

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 77 (April 2019)

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Last month was eventful: President Trump granted massive political support for Prime Minister Netanyahu (and was criticized for it); the "Deal of the Century" was at a standstill (or maybe it was just a waiting period); there were unclear policies regarding Libya and Sudan; the US' "maximum pressure" on Iran was further increased; and there was a standstill in Syria and continued crisis with Turkey.

Growing public criticism of Israeli policy in the US: A [poll](#) conducted by the Pew Institute revealed that the Israeli public enjoys a high rate of sympathy in the US (64 percent), but the government of Israel enjoys a much lower rate (51 percent do not support it). The findings show a clear difference between Republicans and adults (who show higher rate of support for Israel) and Democrats and young people (who are less supportive). These findings corroborate the findings of the [Gallup Poll](#), that was published last month.

The results of the elections in Israel prompted widespread discussion among researchers in the US about Netanyahu's victory, raising questions about its implications for the peace process, the Palestinians and the internal political and social situation in Israel. Criticism toward Israeli policy focused last month on Netanyahu's statements regarding territorial annexations in the West Bank. In response, the [House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs](#) conveyed its concern over the possibility that Israel will unilaterally annex territories. The Committee referred to the declaration signed by four legislators who are among Israel's greatest friends: Eliot Engel (Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee), Nita Lowey (Chairperson of the Appropriations Committee), Ted Deutch (Chairperson of the Ethics Committee) and Brad Schneider.

Prof. Alan Dershowitz, one of Israel's greatest defenders, also expressed his criticism. In a letter to President Trump, nine Jewish organizations, including the Reform and Conservative movements, asked him to "restrain" Netanyahu. Senator Bernie Sanders, one of the Democratic candidates for presidency, clarified that criticism of Netanyahu's policy is not in any way an anti-Israeli move. The young and rising Democratic candidate Beto O'Rourke referred to Netanyahu as "racist" and stated that his policy is not necessarily acceptable to most Israelis, and certainly harmful to Israel-US relations. Even the new Democratic candidate Pete Buttigieg (who was described by Israeli media as the only Israel supporter among candidates) criticized Netanyahu's declaration, saying it was harmful to Israel, the Palestinians and US interests, and added that support for Israel is not necessarily support for Netanyahu's politics.

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President Trump did not miss the opportunity presented by the critical positions of the Democratic candidates against Netanyahu and quickly made a statement at the Jewish Republican Coalition Conference that a democratic victory in 2020 would lead to abandoning Israel. Netanyahu, for his part, according to the *New York Times*, [sees in Trump](#) an enabler that allows him to ignore criticism and continue his settlement policy. Indeed, when Secretary of State Pompeo was asked on April 12 if he believed that the annexation of the settlements would negate the Trump Plan, he replied that he [did not think so](#). Meanwhile, on April 5, the US canceled the entry visa of the Special Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court Fatou Bensouda, because of her intention to investigate possible war crimes committed by American, Israeli, or allied soldiers.

In anticipation of publishing the Trump Plan: The Administration has been spreading clarifications that the plan will be presented in late spring or early summer (after Ramadan), but avoided clear messages. Trump's envoys denied rumors about an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian confederation or the transfer of territories from Sinai to Gaza. In a [New York Times article](#), envoy Jason Greenblatt placed full responsibility for the situation in Gaza on the Palestinians, especially on Hamas. Jared Kushner argued that the two-state solution has failed. He made reference to a Palestinian autonomy rather than to a state, which will be given economic incentives and more civil liberties. His team members said that "both sides will have to be flexible". The Palestinian Authority rejects the American moves, as expressed in the squabbling twits between Palestinian Prime Minister Shtayyeh and Greenblatt. In principle, the Palestinian Authority is unwilling to discuss a plan that does not include a Palestinian state. It is hostile to the American plan that is being formulated with clear preference for Israel.

At the same time, concerned voices are heard in Washington's foreign policy and defense community that reject the plan. Robert Satloff, head of the Washington Institute, made an emotional plea that ["Trump must not allow Jared Kushner's peace plan to see the light of day"](#). Satloff enumerates possible adverse consequences of the American moves, including legitimizing Netanyahu and the Israeli right to annex territories in the absence of a negotiating partner, the end of security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the loss of support from Saudi Arabia and moderate Sunni states, and particularly the potential harming of Trump's most tangible achievement, which is exercising "maximum pressure" on Iran, which, he says, is beginning to bear fruit. In the eyes of Satloff, the "Kushner Plan" will cause losses to all parties, but as long as it is not published with President Trump's endorsement, the damage can still be contained.

Increasing US pressure on Iran: The Administration announced that three out of the eight countries that were temporarily exempt of imposing sanctions on Iran, have already stopped importing oil from Iran and that the Italian bank UniCredit is concluding an agreement to pay a fine of 900 million Euros for laundering Iranian money. The Administration is working on a "veil of sanctions" that will inflict even a greater economic damage on Iran. It may be that the intention is to intensify the central bank's boycott on Iran, aiming at deterring Iran from conducting terrorist activity and support Hezbollah (and not necessarily preventing Iran from developing its nuclear project), based on the assumption that it will be difficult for a future US president to revoke such a boycott.

The "maximum pressure" policy was manifested on April 8, when the US announced designation of Iran's Revolutionary Guard a "foreign terrorist organization". This step did not change the actual situation, as the US Treasury made the same announcement yet in 2007

regarding the al-Quds Force and in 2017 for the entire Revolutionary Guards. The significance of the new US announcement is mainly about restrictions on immigration to the US, and a ban on business or other types of contact with the organization. The EU has already declared the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist organization in 2008, and the signing of the nuclear agreement has not changed this. Iran's foreign minister, Zarif, has threatened that the American move would have ramifications, and directly declared the US Central Command a terrorist organization, but on the same note he has also proposed a prisoner exchange. Zarif also told New York reporters that he does not think Trump wants a war with Iran, but that he might be drawn to do by his hawkish team of advisors.

After the Revolutionary Guards were designated a terror organization, the Republican senator from Kentucky Rand Paul attacked Pompeo saying that the Administration had no authority to start a war and that only Congress was entitled to decide to do so. In addition to declaring the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization, the US made a minor, but surprising reconciliatory gesture. In an article in the *New York Times*, Brian Hook, the US special representative for Iran, [merely wondered](#) whether it was not the time for Iran to make a move toward reconciliation with the US. After meticulously enumerating Iran's sins and saying what it should do (stop efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, stop all regional terrorism actions, including her poor record on human rights etc.), he stated that "America stands ready to discuss with an Iranian government out of mutual respect". In the meantime, it is the Lebanese government that is seriously taking into account possible consequences of the "maximum pressure" policy (including the damage to the Lebanese stock market due to the laundering of Colombian terror funds and Hezbollah funds). As a result, Lebanon sent a delegation to the World Bank, whose main purpose was to lobby for Lebanon's interests.

In connection with the Iranian nuclear project, a team of six researchers from the Belfer Center at Harvard University, visited Israel in January 2019 and obtained access to the Iranian nuclear archive. The [Belfer Institute report](#), published in April following the visit, stated that contrary to the prevailing belief in the West, Iran had an advanced and detailed plan to acquire nuclear weapons, which was sufficient to produce five bombs, for which Iran received assistance from various sources. Researchers argued that this capacity still exist, however they noted that it was not clear from the nuclear archive which policy Iran has taken since it decided to stop the project in 2003.

Egyptian President visits Washington: President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited Washington on April 9 and asked that the US designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, as it did with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards a day earlier. President Trump granted al-Sisi a lavish reception and said that the relations between the two countries had never been better, while ignoring Egypt's legislation that would allow al-Sisi to serve for many more years and the tightening relations of al-Sisi with Putin (including the purchase of 20 Russian fighter jets, despite generous US military aid of 1.3 billion USD a year). Egypt also announced that it avoids joining the "Arab NATO", which the US is trying to establish as a Sunni alliance against Iran. However, some at the US media and Congress were harshly criticizing al-Sisi, including a [letter from 17 senators](#) from both parties to the Secretary of State, which raised concerns over the state of democracy and human rights in Egypt, and its relationship with Russia.

Tensions with Turkey over the S-400 deal: Washington followed with concern the implementation of the S-400 acquisition deal signed by Turkey and Russia. The implementation of the deal could lead to a rupture in Turkey-US relations. The pressure on

Erdoğan to avoid implementing the deal now comes not only from the Administration but also from Congress. A [bi-partisan op-ed in the New York Times](#), signed by the Chairpersons and minority members of the Senate Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees, makes it clear that Erdoğan should choose: "A US fighter jet or a Russian missile system, [but] not both". The Senate was also promoting a bi-partisan bill to tighten the security and energy relations between Greece, Cyprus and Israel, which does not include Turkey. Turkey, for its part, clarified that the deal with Russia does not undermine its commitment to NATO. After a meeting between the US and Turkish defense ministers on April 16, the Turkish minister said that if the Congress imposed sanctions, he expected the president to use his veto power to revoke them. In addition, a conversation on the issue between Trump and Erdoğan was held on April 29, in which Erdoğan suggested to establish a joint working group. Trump's response was not reported.

Trump's intentions to withdraw from Syria: Trump's statements about a withdrawal from Syria have received political support only from those who the president was not interested in their support, like Republican Senator Rand Paul and the new Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. On the other hand, and as an expression of frustration experienced by the national security circles, the president was severely criticized by the former US envoy to the coalition against Daesh, Brett McGurk. In an [acrimonious article in Foreign Affairs](#), McGurk came out against the president's claim that the US could do "more with less", or with "fewer forces". He strongly criticized Trump's wiggling behavior that led to a situation whereby the US was no longer able to achieve its goals, while having to settle for only preventing Daesh from regaining power and for stopping Iran. According to McGurk, the US must recognize the limitations imposed by Trump and their role in shaping the US' standing in the region. Washington could no longer prevent the Arab states from readmitting Syria. In view of Trump's efforts to reduce the American presence in the region, he argued that it should be recognized that Assad is back in power, acknowledge Turkey's role, and work with Russia and Israel.

Decisions regarding Saudi Arabia and Yemen: The Senate approved by a huge and bi-partisan majority (92 vs. 7) the appointment of John Abizaid, a retired four-star general who commanded CENTCOM, as ambassador to Riyadh. Abizaid is a Lebanese descent Catholic. On April 16, the president imposed a veto on the legislation calling for a halt in the assistance in the Yemen campaign. This move was chiefly related to the fact that Trump perceives Saudi Arabia as an ally against Iran and as a possible supporter of his "Deal of the Century", a position he did not change even after the Khashoggi affair.

Miscellaneous: The US was also required to react to the situation in **Libya** (Trump's surprising support of General Khalifa Haftar attacking Tripoli), to the developments in **Sudan** after the ousting of Bashir, and to the continuing challenge that **Daesh** poses in various areas (from Syria to Sri Lanka) despite the American announcement that it had defeated the terrorist organization.

Recommendations to Israel: Considering that the 2020 presidential and congressional elections have been practically launched, Israel should get in closer relations with various segments of the American political sphere, but refrain from political involvement and from siding with any party or candidate. It must reactivate the channels of dialogue with the Democrats, while maintaining and nurturing close relations with the Republicans. Israel must enhance and upgrade its activities vis-à-vis young audiences and important minorities in the US, with an emphasis on African Americans and Hispanics. Israel should continue struggling

uncompromisingly against the rise of anti-Semitism while recruiting the support of Trump, the leaderships of the parties and leading governors (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.). Israel can encourage a legislative process in Congress or at least a firm "Sense of Congress" on the issue, and promote similar moves in state legislatures. Furthermore, Israel should quickly rebuild its relations with the Jewish communities in the US. All that requires action throughout the US, not only in Washington, and to that end, it is recommended to increase the workforce in Israel's consulates in the US.

Key events for April 2019

Denunciations of Netanyahu's statements regarding annexation by leaders in the [Jewish community and the Democratic Party](#)

The [renewal](#) of American sanctions on Iran

Egyptian president al-Sisi [visits](#) Washington

The US appoints a [new ambassador](#) to Saudi Arabia

The US expresses [concern](#) over the cooperation between Israel and China

Formulating a strategy and a [law proposal](#) on the East Med partnerships