

The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy towards the Middle East in the Trump Era

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Abstract

The Israel Lobby is the loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. "The Lobby" is not a unified movement with a central leadership or consensus on issues. However, the core of the lobby comprises American Jews who make a significant effort in their daily lives to bend US foreign policy to advance Israel's interests. In particular, the lobby influences US domestic politics and shapes US foreign policy in the Middle East especially the Arab-Israel peace process in its favor through various mechanisms. The activities of the lobby go beyond merely voting for candidates who are pro-Israel to include letter-writing, financial contributions, and supporting pro-Israel organizations. This essay, therefore, analyzes the Israel lobby's role under the US President Donald Trump to argue that not only did the lobby influence US foreign policy towards the Middle East significantly, but it also became stronger under the Trump administration. The essay further outlines how the lobby shaped US moves in the Middle East particularly the decision to shift the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; the recognition of the Golan Heights as part of Israel; and Trump's Middle East Peace Plan. The essay will conclude with a discussion of the need for the US to reorient its policy posture towards the Middle East to maintain peace and stability in the fragile region.ⁱ

Keywords: *Israel Lobby, US Foreign Policy, Middle East, Trump Administration*

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Introduction

The word “lobby” is defined in Merriam Webster Dictionary as an organized group of people who work together to influence government decisions that relate to a particular industry, issue, etc. The term the Israel lobby is defined as a loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to shape US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction.ⁱⁱ Stephen Waltz and John Mearsheimer state that the lobby is not a unified movement with a central leadership. The core of the lobby is comprised of American Jews who make a significant effort in their daily lives to bend the US foreign policy in the favour of Israel. The Israel lobby utilizes various techniques to influence the US foreign policy. It encompasses voting for particular candidates who view Israeli government favorably; letter writing; and financial contributions to the Presidential candidates, congressmen, and senators. But not all American Jews are part of the lobby and, according to a 2004 survey, approximately 36 percent of American Jews are not emotionally attached to Israel.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moreover, even within the Israel lobby, various organizations do not agree on various agendas. For example, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is in favour of a “Two State Solution” to settle Arab–Israel conflict whereas the Israel American Council is not in favour of a “Two State Solution” and continues American aid to Palestinians. Similarly, in the third week of August 2019, the government of Israel barred two US Congresswomen from visiting the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. This move of Israel was condemned by the AIPAC and various members of the AIPAC tried to persuade Israeli government authorities to allow Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Talaib of Michigan to visit Palestine. However, it could not materialize. Even President Trump endorsed the decision of the Netanyahu administration to not let two Congresswomen enter the occupied territories of Palestine.^{iv} Thus, the Israel lobby is not a unified movement but rather a conglomerate of various

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organizations and individuals who favour Israel and endeavor to shape US foreign policy in favour of Israel.

Although various organizations of the Israel lobby disagree on certain issues, yet these organizations generally agree on most of the issues. For example, the AIPAC and the Conference of the Presidents of Major Jewish Organization (CPMJO) support the expansionist policies of the Likud Party, including their hostility to the Oslo agreement. Moreover, American Jews normally consult Israel government officials, so that they can influence policy making in the US in favour of Israel. According to a member of the Israel lobby, it is our routine to say: “this is our policy on a certain issue, but we must check what the Israelis think.”^v And there is hardly any member of the Jewish organization that condemns or criticizes Israel policies towards Palestine.

American Jews have created an impressive array of organizations to influence American policy, of which the AIPAC is the most powerful and well known. A study was conducted by a National Journal in March 2005, which concluded that the AIPAC is the second most powerful lobby in Washington.^{vi} The lobby also includes influential Christian evangelicals like Mike Pompeo, Mike Pence, Jerry Falwell, and Tom Delay. The Christian evangelicals believe Israel’s rebirth is part of Biblical prophecy; support its expansionist agenda; and think that pressurizing Israel is contrary to God’s Will. Moreover, numerous neo-conservatives like Charles Krauthammer, Bernard Lewis, John Bolton, and Jeanne Kirkpatrick are part of the Israel lobby. Furthermore, prominent leaders who are part of the Trump administration and have Pro-Israel penchant include Nicky Halley, Jason Greenblatt, David Friedman, Jared Kushner, and Sheldon Adelson.

Sources of Power

The structure of the US government is based on the principle of separation of power. There is division of power among the legislature, executive, and judiciary. This division of power gives lobbies and interest groups the opportunity to manipulate the decision-making process. The Israel lobby influences

congressmen, senators, and officials of the White House. Besides, the lobby makes enormous financial contributions during the elections. Furthermore, the Israel lobby enjoys disproportionate power when they are committed to a particular cause whereas other parties are silent, and the majority of the population is indifferent towards Arab-Israel conflict.^{vii} There are not any substantive Palestinian groups who can protect the interests of Palestinians.

Strategies for Success

The Israel lobby adopts two broad strategies to gain the US support for Israel. First, it wields significant influence in Washington by pressurizing both the Congress and Executive. Secondly, it shapes public discourse in favour of Israel by silencing critics and parading the Arabs as evil. Any kind of commentary or programmes which are critical of Israel are not given due time in the media. Hence, any information which is critical of Israel is controlled through gate keeping.

Influence in the Congress

A key method through which the lobby maintains its effectiveness in US politics is its influence in the US Congress. Aggressive policies of Israel are never condemned or discussed in the Congress which never shies away from criticizing any other critical matter be it an issue of health care, affirmative action, or social welfare. Aggressive behavior of Israel is hardly discussed in the Congress. One reason why the lobby is strong in the Congress is that various members of the Congress are Christian Zionists who are staunchly in favor of the Greater Israel. Besides, there are also Jewish Senators and Congressmen who devoutly work to make the US foreign policy in favour of Israel. Moreover, Pro-Israel Congressional staffers are another source of the lobby power. Various Jews are also working at the Congressional staff level, and they are willing to support Pro-Israel policies.^{viii} Finally, the AIPAC itself forms the core of the lobby's influence in the Congress. The AIPAC influences the Congress through supporting legislators who support Pro-Israel narrative and punishes those

who are critical of Israel. The AIPAC makes huge financial contributions to the Congressmen and Senators during their election campaigns. Furthermore, it is common among members of the Congress to directly consult AIPAC if they need any kind of information before they consult the Congressional library. Even various members of AIPAC are involved in drafting laws, policies, and speeches for Congressmen. As per one senator: “You can’t have an Israel policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here.^{ix}” Hence, one of the three branches of the US government is committed to supporting Israel.

Influence over the Executive

The lobby has significant leverage over the Executive branch. The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee draws its power from Jewish votes. Although Jewish voters are less than 3%, yet the majority of these voters are registered in the Swing States like California, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. Moreover, Jewish voters have a very high turnover and the AIPAC makes sure that the majority of Jews should vote for the candidate that AIPAC backs. Secondly, the Israel lobby makes large campaign donations to candidates from both parties. According to the Washington Post, Democratic Presidential candidates “depend on Jewish supporters to supply as much as 60% of the money.^x Moreover, in terms of ideology, 44% of American Jews are liberal, much higher than the overall 25% among the total population, making Jews the most liberal of any major religious group we identify. Thus, in terms of their political orientation, American Jews are more closely associated with the Democratic Party. Since 1968, in fact, Jewish voters have voted on average 71% for Democrats. That was the exact number that went for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Exit polls from the 2016 election showed that of the 3% of voters who identified as Jews, 71% voted for Clinton and 23% for Trump.

However, irrespective of American Jews’ bent towards the Democratic Party during the 2016 Presidential election, Sheldon Adelson, a Jewish businessman, was among the top

financial contributors who campaigned for Donald Trump. Moreover, during Trump's period in office, many Jews shifted their allegiance from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party particularly because the Trump administration showed public support for Israel through both the president's rhetoric and policy actions. Trump publicly supported Israel and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He followed through on a campaign promise to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and routinely attacked members of Congress who he criticized as anti-Israel and anti-Semitic. Moreover, Trump's motivation was to maintain support among Christian evangelicals who make 25 percent of the US vote; are Pro-Israel; and form a key component of his political coalition.^{xi} During the 2020 Presidential election campaign, Trump stated: "In my opinion, if you vote for a Democrat, you're being very disloyal to Jewish people and you're being very disloyal to Israel."

Another way to examine political inclination of American Jews and Christian Zionists towards the Republican Party is to review net sympathies toward Israel—the percentage of those who sympathize with Israel minus those who sympathize with the Palestinians—among the main ideological groups within each party. Conservative Republicans have long been partial to Israel in the conflict, given their consistently high net-sympathy ratings. Moderate/liberal Republicans have the second-highest net-sympathy for Israel, followed by moderate/conservative Democrats while liberal Democrats have the lowest net-sympathy for Israel. Sympathy for Israel is, however, increasing among both Republican groups and decreasing among both Democratic groups. A poll commissioned by the Republican Jewish Coalition found that 30.5 percent of Jewish voters voted for GOP incumbent Donald Trump nationally compared to 60.6% for Democratic challenger Joe Biden. Exit polls of the 2020 presidential election show that a large majority of Jews voted Democratic as they have done in the past, choosing Joe Biden over Donald Trump by a wide margin. But results also indicated that more Jews, as many as 250,000 nationwide, voted for Trump than they did four years ago. Ari

Fleischer, who served as White House Press Secretary under George W. Bush said the “conclusion” suggested by these numbers is that “it’s not just the embassy that moved. Jewish voters have moved, too. And they’re moving Republican.”

Thirdly, the Israel lobby also directly influences the Executive. Lobby ensures that whosoever gets top positions in the administration should have positive views towards Israel. Moreover, especially the appointment of Secretary of State is very vital for the Israel lobby. The lobby ensures that individuals who get this top slot should have a favorable approach towards Israel. On the other hand, the lobby opposes those who are not in favor of Israel. Furthermore, the lobby’s goals are also served when Pro-Israel individuals occupy important positions in the Executive branch. The Trump administration was dominated by such Pro-Israel individuals who occupied top positions. For example, John Bolton who served Trump as a National Security Advisor has a very hawkish approach towards the Middle East and a very friendly approach to Israel. He backed the Iraq war in 2003. Moreover, Mike Pompeo and Bolton were against the Iran-nuclear deal which was signed during the Obama administration. Once in power, both convinced Trump to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).^{xii} Both even encouraged regime change in Iran without taking into consideration international law and multilateral institutions. Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of Trump, has a very strong bias towards Israel and has very close ties with Benjamin Netanyahu. As Trump’s top policy advisor in the Middle East, Jared Kushner played a critical role in the US administration’s decision to shift the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.^{xiii} Moreover, he is chief architect of the Trump Peace Plan of 2020, which is condemned by the Muslim states. Greenblatt, a key lawyer who worked in making the Trump Peace Plan, views Israel favorably and has negative views of Arab Palestinians. David Friedman, the US ambassador to Israel, financial contributor and supporter of the AIPAC, also played a key role in the decision-making process under the Trump administration.

Influence over Media

Besides influencing government policy directly, the lobby strives to shape public perceptions about Israel and Arab Palestinians. It does not allow free and critical debate related to Israeli's aggressive policies towards Palestine. Moreover, media think tanks and academia develop such discourse which is strongly in favour of Israel and in which Palestinians are stereotyped as terrorists and Islamists. In the mainstream media, most of the commentators are Pro-Israel. Journalist Eric Alterman writes that "61 columnists and commentators can be counted upon to support Israel reflexively and without qualification. The pro-Israel bias can be examined in most of the editorials written in the major newspapers. The Wall Street Journal, the Chicago, Sun-Times, and the Washington Post regularly wrote editorials in favour of Israel. Magazines like Commentary, the New Republic, and the Weekly Stand are staunchly in favour of Israel and protect the interests of Israel through various ways.

The media reporting on Israel-Palestinian conflict is more even-handed.^{xiv} On the one hand, media reporters need permission of the Israeli government to access the West Bank and Gaza; those journalists who do not view Israel favorably are denied access to these places. On the other hand, those who are provided access to these areas are highly in favour of Israel. Even with such constraints, if the media presents facts accurately and runs programs which are critical of Israeli policies, various organizations and individuals write to them to criticize such programs.^{xv} These factors unveil why there is almost no criticism of the aggressive policies of Israel in the media, and why no one discusses the lobby's influence on US policy.

Research Institutes

Pro-Israel forces are predominant in think tanks and play vital role in shaping public discourse as well as actual policy. The lobby created its own think tank in 1985, known as the

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Washington Institute of Near East Policy (WINEP).^{xvi} Although WINEP claims that it does not have any association with Israel and that it examines Arab-Israel conflict objectively yet its funding sources reveal another story. WINEP is heavily funded by those individuals who have a strong Israel bias. Moreover, Jews hold very significant positions in various think tanks like the Hudson Institute, the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, the Center for Security Policy, and the Heritage.

The Great Silencer

Another tool that lobby manipulates is the label of anti-Semitism. Anyone who even criticizes aggressive policies of Israel is labeled as anti-Semitic. And no one in the West likes to be labelled as Anti-Semite. But being critical of the policies of the State of Israel and having anti-Semitic views are two different things. However, the Israel lobby portrays as anti-semitic anyone who holds critical views against the policies of the Israeli State. For instance, in February 2019, Rep. Ilhan Omar responded to a tweet by a journalist Glenn Greenwald, who posted about House GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy threatening to punish Omar and another congresswoman for being critical of Israel. Omar wrote: "It's all about the Benjamins baby." In another tweet soon after, Omar named the AIPAC, saying it was funding Republican support for Israel. This tweet received bipartisan backlash, and Omar was widely accused of anti-Semitic speech. Furthermore, Omar stated: "I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it is OK for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country. I want to ask why it is OK for me to talk about the influence of the NRA (National Rifle Association), of fossil fuel industries or Big Pharma, and not talk about a powerful lobbying group that is influencing policies." Again, Omar was accused of anti-Semitism. Being opposed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the occupation is not the same as being anti-Semitic.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green (R-GA) represents the Far Right in the post, theorized that the Rothschild family was involved in starting California wildfires using lasers from space. Invoking

conspiratorial control by the Rothschild banking family over world events is a centuries-old anti-Semitic stereotype. In response, the Republican Jewish Coalition released a statement condemning Greene saying Greene is “far outside the mainstream of the Republican Party.” Furthermore, on February 4, 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives stripped a Georgia Republican congresswoman affiliated with the anti-Semitic QAnon conspiracy theory of her committee memberships, citing especially Marjorie Taylor Greene’s apparent threats against her colleagues.^{xvii}

Recalibration of the US Grand Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the US emerged as a dominant actor in the international system. Power diffusion led towards transformation in the world order from bipolarity to Unipolarity. The US became the sole super power in global affairs. In the Post-Cold War era, the US promoted a liberal world order by supporting liberal democracy, free market capitalism, and multilateralism. The US propagated states to integrate with the global economic institutions to attain economic development.^{xviii} It encouraged friendlier domestic foreign direct investment regimes. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was wild euphoria in the US; leaders and policy makers considered America as an exceptional nation with unique values, political stability, technological innovation, and military might. The US decision-makers began to think of American invincibility, “Unipolar Moment”, and “End of History”. Besides, initially the US pursued policy of engagement with states and international organisations.^{xix} But gradually relative power dominance of the US in global affairs would turn into liberal hegemony where the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once stated that “America is an indispensable state, we are taller and think far ahead than others.”^{xx} To maintain primacy, the US used military force in various parts of the world. The unilateral use of force by the US in Iraq in 2003 without taking into consideration the norm of

multilateralism and international law had disastrous consequences for Iraq.

The policy of global domination was pursued by the Bush administration, which was backed by many neo-conservatives who were closely associated with the Israel lobby.^{xxi} During the Bush administration, neo-conservatives which were at the helm of affairs propagated the invasion of Iraq. Although neoconservatives and other Lobby leaders were eager to invade Iraq, the broader American Jewish community was not.^{xxii} In fact, Samuel Freedman reported just after the war started that “a compilation of nationwide opinion polls by the Pew Research Center shows that Jews are less supportive of the Iraq war than the population at large—52% to 62%.”^{xxiii} Thus, it would be wrong to blame the war in Iraq on “Jewish influence.” Rather, the war was due in large part to the Lobby’s influence, especially the neoconservatives within it. According to Philip Zelikow, a member of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (2001-2003), the “real threat” from Iraq was not a threat to the United States.^{xxv} On August 16, 2002, eleven days before Vice President Cheney kicked off the campaign for war with a hardline speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the *Washington Post* reported that “Israel is urging U.S. officials not to delay a military strike against Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.”^{xxvi} Foreign Minister Shimon Peres told reporters in September 2002 that “the campaign against Saddam Hussein is a must. Inspections and inspectors are good for decent people, but dishonest people can easily overcome inspections and inspectors.”^{xxvii} At the same time, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak wrote a *New York Times* op-ed warning that “the greatest risk now lies in inaction.”^{xxviii}

As the Neo-conservatives were theorising for war in Iraq, both Clinton and Bush administrations refused to accept their assumptions. But finally opportunity came when the US homeland was attacked by terrorists on the 11th September 2001. After the 9/11 incident, the Bush administration campaigned for the war on terror and decided to use force unilaterally. This became a golden opportunity for the lobby to strike and propagate for the Iraq war. Prominent members of

the Lobby—most notably Scooter Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, and the Princeton historian Bernard Lewis—played especially critical roles in persuading the President and Vice-President to favor war. Wolfowitz advocated attacking Iraq before Afghanistan, even though there was no evidence that Saddam was involved in the attacks on the United States and Osama bin Laden was known to be in Afghanistan.^{xxix} The Vice President's influence helped convince President Bush by early 2002. With Bush and Cheney on board, the die for war was cast.

In the October 1 issue of the *Weekly Standard*, Robert Kagan and William Kristol called for a regime change in Iraq immediately after the Taliban was defeated. That same day, Charles Krauthammer argued in the *Washington Post* that after we were done with Afghanistan, Syria should be next, followed by Iran and Iraq. “The war on terrorism,” he argued, “will conclude in Baghdad” when we finish off “the most dangerous terrorist regime in the world.”^{xxx} A key part of this campaign was the manipulation of intelligence information to make Saddam look like an imminent threat. For example, Libby visited the CIA several times to pressure analysts to find evidence that would make the case for war, and he helped prepare a detailed briefing on the Iraq threat in early 2003 that was pushed on Colin Powell, then preparing his infamous briefing to the U.N. Security Council on the Iraqi threat.^{xxxi} According to Bob Woodward, Powell “was appalled at what he considered overreaching and hyperbole. Libby was drawing only the worst conclusions from fragments and silky threads.”^{xxxii} Although Powell discarded Libby's most outrageous claims, his U.N. presentation was still riddled with errors, as Powell now acknowledges. The campaign to manipulate intelligence also involved two organizations that were created after 9/11 and reported directly to Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith.^{xxxiii} The Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group was tasked to find links between al Qaeda and Iraq that the intelligence community supposedly missed. Its two key members were Wurmser, a hard core neoconservative, and Michael Maloof, a Lebanese-American who had close ties

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with Perle. The Office of Special Plan was tasked with finding evidence that could be used to sell war with Iraq. It was headed by Abram Shulsky, a neoconservative with longstanding ties to Wolfowitz.^{xxxiv} The shift in US grand strategy from selective engagement to the policy of global domination led to a relative decline in the US power.

US Foreign Policy under the Trump administration towards the Middle East

During the Trump administration, Republican neo-conservatives are back in power. Neo-conservatives like John Bolton, Mike Pompeo, Greenblatt, Adelson Sheldon, Nikkey Halley, David Friedman, and Jared Kushner have played a key role in shaping the US foreign policy under the Trump administration. Moreover, “America First Approach” of the Trump administration has added fuel to fire. Various policy initiatives undertaken by the current dispensation have undermined the already fragile liberal world order. The Trump administration’s decisions to withdraw from various multilateral initiatives have brought more uncertainty in world affairs.

Iran: There is a remarkable shift in the US foreign policy towards the Middle East under the Trump administration from its predecessor’s policies.^{xxxv} First, the landmark achievement of the Obama administration, the Iran Nuclear deal was reversed. With the neoconservatives back in power at the highest level, the lobby influenced the US foreign policy decision-making process which led to the withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Although the JCPOA is a multilateral treaty and is backed by the United Nations Security Council, yet the Trump administration withdrew from the treaty without giving valid a justification. According to the IAEA, Iran was complying with the treaty provisions, and it would have taken Iran years to develop nuclear weapons. But still Trump stated that the treaty was flawed from its core and did not prevent Iran from pursuing hegemonic policies in the Middle Eastern region. Moreover, the treaty did not deal with the Iranian missile

program. However, if we deconstruct this, we learn that the Israel lobby was not in favour of the Iran nuclear deal; rather, various individuals of the lobby had tried to convince various US administrations to use force against Iran and bring regime change.^{xxxvi} Moreover, leaders of Israel consider Iran as its arch rival and an existential threat to its survival as a sovereign state. Thus, during the Trump reign, the US decided to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. Moreover, the current dispensation has pursued the policy of “maximum pressure” against Iran with harsh sanctions.

Syria: Since the early days of the Syria Civil War, Israel has been propelling the US administration to wage a full-fledged war on Syria which, Israel believes, is a close ally of Iran. AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups, like the Christians United for Israel, instigated the US lawmakers to accuse Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of using chemical weapons against its civilians and, ultimately, using it as a pretext to attack Syria.^{xxxvii} Although during the Presidential election campaign, Trump criticised the Obama administration for its involvement in the Syrian civil war^{xxxviii} as Trump was in favour of disengagement from Syria, but various neo-conservatives wanted the US to maintain its presence in Syria. Thus, during the Trump administration, the US maintained its limited presence in Syria. Hence, neo-conservatives got what they wanted in Syria. Moreover, the US has recently recognised sovereign rights of Israel over the Golan Heights which Israel annexed from Syria during the 1967 Arab-Israel war. While the US decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights is primarily being explained away with geopolitics, it, in fact, has much more to do with US domestic politics. With this move, President Donald Trump aims to cement the gradual shift in partisan support of Israel from the Democrats to the Republicans and rally evangelical Christians around his presidency.^{xxxix} The US decision to recognise Golan Heights as a sovereign part of Israel is a flagrant transgression of international law and rules of the international society.

Iraq: The Trump Administration's approach to Iraq has sought to promote Iraqi unity and stability, prevent an IS resurgence, limit Iranian influence in Iraq, and sustain power of its allies in the Kurdish autonomous region.^{xi} Iraqi and U.S. leaders have engaged in a high-level strategic dialogue in 2020 to renew shared understandings about bilateral security cooperation and U.S. assistance. In August 2020, Iraqi and U.S. officials endorsed continued security cooperation, including a U.S. military presence. U.S. Central Command subsequently announced that U.S. force levels in Iraq would decline from 5,200 to 3,000, and in November, President Trump directed a further drawdown to 2,500 by January 2021. Nonetheless, there is continuation in the US foreign policy towards Iraq.^{xii}

Turkey: Initially the Trump administration assessed Turkey as a friendly state, and Trump had positive views about the President of Turkey. However, a series of crises between the US and Turkey over the Turkish purchase of S-400 missile defense systems from Russia and the ensuing U.S. sanctions on Turkey, conflicting interests over the Syrian Kurds, the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, and the arrest of an American evangelical pastor, Andrew Brunson in 2016 created a rift between these two NATO member states. Currently, the United States and Turkey do not enjoy cordial ties. And according to Galip Dalay, US-Turkey relations will remain crisis-ridden for a long time to come.^{xiii}

Saudi Arabia: Another shift in the US foreign policy under the Trump administration was its warm ties with Saudi Arabia. The previous regime did not have cordial relations with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni states of the Gulf region. But the Trump administration sought rapprochement by first visiting Saudi Arabia and developed warm relations with Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. The reasons behind the rapprochement were that without Saudi Arabia, the United States cannot have a coherent and effective policy to counter Iran's hegemonic activities in the Middle East. Moreover, an unstable Saudi Arabia would be a preeminent source of potential terrorists and radical ideology. In addition, the U.S. security relationship with Saudi Arabia goes well beyond arms sales: it also involves intense

intelligence, community collaboration, and significant financing for counterterrorist campaigns. Besides, without reliable U.S. military protection, Riyadh might well seek to acquire nuclear weapons. Finally, if the United States weakens its partnership with Saudi Arabia, the US adversaries, China and Russia, will fill the vacuum that can drastically change power dynamics in the Gulf region, contrary to the interest of the US.

Israel: Under the Obama administration, relations between Israel and the US were strained to some extent. The Obama administration pushed Benjamin Netanyahu's government to talk to the Palestinian Authority and start the peace process. Moreover, the Obama administration repeatedly communicated to the government of Israel to halt Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Furthermore, he signed a nuclear deal with Iran which was disliked by Benjamin Netanyahu.^{xliii} But once Trump came into power, he improved relations with Israel. He visited Israel and later on accepted all outstanding demands of Israel. During the Trump administration, the members of the Israel lobby pushed for various policy initiatives which favoured long seated demands of Israel. First, during Netanyahu's visit to the US, Trump moved from the "Two State Solution" and stated that he will endorse what the two parties of the conflict agree on. But the UN Secretary General and the international community condemned the statement of the US President and stated that there is no alternative to the Two State Solution. In November 2017, the US decided to shift the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and recognized Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel.^{xliiv} The US decision to shift the US embassy to Jerusalem received condemnation around the world. In the emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, the US decision to shift its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was condemned. And the Security Council urged the US to reverse its decision. The status of Jerusalem is a very intricate matter for Arab Muslims. The Palestinians wanted East Jerusalem to be their future capital and approximately 3.5 million Muslim Palestinians live there. Since the 1967 war, when Israel annexed East Jerusalem, the

international community criticised Israel and demanded Israel to withdraw from the occupied territory. Moreover, all previous US Presidents also favoured the “Two State Solution” to resolve the conflict between Arab Palestinians and Jews and backed the creation of a separate Palestinian state with its borders that of the pre-1967 war. Thus, the Trump administration’s decision to shift the US embassy can further destabilize the region which is already in turmoil.

Trump’s Peace Plan

The Trump peace plan is the final nail in the coffin. In February 2020, the US President unveiled the much awaited peace plan.^{xlv} During the announcement of the plan, no Palestinian representative was available. Moreover, after the US decision to shift the US embassy to Jerusalem, Mahmood Abbas refused to meet Jared Kushner and Greenblatt who are the chief architects of the Middle East peace plan. Thus, due to media spin, initially when the plan was announced, there was very little or muted response from the Arab world. However, later on, Mahmood Abbas denounced the plan and said that East Jerusalem is not for sale and no Palestinian can accept such plan which offers Palestinians truncated state without any kind of single territorial entity.^{xlvi} According to plan, no individual will be expelled from the place where one is residing which means recognition of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Moreover, Israel has been given territories along the Jordan River. Thus, the state of Israel has boundaries extending from the Jordan River to Mediterranean Ocean. However, the Trump Middle Peace Plan is being criticized because it recognized illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Secondly, it has given Israel access to the Jordan River, thus much of the areas of the West Bank are handed over to Israel. Thirdly, it recognizes Jerusalem as part of the undivided capital of Israel and gives few areas to the future Palestinians capital in the suburbs of Jerusalem. Fourth, in the plan, it is stated to take it or leave it which means Israel can further expand its areas. Fifth, it is stated that Palestinians have to recognise Israel as Jewish homeland in order to have a future state. Hence, such unilateral policy overtures on behalf of the US have

undermined international law and norms of international society.

Policy Recommendations for the upcoming Administration

The unconditional support to Israel under the Trump administration has further descended the Middle Eastern region into chaos. The Israel lobby has played a crucial role in shaping unilateral policy overtures under the Trump administration towards the Middle East which has served the interests of Israel rather than promoting American national interests and liberal values on the basis of which the US enjoys a status of benign hegemon in global affairs. Such biased American approach in favour of Israel has changed power dynamics and added instability that needs to be reversed in order to attain equilibrium and order. The Biden administration needs to reorient US foreign policy towards the Middle East.

First, American national interests and liberal values should be guiding the principles of US foreign policy towards West Asia. Moreover, the US needs to mitigate conflicts rather than fuel them by extending cooperation to her allies. The unconditional support to Israel has added fuel to fire in the regional turmoil. Thus, the current dispensation needs to reverse unilateral policy overtures pursued by the previous regime, particularly related to the Arab-Israel peace process. Moreover, undue influence of the Israel lobby should be recalibrated and contained. The Biden administration should pressurize the Israeli government to halt building further settlements in the West Bank. Besides, the democratic administration should encourage both parties of the conflict to come to the negotiating table and resolve their issues on a bilateral basis rather than taking sides in order to improve the tarnished image of the US in global affairs.

Second, US support to Saudi Arabia has also exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The upcoming Biden administration needs to persuade Saudi administration and resolve the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Moreover, the Biden administration should softly convey to Saudi ruling elite that they need to follow rules of international society. However, a

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complete rupture of American-Saudi relations is not recommended as the US needs collaboration with Saudi Arabia to protect its geo-strategic interests in the region.

Third, the current democratic administration needs to adopt a pragmatic approach vis-a-vis Iran. The US-Iran rapprochement can broadly diffuse tensions in the conflict-ridden region. Moreover, the US needs to address apprehensions of her allies before any reconciliation with Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) needs to be reconsidered. However, any quid-pro-quo should be based on a multilateral basis with credible verification mechanisms. Moreover, the Biden administration should explicitly convey to Iranian authorities that trade sanctions would be gradually uplifted based on Iranian behaviour to curtail her proxies in the region.

Fourth, the Biden administration should pursue a policy of restraint towards Syria rather than pursuing a policy of global domination. The US should not deeply get embroiled in the Syrian civil war and let the Russians and Iranians do the social engineering to protect the Assad regime. It would better serve American interests in the region. The US should narrowly focus on its particular interests and keep a very limited presence in Syria in order to fight against the reemergence of any violent non-state actor and to support its Kurd ally in the region.

Fifth, the Biden administration should pursue a policy of selective engagement in Iraq. It should keep a limited presence in Iraq to protect US national interests. Furthermore, selective engagement with the ruling authorities in Iraq is essential in order to maintain stability, contain increasing Iranian influence, and protect the regional autonomous government of its Kurd ally.

End Notes

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ⁱⁱ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy", (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

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