

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 80 (July 2019)

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**August 2019**

A comprehensive, critical discussion of the President's foreign policy is under way in Washington's national security community. The [Trump doctrine](#), it is claimed, is nothing but personal diplomacy focusing on North Korea and China, and on Russia to a lesser degree, but not on the Middle East (despite the "deal of the century"). It is also being claimed that at the G-20 Summit in Osaka, Trump laid the ground for a new world order based on the US, China and Russia. Following the leaked UK ambassador's assessment of the Trump Administration's flaws, [contradictions](#) in US foreign policy have emerged, painting Trump as someone who prefers to negotiate with authoritarian leaders rather than carry out threats against them a la John Bolton (who reportedly has fallen out of favor with the President). In the Middle East, countries from Turkey to Egypt appear to be charting a new course toward Russia, not prompted by a pro-active Russian policy but by US disengagement and the fading of Europe. Indeed, in light of what is perceived as a decline in America's global status, and its involvement in "endless war", American business tycoons George Soros (a liberal) and Charles Koch (a conservative) [have established](#) the Quincy Institute, a think tank dedicated to extricating the US from its current fixed mindset on foreign policy and defense.

**Trump's peace plan** - The administration refuses to relate to the two-state solution as the basis for an Israeli-Palestinian accommodation and envoy Jason Greenblatt has described Palestinian aspirations in East Jerusalem as "exaggerated". On the other hand, Trump's close associate, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, expressed support for the two-state solution while on a visit to Israel. Palestinian anger at the US following the Bahrain Economic Workshop, which Mahmoud Abbas dubbed "the great lie", intensified after US Ambassador David Friedman, wielding a symbolic sledgehammer, took part in a ceremony marking the opening of an ancient tunnel in Silwan. Greenblatt claimed the event was archeological in nature, not political, and accused the Palestinian leadership of blocking progress toward peace. Jared Kushner urged Abbas to join in the US moves, and together with Greenblatt left at the end of July for a Middle East tour that included Israel, to advance the American initiative. Trump said at the G-20 Summit in Japan that unless Israeli-Palestinian peace is achieved during his term, it would never be achieved. He explained the US aid cutoff to the Palestinians by saying their leader had said "nasty" things about him. At the same time, US pressure resulted in the release of a Palestinian businessman from Hebron who was detained by the Palestinian Authority on suspicion of treason upon returning from the Bahrain workshop.

**Tensions with Iran** - The US welcomed the seizure of an Iranian oil tanker in Gibraltar in line with the sanctions on Iran and Syria, but was unprepared for the implementation of Iran's threat to take counter-measures unless the tanker was released. The UK was therefore

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preparing to the best of its ability to send the SBS (Special Boat Service) and an additional destroyer to the region, and the US is trying to put together a naval force to protect freedom of navigation based primarily on the oil consuming countries, with US participation limited to intelligence and other outside support. The US is also working to convene a fall conference in Bahrain to discuss shipping in the Persian Gulf in light of Iranian threats.

At a July 19 counter-terrorism conference in Buenos Aires marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jewish community center bombing, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised regional cooperation against Iran and detailed [US measures](#) against Hezbollah and its affiliates. He pointed to the US sanctions imposed on the coordinator of the 1994 attack, Salman Raouf Salman and on other senior Hezbollah officials. The US and Iran are confronting each other in Iraq, too. Under US pressure, the Mahdi government extended the deadline for pro-Iranian militias to integrate into the official government security forces by July 31. However, they appear to be ignoring the decree and Iraq does not seem able or interested in enforcing compliance. For Iraq to be able to do so, the US must keep training and equipping the Iraqi forces, provide Iraq with economic aid to limit its dependence on Iranian energy and to convince the Iraqi public that the fight against Iran is their fight, too.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran had breached the 300-kilogram limit of low-enriched uranium. Iran confirmed the report and announced it would upgrade its enrichment from 3.67% to 5%. Pompeo accused Iran of attempts to carry out its nuclear intentions and Trump warned against such moves. The US [called on Iran to desist](#) from enrichment and requested a special meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors, at which [the US ambassador described](#) Iranian moves as “nuclear extortion”, saying an easing of sanctions would only follow an unconditional Iranian return to negotiations. The US is also threatening tougher sanctions whereas Iran is displaying determination, for example arresting 17 Iranians it accuses of spying for the CIA. Nonetheless, along with the escalation, the US is still interested in dialogue and on July 14, it was suggested that Iran might be willing to discuss its missile program – a report Foreign Minister Mohammed Zarif immediately denied. This could nonetheless be the reason Trump gave his blessing to Republican Sen. Rand Paul meeting with Zarif. At the same time, the US had put into effect its imposed sanction on Zarif, which was delayed until July 31 in an attempt to leave an opening for negotiations, though it was imposed earlier along with sanction on Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and broad segments of the Iranian regime, this closed off the diplomatic channel. Iran, for its part, claims it is interested in negotiations, but according to President Hassan Rouhani will never agree to negotiations over capitulation. Iran denies any responsibility for the crisis but underscores that absent other options it will cope with it, and is demanding that Europe, Russia and China circumvent US pressure. The Europeans condemn Iran’s moves, but refrain from an action toward renewed UN sanctions, generating tensions on this issue with the US.

Republicans keep insisting that President Obama’s nuclear agreement was responsible for allowing Iran to pursue its nuclear intentions, and three Republican senators pen [a letter](#) urging tougher sanctions on Iran. The Iran question turns into a key issue for Democratic primary contenders, taking center stage at their debates. Most support a return to the deal with Iran under certain conditions. Columnist David Ignatius [recommends](#) that the candidates get tough on Iran, take the moral high ground and make clear that while Trump’s policy is unacceptable, so is Iranian subversion. Meanwhile, on June 28, the Senate adopted an amendment limiting the President’s executive power to launch war on Iran, but Democrats are unable to rally the required majority to block a presidential veto (despite four

Republican desertions to their side), handing Trump a victory. Gen. Charles Wald, former commander of US Central Command Air Forces, joins Trump critics, claiming Qatar is aiding Iran and the US is avoiding calling it out, even treating it with kid gloves and deepening economic ties with the emirate because of its centrality to the region.

**S-400 crisis with Turkey** - After Turkey took delivery in June of the first shipment of the Russian S-400 air defense system, noted historian Walter Russel urged the US [not to give up on Turkey](#) despite its rapprochement with Russia. Growing Russian ties with Turkey are also linked to Russian support on the Kurdish issue, and not only to the S-400 deal. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan believed the US would not impose sanctions on Turkey over the Russian missile acquisition, but despite Turkish assurances that technical information about the fighter's capabilities would not leak to the Russians, the US decided to remove the Turks from the F-35 program. Now the Pentagon must plug the 200 million USD funding shortfall created by the decision. There is also concern about the tactical nuclear weapons the US stores at its Incirlik air base in Turkey, both due to its proximity to the Syrian border and to the nearby deployment of the S-400s. Democrats [have attacked](#) Trump for working only with Republicans on the Turkish sanctions issue. Despite the crisis, the US Embassy in Syria issued a statement of support on June 28 for Turkey's efforts to preserve the fragile truce in Idlib. The Kurds, for their part, are concerned about ideas raised by US envoy James Jeffrey regarding a buffer zone under Turkish auspices in northern Syria.

**Relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia** - On July 1, the ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee Robert Menendez sent [a letter](#) to Secretary Pompeo demanding an inquiry into the UAE's transfer of US-made anti-tank missiles to Libya's Gen. Haftar, and America-made armored vehicles to Yemen. Menendez cited the 22 congressional resolutions rejecting arms sales to Saudi Arabia and argued that the state of emergency the President had declared in order to justify arms sales to the region was bogus. At the same time, the UAE is withdrawing its forces (5,000-strong) from Yemen, but claims they could be restored as needed. The force reduction will tie the Saudis' hands in various regards, including on action against al-Qaida, and could lead the US to push its local allies for contacts with the Houthis. Congress, which condemned the Emirati and Saudi conduct in Yemen, could take a stand on the nature and cost of the US reaction to the UAE withdrawal. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer [boasted](#) of passing legislation over the President's objections banning arms sales to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which Trump then vetoed. The administration maintained [its support for Saudi Arabia](#), primarily in light of the Iranian threat, and decided to send a reinforcement of 500 US troops to the region.

In the longer term, it appears that despite Trump's determined support for Saudi Arabia, the US-Saudi alliance, which was based for years on an energy-for-defense quid-pro-quo, may be starting to crack after seven decades. Democratic candidates are asking tough questions, criticizing Saudi moves vis-à-vis Yemen, and accusing Prince Mohammed Bin-Salman in one way or another of responsibility for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Trump adopts the views on Iran held by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel, shaping his Saudi policy accordingly. The Democrats reject this, although even Bernie Sanders only advocates a gradual cooling of relations and not any sudden dramatic move. The Saudis are targeting their efforts at winning over Democratic candidates (investing \$40 million in this endeavor just this year), after realizing that they may have been wrong in the past when they acted mostly vis-à-vis the administration and neglected Congress.

**The special relationship with Israel** - The special relations between the US and Israel received a boost in July with reports about a possible defense treaty between the two countries, perhaps as a trial balloon. The US also blocked a UN Security Council resolution condemning the demolition of Palestinian homes in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sur Baher; Secretary Pompeo [reiterated](#) his country's staunch friendship for Israel, and Congress passed [legislation denying international support for Palestinian terrorism](#) (which is awaiting a Senate vote). The visit by Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz to Washington passed without much notice. Katz did meet with his counterpart from Bahrain, but not with Pompeo. On the other hand, several agreements were signed during a successful trip to Israel by US Energy Secretary Rick Perry, who went on to Cairo with his Israeli counterpart Yuval Steinitz to take part in a meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum.

A heated discussion emerged in the Democratic party over legislative initiatives related to Israel and the BDS movement. Four Muslim Congresswomen (dubbed "[The Squad](#)") backed legislation in favor of the BDS movement sponsored by [Rep. Ilhan Omar](#), which fell through. The House of Representatives did approve [anti-BDS legislation](#) (in a 398 to 17 vote), but not before the argument over the bill spilled over into discussion of the President's character, Israel, BDS and the Mexican border. Vice President Mike Pence attacked Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for comparing the US detention facilities on the Mexican border to Nazi concentration camps. President Trump demanded that the four representatives apologize to Israel and suggested they return to their countries of origin, and the House (including Republicans) condemned the President for his invective. The progressive Jewish community in the US also [protested](#) the President's stance against the lawmakers and Jewish communities welcomed Israel's announcement that it would allow the four Muslim lawmakers to enter the country. In addition, Democratic presidential candidates were asked if they would seek to return the US Embassy in Israel from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Four answered they would not but expressed displeasure with Trump's move, two answered in the affirmative and four did not respond to the question.

**Recommendations for Israel** - With Congress on its August recess, many delegations of US lawmakers have scheduled Israel visits. Israel's diplomatic and political echelons should take the opportunity to meet with them for talks that could serve as the basis for future discussion and agreement. Special emphasis should be placed on talks with Democrats given the troubling erosion of their attitude toward Israel, without neglecting the Republican guests. A true plan for the rehabilitation of Israel's battered, eroded diplomatic missions in the US must be formulated, and the budgets and authorities of these missions must be restored. Israel should also formulate a plan to rehabilitate its damaged ties with American Jewish communities, which constitute a key bridge between Israel and the administration, Congress and all other US power centers.

**Key events, July 2019**

**Trump emissaries [visit](#) Mideast, including Israel, to promote peace plan**

**Energy Secretary Perry [visits Israel](#) and takes part in regional gas forum meeting in Cairo**

**US [removes](#) Turkey from F-35 program following missile deal with Russia**

**Growing [US-Iran tensions](#) fueled by tanker crisis**

**Israel Foreign Minister Israel Katz makes official [Washington visit](#)**

**[Israel decides](#) to allow visit by critical Congresswomen (before reversing its decision in August)**