

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 78 (May 2019)

Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah*

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From the viewpoint of American foreign policy, the month of May knew many debates and deliberations: a workshop regarding the economic aspects of Trump's plan was announced, along with harsh criticism of the plan and calls to shelve it; belligerence vis-a-vis Iran alongside reassuring messages; the continued crisis in Yemen, dotted with dilemmas facing Saudi Arabia; petty bickering in Iraq, against the backdrop of the big (Iranian) elephant in the room; and sourness in the relations with Turkey over a deal with Russia, along with an effort to preserve Turkey's relations within NATO. All that underscores the question that constantly gets around foreign policy circles in Washington: [Does Trump have any foreign policy doctrine at all?](#)

The Trump Plan and the Bahrain Economic Workshop: Before the announcement of the new elections in Israel, it seemed that Trump's plan regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was about to be released. In a discussion with [Rob Satloff](#), Director of the Washington Institute, Jared Kushner referred to the plan, saying that his team chose to focus on the details of the nature of the solution rather than on the big headlines, assuming that the solution would emerge while working out the details, as often happens in business negotiations. He said that the administration had made good achievements on all the problems it inherited, such as Iran, Daesh and Syria, but with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, regional powers should also help. He stressed that the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 was a noble attempt but it did not lead to a solution. The US has a paramount interest in Israel's security, he said, but the Palestinians must be allowed a fair and dignified life, which will hopefully give rise to a political solution. Kushner argued that Trump's plan would also propose possible solutions for permanent borders, including in Jerusalem, but said it would be better to remove Jerusalem and the Golan Heights from the agenda because it is clear from the outset that Jerusalem, the capital, and the Golan will always remain in Israeli hands. He avoided responding to Netanyahu's annexation declarations, and did not express support for the two-state solution.

In a response article, interviewer [Satloff repeated his harsh criticism](#) of the Kushner's plan, saying it was "a disaster" and that it [should not see the light of day](#). He criticized Kushner's naiveté and lack of experience, as well as his belief that any international problem can be resolved as a real estate deal in Manhattan. Dennis Ross joined the criticism, stressing that the gestures the US made to Israel have put the Arab leaders on the defensive. He added that they could not agree to a plan if it did not include a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Had Arab leaders supported it, it would be more difficult for Mahmoud Abbas to reject it outright, as he does now. For its part, the administration announced its intention to

* Ambassador (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.

reveal first the economic part of the Trump plan and to convene an [economic workshop in Bahrain](#) on June 25-26, with the participation of finance ministers and business leaders from various countries. The Palestinian Authority declined to participate and so did, reportedly, Russia and China. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have announced their intention to participate, and the administration has exerted pressure on Jordan to join as well, while the US administration continued to rebuke the Palestinian Authority and criticize its conduct.

Public opinion among American Jewry: A [PEW poll](#) found out that American Jews believe that Trump excessively favors the Israelis, much more than other Americans do (42 percent compared with a general public average of 29 percent). A [survey conducted by J Street](#) showed that most Jewish Democrats have a positive view of Israel (a 25 percent gap between positive and negative views) and Palestinians (a 13 percent gap), but have a negative view of Prime Minister Netanyahu (27 percent gap in favor of negative views). Despite the Trump administration's ostensible support of Israel, which is praised by legislators (a [letter from 10 senators](#) thanking Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan), the situation is different within the Jewish community. A [new poll](#) shows that Trump's bias for Israel is not a part of the political considerations of most American Jews, as more than 70 percent feel less confident today than two years ago, arguing that the administration is not doing enough to fight anti-Semitism.

US pressure on Iran: Washington is aware of the Iranian threat to the freedom of navigation, the transfer of energy and to the interests of the US in the Persian Gulf. Consequently, the US has sent an aircraft carrier and air force reinforcement to prevent an escalation and possibly prepare for future action. The Trump administration understands that the sanctions regime will harm primarily the Iranian public, but believes that the current timing may be suitable for a move against Iran, as Supreme Leader Khamenei is approaching the end of his term in office. Khamenei does indeed appoint devout young people for senior positions, but he is equally trying to avoid unnecessary confrontations with the US. His goal is that the current regime survives and continues to rule after his departure, and he fears that the US is striving for a regime change rather than just changing Iran's policy. US National Security Advisor Bolton made it clear (following an Israeli intelligence warning) that the US did not intend to wage war, but cautioned against a "unrelenting force" that would be activated if Iran dared to attack American targets. Bolton added that the American "maximum pressure" policy would continue until Iran's leaders learn to change their destructive policy, respect the rights of the Iranian people, and return to negotiation table. Up to now, the US has dispatched [1,500 troops](#) to the Gulf, but the [White House has reviewed its plans](#), in echo of the Iraq war, which was also led by Bolton, and the possibility of sending up to 120,000 soldiers is being considered.

There is a certain duality in the American position. Trump said he did not want a war with Iran, and despite his threat saying that "it would be the official end of Iran" if it dares to attack, he expressed his desire to talk to the Iranian leadership, contrary to the position of some of his more hawkish advisors. Against this backdrop, there is an ongoing dispute between Bolton and Secretary of State Pompeo and his team, who seem to be closer to the Trump's position. In his meeting with EU foreign ministers in Brussels, Pompeo failed to convince them to endorse the American position, and the drums of war seem to thunder as the controversy goes on. [Four senators conveyed their concern to the president](#) about the possibility of inflated intelligence reports. Senior officials of the Obama administration, such as former senior State Department officials Burns and Sullivan, who negotiated the nuclear

deal, [argued in an op-ed](#) that "force without diplomacy" would not work; the former deputy National Security Advisor warned of drifting into war by allowing Israel to attack Iran, in light of the close alliance between Trump and Netanyahu. The US foreign policy community believes that the sanctions are effective in stopping Iran's oil sales, but not in bringing about a regime change. They wonder whether Trump has a plan of action in case Iran persists with its behavior. Legislators, including Republicans, join the concern and initiate the repeal of the Authorization for Use of Military Force Act enacted shortly after September 11, 2001, allowing the president to act without authorization from Congress in case of emergency.

On May 8, Iran sent a letter to the signatories to the nuclear agreement, stating that in light of the unilateral move by the US, it would not withdraw from the agreement but would limit its compliance. The US will have to address additional actions that Iran may take, including: the threat to wage an attack on Israel; a threat to renew uranium enrichment; abandoning the collateral protocol of the nuclear agreement; accelerating research and development of advanced centrifuges; and stockpiling excess of nuclear materials (enriched uranium and heavy water). Meanwhile, 400 members of Congress from both parties [wrote a letter](#) to Trump calling on him to take action in Syria against Iran and Russia, and address the threat they pose to Israel.

Pompeo's visit to Iraq: On May 6, Pompeo visited Iraq to announce the continued exemption that the US granted Iraq regarding oil purchases from Iran, but also to convey the message that the US would not allow Iraq's territory to be used by Iran for retaliation purposes. Pompeo also advanced a contract for ExxonMobil to develop energy reserves in southern Iraq, which is valued at 53 billion USD. Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi had clarified that "Iraq is responsible for preventing any kind of harm to the member countries that are present on its territory [...] we will not accept harm to anyone, whether it is the embassy or military force". Nevertheless, on May 19, a rocket was fired at the "Green Zone" in Baghdad, home to foreign embassies, including that of the US. The following day, US Assistant Secretary of the Treasury visited Baghdad for talks on economic issues.

The February arrest of pro-Iranian PMF militias' activists on criminal grounds, allowed the US to argue that Iran and its allies are not helpful to the Shiites. In May, there was a [debate among experts](#) in Washington, whether to accept the Iraqi government's position that the PMF militias would eventually integrate into Iraqi forces or to condition continued aid to the Iraqi forces on an Iraqi government action against these militias.

Saudi Arabia and Yemen: The American dilemma is that without the Saudi coalition, Iran proxies – the Houthis – would win in Yemen. However, the atrocities that the coalition is committing and the deteriorating humanitarian situation led to congressional pressures and to legislation aiming at stopping intelligence aid and arms sales. Consequently, military aid to Jordan and the United Arab Emirates would also be restricted. President Trump [vetoed this legislation](#), and the Democrats do not have enough votes in congress to override this veto. It seems that the US has little choice but to continue to support Saudi Arabia and its coalition, while demanding that the Houthis be part of the future government in exchange for the removal of the Iranians and Hezbollah. To further this end, the administration takes advantage of a loophole in the arms control legislation, declaring a [state of emergency](#), in order to bypass the need for Congressional approval. The increasing criticism in Congress over the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, the fact that the US became nearly energy-independent, the growing civil and social modernization in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi hostility to the American criticism of Crown Prince Bin Salman, could have been a sign of a

crisis between the two countries. However, it is [not likely](#) at this point. Most of the Saudi leadership was educated in American universities and the kingdom has invested in US economy approximately 800 billion USD.

Tensions with Turkey: The [S-400 crisis](#) between Turkey and the US is intensifying as Turkish teams leave for training in Russia ahead of the expected arrival of the missile system in October. The US refuses to sell the F-35 fighters to Turkey as planned, out of fear that the attributes of the aircraft would be exposed to the Russian system. Because of the crisis, the Turkish economy is likely to suffer another blow, and the Turkish *lira* crisis may intensify. The US is also canceling the preferential trade agreements with Turkey, ostensibly because Turkey is economically advanced and is no longer in need of such assistance. Russia has strongly condemned the US position with regard to Turkey, while being certainly pleased with the tension between Ankara and Washington. Turkey insinuates that it can consider Russian alternatives to the F-35 airplanes, but it will have to decide whether and to what extent it should lean toward Russia, thereby endangering its relations with the US and NATO. Turkey has important interests vis-a-vis the US, including in northern Syria, therefore it is understandable why it is willing to comply with the American sanction regime against Iran and why it decided to cease buying Iranian oil after the exemption granted to Saudi Arabia and other countries expired. Erdoğan and Trump are to meet during the summer, maybe as early as the June G-20 summit in Japan.

Lack of clarity in US policy toward Libya: The [US inability to make decisions](#) with regard to Libya since early April, does not help resolve the crisis that emerged against the backdrop of the conflict between the UN-backed "Government of National Accord" and General Haftar's forces. In the chaos that has emerged, the US should act to stop the violence, prevent support from the rival factions and be present in the talks to end the crisis. Libya is important for the US because of its geographic location and its share in the energy market, and because many asylum seekers use Libya as an outlet to reach US' allies in Europe.

Recommendations for Israel: The renewed political chaos in Israel gives the government some time, but the Israeli political timeline begins to overlap with the American election year, which will officially open in November. It is therefore recommended that all relevant political parties and officials in Israel, both in the government and the opposition, work vigorously to rehabilitate (or establish) relations with the Democratic Party, while continuing to cultivate ties with the Republicans. That should be done not only with potential candidates for the presidency, but also with candidates for the House and the Senate, as well as for various governorships. At the same time, efforts must be made to restore Israel's shattered relations with the Jewish communities and to strengthen its diplomatic missions in the US.

Major events in May 2019

The white house [announced](#) an "economic workshop" in Bahrain

Kushner and Greenblatt [visit](#) the Middle East to advance Trump's plan

Turkey stopped [purchasing](#) Iranian oil, due to the US' sanctions regime

Defying Congress, Trump [approves](#) weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Jordan

Trump [sends](#) additional military resources to the Persian Gulf

The US is trying to [mediate](#) the Israel-Lebanon maritime dispute