

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 75 (February 2019)

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The annual State of the Union speech, delivered by the US president to the two houses of Congress, is a major platform to present the US Government's foreign policy. However, in his [speech](#) on February 5, 2019 President Trump [hardly mentioned](#) foreign policy issues. He only referred to China, North Korea and Venezuela, and criticized Canada and Mexico for NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). Trump barely related to the the Middle East, overlooking his flagship program for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and mentioned Israel only in the context of the moving of the US Embassy to Jerusalem. As for Syria, he noted briefly that what remains for the US to do there is merely to eliminate the remnants of Daesh.

Consequently, the US-led Middle East conference in Warsaw (13-14 February) became the central forum for the US to convey its Middle East policy. The US convened the conference to rally world powers vis-à-vis Iran, but had to downplay this aspect and focus on the general issue of stability in the Middle East, somewhat similarly to the 1991 Madrid conference. However, the then Secretary of State James Baker, devoted eight months of preparations in advance of the conference, succeeded in enlisting Moscow, and in producing a positive conference. Furthermore, the geopolitical context was more favorable then. The Madrid conference was held shortly after the US and its allies marked a victory in the Gulf War and the Cold War. In contrast, Pompeo barely made any preparations ahead of the Warsaw conference, and some claim that he did not even inform the Polish hosts in advance of all the related details. Even the US' most important allies were not informed and some of them even chose not to send a senior delegate to the conference. The British Foreign Secretary, for example, conditioned his participation on discussing the situation in Yemen, and the attitude of the EU toward the conference was critical in general.

Although Iran was mentioned numerous times during the Warsaw conference, there was hardly any reference to Iran in the conference's [concluding statement](#). Participants agreed on fighting terrorism and countering the financing of terrorism, preventing missile development and proliferation, securing the safety of air and marine traffic, promoting cyber security, energy security, and human rights and fighting wrongful arrests. They agreed to establish a Middle East Strategic Study Group, under the guidance of an American research institute (yet to be named). Dennis Ross, who participated in the conference, enumerated five of its [key features](#). Noticeably, participants reached agreements concerning Iran; the Europeans, who were impressed by the Arab-Israeli consensus on the need to counter Iranian subversion, made it clear though, that they would not withdraw from the nuclear agreement, but demanded that Iran changes its behavior, including with regard to missiles; all in all, this conference was different from past conferences. Israel and the Arabs were willing to sit next to each other in one room while listening to each other, and Arab delegates

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even said that Israeli activities against Iran-backed presence in Syria were justified and in-line with Israel's right of self-defense. In Ross' opinion, the Palestinians made a mistake in boycotting the conference – had they participated, they could have influenced the shared Israeli-Arab discourse that developed above their heads. The conference also helped bringing about agreements regarding Syria, as well as the Iranian and Russian involvement there. Ultimately, the success of the conference will be measured against the question of whether the Europeans will take tougher steps against the Iranian threat in the region, for example, by adding Hezbollah, including all its divisions, to their list of terrorist organization, as the UK did.

Iran: The US and the EU continued to disagree on how to deal with the Iran issue. Chancellor Merkel wondered whether abandoning the nuclear agreement by the US was beneficial, while Vice President Mike Pence defined Iran as anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi state, and rejected Merkel's call for cooperation with Russia on the issue. In addition, the US faced an embarrassing incident: US air force intelligence officer Monica Elfriede Witt converted to Islam and defected to Iran, apparently causing considerable damage.

Syria: Trump's announcement in December of an imminent American withdrawal from Syria, triggered confusion and struggle in government circles over its implementation, in which hawkish National Security Adviser John Bolton prevailed. On January 31, the president revealed in a rare interview to the New York Times, that he continues to adhere to the withdrawal, and on February 3, he even boasted in a widely watched CBS broadcast, that he, unlike Obama, does not fear military activity in Syria, and that he crossed some lines while forcefully defeating Daesh. In order to validate Trump's withdrawal intentions, the administration officially [announced](#) on February 7 the defeat of Daesh. Two weeks later, however, the US announced that it would leave 400 soldiers in Syria. In view of the small size of the remaining American force, the US appealed to NATO member states requesting that 800 to 1,500 soldiers be expedited to Syria. Other possibilities included, continuing the campaign by launching precision artillery fire on Daesh from the Syrian-Iraqi border (which requires Iraqi approval) and placing US and other nationalities front-line observation officers who will make use of advanced electronic devices. However, American [challenges in Syria](#) do not end there. The US will still have to address several challenges. These might include preventing the return of Daesh (who was severely beaten and lost its territory but did not completely disappear; moreover, many Sunnis are still supportive of the organization). Also, the containment of Russia, Iran and even Turkey. Protecting local allies (especially the Kurds, who fear the Turks) will also be an important task, which could be met by declaring a no fly zone in northern Syria. Last, American "soft power" may contribute to the rehabilitation of the economy and civil society in the country.

Saudi Arabia: Three months have passed since Congress demanded the application to the Saudi crown prince and his team, the Magnitsky Act (that allows the president to deny entry to the US from individuals who were involved in torturing and murdering dissidents). On February 14, Democratic senators sent a letter requesting Secretary of State to explain why the president did not meet the deadline (February 8) to apply the act and to provide an evaluation of the involvement of senior Saudi officials in the Khashoggi murder. A subsequent letter by Republican senators commended the administration's efforts on the matter, but also demanded explanations. Congress may be unable to force presidential executive steps and the president may use his veto to approve or refuse legislation. However, from now on there will be many summons, hearings, reprimanding letters, and bills that will limit the administration's freedom of action. The Khashoggi affair and the way

the administration handled it, provoked political controversies in Washington that also stretch now to the war in Yemen, that basically associate American support for Saudi activity in Yemen with Trump's failure to comply with the Magnitsky act. The first hearing on the agenda of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, dealt with US policy in the Arabian Peninsula, mainly because of the war in Yemen and the Khashoggi murder. The [evaluation](#) released by the Washington Institute argues that the US operates in a regional and global context of sharp strategic changes and that it must find a new policy balance.

Against the backdrop of the rivalry between Congress and the president, the House of Representatives passed legislation in February, supported by 18 Republicans who joined the Democratic majority, invoking the [War Powers Act](#). If the Senate joins the legislation initiative, it could hinder the supply of American fuel to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The administration is reluctant to clear these countries of the allegations of harming civilians in Yemen, apparently due to fears of political confrontation and its unwillingness to spend additional political capital for the Saudis. As American criticism toward the Saudi Crown Prince rises, the Senate is expected to introduce in the energy cooperation bill, a clause prohibiting the Saudis to develop nuclear weapons. This comes as a reaction to Bin-Salman's statement on CBS, that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will have to follow suit. In view of its public image, Riyadh appointed Princess Rima as ambassador to Washington - the first Saudi woman in such a senior position.

Iraq: The Iraqi parliament is required to extend the mandate of the US-led Joint Task Force (CJTF), which includes 15 countries, and relies on American economic, military, and intelligence backing. The US is trying to make the Iraqis understand that without this task force capable of stopping Daesh. In the US view, the CJTF is a source of international legitimacy for Iraq, and the justification for international interest as well as for the international community to grant Iraq with financial aid. The US also argues that the force should not be split between the US and other members of the task force. It also seems that the US underestimated the ties between Iraq and Iran, with the latter saying (through Foreign Minister Zarif) that the US cannot speak for Iraq, while the Iraqi President Salih made it clear that the US "did not ask" for permission to deploy its forces on Iraqi territory. Possibly, the US does not properly internalize the developments in the Iraqi political system, which include the emergence of new organizations, some are Shiite and connected to Iran, out of which the US should pick those that it is able to cooperate with, even indirectly.

Turkey: Against the backdrop of tension between the US and Turkey over Syria, Erdoğan announced that Turkey would not withdraw from the S-400 missile deal with Russia. The State Department expressed concern over the indictment of sixteen social activists in Turkey, including media professionals and businessmen, and called on Turkey to release them. On the other hand, and in order to emphasize the importance of the relations between the two countries, the veteran diplomat David Satterfield (currently assistant secretary of state for Middle East affairs) was appointed US ambassador to Ankara.

Towards the 2020 elections: Democrats are beginning to form foreign policy plans and challenge President Trump ahead of the elections. In an [interview](#) with the New Yorker, Jake Sullivan, former chief of staff for Secretary of State Clinton, said that America under Trump is adopting a mistaken approach to American Exceptionalism, which sees the US above everything else, instead of pursuing a foreign policy of partnership with other countries. The foreign policy advisor of the liberal Senator Bernie Sanders (who runs for president) also [drew up](#) a progressive foreign policy agenda.

Israel: Republican Senator Marco Rubio was able to pass, by a majority of 77 to 23, the 'Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act', intended to ratify aid to Israel and security cooperation with Jordan. In addition, there is a [growing US concern](#) about the transfer of technologies from Israel to China, which led to a US demand for a new Israeli regulatory mechanism to control Israel's technological transactions, with an emphasis on Chinese companies.

In the run-up to the 2020 elections, it appears that Israel will be the "[acid test](#)" not only between the Republicans and the Democrats, but also within the Democratic party: six leading Democratic senators who in the past supported legislation against the BDS Movement, now objected to Rubio's bill on the grounds that freedom of speech might be infringed. Democratic candidates running for president will have to contend during the election campaign questions such as whether to return the embassy back to Tel Aviv or whether the territories Israel holds are occupied. In the meantime, there was an unusual [harsh criticism](#) from AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League, the American-Jewish Committee, and other organizations, regarding Netanyahu's attempt to introduce the far-right *Otzma Yehudit* party into the next Knesset.

On the 25th anniversary of the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre carried out by Baruch Goldstein, envoy Jason Greenblatt [tweeted](#) condemnation of the murder and expressed the hope that the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael would reconcile. Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt continue to [promote](#) parts of the American peace plan in the countries of the region. At the Warsaw conference, Kushner said that the US would present the peace plan after the Israeli elections, and in an interview with the SKY network (in Arabic), he added that the plan was very detailed and that most of it had been kept secret until now. He said that the plan will deal with Israel's future borders and with other core issues. He further added that the US hopes for a non-corrupt Palestinian leadership.

Recommendations: We recommend that Israeli politicians, who attend the AIPAC annual policy conference on March 24, meet with as many legislators as possible from both parties, but especially with Democrats. We further recommend that they meet with leading figures from Jewish communities throughout the US, to mitigate the crisis that erupted following the *Otzma Yehudit* party turmoil, the Western Wall plan, etc. In addition, when the American election campaign begins and when all presidential candidates are known, it is recommended to identify the professional hives of each candidate and to enter in working relations with them.

Major events in February 2019

The [Warsaw conference](#) on the stability of the Middle East convenes, against the backdrop of European criticism

Trump announces the [defeat of Daesh](#), despite disagreements among officials on this assessment

New US ambassadors are appointed to [Turkey](#) and the [UN](#)

Greenblatt and Kushner [present parts](#) of the peace plan to Arab leaders

Trump's envoys and Palestinian leaders continue their [Twitter fights](#)

[AIPAC](#) and other Jewish organizations criticize the connection between Netanyahu and the far-right Otzma Yehudit party