

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East Issue 72 (November 2018)

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The 1994 mid-term elections were supposed to be a kind of a referendum on Bill Clinton's presidency, and the sweeping victory of the Republicans led by Newt Gingrich, both in the Senate and in the House of Representatives (for the first time since 1954), was supposed to herald a turnaround also in the White House in the 1996 presidential election. But that did not happen and Clinton defeated World War II hero, Senator Bob Dole, despite his political power as Senate Majority Leader. Likewise, the 2018 midterm elections, held in November, may turn out to be a referendum on Donald Trump's presidency ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

The Democratic Party's victory in the House of Representatives was quite impressive (the party enjoys a majority of 235 vs. 200). There is a number of reasons for this victory, including the rise in Hispanic voter turnout – which almost automatically gives the Democrats an advantage – and the massive support of the pink-hatted women, who are protesting against Trump (the current Congress will have 105 women Democrats and only 19 Republicans). Even in the gubernatorial elections, the Democrats had a fine achievement and won seven governorships, which were previously held by the Republicans (who still hold 27 governorships versus 23 held by Democrats). A mapping simulation of electors based on the midterm elections results, indicates a clear democratic advantage towards 2020.

On the other hand, it seems that the economy will play a major role in the 2020 elections. If the public perception is of economic growth, Trump is likely to win. The strength or weakness of the Democratic candidate will also be important, and it appears that the Democratic Party is unable to elect a candidate to lead the party. Right now, the pack leader seems to be the independent Senator Bernie Sanders, who [has not yet decided](#) whether he should run in spite of his advanced age (he will be 79 when he enters the White House, if he wins) or maybe he should be the kingmaker of the upcoming Democratic candidate.

As far as Israel is concerned, it is reasonable to assume that Congress will continue to be pro-Israeli even after the elections, at least according to former Congressman Steve Israel, and most commentators with whom I conversed during my visit to Washington last month. However, these things are not set in stone, and it must be taken into account that the Freshman Class members are largely ignorant of issues related to Israel. There are also members such as Muslim Congresswoman Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, who openly supports the BDS movement. Jewish community activists are concerned that the community, which identifies the current Israeli government as a close ally of President Trump who is [despised](#) by most of its members, may not be enthusiastically mobilized to instill the Israeli message in democratic circles. It should also be noted that the Jewish community was generally very

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critical of what appeared to be the appropriation of the synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh by Israeli representatives in the US.

As for the relations between Congress and the administration, although the House of Representatives does not advise and consent on nominations, the Democratic majority in the House intends to make it difficult for the administration with regard to various issues. The incoming House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman, Rep. Eliot Engel, pointed at the complexity of the situation, whereby the House of Representatives has yet to receive a report on the Trump-Putin meeting held in Helsinki last July. The Democrats intend to make it difficult for the administration on the issue of Russia, the issue of managing the State Department, and especially the Saudi issue. One must also pay attention to the steps taken by Republican legislators. For example, Senator Rand Paul is [delaying a Senate vote](#) on the US-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act which codifies into law the US \$38 billion aid for Israel over the next 10 years, but he does so mainly because he opposes any foreign aid. This is not supposed to affect the transfer of the agreed amounts.

With the exception of the crises with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Middle East and Israel have not been a top priority for the US in the past month. The main foreign policy issues on the agenda were Russia and China, Politically, the administration is experiencing increasing pressure on the issue of Russian involvement in the elections. With rumors that Trump will push for the resignation of special prosecutor Robert Muller (especially after he already fired Justice Minister Jeff Sessions), many senators, Democrats and Republicans alike, are mobilized to build an opposition for such a move.

As for the global power balance, a report commissioned by Congress, states that American national security faces an [unprecedented crisis](#), both with regard to the "superpower competition" with China and with regard to the Russian renewed "assertiveness". The report says that in the event that the US wages war against one or both of them, it might lose the battle and that the administration is not investing enough in defense. We may recall in this context the large-scale Russian exercise (Vostok) that took place last September, with the participation of 300,000 Russian soldiers and thousands of Chinese and Mongolian troops. We may further recall the British-American activities in the Northern Ocean aiming to protect the submarine communication lines between the two countries, for fear that Russian submarines might tear them apart. The administration is also lobbying Hungary (and its neighbors) to disapprove the laying of Russian gas pipelines to Europe through their territories, in order to reduce the Russian hold on Europe. Furthermore, the Pentagon is considering measures against the Russian cyber network. But despite the high rhetoric, the Trump administration is in no rush to increase US investment in defense.

With regard to **China**, which is emerging as a major rival in the Pacific and Indian Ocean, trade talks continue, and by the end of November it was agreed to turn down the flames of the conflict. Commentators believe that the reason underlying the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces agreement (INF) is not only in harsh criticism of Russia but also for the fact that there are currently many sources for ballistic missiles, especially from China, which is not a party to the agreement. Indeed, Trump announced that China is becoming a threat to US supremacy, although the US has also argued that China will not be able to stand up to the US in the event of war. Against this backdrop, the administration supports a legislative initiative intended to expose the Chinese authorities' mistreatment of their Muslim minorities.

In the face of the crisis with Saudi Arabia, the US internalizes and makes it clear that it still needs the relations between the countries, despite the assassination of Khashoggi, and

that as long as it is not ready to practically return to the Middle East, only Saudi Arabia can stand against Iran. Although the Senior Director for Gulf Affairs at the National Security Council Kirsten Fontenrose has pushed for tough measures against the Saudis for this murder and insisted that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's aid, Saud al-Qahtani, be included in the American boycott list, the Trump administration continues to try to cleanse Bin Salman. This was reflected in the statement by National Security Advisor John Bolton on November 13, who said that the recording that allegedly documented the murder of the journalist does not portray Bin Salman guilty. The US has imposed sanctions on 17 Saudis related to the alleged murder, including associates of Bin Salman, but not Bin Salman himself.

The absence of an American ambassador to Saudi Arabia does not help advance the relationship (despite the close ties between Jared Kushner and Bin Salman), and the appointment of General John Abizaid – of Lebanese origin, speaking Arabic and with an appropriate experience acquired during the Iraq war – for ambassador, should help strengthen relations. Meanwhile, Republicans in the House of Representatives (where they still hold a majority) succeeded in delaying a vote that would have prevented US involvement in Yemen, thereby easing the pressure from Saudi Arabia and indirectly from the administration. A similar resolution passed in the Senate by a bipartisan majority of 37 vs. 63, and five Republican senators asked Trump to cease negotiations with Saudi Arabia on nuclear energy, because of the Khashoggi murder.

President Trump's statement on November 20, which strongly condemned the murder of Khashoggi, but stressed that neither the king nor Bin Salman knew anything about it, summarized the US policy on the issue. The president ruled that Saudi Arabia would withdraw from Yemen if Iran did so, adding the key argument, from his perspective, that Saudi Arabia intends to invest \$450 billion in the US (\$110 billion for security purchases) and that it serves the interests of the US, Israel and other US partners. Some in the Washington national security community [believe](#) that Congress and the president must reach a compromise on everything related to Saudi Arabia, recognizing its being problematic, but also its being an asset.

Turkey, for its part, signaled that it would not tie the continued investigation into the murder of Khashoggi (which harms Saudi Arabia and subsequently the US) with its constant demand to extradite Fethullah Gülen from the US. In his Washington Post article, [President Erdoğan dismissed](#) the Saudi king from responsibility for the murder (but did not mention Bin Salman) and criticized the Saudi authorities for not doing enough on the matter. In general, US-Turkey relations were somewhat thawed after the American priest was released and in view of a \$5 million award announced by the US for whoever has information that would lead to the arrest of the PKK combatants. However, Turkey expects more, especially after the cessation of American aid to YPG Kurds in northern Syria. The special American envoy to Syria James Jeffries, made it clear that US aid to the Kurds was only in the form of light weapons. In addition, Turkey had received a temporary exemption from the US Treasury for implementing the sanctions against Iran. It should be noted that to the displeasure of Turkey, the pro-American militia (SDF) raids on Daesh in Syria on its border with Iraq, and that Turkey had rejected the American plans to set observation posts on the Syrian-Turkish border. On the other hand, the idea promoted by Ankara of considering a deal of Russian S-400 system triggered a warning from the Pentagon saying that Turkey might find itself outside the F-35 program if it did indeed realize such intentions.

With regard to Iran, on November 5, the US announced the imposition and renewal of sanctions against Iran, demanding the cooperation of the SWIFT network and threatening that it could take steps against the network too. There could be further sanctions by Congress, expected to be advanced by the Republican Senator from Texas Ted Cruz. At the same time, the US granted temporary exemption to eight countries: Japan, Taiwan, Italy, Greece, China, India, Turkey and South Korea. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained that these countries require more time to organize and that a certain global financial balance should be maintained. However, such actions are thinning and diluting the sanctions. Indeed, contrary to the expectations of hasty purchases prior to activating the sanctions, no special pressures were observed in the oil market in the week preceding the announcement. The US is exerting pressure on international officials not to sabotage the new sanctions, and Iran has held huge demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the American embassy takeover. The US is expected to have several problems concerning the sanctions: (1) a difficulty to impose their implementation; (2) the possibility that oil prices will not fall, which will make it easier for Iran; (3) the internal chaotic situation in Iran, which is not guaranteed to lead to the strengthening of liberal forces; (4) the need to demonstrate greater American pressure to enforce the sanctions; (5) the possibility that Iran will decide, following the imposition of sanctions, to return to its nuclear program, a road Iran has not taken after the US abandoned the nuclear agreement (JCPOA).

Considering **Iraq and Syria**, the atmosphere in Washington is that the US should press Iran harder in both Syria and Iraq. However, the US military presence in the region is hampered by the reallocation of forces (including the transfer of USN Roosevelt carrier from Bahrain) to the Pacific as a show of force vis-à-vis Russia and perhaps China. The US now relies on smaller ships and on a renewed reduced British presence in Bahrain. The US remains with the hope that Russia will "allow" Israel to continue operating in Syria. Furthermore, the Pentagon warned Russia not to clean the area of Aleppo after the attacks on the Syrian regime. Ambassador Jeffries said that removing Iran from Syria was part of the process, but it is not necessarily a US military goal. He went on to maintain that the Iranians do not expand the fighting zones and everything is quite stagnated. It may also be recalled that the US voted for the first time against the UN's annual resolution on the Golan Heights, while noting, among other things, the murderous nature of the Syrian regime.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of little interest to Washington in view of the impasse. Reports that the US intends to announce its peace plan between December and February are at most exaggerated, and many experts in Washington, from all parts of the political and academic spectrum, including Arab diplomats, say that the conditions are not ripe and that the US-Palestinian Authority disengagement continues. In the meantime, the US continues to exert pressure on the Palestinians by announcing its intention to fire about half of USAID workers dealing with the West Bank and Gaza, and its intention to award \$5 million to anyone who has information about Hamas's Salah al-Aruri, who was responsible for the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli boys in 2014, including US citizen Naftali Frenkel. The outgoing US Ambassador to the UN Nicky Hailey, attacked UN resolutions for treating Israel and Hamas equally when calling for a cease-fire in Gaza. On the other hand, a public opinion poll showed that West Bank residents prefer employment in Israel to armed struggle, but only a quarter of them want renewed US-sponsored negotiations with Israel.

As far as civil action is concerned, Airbnb's decided to stop marketing accommodations in the settlements of the West Bank. The American administration criticized the company, and Republicans even started taking actions against it. The governors of Illinois (outgoing) and Florida (incoming) expressed support for the activities of state legislatures against Airbnb

and named 26 states – the same number of states that successfully passed legislation and/or state regulations against state investments in companies trading with the Iranian energy sector.

Recommendations for Israel: As previously recommended in recent months, Israel should tighten its relations with the Democrats (and, along the road settle the differences with the non-Orthodox Jewish community). The reason being not only their victory in the House and their declared desire to confront President Trump and everything he represents. It is even more important in view of the prospects that the Democrats will deepen their grip on Capitol Hill in the 2020 elections, or may even return to the White House. Israel should better be there when it happens. In addition, the Israeli-Palestinian process is stuck and the administration does not seem to be in a hurry to publish its "deal of the century". Subsequently, while in Washington I was advised that if the Israelis and Palestinians show signs of resuming the peace process, the US will help along, despite the current lack of attention on the part of Washington to the conflict. However, the process should start from the bottom-up and not be imposed top-down by Washington. Therefore, it is recommended that Israel renews channels of dialogue with the Palestinian Authority, in order to create a political horizon whereby new US inputs will assist the parties, even if it happens only after the 2020 elections.

Major events in November 2018

USAID to lay off employees and close doors of its West Bank and Gaza office

Report on delaying the release of the Trump peace plan, and the reaction of Ambassador Friedman

More than 75 percent of American Jews voted for Democrats in the midterm elections

The US backs Israel during the escalation in the Gaza strip

Renewal of US sanctions on Iran

Trump backs Bin Salman following the Khashoggi murder, and disagrees with the CIA

New controversy between the US and Turkey over Syria, after signs of improvement in the relations