

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 87 (March 2020)

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The Coronavirus pandemic has become the primary issue on the agenda of the US administration and Congress. As for the Middle East, there is little or no reliable information on the extent of the spread of the epidemic (perhaps with the exception of Iran, which reported about 3,500 deceased as of the end of March 2020), and estimates are based on indirect information such as closing schools and canceling public events. Middle East instability, along with the ramifications of the pandemic, just as in the US, could [jeopardize Trump's reelection](#). For various reasons, both Republicans (Trump) and Democrats (Sanders) are of the opinion that the US should withdraw from the Middle East. One reason being the [repurposing of national resources and skills in favor of the power competition](#). In this regard, Dennis Ross states that [in the absence of the US a vacuum will be created](#) which is already filled by Russia, Iran and Turkey. This situation does not bode well for the US and therefore it cannot renounce the region.

Jews and Israel - Against the backdrop of the spreading Coronavirus epidemic in the Middle East, the US praises Israel's preparedness for the pandemic outbreak. However, there is [concern over the democratic nature of Israel](#) as well as criticism of the governmental changes that Netanyahu is performing while taking advantage of the Coronavirus outbreak. The growing rift between Israel and the American Jewry is also evident. As observed by [Ethan Bronner](#) (former head of the New York Times bureau in Israel) who reviewed two recent books, not only the Jewish community is moving away from Israel, but also the entire American society.

AIPAC's annual Policy Conference was held in early March in the presence of some 18,000 participants but with a meager presence of leading Democratic politicians, also because of the timing of the primary elections in many states. The only Democratic presidential candidate who attended the conference was Bloomberg. Biden, Klobuchar, and Buttigieg addressed the conference via video, Warren and Sanders abstained, and Sanders labeled the conference as providing "for those who express bigotry and oppose basic Palestinian rights". Conversely, many participants in the AIPAC conference, Republicans and Democrats alike, condemned the calls made by some Democratic candidates to condition the aid pledged to Israel on the measures that Israel will take on the Palestinian issue. The Democrats among them, emphasized that they would support Biden's (and not Sanders') candidacy, also because he opposes the notion of conditioning Rep. Eliot Engel, the Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs said that conditioning aid to Israel is "the stupidest thing" he has ever heard. The Conference became a collision scene between the two parties. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman said that the Democrats practice

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"hating Donald Trump is not an Israel policy". Senator Van Hollen of Maryland replied that the Republicans abandoned the two-state solution that had been the bipartisan foundation for years and that they turned Israel into a political issue. The [speech of Secretary General Pompeo](#) was solemn but presented the usual praise of the administration's accomplishments: moving the embassy to Jerusalem, the legal status of the settlements, the Trump Plan, withdrawing from the Nuclear Agreement with Iran (JCPOA), the elimination of Soleimani, advancing counter measures against the BDS and improving relations with Arab countries. To the chagrin of those who oppose China, Pompeo refrained from commenting on Israel's close technological cooperation with China. He also complained that Congress had blocked legislation against BDS. However, the annual conference of BDS supporters, scheduled to be held in Washington in late March, was postponed to September, due to the Coronavirus crisis.

In a closed briefing to a group of senators on March 4, [Jared Kushner presented](#) the details of President Trump's peace plan. He noted that whenever negotiations are stalled, the Palestinians may receive some financial compensation, while Israel was expanding the settlements. Kushner added that the administration is prepared to receive comments from the Palestinians on the Plan, but should the Palestinians not show willingness to join the process - it will advance without them. Kushner also said that given that the two major political parties in Israel support the plan, despite the political chaos, he is convinced that there will be progress and that Israeli and American mapping committees continue their work and are exploring annexation options. The US military reversed its intention to purchase additional "Iron Dome" batteries (beyond the two batteries already purchased) worth of 1 billion USD, because Israel refused to disclose to the US the codes necessary for the integration of the batteries with American systems. On the other hand, the US sells new Boeing KC-46 refueling aircrafts to Israel, which will replace the old refueling aircrafts.

Iran - Given its plight with handling the Coronavirus outbreak and the severe impact of the sanctions on its economy, Tehran has initiated a political campaign to lift the US sanctions. It has asked the World Monetary Fund a 5 billion USD emergency loan for combatting the virus. President Rouhani also addressed letters to heads of state in which he condemned the "cruelty" of US sanctions that undermine Iran's ability to effectively combat the epidemic. Foreign Minister Zarif also claimed that the Swiss-led mechanism that was put in place to procure food and drugs (in coordination with the US) is ineffective. In light of the Iranian calls for lifting the sanctions, the US administration has made it clear that the sanctions will continue and further sanctions may even be imposed. In this regard Pompeo met the UN Secretary General in order to pressure the UN to cut-off aid to Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, in order to increase pressure on Tehran.

The US also leads efforts to encouraging Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent the United Arab Emirates) to help the Yemenite government against the Houthi insurgents in order to help those who oppose Iran mark some gains. Some US politicians (such as Bernie Sanders) call for lifting the sanctions for humanitarian reasons, while others [oppose lifting the sanctions](#) and "throwing a life raft to Iran" at this time, not even for the sake of fighting the Coronavirus. However, pleas made by the UN, the EU, the UK, Russia and the World Health Organization have led to some sanction relief, mainly on banking activity intended to allow Tehran purchase equipment and drugs.

Consequently, the IAEA announced that Iran had once again crossed the nuclear fuel threshold needed for the manufacturing of nuclear weapons and had not allowed agency

inspectors to access the sites. In response, the [US added five Iranian scientists](#) to its sanction list as well as seven energy companies, from China, Hong Kong and South Africa that traded with Iran. Iran, for its part, advances a US based group called the [National Iranian American Council](#) that would engage in pro-Iran lobbying efforts within the US. The US fears anti-US actions by dormant Hezbollah cells around the world including in the US. Recently, a [Pentagon linguist was arrested](#) on suspicion of transmitting intelligence to Hezbollah.

Iraq - In the face of the Iranian plight and to exert military pressure on the US to pull its forces out of Iraq, a US military base in Taji north of Baghdad was targeted on March 11. This attack was in retaliation for the assassination of Soleimani, but was also aimed at deterring the US (and British) military and the international community from taking action against Iran, demonstrate that the Revolutionary Guards are vital, and influence the regime in Baghdad and signal that Khamenei is willing to bear the consequences even if that means losing the lives of Iranians. The US responded with dispatching two aircraft carriers, Marines and Patriot missile batteries into Iraq. Secretary of Defense Esper made it clear that Washington intends to keep this force in the region for some time in an effort to stop Iran. There have also been deployment changes, including the removal of several units from Iraq.

Iran for its part, deploys troops within civilian population which nullifies the military advantage that the US and its allies have. One can also expect additional Iranian retaliation that may not necessarily be in the region, aimed at the "soft belly" of the US, for example in Latin America (i.e. hitting US targets, just as Iran did in Buenos Aires against Israeli target after the assassination of Abbas al-Musawi). Iran has many resources in Latin America, including 11 local Shiite missions and communities that could serve as civil logistical and operational support to Hezbollah.

The consent of NATO members to increase their involvement in the Middle East in response to Trump's speech on February at the NATO Summit in England, may lead to a commitment (according to NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg) to deploy forces in Iraq, in order to help the Americans free-up resources for power competition. However, past experience in Afghanistan indicates that in the end, the Americans had to return to the field and fulfill the various tasks on their own because the forces provided lacked the required skills.

The agreement with the Taliban - The US/Taliban (rather than sovereign Afghanistan) [agreement](#) reflects the ambivalent US position. On the one hand, in exchange for a vague pledge to prevent terrorism against the US and its allies emanating from Taliban-controlled territories, the US is willing to make far-reaching concessions, including reducing the number of troops to 8,600 within 135 days, withdrawing the remaining troops by the end of 2021, lifting the sanctions by August 2020, exchanging prisoners and maintaining Afghanistan's sovereignty. On the other hand, the US is not inclined to recognize its partner to the agreement, and so the agreement was formally signed between the US and the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the US and will be referred to herewith as the Taliban." Defense Secretary Esper explained in a [Washington Post](#) piece the rational underpinning this agreement: For 18 years, the presence of US troops has succeeded in curbing anti-American attacks, and now the agreement is an opportunity to bring the troops back home. Michele Flournoy, Under Secretary of Defense in the Obama administration, wrote that the agreement just signed is an important first step and that the US withdrawal should be gradual and conditional. The US has 135 days to see whether the Taliban is performing on its commitments, which gives the US a lever for negotiations. It is not a perfect

agreement, but what are the alternatives after 18 years of war in which neither parties have been able to defeat each other?

However, the agreement raises many questions. For example, how will the US defend its troops should they face a lawsuit in the International Criminal Court (ICC)? The gap between the parties lies in the mere fact that the US aspires for peace while the Taliban wants to rule an Afghani Emirate. Afghanistan faces real economic difficulties while making efforts to recover. Agreements with donor countries will expire by the end of the year and Afghan tax-collecting is far from meeting the cashflow needs. The agreement looks even more problematic, considering all the past agreements between the parties that were not respected; or Washington's disregard for the Afghan government (disregard that brought about bitterness, anger and concerns in Kabul) or the good relations between the Taliban and al-Qaeda and the risk that the Islamic State could fill the void that will be created in Kabul when the coalition troops withdraw as per the agreement. The Vietnamese model is still remembered and sets an example. Two years after the signing of the Paris agreement (between the US and South Vietnam on the one hand and North Vietnam on the other), North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam and eliminated the regime therein. Meanwhile, the Taliban refuses to even negotiate with government officials in Kabul. The administration in Washington considers the very agreement as an achievement, and Trump even had a phone conversation with a Taliban official Zabihullah on March 3. However, Pompeo refused to disclose four secret appendices to the agreement which attracted criticism by members of Congress including a group of 22 Republican lawmakers led by Congresswoman Liz Cheney (daughter of former Republican Vice President Dick Cheney).

Turkey - The lack of progress in EU/Turkish relations is a cause for much frustration for Turkey. A Turkish official declared on February 28th that Turkey's borders are now open for refugees heading toward European frontiers. In doing so, Ankara puts pressure on both the EU and the US since Erdogan makes the connection between the accession to the EU, his demand for greater NATO assistance with Northern Syria issues, and the dispute with Russia over Idlib. Initially, reactions of NATO members and the West were supportive; a State Department spokesperson said the US stands alongside its NATO's ally at the same time for an immediate ceasefire to the Assad regime, Russia and Iran-backed troops. The spokesperson added that the US was exploring possibilities of extending aid to Turkey in this crisis. NATO and US support, although not fully satisfying Ankara, could nevertheless allow Erdogan to strengthen the Turkish umbrella over northern Syria and exacerbate pressure on the Assad regime. However, the administration's divisions are not unanimous regarding the nature and quality of aid to be provided to Turkey: Pompeo and Special Ambassador Jeffrey are in favor of strengthening Turkey, and the State Department has encouraged the European allies, including the UK, to strengthen their cooperation with Turkey. In contrast, the Pentagon is hesitant to give Turkey all its demands in view of its involvement in Iraq and Syria in recent years, as well as its S-400 deal with Russia which resulted in dismissing Turkey from the F-36 project. Consequently, Congress is already discussing the role of the US in Idlib when the war ends, since it is clear that no one party – be it the Assad regime, the Russians or the Iranians – will have the resources needed to rebuild the region. This realization allows the US to embark on a collaborative effort to rebuild Syria together with the UN, the EU, and Turkey, while redesigning it effectively.

Saudi Arabia - In order to prevent the flooding of the markets with cheap fuel, the administration considers taking countermeasures vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and Russia, who are lowering oil prices. The US is interested in maintaining the best price level for the

American energy industry and to minimize damage to the shale oil industry, that cannot cope with a price war that will last for several months. Six Republican senators have written to Secretary of State that [Saudi Arabia should retire from OPEC](#) in light of the overflow of energy markets.

Key March 2020 events

AIPAC Annual Policy Conference convened, and is attended by few Democratic candidates

The Israeli-American Border Mapping Commission continues its activity, based on the Trump Plan

The US reaches an agreement with the Taliban regarding the situation in Afghanistan

US and NATO support Turkey in view of the Idlib crisis in Syria

Concerns in the US over the effects of the Coronavirus epidemic on the stability in the Middle East