

## **US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 76 (March 2019)**

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**Israel, the Jewish community and American lawmakers** - Israel was the talk of the town in March in Washington. Netanyahu, his rival Benny Gantz and other politicians participated in the annual conference of the pro-Israel lobby organization AIPAC, which yet again made political observers [question](#) the power attributed to this group. Vice President Mike Pence used the forum to chide eight Democratic presidential candidates who declined to attend the conference, claiming that they had undermined the American bipartisan support for Israel. However, a [close examination](#) by the Washington Post revealed that apart from Senator Bernie Sanders, who stated that he would not participate because he had no interest in meeting anyone who did not support the two-state solution, other Democratic candidates had good reasons for not attending, and that they did meet conference delegates of the Jewish communities from their states. However, such attitudes should not be underestimated, and particular attention should be given to the promising young Beto O'Rourke of Texas, who equates Netanyahu, whom he sees as a racist, with Abbas; both leaders according to O'Rourke are obstructers of peace.

The issue of Muslims in the US was raised again right alongside the conference. On March 6 Muslim Democratic congresswoman Ilhan Omar made a controversial comment about "organizations that encourage loyalty to a foreign country", and was immediately reprimanded by the House Democratic leadership. In a closed meeting held on March 7, of Jewish and Muslim Democratic legislators, there was no consent regarding how the Israeli and Jewish issues should be handled, besides agreeing that they should be further discussed. In any event, the midterm elections of November 2018 provided a glimpse into the [issue of Islamophobia](#). This goes beyond the public debate about the headscarf that Omar wears: out of the 166 Muslims candidates for various primaries, city councils, and State legislatures, 40 percent reported that they encountered only few anti-Muslim remarks, one-third reported encountering harsh comments, and only four reported to not have encountered Islamophobia at all.

The Democratic Party does not have an anti-Semitic problem, as the leader of the British Labor party has. However, those who have not learned how to criticize Israel without being considered anti-Semitic will have to draw their lessons from Omar's case. Meanwhile, Democratic lawmakers have submitted – along with two Republicans – a bill banning BDS. This is a follow-up to a Republican bill in the Senate (the first bill they submitted in 2019) in support of Israel, which was criticized of hindering freedom of speech. President Trump and the Republicans attempted to take advantage of the situation. Trump called the Democrats "the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish party," but so far, he has not been able to attract more Jewish supporters. The Pew Research Center polls of January and February 2019 show that only

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24 percent of Jews in the US give Trump high marks. The [Gallup poll](#) in February showed that the support for Israel slightly dropped, and currently stands at 59 percent of the American public (support for the Palestinians is at 21 percent, which is a slight increase compared with previous findings). The decline is evident among voters of both parties, but it is dramatic among Democrats. According to the survey, the overall rate of support for Israel among Republicans is 76 percent while among Democrats it is only 43 percent.

### **The peace plan, recognition of the Golan Heights, and trade and strategic cooperation**

- Official details of Trump's peace plan are yet to be known, but the Washington Institute has estimated that, due to its [veil of confidentiality](#) it may still succeed, in spite of the skepticism in Washington toward the plan. American envoys recently held talks with Arab leaders, to present the economic parts of the plan. In addition to his continuing wrangling over Twitter with the Palestinian leadership, Jason Greenblatt congratulated the appointment of Muhammad Shtayyeh as the new Palestinian prime minister, but it seems that notwithstanding this appointment, contacts between the Palestinian Authority and the Trump government will not necessarily resume. The closing of the American consulate in Jerusalem, which effectively served as the US Embassy to the Palestinian Authority, and the establishing a "Palestinian office" within the US Embassy in Jerusalem is also seen as a precursor to the direction that the US is leading in Trump's peace plan.

Trump's recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights was applauded by the Israeli government and American right-wing organizations such as Christians United for Israel (CUFI), but condemned by 14 Security Council members (excluding the US), 28 EU member states and other international actors. Others questioned its necessity since it attracts attention to an issue that no Arab leader (besides Assad) wanted to deal with, and led the Syrian opposition to announce that it would allow Hezbollah to carry out anti-Israeli activity from the Syrian Golan.

In the US, there is growing concern over Israel-China relations. Pompeo said in an interview that China indeed offers many opportunities, but countries that trade with China should also be aware of its espionage efforts. Netanyahu informed Trump of the establishment of a committee that examines how to limit Chinese investment in Israel. In terms of bilateral trade, the US administration plans to negotiate with Israel how to change the trade agreement in order to facilitate the import of agricultural goods from the US to Israel, in the framework of the administration's global efforts to increase US exports, which affects Israel as well.

**Iran and Hezbollah** - The US accuses Iran of still attempting to obtain nuclear weapons. Indeed, on March 22, 14 individuals and 17 institutions that are associated with Iran's Defense and Innovation Administration were designated by the US as being involved in such attempts while violating Iran's commitments to the international community. Forty years after the Islamic revolution, Iran is still not interested in real relations with the US and continues to view the US as "the devil", which is [frustrating](#) to certain circles in the US. In the meantime, US sanctions are hurting the faltering Iranian economy as well as Iran's proxies in the region. The success of Trump's "maximum pressure" policy resonated in the celebratory *Nowruz* speech of Supreme Leader Khamenei, in which he emphasized the difficulties rather than the "light at the end of the tunnel". He also mentioned Europe along with the US as the old oppressors of Iran. Iran is waiting for the next US administration. At least three Democratic candidates (Sanders, Warren and Harris) have indicated their intention to reinstate the nuclear deal.

The US sanctions on Iran also hurt Syria and Hezbollah. The supply of fuel in Iranian tankers has almost ceased, with the last tanker arriving Syria on January 2. Iranian support for Hezbollah has also declined, which according to Secretary of State Pompeo (in a Beirut speech on March 19), reached 700 million USD a year. Subsequently, Hezbollah has taken austerity measures: half-reduced salaries, withdrawal of forces from Syria while the organization is looking for alternative funding sources, such as smuggling and using Lebanese government budgets. Washington should therefore ensure that the CEDRE aid funds transferred from the World Bank, Saudi Arabia and other countries to Lebanon would be transferred directly to their destination and not through the government in Beirut.

**Syria** - President Trump proudly presented a [map of Syria](#) before and after the defeat of Daesh, and the White House spokeswoman announced that the caliphate had been totally wiped out. CENTCOM commander [sent his congratulations](#) to the Syrian Democratic Forces for the elimination of the last stronghold of Daesh, but the US is aware that the organization may return, therefore, special envoy James Jeffrey said on March 25 that the campaign against Daesh would continue. The US was not able to establish a "safe zone" in northeastern Syria, which also depends on Turkish cooperation. By establishing a safe zone, the US would fulfill its promise to protect the Kurds and the YPG who played an important role in eliminating the caliphate. National Security Advisor John Bolton has suggested that one of the US reasons for resolving the situation in northern Syria is the 800 to 1,000 Western Daesh fighters and their families. The US has been holding talks with European countries in an attempt to reach an agreement regarding where should these fighters be tried and, eventually be resettled. Furthermore, Western countries are facing a [huge challenge](#) of how to deal with some 2,500 children of Western Daesh fighters who need to undergo a re-education plan to undo their previous training of Jihadi fighters and even executioners.

At the same time, the US has been trying to prevent the creation of an "Iranian corridor" in northern Syria, while the misunderstandings regarding its withdrawal intentions from Syria have continued. As the CENTCOM commander said there was no final deadline for the withdrawal, it was reported that about 1,000 soldiers would remain in Syria. Trump on the other hand, reiterated his intention to leave only 400 of them on site. The Trump administration found itself in a conflict between his obligations to withdraw forces, and the promise to defeat Daesh. Consequently, he made a plea to European countries to send troops, while promising he would conduct similar activities from Iraq (who is not enthusiastic about it) as well as logistical and intelligence backing. The Europeans are not keen about it, knowing Trump's frantic behavior and out of fear that an operation against Daesh would become an operation against Iran, which is not in their interest. The US, contrary to Russia, is trying to delay initiatives taken by Arab countries to renew official ties with Syria.

**Continued tension between the US and Turkey** - The disagreement over northern Syria only intensifies the crisis between the US and Turkey over the Russian S-400 systems that are of interest to Turkey. Trump promised to "destroy the Turkish economy" in response to the Turkish threat to attack the Kurds (in any case he intends to stop the preferential trade status with Turkey, under which Turkey exports to the 1.7 billion USD in goods, for reasons related with the global economy). Trump signed an order to hold back the supply of F-35 aircrafts to Turkey as long as the latter does not withdraw from the S-400 deal. In addition, the British technology giant BAE and the Rolls Royce company withdrew from the 100 million GBP deal, intended to build a Turkish fighter jet with the Turkish KALE group. Erdogan said in a belligerent speech that "Turkey will not be forced to swallow what it has already spitted".

At the same time, Secretary of State Pompeo participated in the Greek-Cyprus-Israel summit in Jerusalem on March 20, attended by Israeli, Cypriot and Greek leaders. It remains to be seen whether the weakening of Erdoğan's party in the local elections held on March 31 will moderate his positions vis-à-vis the US.

**Iraq** - The presence of the US forces in Iraq is challenged by two opposing forces: on the one hand, the Iranians who want to see a weak and dependent Iraq, while there are more nationalist forces such as Muqtada al-Sadr, on the other. This conflict was well articulated by Parliament Speaker Mohammed Halbousi, who during his visit to Washington this month highlighted the importance of the special relations with the US, but reiterated that Iran should not be ignored. The US is acting with self-control and avoids skirmishes with Iraq concerning legislative initiatives to limit the presence of its forces there, as this presence is essential to Iraq's stability, its ability to regroup and to recruit the resources it needs. However, Trump who sought to take advantage of the situation in order demonstrate his resolve regarding Syria on the one hand, and to claim that Obama's liberal approach created Daesh on the other hand, became insensitive of Baghdad and of Iraqi political needs; his tough rhetoric in the Syrian-Turkish context takes the American presence on Iraqi territory for granted.

This attitude does not help US supporters in the Iraqi parliament who fear that without the presence of the US, the 2011 chaos that led to the takeover of one third of the country by Daesh, could reign again. This rhetoric even intensifies a conspiracy theory in Iraq that maintains that the US created Daesh in order to take control of the country. The fact that the US has designated Iraqi organizations as terrorist organizations, including organizations funded by the Iraqi government or those with legitimate parliamentary representation, creates alienation. This measure led by Pompeo, is intended to facilitate the removal of these organizations, but it could lead instead to counter-measures that would hinder the movement of the 5,200 American soldiers in Iraq.

A recent [public opinion poll](#) held in Kuwait points to suspicion and even hostility toward the US, who liberated Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation two decades ago. Although 49 percent of respondents said they see relations with the US as very important or important, the poll shows that Trump and Putin each has only about 5 percent of support, while the rate of support for Erdoğan reaches 43 percent and the president of China enjoys 34 percent of support.

**Algeria** - Another challenge that the US will have to deal with is Russia's creeping infiltration into North Africa, including Libya, the Maghreb and even Egypt. Putin recognized the withdrawal of the US as an opportunity for Russia to re-establish itself in North Africa, especially in Algeria, which has undergone economic decline (reduction of foreign exchange reserves by half, from 190 billion to 90 billion USD, and rising inflation to 5.59 percent) and a subsequent increased emigration to Europe, mainly of the younger people. The US passively followed the unfolding events surrounding the rule of the old president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the ideas to establish a "second republic" after his departure. Although the US is not as close to Algeria as it is to Morocco or Tunisia, Algeria is nonetheless an important partner in defying al-Qaeda. The protests in Algeria and the criticism toward Bin Salman could indicate that the Middle East is facing a renewed political protest movement. The US has not realized throughout the past decade that the Middle East was experiencing a wave of social protest, and there is a chance that history will repeat itself.

**Recommendations** - Israeli leaders should mend the fences with the Jewish community in the US and maintain contact with both parties there. They should identify the key political and professional actors around the leading presidential candidates and keep a good political dialogue with them, in cooperation with the Israeli diplomatic missions in the US.

### Key events for March 2019

*The closure of the American consulate in Jerusalem and subordinating the relations with the Palestinians to the embassy in Israel*

*Polls show a decline in American public support for Israel*

*Talks on the peace plan between the Trump administration and Arab leaders continue*

*AIPAC conference with the participation of Prime Minister Netanyahu and Ganz, the Chairman of Blue and White party*

*The US recognizes Israel sovereignty over the Golan Heights*

*US-Turkish tension over the S-400 deal between Turkey and Russia*