

## **US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East Issue 69 (August 2018)**

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Donald Trump purports to bring the "ultimate deal" to the Middle East, though he has never claimed an intention to maintain stability in the region. Quite the contrary, he generates unrest everywhere he goes. His son-in-law and his man-of-confidence, Jared Kushner, says this explicitly: "Our goal can't be to keep things stable and as they are [...] Sometimes you have to strategically risk breaking things in order to get there". This is how he conducts himself in his relations with US' loyal allies, Britain and Canada (the good neighbor), with subversive Russia and with the EU. This is what he is trying to do on domestic matters, such as changing his predecessor's health insurance policy (although he has not yet succeeded in doing so).

Such is the situation in the Middle East as well. For months, the "Trump Plan" has been making headlines. Recently, some parts of his policy were exposed, including the transfer of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the major assault on the Palestinian refugee issue, which culminated in the cancellation of \$ 360 million in UNRWA funding and a \$ 200 million cut in USAID's budget. Shutting down the PLO representation in Washington (which came into being following some great efforts undertaken by Israeli representatives back in 1994 vis-à-vis the two houses of Congress. This was done in order to speed up the embryonic negotiations). Trump's recent moves intended to force the Palestinians to return to the negotiations table with Israel and to prevent them from calling the international community to address their plight.

Trump thus deviates from a long-standing tradition of US policy in the Middle East. The former Republican president, George W. Bush, did not raise any expectations for a "revolution" at the beginning of his term, but the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks reshuffled the cards and the US set out for a war in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. Therefore, the US became "an agent for change" and even a catalyst for turnarounds. The Bush administration led far-reaching regional programs such as the Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) or the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA). Barack Obama, too, understood that a well-devised plan had to be launched and the sooner the better. Both failed, and their plans were shattered on the rocks of the Middle East.

Obama was a visionary and rushed to appoint the veteran senator (of Lebanese descent) George Mitchell, a former Senate majority leader who has an excellent acquaintance with the Middle East, as the presidential envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Trump,

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on the other hand, made declarations on the subject from the very beginning of his term, but started taking concrete policy actions only after a year and a half in office. Yet, we do not know whether his latest moves are part of an orderly plan, however obscure at this stage, or they are just impulsive steps. In any event, such actions result, in effect, in a new American policy. Last month, Trump also promised that "Israel will pay more" following the transfer of the American embassy, and that now it is the turn of the Palestinians to get "something good", but it is not clear what he meant and how close we are to realizing this "dream deal".

In addition to Trump's outright support of Israel and the growing fray (on a small to moderate scale) with Erdoğan, the American administration is trying to intervene in the Syrian conflict as well. To this end, Trump sent his envoys to Damascus, James Jeffrey (who took office in August) and Joel Rayburn. But they might have been a bit late. The summit held on September 7 in order to discuss Syria's future, just before the anticipated battle (which is expected to be bloody) in the city of Idlib, did not include the US, but Russia, Iran and Turkey.

The US influence in Syria may therefore be a derivative of its relations with these countries: The Russian subversion that is being exposed by the Special Prosecutor Robert Muller, the renewed sanctions on Iran and the tension with Turkey. Russia's reaction may have political and economic ramifications for the US and Iran may prove stubborn, especially when considering Israel's actions in Syria. Whatever the solution, it would probably not be a "Pax Americana" anymore. Hence, returning to Syria, if and when it happens, could be a source of trouble for the American administration and a reason to disengage again from Syria.

As noted, Trump and his administration began to take practical policy measures only towards the end of the first half of their term. The question is whether the time left for them in office will be sufficient and what will they be able to do. Trump is currently challenged on many levels: the growing doubt toward him demonstrated by parts of "old America" (as expressed through the funeral of the late Senator John McCain) and the midterm elections in less than 70 days that his party aspires to win. Once again, America goes to the polls to elect 435 members of Congress and 33 senators. There is reason to believe that at least one, if not both houses, will be won by the Democrats. This may impair the administration's space of action and turn Trump into a lame duck two years before the official end of his first term. In such a case, even if both Palestinians and Israelis behave like angelic ministers (and they do not), the administration will find it hard to promote a serious peace plan. Israel will have a hard time giving up the advantages it has already achieved, while for the Palestinians it is much less clear that they will cooperate with an administration they consider hostile, who transferred the US Embassy to Jerusalem and crushed their financial aid.

Thus, it is possible that even if the Palestinians do receive something "good" as the president says, they will prefer to hold back and collect support from European countries and other international bodies, and wait until the current administration's term is over. Recent polls suggest that the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress is expected to be less sympathetic to Israel (according to the Gallup poll published on August 21, Netanyahu's popularity rating among Republicans is 64 percent, while among the Democrats, only 30 percent). In large part, this is due to the Israeli government's alienation from the majority of the non-Orthodox Jewish community.

Consequently, Benjamin Netanyahu's main recommendation is to get back to the Jewish Democrats, such as Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, and contact them personally as soon as possible in order to wish them a Happy Jewish New Year from Jerusalem.

**Major Events in August 2018**

*National Security Adviser John Bolton visited Israel for talks with Netanyahu on Iran and Syria*

*The Trump administration stopped financial aid to UNRWA and continued to freeze aid to the Palestinians*

*A Gallup poll showed a significant gap between Democrats and Republicans in their support of Netanyahu*

*Ambassador James Jeffrey was appointed new envoy to Syria, and visited Israel and the Middle East*

*Tensions between the US and Turkey were exacerbated because of the American priest detained in Turkey*