

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East Issue 71 (October 2018)

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Many weeks before the 2004 presidential elections, the Democratic candidate John Kerry enjoyed a slight advantage over incumbent President George W. Bush. Kerry, who was awarded three Purple Heart decorations for his part in the Vietnam War, was certain he would defeat the president who mismanaged the Gulf War and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Karl Rove, the Republican Party's chief strategist, who also feared losing power to the Democratic Party, started mobilizing the supporters of the conservative camp from across the US. Indeed, just before the elections, there was a change of trend and President Bush defeated Senator Kerry by a small majority and unlike his father and President Jimmy Carter, was saved from the fate of becoming a "single-term president".

The mid-term elections in the US on November 6 are likely to significantly impact what will happen in the Middle East during the next two years, as they will greatly affect President Trump's freedom of action. If the Democrats win, the president might become a "lame duck" long before the next Presidential elections. In the Senate, in particular, he would not be able to pass an appointment of a new ambassador to the UN or a Secretary of Defense to his liking (soon after he dismisses Defense Secretary James Mattis, as expected).

On the eve of the elections, most of the forecasts and pollsters predict a Democratic victory at least in the House of Representatives, although it is expected to be a "blue wave but not a blue Tsunami". If the Democrats indeed win, it may have a significant impact on US' policy with regard to various Middle Eastern issues.

Saudi Arabia - It is an understatement to say that the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a US resident and a columnist in the *Washington Post*, is a blow to US-Saudi relations. Trump had many expectations of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, but now many claim that he has been gambling on the wrong horse. Since the murder, Trump has gradually increased the pressure on Saudi Arabia and bin Salman. First, he expressed concern, and later sent Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Riyadh and demanded that a vigorous investigation be carried out followed by drawing conclusions. Trump, however, continues to strongly defend the 110 billion USD arms deal with Saudi Arabia, which is his main consideration. There is mounting international pressure on the US to stop supporting the Saudis in the war in Yemen, because of human rights violations (including drafting children-soldiers). Former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband

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(currently, head of the International Rescue Committee) [said](#) that the US can do much more to stop the horrors.

However, Trump experiences far more serious pressures from within the US. Senator Bernie Sanders [describes](#) the war in Yemen as a strategic and humanitarian disaster for the US, while leading columnist Thomas L. Friedman asserts in his [article](#) in the *New York Times* that he does not believe that bin Salman did not know about the assassination, that the president must realize bin Salman is becoming irrelevant, and that the ideology that gave birth to bin-Salman was also the cause of the September 11 attacks. Therefore, Friedman claims, the main American interest in Saudi Arabia is not necessarily another arms deal, but the need to promote a new, more tolerant and less aggressive Islam, which bin Salman was promoting but can no longer provide. Furthermore, the president is challenged by the Congress, with 20 senators from both parties [calling](#) him (with the support of the Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, led by Ed Royce and Elliot Engel) to use the "Magnitsky Act"¹ against those responsible for the assassination. Pro-Republican circles in Washington's national security community say openly that this is not what they expected from bin Salman, and they are now reflecting on past sins of the Saudi regime, including the kidnapping of Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad al-Hariri, the ongoing war in Yemen and the arrest of many Saudi officials. Leading Republican Senator Lindsay Graham even says explicitly that bin Salman must go.

Israel and the Palestinians – The fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the US to rely on Saudi Arabia may have an impact on Israeli-Palestinian relations. Mahmoud Abbas does not see any reason to positively respond to the massive American pressure (which in his opinion is not successful also with North Korea or Iran), at least not before the US mid-term elections, for several reasons: (1) The US has already publicly expressed its support of the two states solution, and Abbas is not required to make any additional concession for this support; (2) The situation in the Gaza Strip, although being humanitarily and politically complex, does not at this stage require any political, economic or political price; (3) UNRWA, was abandoned by the US, has meanwhile received commitments in the equivalent of 320 million USD from the international community, at least for 2018; (4) The option of exerting Saudi pressure (inspired by the US) on the Palestinian Authority is no longer on the table at this stage; (5) The American idea of a "Middle East NATO" based on the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, which could have led to a regionally concerted action on the Palestinian issue ("from the outside in") are not advancing.

Against this backdrop, Abbas sees US-Israel relations progressing and flourishing, as is reflected in a series of recent events, such as the [entry into force](#) of the Israeli-American Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed during President Barack Obama's term (2016), the dialog between the defense ministries of both countries which was held on October 22-23, and Pompeo's statement that Israel is a [model](#) for a Middle East as the US would like to see it. As if this is not enough, President Trump enjoys massive support in Israel (according to the [Pew Institute survey](#), his rate of support in Israel is 83 percent compared to less than 40 percent in most European countries, except for Britain). Abbas apparently has no reason to rush. He awaits the appointment of a new American ambassador to the UN, to replace the pro-Israel outgoing ambassador Nikki Haley, who might show less overwhelming support of Israel, as well as the possible expected change in

¹ The Magnitsky Act was enacted in 2012 after the Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky was arrested by the Russian authorities and died in prison after about a year. The law rules that anyone involved in this affair will be barred from entering the United States.

Congress. Consequently, Abbas may continue being contemptuous toward President Trump, but he knows he should await a better opportunity to advance his interests.

Iran-Syria-Russia - Iran apparently assumes, and it is right in assuming so, that despite the US' position that Iran's actions in Syria are "malign" and despite being marked by the US as encouraging terrorism, the US response is limited to economic sanctions. The US administration must now restore its relations with its allies, Britain, France and Germany (indeed, Secretary of State met with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on October 3 conveying the message of "business as usual" regarding Iran) and to create bipartisan cooperation in Congress, which is unlikely to happen now.

On October 16, the US Treasury Department imposed a set of sanctions on economic organizations that help the Basij militia and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The next wave of sanctions is expected in early November, and is likely to include the international money transfer system (SWIFT), thereby seriously harming Iran's banking system. In 2012, there was a similar successful motion, but back then, the EU joined the motion, and the SWIFT cooperative society (located in Belgium) followed the EU's legislation. Now, in view of the European hesitation and reluctance to follow Trump in abandoning the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA), the meaning and effectiveness of the upcoming sanctions are unclear.

Iran realized that the US is in no rush to reopen its consulate in Basra, which was closed on September 28, or to take advantage of a friendly government in Iraq, which the [US still treats](#) with "mixed feelings of dread and hope". It also appears that Iran believes it was Israel, not the US, that has so far halted its actions in Syria, and Iran is waiting to see what Israel does in this regard in view of the crisis in its relations with Russia. US' backing for Israel would not return the operational situation that prevailed in Syria before the outbreak of the crisis. Thus, Iran, which is not impressed by the Trump speeches at the Security Council or by the threats of the [Chief of the US Central Command](#), launched a barrage of six surface-to-surface missiles at targets of the Islamic State organization in Syria on October 1, in revenge of the September 22 attack on Ahvaz, and is now waiting for what is to come.

Therefore, it remains to wait for the results of the midterm elections. If the Republicans win, the president will be able to move forward with his Middle East plans, including the "big deal" between Israel and the Palestinians and the idea of a "Middle East NATO." If the Democrats win at least one House, the president's freedom of action is likely to diminish, including with regard to the Middle East.

As far as Israel is concerned, the mid-term elections may reveal even more strongly its rift with the American Jewish Community. The attack at the *Etz Chaim* synagogue in Pittsburgh demonstrated that while the Israeli government (and according to the above-mentioned poll, also the people of Israel) supports President Trump, the Jewish community in the US is overwhelmingly hostile to the president and everything he stands for. The survivors of the Pittsburgh massacre, for the most part, blame President Trump for creating the heinous atmosphere that gave rise to the white supremacy movement and anti-Semitic nationalism that has cost eleven lives, and their opposition to the president and his party is only likely to increase.

Key events for October 2018

Closing the American consulate in East Jerusalem and a rare official ***visit*** by the US Ambassador to a settlement

A US-Turkey agreement to ***release*** pastor Brunson, which also helps ***reduced tensions*** between the countries

US Secretary of the Treasury ***visits*** the Middle East, including Israel

A ***new survey*** shows that the Jewish community in the US opposes Trump's policies toward Israel and the Palestinians

Criticism by various Jewish organizations in the US regarding Israel's initial decision to prevent Lara Alqasem from entering the country