

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 83 (October 2019)

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*Trump's (sudden?) decision to withdraw US troops from the Kurdish regions of northeastern Syria, greenlighting a Turkish invasion, was met with extensive domestic criticism (Republican, too), even as Congress was conducting impeachment proceedings against the President and he was dropping in the polls. Trump's move was perceived in the Middle East as US betrayal, enhancing Iran's and Russia's prestige throughout the region. The killing of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi restored the standing of the US to some degree, but was insufficient to prevent regional players from recalibrating their course and wondering whether they could keep counting on the Americans. In addition, harsh criticism emerged in Washington against the Saudi Crown Prince and the administration's Saudi policy on the first anniversary of the Khashoggi murder. Meanwhile, on the campaign trail, Democratic candidates began calling for US military aid to Israel to be conditioned on a shift in its settlement policy.*

**Syria, Turkey and the Kurds:** The hasty American pullout from northeastern Syria took place after [a phone call between Trump and Erdogan](#) and despite Pentagon objections. Trump's [view of the Middle East](#) is of a region replete with endless tribal strife, which the US was wrong to get into in the first place and must now leave. While the Kurds were useful allies against ISIS (even if they did not land alongside US troops in Normandy in 1944, as Trump accused), Trump felt the US had repaid them properly for their help. Following the Turkish invasion of Syria, immediately after the US withdrawal, [Defense Secretary Esper](#) predicted that Turkey would not be much of an ally in the future, saying it was “spinning” out of the Western orbit. Indeed, Erdogan received the blessing for his actions in Syria from the leader of another power - Putin, not Trump. Turkey claimed the YPG, the American ally in battling ISIS, was part of the PKK and accused the US of creating chaotic situations and expecting Turkey to deal with the repercussions. In his typically frenzied response, Trump tried to contain the damage wrought by the Syria pullout, rushing to draw red lines for the Turks as expressed in [his letter to Erdogan](#) and his tweets. Trump even tweeted that if, [“in my great and unmatched wisdom”](#) he concludes that Turkey was deviating from those lines, he would “totally destroy and obliterate” its economy. He also insisted that [he had not endorsed](#) the Turkish invasion and that Turkey was obliged to protect civilians in Syria. While calling the invasion “a bad idea”, [he trumpeted](#) “a major breakthrough” in Turkey's establishment of a “safe zone”, hailed the ceasefire achieved and said the US would from now on focus on safeguarding the oil fields in the area. Turkey, he said, had fulfilled its commitment and he was therefore lifting the new [sanctions](#) (the shortest ever), but GOP Senator Rubio was quick to tweet that the Turks had not committed to anything regarding administration of the “safe zone”. [The chairpersons of the foreign affairs committees in the House and in major European parliaments](#) condemned the Turkish incursion.

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[The co-president of the Democratic Council of Syria](#) said he had not believed the US would betray the Kurds, but that was exactly what happened. A Kurdish commander lambasted the Americans for “leaving us here to be slaughtered”. The Kurds were forced to seek help from Assad, the “butcher” as Trump labeled him. The US withdrawal, which makes room for further expansion of the “Shiite crescent” (that extends from Iran to northwestern Syria and Lebanon), could lead Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other countries to recalibrate their course and find pathways to a strengthened Iran, absent an effective American umbrella. Iraqi President Braham Salih (a Kurd himself) did not rule out an appeal to Russia or Iran. Polls conducted by [USA Today](#) and the [Brookings Institution](#) indicated that the American public is distancing itself from Trump’s policy, which undermines US credibility and violates his election campaign commitment to reduce the US troop presence in the Middle East. The President’s efforts to create a semblance of bipartisanship regarding his Syria policy, by briefing the heads of both parties, fell flat with Americans remembering only a photo of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pointing an accusatory “teacher’s finger” at Trump.

The House of Representatives [adopted a resolution condemning](#) Trump’s move and calling on the administration to turn back its policy on Syria, while 57 House members, mostly Democrats, wrote the President [a harsh letter](#) decrying the abandonment of allies and asking who would trust the US in the future. Even Fox News broadcasters condemned the “disastrous” move, which also came in for [sharp criticism](#) from GOP leaders, among them Senate Majority Leader [McConnell](#) in a Washington Post opinion article, and Senator Rubio. Republican Senator Graham and Democrat Van Hollen as well as 24 other senators from both parties submitted [a draft bill](#) calling to impose sanctions on Turkey’s energy and military sectors. The administration tried to head off Congress by authorizing presidential potential sanctions against Turkey, just as long as Congress would not be the one enacting them (and thus the only one authorized to revoke them). At the same time, a few observers in Washington (among them Aaron Miller), while critical of the way Trump carried out the move, also accepted his policy as one that he had declared in advance, arguing that the alliance with the Kurds had been temporary and mission specific, that Russia was the leading power in the region, Assad had won the civil war, there would be no second caliphate, and Syria was not a vital American interest.

In March 2019, Trump boasted that the US had eliminated ISIS, although three months later, the [Pentagon’s Inspector General wrote](#) that the organization had not laid down its arms and Ambassador Jeffrey, the US envoy in the fight against ISIS, [confirmed this assessment](#). The killing of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi boosted the prestige of the US and of Trump personally, after the sharp backlash against his abandonment of the Kurds. Even one of Trump’s harshest critics, former US counter ISIS envoy Bret McGurk, reluctantly admitted that the operation had yielded some achievements, although in his view it also illustrated the need for ongoing cooperation with the Kurds. Circles close to the Pentagon hinted that the timetable for the operation was moved up following Trump’s unexpected Syria pullout and concern over the loss of intelligence access. It is too soon to assess the operation’s long-term effect, and whether it will hurt ISIS the way Bin Laden’s killing undermined al-Qaida. A [Washington Institution Policy Watch](#) sums that, after al-Baghdadi’s killing, ISIS carried out dozens of terror attacks in Syria and Iraq driven by its undeterred ideological determination.

**Iran and Iraq:** The US kept up its “maximum pressure” policy, including measures by [the Financial Task Force](#) (FATF) against Iranian money laundering. Iran’s economy has been hard hit but its proxies in the region may have grown stronger if only because the sanctions could not target them directly. The declaration by the UK, France and Germany that Iran

was behind the attack on the Saudi oil fields is important, but the US, whose arguments are always met with suspicion in the Middle East, has yet to expose at the UN information buttressing the claim that the Houthis could not have carried out the attack because they lacked the technical capability.

The US has exhausted almost all its options for action against Iran, and the President lacks public support on this issue. [A Brookings Institution poll](#) indicated growing criticism of Trump's policy on both Iran and Syria. On the other hand, attempts at dialogue with Iran are being met with renewed intransigence on the part of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, who has spoken out against that "heroic flexibility" he approved in 2013 that paved the way for the nuclear agreement. This could result in violent reaction by Iran, as it has in the past, given its frustration with the current state of affairs.

The American-Iranian clash affects the issue of reform and control of the Iraqi militias' umbrella group, the PMF. On the eve of Secretary Esper's surprise Oct. 23 visit to Iraq, the government in Baghdad issued a report according to which crimes were committed in suppressing the riots that broke out in Iraq earlier in the month, but the document did not attribute specific blame to pro-Iranian elements. The report described brutal arrests, sniper fire at crowds, scare tactics, darkening of the internet and media harassment. If the US wants stability, it must identify those responsible, including Soleimani, impose personal sanctions against them, including under the Magnitsky Act<sup>1</sup>, closely monitor violations and spotlight activity by Iran and its proxies. Washington could also signal its support for the new generation of Iraqi leaders.

**Saudi Arabia:** A year after [the CIA determined that Bin-Salman was responsible for the Khashoggi murder](#), dozens of articles were published in the US in his memory, including [direct accusations](#) that the Crown Prince himself had ordered the execution and arguments that his vague acceptance of responsibility in [a 60 Minutes interview](#) was insufficient. Khashoggi was perceived as the voice of free thinking personalities in the Arab world who was silenced but his protest lives on. Against the backdrop of a report by UN Special Rapporteur Callamard [placing responsibility for the murder on Riyadh](#), Arab political exiles in the West [claimed](#) the US administration had been instrumental in helping Saudi Arabia evade blame, and calls were made to reveal the tape of Khashoggi's last moments. In a Washington Post [article](#), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Menendez detailed the administration's failed conduct. Bruce Riedel, a leading expert on the Arabian Peninsula, called on Congress to honor Khashoggi's memory with legislation cutting off US support for Saudi operations in Yemen. Declarations by Bin-Salman that given the Iranian threat, US-Saudi relations were more important than the Khashoggi affair did not have an impact on the discourse in Washington. The Saudis, however, did not simply only defend themselves, they went on the attack. [Prince Turki Al-Faisal](#) chastised Congress, saying members should get off their "high moralistic horses" for the sake of the US relationship with his country. According to the Prince, members of Congress were expressing "horror" and "disdain" for Saudi Arabia even as they are unable to legislate gun control at home.

**Lebanon:** Against the backdrop of infrastructure collapse, fires and demonstrations and hardship caused by US sanctions on the Hezbollah-linked Jamal Trust Bank, the Counter-Hezbollah International Partnership (CHIP) was convened in Washington with the

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<sup>1</sup> The 2016 law allows the US government to sanction foreign government officials implicated in human rights abuses anywhere in the world.

participation of some 30 countries to discuss additional financial action against the organization. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Hariri, Secretary of State [Pompeo called for the urgent formation of a stable government](#). The US manifested its displeasure with Hezbollah's involvement in Lebanon's administration by suspending \$105 million in aid to the Lebanese army.

**Israel and US Jewry:** Concern was expressed that Trump's Syria policy left Israel alone to face Iran and cast doubt on the "special relationship" between the two countries. Secretary Pompeo therefore stopped in Jerusalem to dismiss these concerns, claiming Israel had "not just the right but the obligation" to act in its own defense, including in Syria, and pledging that the US would continue to act to block Iran. At the annual J Street conference, Senator Warren said that if Israel keeps preventing the two-state solution by building in the settlements, "everything will be on the table", including discussion of the annual US aid to Israel. Senator Sanders expressed similar views. Additional Democratic candidates did not rule out leveraging US aid vis-a-vis Israel, either. As we know, in 1991 Republican President Bush Sr. withheld US guarantees from Israel over the settlements (and Prime Minister Shamir's less than truthful statements on the issue). On the other hand, in wishes for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, President Trump called Prime Minister Netanyahu [one of his closest allies](#). The unveiling of the "deal of the century" was postponed, yet again, with Kushner explaining that the US was awaiting the formation of a new Israeli government. Recognizing the political complexity, envoy Greenblatt said it would be a shame (meaning it could be possible) if the plan in which so much work had been invested would not be presented. In their October visit to Israel, Kushner and Greenblatt also met with Gantz and Lapid, accepting the possible change of guard. Treasury Secretary Mnuchin also visited Israel, probably in connection with the establishment of an advisory committee, under US pressure, to weigh national security aspects of prospective foreign investments in Israeli companies, with an emphasis on Chinese ones.

[A survey by the Brookings Institution and the University of Maryland](#) found that Israel still holds an important place in the US political system, albeit with the well-known gap between the views of Republicans (76%) and Democrats (49%). Netanyahu himself enjoys the support of conservative evangelists and Republicans, but only of 1% of Democrats. The survey also found that the two-state format is the solution preferred by most, but the one-state option also had quite a few supporters. [A survey by the American Jewish Committee](#) raised heavy concerns about anti-Semitism, with nine of 10 Jewish Americans viewing it as a growing problem and 72% saying Trump was not dealing with it properly. A third of American Jews declared that they had experienced anti-Semitism and avoided wearing kippahs in public or displaying other Jewish symbols, while 84% said they view anti-Zionist expressions as expressions of anti-Semitism.

**Recommendations for Israel:** In light of the US abandonment of the Kurds and given the political chaos in Israel, we reinforce our recommendation that any candidates, whether self-appointed or official for future Israeli government positions, from all political parties, meet with American counterparts from across the political spectrum, especially with Democrats. We also recommend rebuilding Israel's bridge to the US Jewish community and rehabilitating Israel's ruined Foreign Service.

**Key Developments in October 2019**

*Trump decides on Syria pullout, abandons Kurds, comes in for harsh criticism*

*Pompeo visits Israel to allay concerns about Trump policy*

*Democratic candidates call for conditions to be placed on US aid to Israel*

*Polls indicate US Jews' concerns about anti-Semitism, gap in support for Israel*

*Trump's Saudi policy lambasted on first anniversary of Khashoggi murder*