation it has strenuously denied. President Trump accepted the Israeli denial, and a *Politico* correspondent’s attempt to pin the story on an Israeli source who spoke with the Obama Administration’s coordinator of counterterrorism was rejected by coordinator Daniel Benjamin. One conjecture has it that the story was designed to foil an attempt by Trump to help Netanyahu’s re-election by allowing convicted spy Jonathan Pollard to move to Israel. A *Foreign Policy* [expose](#) on an alleged explosion of an Israeli nuclear device in the south Indian Ocean in 1979 did not generate much interest.

Iran: France sought to promote American-Iranian dialogue based on 15 billion USD worth of credit to Iran until the end of the year in return for an Iranian promise to allow free shipping in the Gulf and resume all its commitments under the nuclear deal. That would require American agreement, if only tacitly. Against this backdrop, reports continued to emerge in September that Trump was “toying” with the idea and that France was trying to arrange his meeting with Rouhani – much to Netanyahu’s chagrin [and fear](#), and [certain concern](#) of Israeli security experts and politicians that Bolton’s dismissal would ease the way for a rapprochement with Iran. Such a rapprochement could be tempered by Trump’s reluctance to endanger his pro-Israel, evangelist base ahead of the 2020 elections. At the same time, Iran increased its pressure on Europe by giving it a 60-day deadline to counter the US economic sanctions on Iran or face further violations of Iran’s commitments to the nuclear agreement, as announced by the head of the Iranian nuclear energy agency Ali Akbar Salehi. Nonetheless, US Treasury Under Secretary Sigal Mandelker (who announced plans on October 2 to step down) made clear that the sanctions on Iran would remain in place. Even Pompeo boasted that the American “maximum pressure” policy had resulted in the crash of some Iranian pension funds.

On September 18, as an initial response to the attack on Saudi Arabia, the US imposed additional sanctions on the Iranian Central Bank and the National Development Fund, and banned family members of top Iranian leaders from visiting the US. The September 14 drone attack on Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia, attributed to Iran despite the fact that Houthi rebels claimed responsibility, shrank Saudi oil output by 5 million barrels a day, boosted energy prices by 15 percent and led the US to authorize a release from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve if needed. The affair opened a Washingtonian hornet’s nest of arguments over the US response, once it comes. Pompeo defined the attack as an “act of war”. While the national security team was busy compiling a bank of potential targets, with an emphasis on striking Iran’s offensive capabilities, Trump displayed restraint, saying at a Sept. 16 news conference with the Bahraini Crown Prince that all relevant information must be gathered, and refrained from directly blaming Tehran. The Pentagon, too, recommended calm and [told reporters](#) that deployment of hundreds but not thousands of troops to Saudi

Arabia would constitute a “moderate” response. Senior *Washington Post* analyst David Ignatius blamed Trump for the crisis, citing his abandonment of the nuclear agreement. Republicans, including Senator Graham, who criticized Trump in June for refraining from ordering a response to the downing of an American drone, called for a painful punitive action that would bring down the Iranian regime, including a strike on Iran’s petroleum depots. Claims were heard that the [President’s hesitancy and fear of wars](#) (other than those conducted on Twitter) prompted the Iranian attack. On the other hand, Democratic lawmakers and even Republicans, among them former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, have made clear their objections to embarking on the defense of a third country, e.g. Saudi Arabia, and certainly without Congressional approval. The anti-war Code Pink movement [urged the US](#) to avoid embarking on a third world war because of Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Even if the US presents proof of an Iranian connection, strengthens regional coalitions, uses productive diplomatic pressure, undertakes clandestine activity, and deploys effective defense of targets such as aircraft carriers, Iran will not necessarily be deterred from action through its allied militias since its entire goal is to change the rules of the game. It believes that the very launch of offensive action serves it well. Subsequently, Iran announcing that US bases and aircraft carriers are “within missile range”. Tehran has made it clear that it would react immediately and severely against any retaliation and threatened all-out war. In the national security community in Washington, the general view was Trump must react, while taking into account what Russia is capable of doing in the Gulf and even Putin’s tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States purchase Russian defensive systems, as did Turkey and Iran.

Trump’s UNGA speech reflected his changed approach. While he still described Iran’s “bloodlust”, he added that peace with it was possible. The administration continues to work, with French help, on renewing dialogue with Iran, including an upcoming meeting of the two presidents “without preconditions”, as Pompeo said. Bolton’s departure allows the forging of a new American policy. However, Iran’s precondition is a lifting of sanctions, which the US refuses to do. With an election year drawing near, and given the support of Democratic candidates for renewing the nuclear agreement, [various options are under review](#) for a future Democratic administration. Meanwhile, Iran is also making its presence felt in the region, most recently in the September 13 exchange of blows between Israel and Hezbollah. And, indeed, the US dispatched a battle ship not to the Persian Gulf but to Beirut, sending Iran a clear message. Even before that and with the same goal of undermining Hezbollah (an Iranian proxy), Washington imposed sanctions on the Lebanon’s Jammal Trust Bank SAL for aiding Hezbollah.

Iraq: The US is looking for ways to weaken Iran’s hold on Iraq’s economy and politics. The Pentagon fears the return of the Islamic State given the disputes between Baghdad and Erbil on various issues, including the new constitution. Iraq complained of alleged attacks by Israel, but its retaliation options are limited. The supply of US air defenses is being held up while Russian equipment does arrive but is insufficient. The US thus has an opportunity to echo Israeli positions against Iranian entrenchment in Iraq (mostly enhancing its missile capabilities) and transferring weapons through Iraq to Hezbollah, and to argue vis-à-vis Baghdad that if it acts to neuter Iranian moves, it would limit its vulnerability. However, [US influence over the Iraqi street is declining](#), and Iran is stepping into the vacuum.

Turkey: A bitter remark by Erdogan about the NPT allowing five countries to have nuclear weapons, but not Turkey, in addition to its purchase of the S-400 system from Russia and its removal from the US F-35 program, does not necessarily indicate that Turkey is seeking a nuclear option. Rather, it is striving for a central role in a new international order with a declining US standing. The US does not have an immediate response to this challenge. Erdoğan keeps threatening that absent a resolution of the Kurdish issue in Syria, Turkey could expel a million refugees into Syria or direct them to Europe. Against this backdrop, and in order to maintain cooperation with Turkey, the US sent 150 troops to patrol northern Syria, in addition to the 1,000-strong US presence there. The Syrian issue also came up in the Trump-Erdogan meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA.

Syria: Washington cannot ignore the conflict in Syria, which is still not over after eight years. Despite his victory declarations, Assad controls only 60 percent of his country's territory, relying on US enemies Russia and Iran for control of the rest. [A special bipartisan study group on Syria](#), formed by the US Congress, recommended that the Trump Administration suspend its pullout from Syria, arguing that even a minimal US presence blocks the resurgence of the Islamic State. The report criticized the US zigzag, which undermines American credibility. Trump's conduct vis-à-vis Afghanistan this month reflected similar inconsistency. Following reports of agreement between the US and the Taliban on a troop withdrawal and summit at Camp David, Trump changed his mind, under [sharp criticism within the administration and Congress](#), and scrapped the summit.

UAE and Saudi Arabia: [In a "60 Minutes" interview](#), Mohammad Bin-Salman denied giving the order to murder Khashoggi but said it happened on his watch and he takes responsibility for it. The UAE withdrawal from Yemen stemmed from a US Senate vote halting the transfer of sophisticated US weaponry to the Saudis and Emirates. The UAE took similar action in 2016 in response to a law allowing lawsuits in US courts against anyone supporting terrorists in Syria, which the Emirates feared would harm it because of its support for such a group. The UAE thus withdrew its support from Libya's Haftar. The Emirati Crown Prince decided to focus on rehabilitating his country's image as a small state seeking stability more than striving for an important regional role. After placing a 1 million USD bounty on his head, the US announced on September 14 that it had eliminated Hamza Bin-Laden, described as the leader of al-Qaeda.

Recommendations for Israel: Given that the political chaos in Israel is expected to continue for months, all that remains is to once again recommend that political leaders set aside quality time for talks with senior US officials, constantly re-emphasize the rehabilitation of ties with the Democratic Party and the Jewish community, and recognize the importance of reviving the Foreign Ministry.

Key September 2019 events

Greenblatt resigns from peace team, is replaced by Berkowitz
After Netanyahu annexation declaration, US says no change in policy
Former Secretary of State Tillerson questions Netanyahu credibility
Trump, Erdogan seek to resolve disputes on UNGA sidelines
US names new envoy to advance Israel-Lebanon maritime border deal
Trump fires Security Advisor Bolton and weighs new approach on Iran