



## The Mitvim-DC Monthly

A monthly report on US policies toward Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Middle East, and Iran

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### A. US-Israel Relations

- **The NGO bill** - American concerns over Israel's proposed ["NGO bill"](#) intensified on both the government and civil society levels. US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro took the atypical step of meeting with Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked to discuss [State Department concerns over the draft legislation](#) that would disproportionately affect the work of progressive organizations. In addition, Anti-Defamation League (ADL) CEO Jonathan A. Greenblatt [urged Knesset members to reconsider](#) the bill, and the American Jewish Congress (AJC) entered the conversation with a grave warning about the [threat that the bill poses to Israeli democracy](#).
- **Security cooperation** - The White House announced that Israel and the US are intensifying their ongoing conversations on [extending security cooperation](#) to Israel. The goal of this process is to deepen and lengthen the memorandum of understanding (MoU) that governs bilateral military-to-military relations. Such a MoU would include increased security aid in the form of defense equipment and technology. The White House confirmed that in the context of these negotiations, ["additional military assistance could be provided to Israeli allies"](#) in the region.
- **Presidential primaries** - It is unlikely that any major candidate will deviate from the well-trodden standard party lines on Israel policy, with the possible exception of Bernie Sanders. Sanders' campaign website includes robust content on the importance of supporting Israel, but also emphasizes that a two-state solution should include Israel's ["end to the blockade of Gaza,"](#) in addition to the cessation of settlement development.

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## B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Labelling settlement products** - The [US stated that it does not oppose](#) the European Commission's [decision to label settlement products from the West Bank](#), and does not view it as a boycott of Israel. Later in the month, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) issued a reminder that the US also labels products coming from the West Bank. While some Israeli media outlets sensationalized the reminder by framing it as new policy, [State Department officials confirmed that the guidance is simply a restatement of previous requirements](#) intended to facilitate duty free access to the US market for Palestinian goods.
- **Israeli policies in the West Bank** - US and Israeli media outlets reported extensively on Ambassador Daniel Shapiro's remarks at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), at which he voiced concern over the fact that in the West Bank, ["there seem to be two standards of adherence to the rule of law: one for Israelis and another for Palestinians."](#) His public questioning of Israel's continued settlement building, legal apparatus in the West Bank, and overall commitment to the two-state solution reflects growing American frustration over Israel's lack of initiative towards peace.
- **The new French initiative** - The unsustainability of the status quo is also reflected in France's announcement that it will try to convene a peace conference, and should that effort fail, it will [recognize Palestinian statehood](#). France's new proposal reflects a larger shift towards multilateralism, and seeks to include American, European, and Arab partners. In response, a State Department official reiterated the official position that ["the preferred path is for the parties to reach an agreement on final status issues directly."](#) Administration officials continue to call for de-escalation and steps to preserve the two-state solution, including ceasing settlement growth, but no new policy initiatives appear on the horizon.

## C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria peace talks** - UN-sponsored [peace talks](#) between the Syrian government and opposition forces in Geneva are overshadowed by continued violence in Syria. The opposition, represented largely by the powerful High Negotiations Committee (HNC), threatens to abandon talks if Bashar al-Assad's forces do not halt their strikes. US Secretary of State John Kerry identified the Geneva talks as a 'pivotal phase,' and [appealed to both sides](#) to push for a political resolution to the war, even as explosions rocked Damascus and many analysts [predicted the imminent end](#) of talks.
- **US priorities in Syria** - US policymakers must balance their stated priorities -- including dismantling the Islamic State and ensuring President Bashar al-Assad's departure -- with other multilateral objectives. Russia and Iran's strengthening of Assad mean that he is unlikely to step down in the immediate future unless the US chooses to force the issue. In light of the benefits of compromising with Russia and

pushing for a negotiated resolution to the conflict in Geneva, it is likely that the US will deemphasize Assad's immediate removal in favor of a phased political transition. In the meantime, the US and Russia maintain a fragile balance of military objectives and operational arenas in Syria, and tensions between Turkey and Russia continue amid [fresh allegations from Ankara](#) that Russia is operating in its airspace.

- **Joe Biden's visit to Turkey** - Energy partnerships took center stage during Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Turkey, which included a meeting [with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#). Biden and Erdoğan discussed Turkey's regional energy partnerships and strategy, in addition to enhanced cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State. While in Turkey, Biden also discussed [how to promote Israel-Turkey rapprochement](#), an issue he later followed-up on in a [phone conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu](#).

## D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran Deal Implementation Day** - On Implementation Day, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verified that Iran has thus far [met its requirements under the Iran deal](#) to ensure that its nuclear program is and remains exclusively [peaceful](#). Implementation Day marked the beginning of a [new phase](#) of the deal, and the US began to lift nuclear-related [sanctions](#). (A range of other sanctions related to human rights and ballistic missile testing remain unaffected by the deal.) Sanctions relief renewed the debate on Iran's [funding of terrorist groups](#), given the increased funds the country now has available. However, it is clear that the deal has already yielded great progress in diminishing the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program.
- **Cooperation with Iran** - While the Iran deal is specifically limited to nuclear security, it has already had an [impact](#) on the broader US-Iranian relationship. Relations built during the deal's negotiation have facilitated increased and [more effective communications](#). These relations were leveraged to facilitate smooth resolutions to recent issues, including the release of [five US citizens](#) imprisoned in Iran and the [subsequent release of two American patrol boats](#) seized by Iran in the Persian Gulf. It is clear that a wide range of problems between the US and Iran remain, but direct communications on a variety of issues greatly decrease the likelihood of a rapid escalation in tensions.

## E. Further reading

### Israel

- Daniel Kurtzer, ["Real Talk on Israeli Settlements,"](#) *Foreign Affairs*, January 13, 2016
- The New York Times Editorial Board, ["The Fading Two-State Solution,"](#) *The New York Times*, January 22, 2016

- Nathan Guttman, ["Who Has Hillary Clinton's Ear on Israel - and What About Bernie Sanders?"](#) *The Forward*, January 25, 2016
- Sahil Kapur, ["Foreign Policy Contrasts Between Cruz, Rubio Sharpen at Jewish Gathering,"](#) *Bloomberg*, December 3, 2015

### Syria

- Stephen Walt, ["The US Should Admit It No Longer Has a Middle East Policy,"](#) *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2016
- Ashish Kumar Sen, ["US Syria Policy 'Paralyzed' by Rhetoric that Assad Must Go,"](#) *The Atlantic Council*, January 13, 2016
- Robert Malley, ["The Man Obama Asked to Defeat the Islamic State,"](#) *Politico*, January 18, 2016
- J. Dana Stuster, ["US Forces Operating from Syrian Airbase,"](#) *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2016

### Iran

- Dan De Luce, ["After Nuclear Pact, New US-Iran Talks Bring New Deals,"](#) *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2016
- Ilan Goldenberg, ["Judging the Iran Nuclear Deal, Six Months In,"](#) *The National Interest*, January 12, 2016

## F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
January 10	US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro meets Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked over the NGO bill
January 16	Iran Deal Implementation Day
January 18	Dan Shapiro's statement on Israel's conduct in the West Bank.
January 21	Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with Secretary of State John Kerry and Vice President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the Davos conference
January 23	Joe Biden meets Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey
January 29	Phone conversation between Joe Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu
January 29-31	Lead-up to the Syrian peace talks in Geneva