

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 88 (April 2020)

Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah*

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The Coronavirus pandemic has taken over the US public agenda, undermining the sense of security in the US. Public interest with foreign affairs has dropped dramatically. However, the conflict with Iran and the superpowers' competition in Syria continue to be on the US agenda. The political chaos in Israel continues to gradually attract increasing media attention in the US. Finally, the higher the prospects that Netanyahu remains in power, it is increasingly urging to wonder, where is Israel heading?

Iran - The launching on April 22 of the Iranian satellite "Noor" that was formally intended to provide surveillance capabilities for monitoring enemy forces, could pose a strategic threat to the US. The satellite is expected to cruise at 425 km above Earth, allowing the launch of anti-US missiles in the coming years. Given the Iranian aspirations for hegemony in the Middle East, this could pose a real threat, albeit still vague, if we are reminded of the 2016 North Korean example of the KMS-4 satellite system. The State Department has [firmly rejected](#) Iran's claims that its space program is peaceful. On April 1, Trump said that based on available information and estimates, the Iranians or their proxies might target American assets in Iraq. He went on to threaten that if they did so, they would pay a heavy price. On April 21, an American patrol was attacked on Syrian territory near the Iraqi border. According to the New York Times, there is an ongoing debate between Secretary of State Pompeo and National Security Adviser O'Brien on the one hand, who prefer a tougher approach, and the Secretary of Defense Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Miley on the other hand, who prefer restraint. Pompeo also argues, as the UN arms embargo expiration in October approaches, that the Security Council must renew the embargo to prevent Iran's rearmament, especially in view of its launching of ballistic missiles to its neighbors' territory, the bombing of oil tankers, the smuggling of weapons into war zones and the intercepting of civilian aircraft. Pompeo emphasized that Iran should not be allowed to purchase additional advanced weapons even after the embargo expires, and that the US will ensure that it does not happen. UN officials went as far as to share that the US actually aims to apply a total embargo on Iran, with no end-date.

The US has extended the exemption to Russian, Chinese and European companies for the purposes of treating Iran's nuclear facilities in Araq and Bushehr, for reasons of continued monitoring of Iran's compliance with its obligations under international treaties. This time it was Secretary of State Pompeo (usually more hawkish) who supported granting the exemption, while the Secretary of the Treasury Mnuchin objected to awarding Iran with a "prize". This division demonstrates the debate within the administration whether to maintain

* Ambassador (Ret.) Barukh Binah is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute. He had served, inter alia, as the Deputy Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry, in charge of North America, as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, Consul General in Chicago and as Deputy Head of Mission in Washington, DC.

"maximum pressure" on Iran or to ease sanctions due to the Coronavirus crisis, as Iran suffered a severe blow. Iran is fourth in terms of the number of victims, and unlike what we wrote last month, it did not act so decisively against the Coronavirus, which has spread from its territory to Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and other countries. However, the prevailing view in Washington is that there is no need for lifting sanctions in order to allow humanitarian response to the virus. Rather it was sufficient to [ease the restrictions in February 2020](#) to allow effective treatment of the pandemic.

Moreover, the US administration believes that it should be made clear to the Iranians that they can use existing international humanitarian tools, like funds that are locked in third countries and the Swiss humanitarian channel provides them with a waiver with regard to purchasing food, medicine and medical equipment. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden supports some relief on Iran for humanitarian reasons. However, even those who support a more lenient approach towards Iran would prefer the adoption of practices used by the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush or Barack Obama in times of severe earthquakes in Iran. They argue that the Coronavirus should not be used as a pretext for sanction relief, as the Iranian regime has not taken any positive step and even claims that the virus is the result of "biological warfare" waged by the United States. President Khamenei even blames the White House of economic and medical terror against Iran. If Washington thought that the elimination of Soleimani would discourage Iran, they were disappointed. It may be said that the maneuverability of the Quds Force in Iraq was somewhat weakened, but the visit of the Force's new commander, Esmail Qaani, aims at closing ranks and asserting their position, as well as influencing the selection of the new Iraqi prime minister. In addition, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) are stepping up their operations in Iraq. In Syria, Iranian proxies are stepping up their political and even cultural activities and their visibility in major cities like Aleppo, Latakia or Homs. Turkey and Syria increasingly take measures to curb Iran's influence in Syria.

The Coronavirus Crisis in the Middle East - The crisis weakens the region as a whole, but may also provide opportunities for the US.

Iraq sees increased ISIS activity, in anticipation to what appears to be an inevitable US withdrawal from the country. Coalition members have withdrawn the majority of their forces and the US has gathered its own troops in a number of secured military bases, such as Erbil and al-Assad. However, the crisis may present the US with an opportunity to provide aid to the local population while advancing its interests. In view of the financial distress in the Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq, the plummeting oil prices and the Coronavirus pandemic, the US could ensure that Baghdad transfers to the Kurds their share in oil revenues (328 million USD for 2019). This will allow the Kurds to meet their commitments and raise additional investments; the U.S. could replace the diesel it is using with Kurdish provided gas; Washington could also restore its support for the Peshmerga forces (from 17 million USD to 23 million USD) and ensure continued support for Barzani and retrieve Kurdish investments in financial institutions.

In **Lebanon**, in view of Hezbollah's takeover of state resources and the diversion of medical staff to treating Iranian troops and their allies, the United States could strengthen the medical system and border forces of the Lebanese military. In **Yemen**, the United States can help reengage its allies in the Gulf (though for the most part they already left the campaign) for a diplomatic resolution that will bring about a dignified end. The US is somewhat ambivalent toward **Saudi Arabia**, regardless of oil production issues. On the one hand, the US takes a

slightly critical note of Saudi Arabia when it comes to the Russia-Saudi Arabia oil prices dispute and the ensuing damage that this is causing the American shale industry. On the other hand, President Trump, when asked about the energy price issue, has boasted that he conducted good talks on the matter with Putin and with "my friend Mohammed bin Salman" – a conversation that took place on the very day marking the 18 months anniversary of the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Congress is also aware of the issue and therefore refuses to ease sanctions on Russia on the one hand and threatens to halt military aid to Saudi Arabia on the other, if it continues to cause damage to the American energy sector. The Russian-Saudi agreement that was recently achieved which is expected to be in effect until June 2022, aims to reduce Saudi and Russian oil production by about 10 percent of global oil output, and along with the relief it brings to the US shale industry, it remains to be seen whether it is fulfilled.

Just months after Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from **Syria**, and after he changed course several times, the US is back in the Deir ez-Zor region competing with Russia to win the Kurds' hearts. The reason being the proximity of the region to Iraq and its many oil resources and therefore considered a strategic asset. The US is engaging anew with those Kurdish tribes to whom it is no longer officially committed. The US also aims to stop ISIS from getting back in the region and to curb Iranian influence to the west. [The US congratulated Germany](#) on its decision to include Hezbollah in the terrorist list. As for **Egypt**, the State Department had raised with the Secretary of State cutting 300 million USD from the 1.3 billion USD annual aid granted to Egypt because of the death of an Egyptian-American citizen in Egyptian prison, after Democratic senators have called on the administration to advance his release before his passing. Meanwhile, President Trump continues to refer to a-Sisi as "a great leader".

State Department Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements - The [annual report](#), published on April 20, deals with many players including Russia, China and Central Asian countries. It also has references to Iran and Syria. The report notes that, according to a trove of Iranian archive documents exposed by Israel in 2018, **Iran** continues to hold technical information that may be relevant to nuclear weapons development, if a decision is made in this context. In November 2019, IAEA inspectors identified uranium particles in locations not declared by Iran. In addition, Iran does not comply with IAEA requirements, thus violating the overall security safeguards arrangements (CSA). In March 2020, Iran did not allow IAEA inspectors access to two sites and did not provide any explanations. In fact, Iran has increased its enriched uranium pool, to the extent that if it decides to develop weapons, its current actions would support it. Therefore, Iran is currently not complying with its nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. The US also notes that Iran does not comply with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) by neither reporting on its arsenal of chemical substances nor on its production capacity. Iran also has not ceased to produce biological weapons, contrary to the Biological Weapons Treaty. According to the report, **Syria** also does not comply with the NPT and does not disclose information with the IAEA regarding its secret al-Kibar reactor that was destroyed by Israel, which is a reason for the US to be concerned about its nuclear intentions. Syria violated the CWC by using chemical weapons in Kabana and Latakia in May 2019. Another [report](#) by OPCW on preventing the use of chemical weapons, confirms that Syria used chemical weapons as of 2017. The US and its allies (UK and France) released this report in April 8, but did not specify which action they intend to pursue.

Jews and Israel - Democratic candidate Joe Biden's expected policy toward the Middle East is still unknown, though he made it clear that as president he will not relocate the US embassy back to Tel Aviv. Though Catholic, Biden and his spouse, sent a festive message for Passover to the Jewish community praising its resilience over the years. [The Jewish Democratic Council of America](#) (JDCA) enthusiastically endorsed Biden (which perhaps would not have been the case should Bernie Sanders won in the primaries). Jewish student groups are organizing under the name [Jews 4 Joe](#) attracting attention on social media. In view of the possibility to declare unilateral annexation as of July 1, [Jewish leaders asked Gantz and Ashkenazi](#) to exert their political power to prevent unilateral annexation in the West Bank. Former [Israeli security officials also stand against the annexation](#), while two Obama administration's officials [urge Biden to speak out against the annexation](#), before it is too late. [Netanyahu is said to take advantage of the Coronavirus crisis](#) to make political gains, to stoke fear and to smash his opponents. At this time, Trump's position is very important, and in fact, [Israel's future character and image](#) are largely in the hands of Trump, in light of Netanyahu's assertion that everything will be agreed with the administration and since the Israeli-American mapping committees are not yet done marking the borders. US Ambassador Friedman is "happy" with the consent to establish a Unity Government between the two largest parties in Israel. President Trump sent President Rivlin a [particularly hearty congratulatory note](#) for Israel's 72nd Independence Day. The mayor of Alabama who cheerfully notified his 193,000 residents that he received 1,000 95N masks as a valuable gift from Netanyahu Junior.

In contrast, anti-Semitism in the US is rising; a radical right-wing pastor claimed that the Coronavirus spreads through synagogues; there have been several cases of hostile takeover of prayers conducted over zoom; an arson attempt on a Jewish nursing home in Massachusetts has been thwarted; the BDS movement continues to be active although its conferences have been postponed (officially because of the Coronavirus; for example, at Columbia University). Protests were voiced against New York City Mayor de Blasio, but his harsh (and justified) criticism came after the ultra-Orthodox community in Borough Park, Brooklyn, severely violated social distancing instructions.

The success of the series *Fauda*, which is considered a recommended binge-watching series for these Coronavirus days, portrays Israel as leading the "active defense" concept that has existed since the release of the films "Cast a Giant Shadow" or "Exodus," and is now adapted to defy present challenges through the *Fauda* series.

US and Muslims - The Zakat Foundation of America charity in Chicago is mobilizing to fund the purchase of equipment and supplies to help fighting the Coronavirus. However, an investigation has revealed that the charity leaders were affiliated with US-designated terrorist organizations, including the Turkish IHH (that led the Marmara flotilla to Gaza and is related to Hamas) and Jamaat-e-Islami (related to Pakistani terrorist movements). The heads of the Zakat Foundation of America accuse their critics of Islamophobia. The Muslim social justice organization, led among others by Linda Sarsour who worked with Bernie Sanders and who gave a talk at Colorado University on behalf of social justice organizations, is increasingly perceived as promoting Islamic rather than social causes. Sarsour's appearance in an election rally of a Congressional candidate of Palestinian descent, who is running against the (Jewish) Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel, looks like a bonus for Engel.

Recommendations for Israel - Although the presidential elections are due in over six months, Israel should already be preparing to work with [Biden's foreign policy team](#), most of whom we know very well. It should be stated and clarified that annexation *per se* should be avoided and any territorial change in the West Bank will only be made in coordination with the US.