

## **US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 103 (July 2021)**

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*While Biden's focus lies in Afghanistan and Iraq, diplomatic efforts to end the war in Yemen and coax Iran back into the JCPOA bear little fruit. Biden continues to pursue a revamped relationship with the Palestinians; Progressive lawmakers lament lack of meaningful strides in the direction, while pro-Israeli lawmakers from both sides of the aisle demand more support for Israel. As the attack on the Mercer oil tanker tests Biden's investment in Israel, the US reassured key allies, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, emphasising their strategic and diplomatic significance.*

### **A. Israel-US Relations**

**Israel and the US are keen on expanding security cooperation, while congress bickers over unconditional support for Israel** - US air defense officials [convened](#) with their Israeli counterpart to discuss joint efforts to strengthen air defense capabilities in an emergency situation. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) the Mercer Street oil tanker attack and its investigation with Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid. The US and Israel [decided](#) to open a joint investigation into the attack. Seven Democratic and Republican Senators [submitted](#) a letter to the Appropriations Committee expressing support for Israel's request for 1 USD billion in aid to "replenish" the Iron Dome Systems "for further conflict". In light of reports by the Washington Post on Pegasus spyware and its use by authoritarian regimes, four Democratic lawmakers [called on the](#) US to sanction and blacklist the Israeli NSO Group.

### **B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process**

**Biden remains resolved to pursue the two state solution and revamp US relationship with the Palestinians** - In the 2022 budget draft, the House Appropriations Committee [allocated](#) 225 million USD in Palestinian aid, an increase of 150 million USD from the 2021 budget. The bill, as currently drafted, will also [enable](#) the Biden Administration to reopen the Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the US Congress' Budget Committee [approved](#) the budget for the reopening of the consulate, as Bennett asked Biden to postpone its reinstatement. In a shared press conference between Secretary Blinken and Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Al-Sabah, Secretary Blinken thanked the latter for Kuwait's constructive role in promoting the two states solution. According to reports in Israeli media, Prime Minister

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Bennet [prevented](#) the Supreme Planning Council, the body entitled with the rights to approve settlement expansion, from meeting at the behest of Biden demands. A 10-member bipartisan delegation of House Representatives [arrived](#) in Israel and convened with Prime Minister Bennet to reinvigorate “diplomatic relationships with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority”.

**Congress remains divided over Palestinian human rights and US Palestinian policy** - Sen. Pocan [expressed](#) his concern of reports on arbitrary arrests of Palestinian journalists by Israel. The US Embassy in Israel [condemned](#) Israeli demolition of a Palestinian home as a punitive measure against a terrorist attack carried by a Palestinian-American, elucidating opposition to collective punishment. Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers continue to fight against warming the relationship with the Palestinians; Republicans in the [House](#) and the [Senate](#) introduced bills aiming to prevent US aid from reaching UNRWA. Six Republican Senators also [introduced](#) a bill which will impose Israel labels on products produced in the West Bank.

### **C. The US and Israel's relations with the Arab World**

**The US welcomes warming ties between Israel and Jordan** - The State Department [welcomed](#) the Israeli pledge to increase water supply to Jordan, and increased Jordanian exports to the West Bank. In their first meeting since Biden [assumed](#) the Presidency, President Biden praised King Abdullah II for reliable allyship with the US. During the King's visit in Washington he [convened](#) with Secretary Blinken who reaffirmed the strategic importance of the Hashemite Kingdom, and thanked Abdullah II for Jordan's pursuit of stability and peace in the region.

**UAE normalization with Israel improves US posture towards the Gulf state** - Deputy Secretary of State Sherman [discussed](#) regional security, bilateral relationship with Israel and Security Council seat with UAE Presidential Advisor Gargash in Washington.

### **D. US Middle East policy**

**US rhetoric committed to JCPOA while chances of restoration dwindle** - The US [condemned](#) Iranian decision to enrich its Uranium to 20 percent purity, yet stressed that JCPOA negotiations are still viable. The US [denied](#) claims by Iranian officials that an agreement on prisoner swaps was reached with the US, deeming the claims an Iranian effort to [derail](#) the JCPOA restoration talks. Despite the reported Iranian [plan](#) to kidnap a US-based journalist, the US will continue to pursue JCPOA talks. Nevertheless, In a press conference with Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Al-Sabah, Secretary Blinken [said](#) that Iran continues to refuse direct talks with the US, and clarified that while the US is willing to engage in earnest with Iran towards JCPOA restoration, “this process cannot and will not go on indefinitely”. In an interview to Sky News Arabia, Secretary Blinken [claimed](#) that the administration's aim is to US the JCPOA as a foundation based on which to address Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. As reports of protests in Iran mounted, the State

Department [issued](#) a statement supporting Iranian freedom of expression and expressed concern that Iranian forces are using violence to suppress peaceful protests. The US [attributed](#) the attack on the Israeli-operated Mercer Street oil tanker near the Omani coast to Iran

**Relations with Saudi Arabia center on ending the war in Yemen** - Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nuland [convened](#) with Saudi Deputy Minister of Defense bin Salman in Washington to discuss human rights, cooperation and regional security. Secretary Blinken attended a portion of the meeting that discussed joint efforts to strike a ceasefire in Yemen. US Special Envoy for Yemen [traveled](#) to Saudi Arabia to discuss ceasefire and economic reconstruction with Saudi and Yemeni officials. Lenderking expressed concern over lack of Houthi seriousness to halt the attacks in Marib and commit to peaceful resolution. In an interview with Al-Jazeera, Secretary Blinken [thanked](#) Saudi Arabia for its cooperation in ending the Yemeni civil war and asserted that the US is “resolutely in support” of Saudi Arabia’s territorial integrity.

**The US seeks to salvage Lebanon from political and economic ills** - The US Embassy in Beirut [announced](#) that a trilateral meeting between French, Saudi and US delegates discussed efforts to stabilize Lebanon amid deepening crisis. The State Department [issued](#) a statement expressing concern regarding the resignation of Prime Minister Hariri, calling on Lebanese leaders to form a united front to deal with Lebanon’s economic ills. Secretary Blinken and Treasury Secretary Yellen [welcome](#) EU sanctions on Lebanon intending to force governmental transparency and accountability to corruption, amid Lebanon’s crippling economic crisis. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces with Qatari Foreign Minister Al-Thani.

**Biden is willing to criticize allies for human rights record** - Egypt [released](#) six detainees, activists and journalists, following vocal US concern regarding Al-Sisi’s record of stifling opposition. A group of US activists [staged](#) a hunger strike in front of the UN headquarters in New York demanding Egypt to stop political executions. The US [added](#) Turkey to a list of countries purported to have employed child soldiers. The US State Department [downgraded](#) Israel from Tier 1 to Tier 2 in a recent report on human trafficking, citing less investigations and persecutions.

## **E. Further Readings**

1. Hanin Ghaddar, [A Mikati Government Will Not Save Lebanon](#), *The Washington Institute*, July 28th
2. Limor Shimhony, [Can Enemies Become Allies in the Fight Against Climate Change?](#), *Foreign Policy*, July 28th
3. Shibley Telhami, [Most Americans, including half of young Democrats, disapprove of Biden’s handling of recent Gaza crisis](#), *Brookings Institute*, July 29th
4. Letters, [Middle East problems stem from western and US interference](#), *The Guardian*, July 29th