

# International Upheaval and the Middle East

Eldad Shavit

The international arena has been marked by upheaval since President Donald Trump entered the White House, and policies and measures adopted by the US administration in 2018 have exacerbated the tension. In response, the other key international players, particularly Russia, European countries, and China, have had to adjust their policies to ensure that the unfolding dynamic does not damage their interests. These developments have directly affected the behavior of the international actors in the Middle East, and shaped the global standing of the United States. In turn, the emergent international situation impacts on the relations among the various countries and between them and Israel. It affects Israel's strategic interests, its resilience, and its maneuvering ability as it devises ways to cope with the challenges before it.

This essay assesses the direct and indirect impact of events in the international arena on the complex matrix of Israeli interests, and the possible implications of expected future developments in 2019.

## The International Arena

President Trump has systematically questioned nearly every assumption that underlay United States policy in recent years in both the domestic and foreign arenas and thereby upset two traditional approaches. The first of these holds that the United States should almost by itself bear the costs stemming from its status as the sole power able to lead the international arena. The second is that American leadership and shaping of international

Zvi Magen, Vera Michlin Shapir, and Galia Lavi contributed to this chapter.

institutions and rules of the game necessarily advances the interests and values of the United States. These longstanding presumptions have been replaced by a belief that international actors are taking advantage of the United States. The administration is consequently committed to an “America First” policy, and within this framework, has abandoned many international commitments embraced by previous administrations (the Paris Agreement on climate change; the JCPOA – the nuclear agreement with Iran; the INF intermediate-range nuclear disarmament agreement signed with the Soviet Union in 1987; and important trade agreements) or has demanded substantial changes in the signed agreements.

From the perspective of the Trump administration, the United States should focus exclusively on promoting its own interests. Its enemies should realize that it is determined to achieve its goals, and its allies will have to pay their share if they wish to rely on US economic and military power. President Trump has not flinched from materially upsetting the familiar structure of transatlantic relations as they have developed since WWII, which were based on an agenda that rested on liberal social and economic principles, including democracy, receptiveness to personal freedom, a free market economy, multilateral institutions, and defense cooperation.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it appears that despite the administration’s attacks on established multilateral institutions such as the UN, NATO, G-20, and WTO, the administration is in no hurry to pull out of these organizations; it is mainly trying to change the way they operate from within, and in particular to ease the burden on the United States in its commitment to them.

In dispensing with longstanding assumptions, the Trump administration has fulfilled promises made during the presidential election campaign, and has launched a trade war with a number of countries, with the declared purpose of reopening all of the United States’ old trade agreements. President Trump wishes to replace them with new arrangements that will benefit industrial and agricultural workers in the United States. In order to force the partners of the United States to respond positively to its demands, the administration has imposed customs duties designed to demonstrate the seriousness of its intentions. Within a few months of his presidency, Trump began a campaign on several fronts. The most prominent measure is the confrontation with China (the volume of trade in goods and services between the two countries

totaled \$710 billion in 2017, while the trade deficit of the United States with China was \$335 billion).<sup>2</sup> That Canada and Mexico were willing to sign a new agreement with the United States, which the United States considers an improvement over the previous North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is regarded as a success, at least by the administration. These trade conflicts are also likely to affect Israel, with an emphasis on the extent of their influence on Israeli exports. A report by the Manufacturers Association of Israel cites the possibility that the global trade war could reduce Israeli exports by NIS 550 million per year.<sup>3</sup>

An assessment of the US administration's policy in general and its foreign policy in particular indicates that the process of change is underway on two parallel tracks. On the one hand, President Trump promotes (mainly through Twitter) a policy that matches his radical approach. At the same time, the other administration systems seek to preserve some of the accepted frameworks of traditional American foreign policy. Furthermore, there is recurring chaotic policy management, sometimes in conditions of uncertainty, and a lack of an orderly decision making process, which often promotes a policy that reflects incoherence and inconsistency toward a goal, and sometimes even the lack of a defined goal.<sup>4</sup> The appointments of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State and John Bolton as National Security Advisor have greatly improved synchronization between the President's wishes and those in the administration responsible for implementing foreign policy.

A recurrent strategy by the administration includes threats (against leaders, countries, and organizations) and an effort to push the other side into a corner, often through economic sanctions and penalties, followed by an attempt to take advantage of the pressure to obtain better results, at least from the administration's perspective, through negotiations. At the same time, it appears that as much as possible the administration wishes to avoid the use of military force as a means of pressure against its opponents. In most cases, it prefers the sanctions weapon, in part because the trauma suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan has made the President, the military establishment, and the public in the United States reluctant to embark on new military campaigns.

Policy toward North Korea, for example, is a clear expression of what is referred to as "Trump's businesslike approach." This has fluctuated between initial threats of war and increased economic pressure and a summit between

President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un; it is unknown whether any practical measures have been taken to date to convince North Korea to relinquish its nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, even if it is premature to determine whether the goal of North Korean nuclear disarmament will be reached, the interest of the United States and North Korea in promoting the contact between them has sparked processes in which the two sides have shown willingness to take confidence building measures, including maintaining channels for ongoing dialogue. Already by early 2018, these had significantly lowered the tension between the United States and North Korea.

Noticeable in the international arena is the clash between the global perceptions of President Trump and those of leaders of the countries regarded for years as allies of the United States. This in turn has negative consequences for the international community's ability to act in coalition, particularly given the bitterness and disrespect typical of Trump's behavior, especially toward his colleagues in Europe, contrasted with his expressions of admiration and praise for belligerent leaders, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, and non-liberal leaders in Europe, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Europe's most prominent leaders, led by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, have not hesitated to publicly express their opinion that Europe's relations with the United States should be reassessed, and that it is the responsibility of European leadership to shape a "balanced partnership" with the United States involving promotion of an independent European capability, including in the military sphere, for the purpose of defending its interests.<sup>5</sup>

Still, the processes launched by the US administration are only beginning. Even if, as a rule, the current prevailing attitude in the international arena toward these processes is mainly critical, in practice, the main consequences for both the United States and the other international actors, for better and for worse, can be assessed only in the coming years.

The geopolitical question marks that are likely to typify the international system in 2019 are not solely a result of the Trump administration. They are also affected by the political instability experienced by Europe following British measures to leave the European Union and other problems pervading Europe and threatening EU cohesion. These challenges include uncertainty about the preservation of the democratic tradition in Europe itself. Isolation

and national insularity have grown, primarily due to xenophobia and the growing opposition to immigration, a struggle against globalization, the erosion of liberal norms, increased populism, and the rise of extreme right groups. Prominent in this context is the rise of conservative/populist governments in countries, led by Hungary and Poland, whose policy reflects a retreat from the democratic values prevalent until now.<sup>6</sup>

For the US administration, 2019 will be a year that will test its ability to achieve its foreign policy goals, above all, relations with Russia and the future of the dialogue underway with North Korea concerning its nuclear disarmament. Tension between Washington and Moscow has grown in recent years, and while the current administration, especially President Trump, has tried to display optimism, in practice, and despite the dialogue held between the US and Russia, bilateral relations are at a low point. This is largely due to the administration's limited room to maneuver, given the ongoing investigation into Russia's involvement in the US elections; results of the investigation are due to be published in the first half of 2019. The emerging concrete direction, however, is toward intensifying tension between the United States and Russia – including the possibility that the sanctions imposed on Russia will be stepped up – and the two countries' inability to reach agreements on issues related to the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Internal developments in the United States over the coming year are also very likely to affect the degree of attention that the administration can devote to foreign policy, including the Middle East. The Democrats' success in the 2018 midterm elections will force President Trump to begin preparing for the November 2020 presidential elections already in 2019. Even if the President feels confident in his standing, his behavior to date clearly shows that he needs to score successes, despite the challenge created by unstable policies and unripe conditions. In this context, foreign policy issues are likely to be a convenient source for achieving success.

For its part, Russia is hard pressed to leverage its achievements in the Middle East to promote its goals in Eastern Europe, especially in obtaining significant relief from the many sanctions imposed on it because of its policy in Ukraine, its interference in the US elections, and the attempted assassination of Russian intelligence agent Sergei Skripal in the UK. The economic sanctions have taken a severe toll in Russia, and authorities are

continuing their efforts to soften the financial and economic consequences through monetary intervention by the Russian central bank. At the same time, however, concern is growing that political tampering with professional economic decisions could cause the situation to spiral out of control. The surge in oil prices over the year did not materially change Russia's economic position, for two reasons. The first is that the price increase resulted from an agreement between Russia and OPEC to reduce oil production, which also applies to Russia. Prices rose, but output and revenue fell. The second reason is that while oil prices rose, the ruble strengthened, so the higher oil prices did not boost Russia's real income. In these economic circumstances, reflected in growing social protest, Putin's standing among the Russian public is declining, despite his efforts to stem this negative trend.

One key question is to what extent these global developments are liable to detract from the status and hegemony of the United States as leader of the free world, or whether they will lead Washington to change its mode of action in the international arena, possibly while creating new frameworks and partnerships. There is still uncertainty concerning the standing of the United States in the international arena. The absence of a stable world order also jeopardizes the ability of the various parties to act together in coping with global challenges, and aggravates the risk of a greater outbreak of conflicts in loci of tension around the world, such as the South China Sea, the Indo-Chinese border, Ukraine, and the Middle East. Even if one assumes that the United States is strong, its economy is sound, and the international actors need the American market, opinions are divided concerning whether the Trump administration's *modus operandi* will indeed boost American power and create a more balanced relationship between the United States and its allies, as per the President's credo.

Over the past year, the administration highlighted its assessment of the threat posed to the United States by China in both the security and economic spheres. The *National Security Strategy* document published in late 2017 once again described Russia, but this time joined by China, as the main challenge to the interests, power, and influence of the United States.<sup>7</sup> In effect, in addition to the trade conflict, tension between the two countries is rising, in part due to China's purchase of weaponry from Russia, American aid to Taiwan, and the struggle for control of the South China Sea. The

need to deal with the Trump administration poses an increasing challenge to the Chinese leadership and requires ongoing efforts at damage control. It appears that the trade war has already affected the Chinese economy, even if the impact so far cannot be described as substantial. There are problems in stabilizing the yuan, and Chinese businesses and companies that depend on American imports to supplement the production and supply chain, or that export to the United States (the main sufferers), are experiencing difficulties. The Chinese economy is slowing down somewhat, although it is difficult to attribute this to the trade war, because the trend has been evident for a long time. The fear of a downturn exists, but at this stage, the Chinese leadership seems determined and confident in its ability to overcome the crisis. From their perspective, the Chinese regard taking a hard line as one element in addressing concern about a loss of public confidence in the economy and an ensuing threat to internal stability. In the context of the Middle East, China is not aiming to promote itself as a leading actor beyond traditional efforts to safeguard its economic interests. China's dependence on energy resources in the region and uncertainty regarding the impact of the new US sanctions against Iran, as well as China's ability to rely on Iran as a future source of energy, require it to act cautiously in the region, while striving to extend its influence there, primarily through expansion of its financial investments, including deeper involvement in infrastructure ventures.<sup>8</sup>

Although relations between Russia and China are complex and have vacillated over the years, the global policy of President Trump and his administration have created a confluence of interests between Moscow and Beijing. Bilateral relations grew noticeably more stable in 2018, involving cooperation that included a large scale joint military exercise in September 2018. Underlying this trend is the desire of China's leadership to take advantage of United States uncertainty and occasional hesitation and European weakness to try to shape a coordinated policy with Moscow. Inter alia, joint efforts are clearly underway to challenge the United States policy of sanctions against Iran and North Korea.<sup>9</sup> Note that the use by the United States of the sanctions instrument is already leading to understandings among the countries facing American pressure, because even if they are currently forced to accede to this pressure, at the same time they strive to find indirect ways to carry out their policy in order to minimize possible damages and



avoid to the greatest possible extent the subordination of their interests and policy to those of the United States.

## **International Involvement in the Middle East**

Principal focal points of international policy in the Middle East in 2018 that directly affect the challenges and dilemmas facing Israel and policy decisions it will have to make in the coming year are the campaign against extremist Islamic groups, the confrontation with Iran, the campaign in Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and relations between the US administration and the Sunni states.

*The campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS) and extreme Islamist groups.* The military efforts by the United States-led coalition have scored much success in attacks against Islamic State cells, which are still present throughout the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq. President Trump's desire to declare victory and withdraw from the campaign is clear, and this was underscored by his decision to withdraw US forces from Syria. At the same time, there is still no coherent strategy concerning what will come after the Islamic State to ensure that both the threat does not recur and conditions facilitating a renewed infrastructure for Islamic radicalism in Syria and elsewhere do not arise. In any case, the instability typical of core areas that are the focus of the Islamic State – Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya – and the problems entailed by the massive human and economic resources necessary to attend to humanitarian needs will make it difficult to translate military successes into an overall plan of action.

*Iran.* At the heart of the matter is President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and fully reinstate the American sanctions in effect before it was signed. The administration's stated goals are to deprive Iran of the capability of attaining nuclear weapons and systems for launching them, and to change Iran's policy in the region. It seeks to renew negotiations with Iran, in order to achieve a better agreement that also addresses issues not included in the previous agreement. Even if the US administration desires the replacement of the Iranian regime, it does not appear to have any concrete policy with measures aimed at regime change. At the same time, the other countries in the agreement (the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) are continuing their efforts to formulate a response



to the challenge posed by the new US policy. They aim to preserve the agreement, and especially to influence Iran to refrain from breaching it by resuming uranium enrichment. Thus far, the American action highlights the isolation of the United States. For its part, Tehran, which apparently wishes to gain time in the hope that President Trump is not elected to a second term in 2020, has entrenched itself in its positions. While the sanctions are already exacting a significant price, and even though American rhetoric is marked by threats to attack Iran's activity in the Middle East, Iran is unwilling to restart negotiations. From the administration's perspective, the means to this end are primarily the economic sanctions, activity by powerful regional players, and reliance on Russia in Syria. In any case, it does not appear that the administration has any intention to use military force in order to increase the pressure on Iran in this theater.

*The campaign in Syria.* In 2018, it became clear that although the civil war is close to an end, the theater has become a focus of international activity. Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, and to a lesser extent Israel are all militarily involved in Syria in order to ensure that their interests are preserved when the war is over. The United States and Russia are engaged in a dialogue on the matter, although thus far this has yielded no practical results. Russia continues its efforts to leverage military success in Syria to promote a political solution that will safeguard President Assad's regime and preserve Russian interests in this country. Russia is thereby aiming – so far with no success – to take advantage of the desire of the United States and other Western countries for stability in Syria to achieve progress in its goals in Eastern Europe (with an emphasis on compromises in the sanctions imposed on Russia for its policy in Ukraine). As of now, however, the crisis concerning Syria has intensified, with no solution in sight. For the US, as in the past, there is obvious tension between the need to find a solution that is compatible with its interests and its limited readiness to devote military, economic, and diplomatic efforts to advance them. Only in late 2018 did it appear that an effort was underway to create a more coherent policy on Syria that would bolster the effort to formulate an overall strategy on Iran. At the same time, even if the United States has important interests in the Syrian context, the decision to end the US military presence in Syria

indicates they are not high on the list of priorities among all of the threats that must be addressed.

*The Israeli-Palestinian conflict.* Expectations that the US administration would unveil its “deal of the century” in 2018 did not materialize. Details of the emerging plan and to what extent it provides an overall solution to the various issues at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are so far unknown. It appears that at present, President Trump’s negotiating team, headed by emissary Jason Greenblatt and son-in-law Jared Kushner, is focusing on an effort to exert heavy pressure on Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas to moderate his opposition to renewed negotiations with Israel. Measures taken by the administration, headed by the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and termination of monetary aid to UNRWA, were interpreted as strongly pro-Israel and intensified the impasse in relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Furthermore, it is clear that these measures resulted in diminishing support by the Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia, for the administration’s efforts to renew dialogue. These countries fear that supporting the administration’s measures, including after the transfer of the embassy to Jerusalem, are liable to have a negative impact on regimes in the internal and regional theater. It appears that the Gulf states have also eased the pressure they were exerting on the Palestinians to cooperate with the US administration.

*Relations between the United States and the Sunni states.* Beyond the dispute in the Palestinian context, it appears that there are other disagreements between the United States and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, concerning the current agenda. These include the political reforms led by the Saudi regime, the crisis between Qatar and its Sunni neighbors in the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the ongoing war in Yemen. Furthermore, the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi constituted the most serious challenge to relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia since the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Like Israel, the Trump administration has pinned many hopes on Mohammad bin Salman, regarding him as a partner in the struggle against Iran and in the regional peace process. However, it is clear that for many in the United States, these hopes have been dashed after bin Salman was held responsible for the failures of Saudi policy. Questions have been raised in Washington

about Saudi Arabia's ability to realize the key role assigned to it by the administration in promoting American efforts to contain and restrain Iran's conduct in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

## **Implications for Israel**

The unequivocal support for Israel expressed by the United States in general, and President Trump in particular, is a strategic asset for Israel. The relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, the withdrawal from the JCPOA, and full backing for the Israeli stance in international institutions will continue to constitute a key element of Israel's strategic strength in 2019. Even if the administration is frequently isolated internationally and there are stark disagreements between the US and its allies in the international and regional theaters, the support it gives to Israel, the close relations between President Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the ongoing dialogue between the two countries will continue to play an important role in Israel's security in its challenge-laden strategic environment.

The flowering of Israel's relations with the current administration, in stark contrast to the relations that prevailed between the governments during President Obama's term, requires that attention be paid to the possible long term political consequences for the stance of the Democratic Party toward Israel. Might what is interpreted as automatic support for President Trump and the Republican Party result in a rift between Israel and the US that will be difficult to heal if and when a Democratic president is elected? This question is particularly salient now that the Democratic Party succeeded in regaining control of the House of Representatives in the midterm elections.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Israel must also deal with waning support by sections of American Jewry, in view of the widening gaps with the Israeli government, and the effects this will have on the US administration.<sup>12</sup>

At the moment, the close ties between the countries help Israel to enhance its international standing, which has strengthened significantly in recent years as a result of its ability to demonstrate its military, economic, and technological power. The intimate dialogue that developed between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin, though encountering difficulty in late 2018, has been of great assistance in relieving tension in the ongoing conflict in Syria, and has highlighted the importance attached

by the Russian President, at least thus far, to close ties with Israel and the realization in Moscow of the need to accommodate Israeli interests in this theater. At the same time, the nearly identical views between the Trump administration's policy and Israel on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran contribute to widened gaps between Israel and its principal allies in Europe, although regular dialogue continues between Israel and leading European countries: France, the UK, and Germany. And even if there is no blatant expression of a rift, insofar as the United States finds itself more isolated and its superpower status is affected, this will necessarily also have an influence on the attitude towards Israel.

Developments in the context of efforts to dismantle North Korea's nuclear program have many international ramifications, and are also likely to affect the Middle East. The assessment of the administration's determination to adhere to the terms it presented to North Korea will have a direct effect on the image of United States power in the region and the seriousness that should be attributed to its intentions. If Pyongyang succeeds in retaining nuclear capability while pressure on the regime eases, Tehran will likewise conclude that it can accelerate its efforts to consolidate its military capabilities and influence in the region, as a result of the realization that attaining more advanced nuclear capabilities will make it easier for Iran to cope with the demands of its enemies.

Over the next year the Middle East policy of the United States will be tested mainly in the context of its ambitious goals vis-à-vis Iran, as stated in the 12-Point speech by Secretary of State Pompeo on May 21, 2018.<sup>13</sup> To date, the administration is pursuing its policy of pressure alone, with no cooperation from the other countries party to the JCPOA. Furthermore, in contrast to the international cooperation during Obama's term, governments in most countries, and certainly in Europe, China, and Russia, are currently doing everything in their power to thwart the administration's efforts in this context. It is still too early to assess to what extent the administration has succeeded in forcing an absolute halt in trade with Iran, particularly regarding the goal of reducing oil purchases from Iran to nil. It is likewise unclear whether the Iranian regime will in fact change its policy in the way that the Trump administration wants, even if the administration is able to enforce significant and comprehensive sanctions. The European Union and

the leaders of the UK, France, and Germany are united in their decision to act jointly to protect the JCPOA as much as possible, and in particular to try to influence Iran not to violate it. From their perspective, breaching the agreement, let alone bringing about its complete collapse, will run the risk of Iran's return to nuclear capability development. The dilemma now facing European countries that wish to maintain transatlantic relations while at the same time defending the European continent's interests, will continue to shape the actions of the EU countries in the near future, possibly to an even greater extent.

The stance taken by the international actors on the disputes concerning Iran will also be shaped by Iran's responses to the stepped-up sanctions against it. At this stage, it is possible that over the coming year one of the following three main scenarios will develop, in order of decreasing likelihood: (a) continuation of the existing situation – strategic patience and a resistance economy on the part of Iran; (2) escalation in Iranian policy, whether through resumption of uranium enrichment and other actions pertaining to the nuclear program (even while continuing to fulfill its obligations under the NPT), or through an increase in direct activity or activity of its allies against US interests; (3) new negotiations with the Trump administration. It appears that under the status quo, the US will continue its efforts to press on with the sanctions as much as possible, based on the assessment/hope that Iran will eventually decide to enter negotiations, and perhaps even that the developing processes will bring about the downfall of the current Iranian regime.

In case of a significant Iranian breach of the agreement, the international community's response is likely to vary. European countries, which were parties to the agreement, may well regard the new situation as risky, and will have no choice but to join the United States in imposing sanctions on Iran. At the same time, however, some, principally Russia and China, will show "understanding" of Iran's motives. As long as Iran remains within the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the NPT, they will prefer to maintain ties with it. The US administration, which has apparently not prepared a Plan B, will find itself in a dilemma, because an Iranian resumption of nuclear activity will mean that it is able and willing to cope with the consequences of the sanctions. In these circumstances, the question is likely to arise what strategy, beyond sanctions, can force Iran to

halt its progress toward the nuclear threshold, and what red line, if crossed, will mandate military measures. The threatening American rhetoric has escalated in recent months, but it is primarily aimed at deterring Iran from taking action directly or through its allies against American targets in the Middle East. At the same time, it appears that in general, the possibility of military intervention is not attractive to the US defense establishment. President Trump is also not eager to return the American army to the Middle East. Particularly in advance of the next presidential elections, it is doubtful whether the administration would choose such a controversial option.

If negotiations begin between the United States and Iran, even if there are respective constraints and red lines, there will be willingness on both sides to compromise. In these circumstances, the beginning of negotiations itself would presumably earn the Trump administration broad support in the international arena, and reinforce the President's image as a deal maker. The American point of departure will be a demand that the negotiations deal with all of the outstanding issues, as Trump demanded, based on the 12 points that Pompeo presented. The Iranian point of departure will be a demand for the removal, or at least the suspension, of sanctions and complete insistence on Iran's right to enrich uranium. It can be assumed that the two sides' opening demands are unattainable, but there is still room for possible mutual concessions by the parties.

For Israel, it is possible that under the worst case scenario, a summit will be held along the lines of the Trump-Kim summit, whose importance lies in the fact that it took place, while its actual accomplishments are unclear. In any case, starting negotiations will enable Iran to gain time in the hope that Trump will be a one-term president. The beginning of negotiations will relieve the pressure on Iran; all of the international actors opposed to the American sanctions against Iran will be glad to resume some form of business as usual with Iran. The Trump administration will have an interest in achieving a better agreement than the one reached by Obama, thereby proving that the allegations that Obama was too soft and consented to the "worst deal ever" were correct. Under these circumstances, a possible clash between Israeli and American interests may occur. The United States has more maneuvering room than Israel, and it will be more likely that any

agreement reached will fall short of what Israel would like; whether such an agreement will be better than the existing one is open to question.

The decision by President Trump to withdraw US forces from Syria indicates that from his perspective, the United States, at least in this theater, has renounced the use of military force in order to limit the Iranian presence in Syria. Moreover, it appears that with this decision, the United States has deposited the entire Syrian file in Russia's hands, and has lost a key bargaining chip in any efforts to influence a political arrangement in Syria, if and when it is achieved. According to at least some of the parties involved, any arrangement was supposed to address Iran's presence in Syria. It is highly doubtful whether the remaining US leverage, namely, its potential contribution to Syria's reconstruction, can help realize an arrangement that includes a change of the Syrian regime and the ouster of Iranian forces. It is likewise highly questionable whether President Trump will agree to invest massive economic resources in Syria, given its low ranking on his overall list of foreign policy priorities.

Even if the United States retains interests in the area, America's conduct vis-à-vis Syria and its response to the Khashoggi murder weakens its potential influence and room to maneuver in face of the challenges before it. As such, it leaves its allies wondering whether the United States can be trusted to support them against the growing motivation of elements that seek to capitalize on American hesitancy in order to enhance their own power and holds in the area.

The dispute between Russia and the other actors in the arena has sharpened as the war in Syria approaches its end. These include Iran, whose forces Russia is being asked, and wants, to remove from Syria; Turkey, which seeks to neutralize the pressure around Idlib in particular and achieve its goals in Syria; and the Gulf states, which want Iran pushed out of Syria. For its part, Russia wants Gulf money for reconstruction in Syria. Indeed, the question of reconstruction is of great interest to Russia, especially given the relative international indifference to this challenge. All of these parties are generating uncertainty about the final state of the campaign in Syria and potential for a crisis.

With the approaching end of the war in Syria, questions involving Israel from Russia's perspective are also paramount, mainly in the context of



Israel's ongoing activity to thwart the consolidation of Iran's presence in Syria and the transfer of advanced weapon systems to the Syrian regime. Continuation of these actions is liable to challenge the settlement that Russia wants to achieve in Syria. The crisis over the downing of the Russian plane in Syria on September 17, 2018, in which 15 Russian soldiers were killed, should also be assessed in this broad context, beyond the anger expressed by Moscow over the incident. In 2019, to the extent that progress is made toward a settlement in Syria, Israel should expect continued pressure from Moscow that is liable to challenge Israel (and through it also the United States), aimed at forcing a settlement on terms convenient to Russia. In addition, the transfer of advanced weapon systems from Russia to Syria, such as the S-300, is liable to complicate the situation for Israel in this theater.

Although other countries in the international theater have interests in the Syrian theater as well, it appears that these were less relevant in 2018. Developments next year will again be affected first of all by the nature of the dialogue between the United States and Russia, mainly on the question of Iran's presence in the area and an agreed interim solution for the Assad regime.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the substance of the "deal of the century" also remains unclear at present. While President Trump repeated his ambition to achieve the "ultimate deal," and the American team is continuing its consultations in the matter, it is unclear at present whether the details of the plan will be made public in the coming months. At the same time, if the administration eventually unveils the plan's details, it is doubtful whether the Palestinians will regard it as a starting point for renewing the dialogue with Israel, even if it contains compensation for their side, as promised by the President. At present, the steps taken by the administration (especially the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem) have also deepened the deadlock, given the Palestinian refusal to conduct talks with the administration's representatives. In practice, these steps had a negative impact on the ability of the United States to lead the political process.

In conclusion, the unsteady relations between the leading international actors and uncertainty regarding the escalating rift between the United States and Iran are likely to culminate in growing instability in Israel's strategic environment. Israel, which enjoys complete support from the

American administration in both political and security aspects, will therefore be acting in a state of uncertainty as a result of both developments in relations between the powers and the effect of American policy, mainly on Iran and the Palestinian issue. Given the substantial disagreements in the international theater on policy toward Iran, setting priorities is of the highest importance, particularly if Iran responds to sanctions by renewing its uranium enrichment program. Since it is likely that the close connection between Israel and the United States is accompanied by a strategic dialogue and coordination of positions, Israel's main challenge will be preserving the close ties with the administration, and especially avoiding situations marked by gaps between the administration's policy and Israeli interests. Israel should particularly emphasize measures that will ensure the preservation of bipartisan support in the United States, especially with the 2020 presidential elections looming. Simultaneously, Israel should avoid any substantial deterioration in its relations with European countries, which have been extremely significant for its strategic standing in recent years. Given the volatile situation in Syria, Israel should strive to agree on rules of the game with Russia that will enable it to continue preserving its interests in this theater, without undue friction between Jerusalem and Moscow.

## Notes

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