

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East Issue 73 (December 2018)

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The US government shutdown due to the controversy over the construction of the wall on the Mexican border coincides with the whirlpool of resignations and appointments at the administration's senior echelon, which illustrates its current chaotic situation. This chaotic trend, which has recently intensified, includes the replacement of Secretary of Defense, White House Chief of Staff and Attorney General, the undermining of the position of the chair of the Federal Reserve Board, and the resignation of Brett McGurk, top US envoy in ISIS fight, in protest against President Trump's policies in Syria. Trump entrusts sensitive issues to unskilled family members, including Jared Kushner, who allegedly advises Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman how to handle the crisis of the murder of the Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

A [study](#) by a senior researcher at the Brookings Institution suggests that Trump does not know how to manage even those who remain in his administration, and that it leads to an incoherent discourse of officials before Congress (for example, on the Saudi issue, as described below). Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson broke his silence by saying that Trump "pretty undisciplined, doesn't like to read" and repeatedly attempted to do illegal things. Even with regard to legal issues, the President had hard time, as his former attorney Michael Cohen and former national security adviser Michael Flynn cooperated with special counsel Robert Mueller, in order to mitigate stiff prison sentences. All this happens against the backdrop of allegations about irregularities in Trump's private family fund. The affection and esteem that the American public showed toward President Bush Sr., who passed away this month and who was [eulogized](#) as a beloved, good and effective president, further underscored President Trump's failures.

The sentiment of a diminishing American leadership was also supported by a poll conducted by [Pew](#) Research Center that showed that America is now less respected and appreciated by the international community. In contrast, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said at a NATO meeting that the US continues to lead, and that this is also Trump's vision. However, Pompeo stressed that, from the US' point of view, multinational bodies cannot be a substitute for nation-states.

Syria was at the center of US policy in the Middle East, in view of the abrupt and sweeping decision by the President to withdraw from this country. It is not clear, whether Trump initiated the decision during a telephone conversation he held with Turkish President Erdogan on December 14, as reported in the media, or whether it is just the fulfillment of his promise to his voters. In any event, in the first two weeks following the announcement, there was an air of crisis in Washington, due to the sense of urgency that surrounded the decision.

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This feeling was exacerbated by the resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis, his chief of staff and other senior defense officials. The anxiety spread among regional and international allies (including Australia, in view of the planned withdrawal from Afghanistan; Pakistan, that announced that it would not be a "gun for hire" of the US; and Iraq that had to be reassured by a visit of Pompeo on December 22) led to slowing down of the withdrawal. Members of the national security community in Washington as well as senators, including Republicans, have asserted that the security of American forces in the region may now be impeded and that the realization that the task against ISIS and the Assad regime was not completed. They also claim that the president is granting (yet again) Russia a victory and a free hand in Syria, and mainly – that Iran did not retreat at all despite announcements made by the US that it would not withdraw from Syria before a full Iranian withdrawal. Right-wing circles also argue that Trump's move is a demonstration of American weakness, and both Democratic and Republican senators have signed a [letter](#) calling on Trump to reconsider his decision.

Regarding **Iran**, Robert Malley and Philip Gordon (two leading functionaries of Middle East policy in the Clinton and Obama administrations) have recently [assessed](#) that US efforts to neutralize Iran would not be successful. Iran did not cease its regional activities, and the renewed sanctions imposed on November 5 thereon, just increase its resolve and do not serve American interests. Iran stresses that it is not deterred by the sanctions. In response to the sanctions, Iran even makes efforts to increase its oil production, diversify its means of transport, and keep a reserve of oil for 50-60 days for self-consumption. In the past year, it has also upgraded its missile program and carried out 12 launches. US efforts to pass a Security Council resolution (on December 12, 2018) to stop Iran's missile program failed. As Israeli pressure on Iran in Syria mounts, Iran transfers missile production to Lebanon assuming that it will make it difficult for Israel to carry out there its preventing attacks. Iran can also resort to carrying out terrorist attacks through its regional proxies. The Washington's national security community believes that there is no discernable difference between Obama's efforts to contain Iran and Trump's policy. The two administrations use similar terminology, such as "blocking", "deterrence" and "isolation" with regards to Iran, while the focus should be on prevention rather than meaningless statements.

The US is making efforts to improve relations with **Turkey**, especially since the American priest Andrew Brunson was released from Turkish detention on October 2018. Following his conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump announced that he would visit Turkey in 2019. In addition, The State Department has approved the \$ 3.5 billion sale of Patriot missiles to Turkey in order to dissuade the Turks from acquiring Russian-made air defense systems. The US decision to withdraw from Syria, makes Turkey's role in Syria more significant. However, in view of Turkish determination to operate in northern Syria, the US warned Turkey not to use a heavy hand with the Kurds, and especially not to attack militias fighting against Daesh. The special counsel Robert Mueller revealed that Flynn was paid by the Turks to act for the extradition of the preacher, Fethullah Gülen, but failed to register as foreign agent; This may embarrass the administration and create additional tensions between the US and Turkey (despite repeated reports that the government is considering the extradition of Gülen to Turkey).

While the media focused on the Syrian-Iranian-Turkish crisis, the main US dilemma in the Middle East remained **Saudi Arabia**, with a harsh controversy at stake. On the one hand, the US had already concluded 12.5 billion USD worth of deals with Saudi Arabia, and additional deals of some 13 billion USD are expected; On the other hand, the nature of the

Saudi regime was revealed following the murder of Khashoggi. The chaotic American administration creates problems of command and control that were exposed through contradicting statements made by Mattis and Pompeo on Capitol Hill about the importance of the relations with Riyadh, and the testimony of CIA chief Gina Haspel on December 4, regarding the role of Crown Prince Bin Salman in the murder of Khashoggi. Leading Republican senators, such as Lindsey Graham and Bob Corker, spoke harshly against the Saudi regime and passed (by a vote of 63 to 37) a bill to stop aid to Saudi forces in Yemen. Graham does not accept the claim that Bin Salman was not involved in the murder of Khashoggi and was reported to be [considering](#) stopping the provision of arms to Saudi Arabia as long as Bin Salman actually runs the kingdom. American pressure on Saudi Arabia over its nuclear program, which Saudi Arabia claims is intended solely for peaceful purposes, is expected to increase as well.

The prevailing perception within the political-security community in Washington, is that the crisis with Saudi Arabia illustrates once again that the US continues to be the dominant power in the Middle East (and that Russia and China cannot or do not want to replace the US) and that it should proactively lead regional political activities. However, if the US primacy in the Middle East is based also on its special relations with Saudi Arabia, it must now rely on new foundations: reduce Saudi access to the Oval Office; build a relationship with other groups or institutions in Saudi Arabia, rather than just with the King and the Crown Prince; make it clear that arms provision and political support cannot be based solely on identifying shared threats but also on formulating a joint strategy against them. In general, the US should replace the strategy based on bilateral relationships, by one that is based on regional diplomacy.

US relations with **Russia** continue to be sour at the global level, as reflected in the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), American flights over Ukraine, and in the US naval presence in northern Japan Sea. Politically, as the investigation by Special Prosecutor Muller into Russia's involvement in the 2016 US presidential election advances, Russia becomes "the big elephant" in the room. At the regional level, the two superpowers are confronting each other on a range of issues: Russia is trying to promote its relations with Saudi Arabia, as was evident at the G-20 and OPEC conferences; in view of the drop in oil prices that reduces oil shale prospects, improving the prospects of Saudi Arabia and Russia, who have large oil reserves, to make higher profits. Russia also warns the US not to meddle in the issue of Saudi succession. It seems that Russia attempts to push the US away from a number of secondary arenas in the Middle East. For example, it became active in Libya and threatens Cyprus not to allow American presence in its territory. It is also trying to establish friendly ties with Lebanon, which until now has not responded to Russian advances, but has recently accepted Russian symbolic aid of \$ 5 million. The continuing disputes between the US and Russia over Syria may affect Israel as well and limit its freedom of action in Syria.

As for **Israel**, [opinion polls](#) conducted by researcher Shibley Telhami from the University of Maryland, showed a declining support for Israel among the American public. A segmentation by party shows that Israel gets unfavorable ratings among Democrats, while the level of support for Israel by the Republicans has not decreased. Trump's "deal of the century" will probably continue to be suspended until at least after the Israeli elections, and it is likely to continue be suspended in light of the approaching election year in the US. The draft resolution submitted by the US to the UN General Assembly on December 6 to condemn Hamas did indeed win a majority (87 in favor, 67 against and 32 abstentions) but was not

adopted because it did not have the required majority of two-thirds of the member states. The US has approved the bill to impose sanctions on Hezbollah and Hamas, who use defenseless civilians as human shields; in the Senate criticism is being voiced by Democratic Jewish senators Diane Feinstein and Bernie Sanders regarding legislative initiatives aimed at restricting BDS activity, claiming it is undermining freedom of speech; a bill was submitted by Republican Senators Ted Cruz and Tom Cotton to recognize the Golan as a territory under Israeli sovereignty; and finally, the US is showing signs of concern over deepening relations between Israel and China and the Chinese partnership in the construction of Haifa port.

This month's events lead to a series of **general recommendations**, which should be adopted by all those in Israel who see themselves serving as prime minister after the upcoming general elections. It is recommended to set up planning teams, far from the public eye, that would formulate modes of action based on a number of scenarios and parameters. Israel must be prepared to conduct another round of talks, when it becomes possible again, that will advance a political plan that will coordinate the time-tables and interests of Israel, the US, the Palestinians, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Europe; Israel must identify ahead of time who might be the main players in American politics after the 2020 elections and prepare for both scenarios: a Republican administration (presumably presided by Trump) and a Democratic Administration; Israel should review the political and economic points already agreed upon in previous negotiations with the Palestinians, evaluate their costs and the identity of the parties that will fund them, and continue negotiating by priority. The output of such a move should be a series of scenario-based working papers, which can be submitted to the next US Administration (as well as potential partners in the region and beyond) as a basis for policy discussions.

Key events for December 2018

Trump [announces](#) the withdrawal of US forces from Syria, which entails counter-reaction within the Administration.

The [release](#) of the American Peace Plan is delayed again, possibly until after the Israeli election.

The last [speech](#) of outgoing US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, containing many pro-Israel messages.

A new survey shows that the American public opinion is increasingly [critical](#) toward Israel.

A [meeting](#) between Netanyahu and Pompeo to discuss the situation on Lebanon and Iran's actions in the region.

American efforts to encourage Arab countries to [agree](#) to condemn Hamas in the UN.

Rapprochement between Turkey and the US, including a planned [visit](#) by Trump to Turkey in 2019.