

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East Issue 74 (January 2019)

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Now that the dust has settled over the dismissal of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and as the investigations by Special Counsel Robert Mueller regarding President Trump move forward, the American lack of direction and sense of confusion concerning the Middle East have increased.

Pompeo's speech and Iran: On January 10, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered in Cairo what was to be the administration's [flagship speech](#) on the US policy in the Middle East. The speech garnered much interest in Washington, and leading think tanks published commentaries (such as the advices published by the Washington Institute [prior](#) to the speech and the Brookings Institute's analysis [following](#) the speech). Under the headline "A force for good", Pompeo insisted that the US will not leave the Middle East and will not stop its air strikes before the war on terror is over. He declared that the US strongly supports Egypt's efforts against Daesh in Sinai as well as Israel's activities vis-à-vis Iran in Syria. He went on to blame President Obama for the American weakness in face of Iran's Islamic extremism and the Assad regime's brutality. He argued that the US was a liberating rather than an occupying power. However, he said, the US will not be tempted again to accept "false promises" and will only cooperate with those who are willing to assist, such as Egyptian President a-Sisi. Pompeo praised the remarkable achievements of the Trump administration, including the coordination of the regional coalition that defeated ISIS and the US efforts to establish a Middle Eastern Strategic Alliance to deal with regional threats. Pompeo stressed that Trump had retracted the "willful blindness" toward Iran that characterized Obama's administration, while reinstating the sanctions on Iran that should never have been canceled. He also praised the coalition of Oman, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, that is designed to thwart Iranian efforts in the region.

While Pompeo presented a well-articulated concept in his speech, President Trump continued acting in a seemingly frantic manner. He sent his intelligence community "back to school" and noted on Twitter that, contrary to community's positions, Iran continues its attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, that Iran is a source of danger and confrontation, and that "their economy is now crashing, which is the only thing holding them back." At the same time, the US continues its efforts to designate Iranian companies and to block the expanding Iranian grip on Syria (not only military but also civilian). The US warned Iran not to continue testing missile tests, such as the one carried out at the beginning of December (which, according to the narrow Iranian interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, did not violate the requirements of the international community).

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The US unexpectedly called for a regional summit in Warsaw on February 13-14 with the intention to discuss the Iranian issue. However, due to European pressures, the Polish and American foreign ministries omitted in their [announcement](#) the intention to focus on Iran, and the summit was re-defined as a brainstorming forum on the stability of the Middle East. Notwithstanding, it is clear to all that the purpose of the summit, which is expected to be attended by Israel and Arab countries, is still intended to focus on the challenging situation with Iran. Russia, on the other hand, is planning to hold a parallel summit in Moscow with the participation of the various Palestinian factions.

A withdrawal from Syria? A few days after Trump boasted the elimination of terrorism, the Islamic State murdered 19 people in the Syrian city of Manbij, including four American service men. Trump's desire to "do more with less" by reducing US involvement may sound good, but it is not feasible, not least because of the huge investments already made or committed by the US. While Trump announced in December that he immediately intends to withdraw from Syria, there is no clear deadline yet and, in the meantime, the US tries to transmit a sense of determination.

However, the American confusion is evident through statements by past and present senior military and political officials: General Dunford, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that the American presence at certain observation posts on the Turkish-Syrian border would continue, but it was denied by the Pentagon spokesman; Brett McGurk, the former special envoy for the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State, stated that the president had no real plan. General John Allen, the former commander of the coalition forces, warned that an American withdrawal from Syria could undermine the elimination of the Islamic State unless the ideology of that the organization is also defeated; even Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell expressed some reservations regarding the president's decision to withdraw from Syria and Afghanistan. The 116th Congress, which convened in early January, initiated the [Sanctions Law](#) against the Syrian regime, known as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (HR 31), named after a press photographer who documented more than 53,000 acts of brutality committed by the Assad regime. However, Trump's statement that Iran can do "whatever it wants" in Syria is hovering over the entire scene.

In view of the regional anxiety over the American withdrawal, Pompeo has set out for a tour of eight Middle Eastern capitals on January 8, while National Security Adviser John Bolton came over to meet with Netanyahu and the Turks. Bolton sent a harsh warning to the Syrian regime not to use chemical weapons and, in order to reinforce the message that the Americans are not abandoning the region, James Jeffrey, the special envoy to Syria, was appointed also as coordinator of the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State. At the same time, the US began to remove some equipment from Syria on January 11. The postponement of the withdrawal apparently gives the US the opportunity to act on behalf of its Kurdish allies and to somewhat restore its credibility. The US indeed sets lines of conduct in the region to protect its Kurdish allies in northern Syria, who may very well be the only ones to maintain the achievements of the campaign against the Islamic State. In this context, Bolton declared during his visit to Jerusalem that there would be no American withdrawal from Syria without a Turkish commitment not to attack the Kurds. This was a message to Ankara, following threats by the Turks, who viewed the American pronounced withdrawal as a kind of green light for their military activity in northern Syria against both the Islamic State and the Kurds. Turkey responded [strongly](#) to the American messages, but the dialogue between the two countries [continued](#). The Kurds, for their part, began to realize their new situation and looked for new pathways to the Assad regime, even without the blessing of the Americans.

The Gulf States: General Anthony Zinni, the Trump administration's envoy to mediate the crisis between the Gulf States and Qatar, resigned. Pompeo's visit to the Gulf was an opportunity for the Americans to ease the continued tension between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors, despite the economic interests shared by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. It was also [presumed](#) that Pompeo and Bolton had tried to advance a visit by Netanyahu to Riyadh.

The US administration continues to overlook Muhammad bin Salman's role in the murder of the journalist Khashoggi and the ongoing cooperation between bin Salman and his advisor al-Qahtani (sanctioned by the US in December). On the other hand, the US is interested in what is happening in Yemen. According to Pompeo, the US carries out actions against the Iranian involvement and in favor of UN resolutions designed to achieve a lasting peace there. The Houthis have not yet fulfilled their commitments according to the Stockholm Agreement (December 13, 2018) to evacuate the coastal cities including the port of Hodeida, therefore the US must approach them in various ways in order to enforce UN Security Council [Resolution](#) 2451. Should the Houthis persist in their conduct, the US could make it clear that it will no longer block the efforts of the Yemeni central government to liberate the areas held by the Houthis.

Israel and the peace process: The intentions of the US to withdraw from Syria force Israel to prepare for a more limited American presence in the region and an increased Russian presence in a way that limits Israel's freedom of military action. Israel can no longer rely on international and regional US actions to safeguard its interests. Against this backdrop, leading experts Dennis Ross and David Makovsky of the Washington Institute [claim](#) that the political parties in Israel should include foreign policy issues in their election campaigns, and not push them aside in favor of domestic issues. The upcoming Israeli elections also affect the peace plan, formulated by the Trump administration. US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and the [Secretary of State](#) publicly clarified that the program will be published only after the elections or not long after them. Pompeo noted that the US is already sharing details with regional players and is working to create the conditions for effective talks. All this is happening while the tensions between the US administration and the Palestinian Authority continue to be high, as also reflected in the exchange of [tweets](#) between US envoy Jason Greenblatt and senior Palestinian officials such as Hanan Ashrawi and Saeb Erekat.

At the traditional workshop for new Congressmen organized by Harvard University, Prof. Stephen Walt expressed [skepticism](#) regarding prospects to achieve the two-state solution and it is likely that this approach will be adopted by some of the more than 100 new lawmakers. In the meantime, in view of what appears to be an American inaction on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Democratic-led House of Representatives is called to assume responsibility and persevere the efforts to promote peace as much as possible. While waiting for the next president to take action, Congress is also called to preserve the [feasibility](#) of a two-state solution, to continue American aid to Israeli-Palestinian projects (via the USAID agency and playing down the anti-terrorism law [ACTA](#)), and to maintain security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority. Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers are pushing for legislation to recognize the Golan Heights as an Israeli territory and to [oppose](#) the BDS movement (legislation led by Senator Rubio, which is criticized for infringing on freedom of speech).

Regardless of all that, the US exerted pressure on Israel to recognize the Venezuelan opposition, in compliance with Trump's policy. The US also warned Israel that its cooperation with the Sixth Fleet could be compromised if the Chinese are given access to the port of Haifa (similar to the 2002 Phalcon plane deal between Israel and India, which the US forced Israel to withdraw from).

Recommendation: In view of the chaos and rivalry between the administration and the Congress on the one hand, and the political uncertainty in Israel in the coming months, on the other hand, we can only repeat the obvious recommendation for Israeli prime-ministerial candidates. They should prepare for various scenarios of American policy once the presidential elections take place in 2020, taking into account also the possibility of a Democratic victory. Some in Israel did so prior to the 2004 presidential elections, and thus Israel was prepared for any scenario – both for a Bush administration or an administration headed by Senator Kerry.

Major events in January 2019

The new Congress held its first session. A [new era](#) in Israel US relations?

Trump's Peace Plan might be [published](#) following the Israeli election

Pompeo's Cairo [speech](#) on Trump's Middle East policy

[Controversies](#) between US and Turkey over the withdrawal from Syria

General Zinni [resigned](#) and will no longer work on the Qatar dispute

US [backtracks](#) on the Iran-focus of the upcoming conference in Poland

American pressure [affects](#) Israel's policy towards Venezuela