

## **US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East Issue 70 (September 2018)**

**Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah\***

**October 2018**

President Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party took a historic defeat in the 1994-midterm elections. The House of Representatives, which has been controlled by the Democratic Party since 1954, as well as the Senate, were taken over by the Republicans in what was known as the “Newt Gingrich Revolution”. The forecast for the 2018-midterm elections, to be held in early November, is for a similar reversal, but not of the same order of magnitude. According to [Real Clear Politics](#), the House of Representatives is expected to become Democratic, albeit by a small majority, while the Senate may remain under slim Republican majority. On the other hand, President Donald Trump and the Republicans must consider the possibility of losing both the House and the Senate. The prominent pollster Charlie Cook [says](#) that the Senate elections will be decided by voter turnout, as has been the case in many election campaigns in recent decades, and in this context a [recent poll](#) by the Pew Institute shows that Democrats are much more eager to vote in November than Republicans.

Therefore, the challenge for the Trump administration is enormous: it must complete, or at least significantly advance, major moves in a short period of time. The pressure felt by the administration was evident, for example, in its attempts to appoint Justice Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Even if the president would have been willing to consider another candidate (as perhaps was hinted by his unusually prudent statements to let the Senate and the FBI do their jobs), he actually did not have time to nominate a new candidate who could be successfully vetted and elected by a Republican Senate. The next Senate might oppose any candidate the president would propose. The Trump administration faces some foreign policy challenges too. The reactions to Trump’s speech at the UN General Assembly vindicate the recent Pew Institute survey, which showed that the US under Trump is [losing its primacy](#) as a global leader (while Angela Merkel stands out as the preferred leader). The declining position of the US as a world leader is also reflected in the following fronts in the Middle East:

**The US and the Palestinians** - The US has continued its blunt attitude towards the Palestinian Authority and its leader. After a particularly successful meeting between Trump and Netanyahu, in which the US emphasized its uncompromising support for Israel, the president said that he “likes the two-state solution”. Netanyahu also expressed his support for what is perceived as a “mini Palestinian state”, saying that he is willing to allow the Palestinians to defend themselves (but not act against Israel). Despite the change in the American tone, Trump’s “deal of the century” has not yet been published and the president

---

\* Ambassador (Ret.) Barukh Binah is a Policy Fellow at Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policy. He had served in many assignments in the US, including Spokesman in New York, Minister for Public Diplomacy in Washington DC, Consul General in Chicago and Deputy Head of Mission in Washington, DC. He had also served as Deputy Director-General of Israel’s Foreign Ministry, in charge of North America, and (recently) as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark.

has even announced that he might present it "within a few months." Meanwhile, the intense American offensive in an effort to coerce the Palestinians to possibly agree in advance to the American program does on.

Following the cuts in the UNRWA budget and in the assistance of USAID last month, the US took steps in September including the additional 25 million USD aid cut for hospitals in East Jerusalem and even the cessation of American aid to joint Israeli and Palestinian projects (despite envoy Jason Greenblatt saying that the US welcomes Israeli-Palestinian joint projects, especially between youth from both peoples, even though such projects would be meaningless if the Palestinians reject the Trump plan when it is presented). The US also decided last month to close the PLO office in Washington (including the revocation of visas, the closure of the Palestinian bank accounts, and the immediate expulsion of the Palestinian ambassador's family). The American pressure has not yet ended and it remains to be seen if and when the Palestinians will succumb to such pressure. If that happens, Trump's gamble on blatant pressure may prove to be a good bet. But if the Palestinians persist in their position and Israel experiences a new wave of terror, then the president will have to live up to all the commitments he publicly made to Netanyahu, while Israel, and to a certain extent the US, may become increasingly isolated.

**The US and Russia (including in Syria)** - Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Karem told the Armed Services Committee that the US is not interfering in the Syrian civil war and that the limited American forces stationed there are concerned only with assisting those who fight the Islamic State. Thus, the US, which did not take part in the September 7 summit on Idlib and left the issue to be "resolved" between Russia, Turkey and Iran, is not a weighty force compared to Russia in shaping Syria's future. US' weakness in this regard was even more pronounced during the Israeli-Russian crisis. Prime Minister Netanyahu said after his meeting with Trump that the American president unequivocally supports Israel's right to defend itself in Syria and that he "received everything he wanted" from the president on this issue (as on others). National Security Advisor John Bolton also backed Israel and urged the Kremlin to reconsider its decision to transfer the S-300 batteries to Syria. However, according to the former US ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro, this is not enough. In his article in the [New York Post](#), he asserted that the Trump government should have publicly supported Israel's actions in Syria (suggesting that Netanyahu's statement is not enough) and that a "solidarity visit" to Israel by a senior American defense official was definitely in order. However, although Shapiro represents the former administration, it does not invalidate the argument that Israel remained more or less alone vis-a-vis Russia. The widely communicated transfer of the Russian S-300 batteries to Syria challenges the US, and senior US officials (such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo) have indeed expressed this very fiercely, and it remains to see the American arsenal of reactions and how it is used against Russia in this context.

**The US and Iran** - On the issue of Iran, the US acted and expressed itself decisively on several occasions in September. First and foremost, President Trump's [resolute statements](#) in the UN General Assembly that Iran is sowing "chaos, death and destruction" in the Middle East, along with his impressive appearance at the Security Council debate on demilitarization; Bolton's [threats](#) that Iran will "pay a hell of a price"; new legislation intended to prevent international funding for Hezbollah ([S. 1595](#)), which, in the words of the Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Ed Royce, was intended to curb the "terrorist arm of Iran"; and efforts on the part of the head of the Arabian Gulf division of the State Department Timothy

Lenderking to get the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on board for an anti-Iran activity in the Persian Gulf and Yemen.

The American measures against Iran have gained resonated support from Netanyahu and Israel, but were received with a cold shoulder by the other countries that signed the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA), including US allies and rivals, who at the time were able to overcome their disagreements over the issue. They are now clarifying that they will not join the US in canceling the agreement and imposing renewed sanctions, and they even initiate a mechanism that will allow European companies to overcome American sanctions. This does not mean that President Trump's measures will necessarily fail, as commercial companies will have to decide independently whether to surrender to the renewed American boycott or rather, that the European mechanism provides them with a sufficient escape route. Iran itself is reacting with belligerent statements as expected, continues its subversive activity on various fronts, and responds with an ironic and amused mockery in the world media (see for example the polished appearance of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif in Fareed Zakaria's program on CNN).

With regard to **Iraq**, the US is reactive rather than proactive. Having invested more than 2 trillion USD in Iraq over the past 15 years, it does not emphasize enough the benefits of cooperation between Iraq and the US, and does not even advance existing agreements between the two countries. To a large extent, it does not convey a clear position regarding Iraqi politics, and in fact leaves this front unattended, which benefits Iran. The US accused Iran of attacking the US consulate in Basra and announced the closing of the consulate on September 28. Iran, however, boasted that when its own consulate was attacked and set on fire, it simply moved the Consulate's activities to another location. Perhaps this symbolizes the difference between Iran and the US when it comes to their conduct in Iraq.

**The US and Turkey** – In September, US-Turkey relations slightly thawed. Secretary of State Pompeo said that the American priest that was arrested in Turkey, Andrew Bronson, might soon be released. This statement stabilized the Turkish Lira a bit. In addition, Trump and Erdoğan shook hands during the UN General Assembly.

In conclusion, the past month demonstrated that the Trump administration's balance in the Middle East so far is not positive. It is yet to be seen whether Trump could boast concrete achievements at home (in addition to the appointment of Judge Kavanaugh) and abroad in the last month of the first half of his first (and perhaps the last) presidency. If the Republicans retain their control of Congress, the president will come around stronger and will be able to advance his policy in both houses of Congress. On the other hand, if the Republicans lose the Congress, or at least the House of Representatives, it will be even more difficult for the president to advance his peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, which he boasts even before it has officially seen day light.

Israel must act without delay to rehabilitate its status as a non-partisan issue in American politics. This goal is especially important in view of the prospects of democratic victory in at least one of the two Houses of Congress. In an [article](#) published in the Guardian newspaper, independent Senator Bernie Sanders, who may be among the Democratic presidential candidates in 2020, called for the establishment of an international progressive front in view of what he calls the "authoritarian axis," which includes countries like Hungary, Netanyahu's Israel and the US under Trump.

Therefore, it is recommended that the Israeli government acts along two parallel routes: on the one hand, cooperate with the Trump administration, immediately after the midterm elections, even if the results are not in his favor, in order to formulate scenarios and possible means of action in the Middle East. On the other hand, Israel should strengthen its ties with the Democratic Party and its leadership, as well as with Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders, and with Jewish politicians such as Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, who may become Senate Majority Leader, or Congressman Eliot Engel, who may become Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives.

### Major Events in September 2018

*The US closes the PLO representation and freezes its bank accounts*

*The US cuts funding to hospitals in East Jerusalem and to Israeli-Palestinian people-to-people projects*

*Trump and Netanyahu meet and make references to the two-state solution*

*At the UNGA, Trump meets Sisi and shakes hands with Erdoğan*

*The US keeps a low profile in the Israel-Russia crisis, which followed the downing of a Russian plane by Syrian forces*