

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 99 (March 2021)

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*US-Israel relations have focused in March on reconciling differing approaches to Iran. Nevertheless, Biden's priorities lie elsewhere; the administration focuses on re-assessing postures towards Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni crisis as Congress becomes vociferous about its allies' human rights record. For the first time since assuming office, Biden has ordered aid to the Palestinians, with no substantial strides towards Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The reinstatement of the JCPOA is at a catch-22 standstill, as both sides adamantly demand a gesture of good-will to reciprocate.*

### A. Israel-US Relations

**1. Security cooperation with Israel continues in light of Iranian aggression.** An Israeli aircraft [accompanied](#) two US F-52 bombers and aircrafts from Qatar and Saudi Arabia flying in Iranian proximity. The first meeting of the US-Israel Strategic Consulting Group [convened](#) this month and was led by National Security Advisor Sullivan and Israeli counterpart Ben-Shabbat, to share “perspectives on regional security” and affirm “common determination to confront the challenges and threats facing the region.”

**2. The US voices traditional support for Israel in the international arena.** Secretary Blinken and Spokesperson Price [reiterated](#) US opposition to the ICC probe, although it is unclear whether the ICC decision will [affect](#) the Trump sanctions imposed on the ICC in 2019. Senate Republicans and Democrats [submitted](#) a letter to Blinken expressing concern over the ICC decision, eventually signed by 57 lawmakers. For the first time since assuming office, Vice President Harris [spoke](#) to Netanyahu and restated US opposition to the ICC ruling. In a congressional hearing about the ICC, Blinken [asserted](#) that he is concerned about the singling out of Israel in the international arena. In her confirmation hearing to lead USAID, Samantha Power was [challenged](#) about her time as Obama's US Ambassador to the UN and posture towards Israel. While she avoided elucidating her stance regarding Security Council Resolution 2334, which criticizes Israel and calls the settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank occupied Palestinian territories and which she abstained from voting on, Powers averred that the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem is not occupied and criticized the UN as “biased”. In a press briefing, Ambassador Barks-Ruggles of the Bureau of International Organization Affairs [stated](#) that Israel should not be “treated unfairly” by the UN, and that the Israel-US alliance will “continue uninterrupted”. Spokesperson Price [reaffirmed](#) US opposition to Agenda Item 7, a permanent component of the UN Human Rights Council agenda that focuses on the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories.

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## B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process

**1. Congress expresses concern over Palestinian rights, especially COVID-19 vaccination access.** Sen. Sanders [submitted](#) a letter to Secretary Blinken, urging him to pressure the Israeli government to “do more to help” Palestinians during the pandemic and extend access to vaccinations. In a separate [letter](#), 17 House Democrats called for Blinken to place pressure on Israel to ensure vaccination access to the Palestinians. Ten House Democrats submitted a letter to Blinken, spearheaded by Rep. Tlaib and Rep. Pocan, [highlighting](#) different human rights issues in the Palestinian territories, such as house demolitions. In a speech in Brussels, Blinken [proclaimed](#) US determination to “speak up” for human rights in all countries, at a time when they are being challenged, domestically and externally.

**2. Biden works to restore assistance to the Palestinians.** According to a policy memo obtained by the press, the Biden administration [plans](#) to reset relations with the Palestinians, while concurrently toughening US positions on Israeli settlements and Palestinian prisoner payments. Later in the month, Blinken [announced](#) 15 million USD in COVID-19 aid to the Palestinians to be provided by USAID for “life-saving humanitarian needs”. In response, a Republican representative [lamented](#) that the decision violates the [Taylor Force Act](#), which requires any restoration of aid to the Palestinians to be tied to ending “acts of violence”. Meanwhile, Biden’s first human rights report [restored](#) the section about the Palestinian “occupied territories”, eliminated by the Trump administration since 2018.

## C. US Middle East policy

**1. Souring relationship with Saudi Arabia over human rights concerns.** Three House Democrats [introduced](#) a bill urging the sanctioning of Saudi officials in light of the recently published report on the killing of journalist Khashoggi, and Rep. Omar [implored](#) the House to sanction Mohammed bin Salman. Democratic representatives [introduced](#) a bill to the House floor aiming to protect Saudi dissidents. A sub-committee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs [conducted](#) a hearing “Assessing the Human Rights Situation in Saudi Arabia”. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Saudi counterpart Farhan Al Saud about US commitment to its territorial integrity and security interests, as well as resolution of the conflict in Yemen.

**2. The US sanctions Iranian officials and focuses on multilateral cooperation.** Nominee for Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman seemed to [backtrack](#) from indubious backing of the JCPOA in her confirmation hearing, calling for a comprehensive agreement to contain the Iranian threat. While Iran continues to [stress](#) the lifting of US sanctions as a prerequisite for renewed JCPOA compliance, Spokesperson Price reaffirmed that the US will not take any “unilateral gestures”. National Security Advisor Sullivan [apprised](#) reporters that the US is communicating indirectly with Iran through European mediation in efforts to resume talks. On the 14th anniversary of Iran’s abduction of FBI agent Robert Levinson, the State Department [called](#) on Iran to release all US prisoners “unjustly” held in Iran. A bipartisan statement led by numerous House Democrats and one Republican condemned Iranian uranium enrichment and [called](#) on Iran to cease escalating and imperiling regional security. In a press conference following discussions with his Chinese counterparts, Secretary Blinken [stated](#) that concerning Iran, the US “interests intersect” with China’s. A State Department press release claimed that the US Navy will [conduct](#) a naval exercise together with Belgium, France and Japan in the Middle East in light of heightened tensions with Iran.

Secretary Blinken [announced](#) the designation of IRGC interrogators Ali Hemmatian and Masoud Safdari for “gross violations of human rights”, barring US entry to them and their families. Ten Iranian nationals have been [convicted](#) of evading US sanctions, in a scheme amounting to 300 USD million in transactions. Republican Rep. McCaul [introduced](#) a bill co-signed by 20 House Republicans that will require a congressional review for any executive attempt to waive or terminate sanctions against Iran.

**3. The US takes a tough stance on the Houthis and stresses cooperation with international peace efforts.** Secretary Blinken [announced](#) the designation of two prominent Houthi leaders as “Persons Threatening the Peace, Security, or Stability of Yemen” and emphasized Iranian responsibility for escalation in Yemen. The US, Britain, Germany and France [released](#) a shared statement denouncing the ongoing Houthi attack on Ma’rib and affirming commitment to Saudi security and sovereignty. Spokesperson Price [denounced](#) the Houthi attack on Saudi Arabia that compromised an oil facility in Jizan, and [expressed concern](#) about Houthi practice of stealing humanitarian aid aimed at the impoverished Yemeni citizens. The State Department [welcomed](#) Yemeni clearance of four commercial fuel ships into Hudaydah port, reiterating the need to enable the free flow of humanitarian assistance and necessary goods into Yemen. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) US commitment to peace in Yemen and instatement of the Riyadh Agreement with Yemeni Prime Minister Saeed, and [proclaimed](#) that the US will provide 191 million USD in humanitarian assistance to Yemen, mostly through USAID. He also [spoke](#) to the UN Special Envoy to Yemen Griffiths about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. Special Envoy Lenderking [traveled](#) to the Middle East to convene with leaders from the Gulf, Jordan and the Republic of Yemen to advance the UN-proposed ceasefire plan. Lenderking returned to the Middle East later in the month to convene with Griffiths, and senior government officials.

**4. Biden refuses to overlook human rights in Turkey.** President Biden [has yet to call](#) President Erdoğan, as White House Spokeswoman Psaki assured Biden will contact his Turkish counterpart “at some point”. The State Department [called](#) on Turkey to “respect freedom of expression” in light of the [detention](#) of pro-Kurdish Member of Parliament Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu. The US [condemned](#) Turkey’s decision to withdraw from the 2011 Istanbul Convention crafted by the Council of Europe aiming to protect women rights. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Borrell about “de-escalation” in the Eastern Mediterranean and the realization of common interests with Turkey. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) security cooperation with his Turkish counterpart Çavuşoğlu, urging the latter to relinquish the Russian S-400 missile system.

**5. The US and Jordan announce military cooperation.** Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi [publicly acknowledged](#) a comprehensive defense agreement with the US struck in January that enables US military access to Jordanian territory. Safadi defended the deal, whose approval circumvented the parliament, claiming that it will reinforce the “kingdom’s security and stability through military training and equipment,” stressing that it does not enable US military offensives on Jordanian soil.

## D. Further Readings

- Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, [Meet Biden's Middle East Team](#), *Foreign Policy*.
- Bradley Bowman and Katherine Zimmerman, [Biden Can't Bring Peace to Yemen While Iran Keeps Sending Weapons](#), *Foreign Policy*.
- Jason D. Greenblatt, [Saudi Arabia Is an Indispensable Middle East Ally for the United States](#), *Newsweek*.
- Anna Borshchevskaya, [Putin Prioritizes Syria. Biden Should Too.](#), *The Washington Institute*.
- Patrick Kingsley, Ronen Bergman, Farnaz Fassihi, Eric Schmitt, [Israel's Shadow War with Iran Moves Out to Sea](#), *The New York Times*.