

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 79 (June 2019)

**Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah\***

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*In June, the US Middle East policy focused on two issues: the protracted conflict with Iran, in which both sides apply cautious brinkmanship, which could still erupt at any moment into a more active confrontation; the economic workshop in Bahrain that was supposed to precede the launching of the Trump peace plan (that has been postponed at least until after the Israeli elections). Also in June, the US and Russia honored Israel with a tripartite summit of national security advisors (with unclear outcomes, if any); finally, the tense US-Turkey relationship continued over the S-400 deal and the US kept attending to the bleeding situation in Yemen and Sudan.*

**Iran:** 63 generals/admirals and 13 former ambassadors have called on President Trump to reduce tensions with Iran and to favor aggressive diplomacy over military action to safeguard the interests of the US and its friends in the region. Lawmakers also called for avoiding a war that will be “unconstitutional” without the approval of congress. On June 20, the White House summoned Congressional leaders, including senior Democrats, for briefings. Reportedly, there is a bitter argument between Trump and his National Security Advisor Bolton, who calls for a much harder position against Iran than does Trump, while Secretary of State Pompeo is in between the two. Having labeled Bolton “hawkish”, the president made it clear that only one opinion matters and that is his own, and that he is “not a warmonger”. Bolton, for his part, stresses that Iran should not interpret the caution and responsibility that the president demonstrates as weakness. Recent [war games](#) indicate possible difficulties in the event of a military confrontation, which could lead to an escalation if Iran or the US [cross red lines](#). At the same time, Washington is conducting in-depth discussions (though across [partisan divide](#)) on the question of how to [read the intelligence](#) on Iran, while Europe sees the abandoning of the JCPOA by the US as the source of the crisis.

Iran's Plan A – surviving Trump – turns out to be less feasible. Thus, they start implementing Plan B – a series of offensives by the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard. The US is developing a broad list of responses, while keeping the situation under control. It is not concerned over an eruption of a full war as much as over a “gray zone”, in which war could spill over to the region. The Iranian offensive targeting two oil tankers (see the [schedule and maps](#)), the interception of a drone, as well as the attack on an American-Iraqi base in Mosul, appear to be in accordance with Khamenei's strategy. Namely, attempting to gain strategic advantage over the US by beating Washington at its own game, including the use of military tools, while at the same time not allowing the situation to spiral out of control into a general confrontation. Even after Norway, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) argued

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\* Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah is a Policy Fellow at Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policy. 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 Deputy Head of Mission in Washington, DC.

before the UN Security Council that only state mechanisms could attack the tankers in Fujairah on May 12, the Iranians claimed that the American charges are unfounded. However, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford, confirmed at the Brookings Institution that American intelligence had detected Iranian activities in Yemen, in the Gulf, and in Iraq, and made it clear that Iran would bear the consequences. Against the backdrop of images showing American vessels escorting civilian ships in the Straits of Hormuz, the head of the Middle East division of the Pentagon in the Obama administration harshly criticized US allies in the Gulf, in an [op-ed](#), for lacking the required military capability, and despite spending billions of dollars on military hardware are not true partners. In his opinion, the notion of an "Arab NATO" will not materialize simply because of the lack of Arab operational capability.

However, somewhat surprisingly, Trump is not a trigger-happy president, and settles for insinuations such as "you'll see if we attack," adding that the military option is still on the table. On June 21, he approved a retaliating attack, which at the end was not carried out, possibly because Iran assumed some responsibility for shooting down the American drone. The president played down the meaning of the attacks on the tankers, and finally the US responded only with the option of a cyber-attack. The administration continues to signal, further to Trump's comments in May, that it is not seeking a regime change but to ensure unequivocally that Iran will not have nuclear weapon and that the US is ready for negotiations "without preconditions". The administration also allowed Iraq to continue importing Iranian gas and electricity, and it maintains the American positions are issues to be discussed in future negotiations. Pompeo said that the US would block Iranian actions and denied the claims that an invitation to negotiations had been extended to Iran via Oman.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a [ban on commercial flights](#) in the Iranian airspace around the Straits of Hormuz, and some airlines have consequently stopped flying there. In short, the US is trying to walk the tight rope between "maximum pressure" on Iran and its willingness to negotiate. Trump does not want war, but would rather weaken Iran before going back to the negotiating table, while threatening that if war breaks out, Iran will be "obliterated". However, the "maximum pressure" which has recently been stepped up with personal sanctions against Supreme Leader Khamenei, is not expected to bring about an Iranian concession, especially as long as it is not backed by American boots on the ground. The tough American rhetoric continues with regard to the Iranian nuclear plan as well. In her [statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency \(IAEA\) Board of Governors on June 11](#), the US ambassador demanded that Iran stops its subversive and vicious behavior. According to her, an escalation will only ensure the deepening isolation of Iran. Iran should return to the negotiating table and refrain from further preparations toward obtaining nuclear weapons.

**Trump's peace plan:** The administration released the [economic plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace](#) with a 10-year projects list, worth about 50 billion USD. However, on the eve of the meeting in Bahrain, the agenda of the "[economic workshop](#)" appeared to be lacking in content, [without details and action plans](#). The Palestinians [utterly condemned the workshop](#) while releasing a quiet sigh of relief (and asserting that the annexation of territories – which US Ambassador to Israel Friedman claimed Israel has a right to do – is a [war crime](#)). They expressed satisfaction with the fact that no official Israeli representatives were invited to the workshop. The administration expressed its frustration at the political developments in Israel, which would delay the release of the political part of Trump's plan. The online quarrel between Trump's emissaries and the Palestinian leadership [continued](#), as the Palestinians

refused to take part in the move led by the administration, while in Washington the general sentiment toward the Trump plan continued to be doubtful. In view of the concern that it may provoke Palestinian riots and encourage settlers to further advance the annexation of territories, some in the US are of the opinion that it is better not to publish the plan at all. Trump apparently also believes that the plan is not feasible at this stage; therefore, he keeps postponing its release. Pompeo shares this opinion, and a briefing he gave in a closed session along these lines was [leaked to the Washington Post](#).

**Saudi Arabia:** A group of 60 senators led by Graham (R-SC) and Menendez (D-NJ) is trying to block – through 22 bills – the sale of weapons worth more than 8 billion USD to Saudi Arabia and the UAE (including self-production of smart bombs). They demand a debate in Congress, within the usual timeframe, while ensuring that Congress will not be ignored. In light of the administration's declared emergency, it is likely that they will not be able to stop the expected deals, but it may lead to obstacles in future weapons' transfers. The US has yet to officially respond to a [UN investigator's report](#), that, even if there is no "smoking gun" implicating Saudi Crown Prince bin-Salman of "illegal execution" of the Saudi journalist Khashoggi, he still played a leading role in the repression of opponents and it is not possible that he did not know in advance about the plans to dispatch the assassination team.

**Syria:** The US has denied that it has reached the understanding with Russia that Assad will remain in power in exchange for the removal of the Iranians. An American official has made it clear that the US is interested in a regime change in Syria, in defeating Daesh and in Iran's departure from Syria. The administration signaled that it would settle the score with those who benefited from the chaos in Syria and cooperated economically with the Assad regime. US, Russian and Israeli national security advisors met in Israel to discuss Syria. The parties lowered their expectations for the meeting, and Putin even said on June 13 that relations with the US were becoming worse. The American and Israeli interest in Syria is to put the situation under control, prevent the transfer of Iranian equipment and reduce friction. However, while the Americans and the Israelis are firmly opposed to Iran and its negative role, Russian Security Council Secretary Petrushev reefs to Iran as an ally that is contributing to the eradication of terrorism in Syria, adding that Israeli air force activity in Syria is undesirable.

**Lebanon:** Last month, progress has been reported in the mediation efforts between Israel and Lebanon that the US has been conducting since 2012. The efforts are focused on helping resolve the demarcation of the maritime border, and advancing the expected negotiations on the issue between the two countries. In the meantime, the Iranians seem to shift their attention from Lebanon and Hezbollah to Yemen and the Houthis, mainly because they do not want to escalate the confrontation with Israel and play into the hands of the US with regard to Syria. Yemen is relatively isolated and those who pay the price are the Saudis. As always, Iran selects its pawns at its convenience. Meanwhile, reports of [Hezbollah activity in North America](#) were published.

**Turkey:** In light of the Turkey-Russia S-400 deal, the US decided not to continue training Turkish F-35 pilots, and Turkey for its part announced that it would take steps against the US. Various issues were discussed (according to the Turks) at the meeting of Turkish and American defense ministers on June 26, including Syria and the F-35 deal. Erdoğan blamed the Trump team for the crisis, but refrained from blaming the president directly, maintaining that the US could not unilaterally remove Turkey from the agreement to develop the fighter

jets. Erdoğan further said, following his meeting with Trump at the G-20 summit in Japan, the Trump promised him that the US would not impose sanctions on Turkey. However, senior Pentagon officials made it clear that Turkey would not be able to participate in the F-35 project. A severe [crisis could erupt between the two countries](#) over a mutual misperception. The new US Ambassador to Ankara, the experienced diplomat Satterfield, will have his job cut out for him, trying to evade a protracted crisis. The [problematic relationship](#) between Turkey and the US over the past decades are at the backdrop of recent events, as well as the current tension between the two countries over Syria and the gas fields in Cyprus. As far as Turkey is concerned, this justifies another anchor beyond the US and NATO.

**Egypt and Sudan:** Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE are all involved in Sudan. Saudi Arabia and the UAE employ some 4,000 fighters from the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces who fight the Houthis in Yemen, and they pay their families considerable sums while ignoring the atrocities committed by the Sudanese forces against protesting civilians, including the numerous acts of rape. Egypt supports the new Sudanese regime and does not take "active neutrality", specifically in the relations between Sudan and Ethiopia, over the Nile waters dispute and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), as the US does, and to a certain extent also Europe. However, the US conveyed its concern over the behavior of the three Arab countries; Assistant Secretary of State Carson, said that their leaders do not share "our basic democratic values and therefore their views on the future of Sudan are significantly different" to US policy. Undersecretary of State Hale spoke with the Saudi Deputy Defense Minister about the brutality of the regime forces in Sudan.

**Jews, Israel and elections:** Along with the inauguration of Trump Heights in the Golan Heights on June 16, Israeli affairs are slightly pushed aside. The *New York Times* polled 20 Democratic candidates and raised the issue of the [alignment of Israel's actions with human rights standards](#). Seven candidates responded that Israel behaves well; ten responded that it needs improvement, and the rest refrained from direct answers. In Congress, the following occurred: (1) On June 27, the Senate passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) pledging 500 million USD for Israel's missile defense program, including the Iron Dome system, tunnel exposure technologies, unmanned aerial vehicles, and intelligence exchanges; (2) Senator Graham initiated a defense agreement between the US and Israel, while maintaining Israeli freedom of action; (3) Jewish liberal movements, including J Street, called for legislation opposing land annexation; (4) AIPAC, J Street and many other Jewish organizations, supported a bi-partisan bill pledging 50 million USD to advance Israeli-Palestinian civil dialog, which was revoked earlier by the Trump administration for unclear reasons; (5) The Senate joined the administration's concerns about China's involvement in Israel, with an emphasis on the port of Haifa, in view of the intensifying Sino-US trade war and the growing Chinese involvement in the Middle East.

**Recommendations for Israel:** The political schedules in Israel and the US are synchronizing. Israeli parties running for elections will be submitting their lists of candidates in early August, on the same week that the US Congress begins its summer recess, during which many political delegations from the US are expected to visit Israel. It is therefore recommended that both the government and Israeli political parties, in general, meet with every American legislator visiting Israel. The focus should be placed on the Democratic Party, where a regarding Israel may be detected, but the Republicans should not be ignored. This includes candidates for Congress, new members of Congress, and candidates for

various positions at state level (such as governors and state Attorneys General). These meetings will create the foundation for continued contacts and cooperation. It is also recommended that the various political candidates in Israel publish detailed plans to strengthen the badly bruised Israeli Foreign Service, especially with regard to the US, and the need to heal the rift in relations with the US Jewish communities.

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### Major events in June 2019

*Publication of the [economic part](#) of the Trump plan and the convening of the [workshop in Bahrain](#)*

*US ambassador to Israel supports [Israel's right](#) to annex territories*

*[Bill](#) to finance dialog between Israelis and Palestinians*

*US, Russian and Israeli national security advisors [meet in Jerusalem](#)*

*An attack [against Iran](#) that was cancelled and imposition of sanctions*

*The [Trump-Erdoğan meeting](#) and the [appointment of a new US ambassador](#) to Turkey*