



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

- **Security cooperation and aid** - Negotiations over a new 10-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) governing US aid to Israel continue. Although all discussions are conducted in secret, [analysts have weighed in](#) on the incentives for both sides to quickly conclude the deal, as well as the remaining roadblocks. The White House [has not set a timeframe](#) for reaching a deal. In the meantime, 83 senators [signed a letter](#) from Senator Coons (D) and Senator Graham (R) pushing for an immediate agreement. The Obama administration has prioritized the MOU since 2013, but negotiations only began in earnest in January. In addition to reaching agreement on the precise [amount of funding](#) provided, experts must also conduct a security assessment in order to tailor assistance to Israel's current threat environment. Both Israel and the US have committed to reaching a deal prior to the end of President Obama's term in office, following PM Netanyahu's reversal of his previous threat to [wait to negotiate](#) with the new American administration.
- **Status of the Golan** - Netanyahu's statement that the Golan "will forever remain under Israeli sovereignty" was rebuked by the State Department. Spokesperson John Kirby said that the position of the US remains unchanged, and that "those territories are [not a part of Israel](#) and the status of those territories should be determined through negotiations." Kirby also mentioned that the Syrian war does not presently allow for these negotiations, reflecting a tacit acceptance that the status of the Golan is unlikely to change in the near future.
- **Election campaign** - In an [interview](#) with the New York Daily News, Senator Sanders criticized settlement growth and said that a strong US-Israel relationship requires Israel to improve its relationship with the Palestinians. He also criticized Secretary Clinton for [failing to mention the Palestinians](#) during her speech at AIPAC, marking the first time that Palestinian rights have been featured in a presidential primary campaign. Shibley Telhami, a former senior advisor to President Obama's special envoy for Middle East peace, commended Sanders for bridging the divide between the rhetoric of democratic politicians and the beliefs of the party's grassroots base. In

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her interview with the New York Daily News, Clinton [also voiced opposition to settlement development](#), but took a softer line on Israel and also attacked the BDS movement. Both candidates reaffirmed their support for Israel and differentiated between the bilateral relationship and longstanding US policy on settlements. On the republican side, Senator Cruz mentioned [moving the US embassy](#) from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem if elected. This [rhetorical commitment](#) is a common tool in US presidential elections, and does not necessarily reflect policy planning. State primary elections continue in the buildup to the Democratic and Republican conventions, which will begin on July 25 and July 18, respectively.

- **Anti-BDS legislation** - Opponents of the BDS movement continue to pursue an aggressive legislative strategy across the US. In April, Iowa became the [eighth state](#) to pass [legislation](#) opposing BDS, and the bill is currently awaiting a signature from Governor Terry Branstad. Legislators in over 20 states have taken up similar legislation. While some of the bills simply condemn the campaign, others - including Iowa's - [prohibit the investment of state funds](#) in companies involved with BDS. Meanwhile, Illinois, which was one of the first states to pass this type of legislation, has begun implementation by [cataloging the companies](#) that may be affected. Anti-BDS legislation is a stated [policy priority](#) of AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations.
- **Energy cooperation** - Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz's visit to Israel culminated in the signing of a new [amendment](#) on increasing bilateral [energy cooperation](#). The agreement includes cooperation on natural gas, the physical and cyber protection of energy infrastructure agreements, power plant energy, and research and development on clean energy sources. Secretary Moniz highlighted the agreement's potential in driving down the costs of clean energy technologies and encouraging collaboration between top energy scientists. This is one example of deepening cooperation between Israel and the US on a range of issues, including [enhanced cyber and military cooperation](#).

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **The French initiative** - The US has [declined to issue judgement](#) on the French proposal, or to comment on whether Secretary Kerry will attend a foreign ministers meeting scheduled for May 30, in advance of a planned summer peace conference. The prolonged silence over the initiative reflects skepticism over its potential in the absence of Israeli-Palestinian talks or positive steps towards de-escalation. There may be some room for multilateralism, however; the US admits that there is currently [no path towards](#) its preferred track of bilateral talks. In the current environment, the US will focus on creating conditions conducive to the resumption of talks, and officials agree that "[how that preliminary work is done](#) is open for discussion." It is likely that if the US participates in the May 30 preparatory conference, it will de-emphasize multilateral declarations in favor of pushing for direct progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, including de-escalation.

- **President Obama's final year** - Although a minority believe that the peace process is [no longer a US policy objective](#), speculation over a possible [end-of-term peace initiative](#) continues. Analysts believe that there are several options under consideration, including a UN Security Council resolution that would address some combination of [parameters](#) for a [two-state agreement](#), [the potential recognition of a Palestinian state](#), and a [strong stance against settlements](#).
- **Lowey-Granger letter** - U.S. State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee Ranking Member Nita Lowey (D-NY) and Chair Kay Granger (R-TX) authored a [letter](#) urging President Obama to veto "one-sided UN Security Council resolutions" against Israel, oppose Palestinian statehood initiatives in international organizations, reject attempts to 'impose' peace, and take other similar steps. The bill was signed by 388 members (over 90%) of the House of Representatives. The strongly-worded letter left the door to multilateralism open in one point urging the president to continue the US commitment to "work with Arab states to contribute to peace and development efforts."

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - The shaky 'cessation of hostilities' agreement was rocked by an [airstrike on a pediatric hospital](#) in Aleppo supported by Doctors without Borders that killed at least 50 people. Secretary Kerry [blamed the Syrian regime](#) of Bashar al-Assad for the strike, and the US and Russia pushed for a recommitment to the ceasefire. In the meantime, the Syrian regime, Russian forces, and the US continue to target the Islamic State and al-Nusra front, the two organizations not included in the ceasefire. Progress towards a political resolution is hindered by ongoing violence and deep divisions over Assad's role in a planned transitional period. During a recent meeting in Geneva, the opposition High Negotiations Committee clarified that it [would not accept an interim or transitional role](#) for Assad. The UN has issued August deadline to form a new government, but it is uncertain whether the parties will be able to overcome the instability caused by political disagreement and recent violations of the ceasefire. The US [continues to demand](#) Assad's departure, but has shown flexibility on the timeframe in favor of reaching a negotiated solution.
- **Russia's troop withdrawal** - Russian forces remain [heavily involved](#) in Syria almost a month after Vladimir Putin's announcement of a troop withdrawal. Russia's strategy reflects a delicate balance: Moscow needs to avoid [entanglement](#) in a prolonged war, while remaining engaged enough to secure its political leverage and economic links to the Syrian government. The US believes Russia has [kept to the ceasefire](#). Recently, UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura appealed for "[a US-Russian urgent initiative](#) at the highest level, because the legacy of both President Obama and President Putin is linked to the success" of securing the ceasefire and bringing about a political resolution to the war. The US confirmed that the US and Russia have agreed to exert influence to reinforce the ceasefire in specific areas.

- **Obama's visit to Riyadh** - President Obama visited Riyadh to participate in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit, following a [year of tension](#) with many GCC member states. He discussed a [variety of issues](#), including strengthening security cooperation, ISIS, Iran's role in the region post-JCPOA, and the strained ceasefire in Syria. [Outcomes](#) included a commitment to push for a Syrian transitional governing body, and a new constitution with free elections. The visit also shone a light on the US-Saudi relationship and the [sharp differences](#) between the two countries. Recently, King Salman has increasingly [relied on the use of force](#) to counter threats, while the US prefers [diplomacy](#). While former King Abdullah was known as relatively cautious in the West, King Salman has appeared more aggressive in his mass executions of suspected terrorists and the Saudi [military campaign](#) in Yemen. But there are opportunities for more cooperation: in the wake of the Iran deal, both the US and Saudi Arabia have an interest in containing [Iranian activity](#), given Tehran's history of funding terrorist groups and renewed access to more of its financial resources as a result of its compliance with the JCPOA. In addition, the [US welcomed](#) Saudi Arabia's "[Vision 2030](#)," an ambitious 15-year economic and social plan designed to diversify the country's energy resources.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran deal implementation** - During the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit, President Obama said that the nuclear deal has "[achieved a substantial success](#)." The White House later provided details on [Iran's compliance with the deal](#), including its reduction of its nuclear stockpile by 98%, removal of thousands of centrifuges, and steps to render its heavy water plutonium reactor incapable of producing weapons-grade material.
- **US-Iran relations** - Iran, on the other hand, has accused the US of failing to fully meet its obligations under the deal, specifically by facilitating business deals that involve accessing the US financial system. This issue was addressed by [President Obama](#), who explained that it will likely take several months for companies and their legal departments to feel confident moving ahead with transactions. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew and his P5+1 counterparts are in the process of "providing clarity to businesses" about the legality of specific transactions. Obama also raised the possibility of Iran working through European financial institutions instead of initiating dollar-denominated transactions. He also mentioned that business development depends on the Islamic Republic sending signals that it is a stable economic partner, and that "[provocative actions](#)" such as ballistic missile tests, destructive rhetoric against Israel, and the provision of missiles to Hezbollah could deter companies from engagement.

E. Further reading

Israel

- Ibrahim Fraihat, "[To Save His Middle East Legacy, Obama Must Recognize a Palestinian State Now](#)," *Brookings Institution*, April 14 2016
- Lara Friedman, "[Israel's Unsung Protector: Obama](#)," *The New York Times*, April 10 2016
- Micah Zenko, "[Does your Candidate Even Have a Foreign Policy?](#)" *Foreign Policy*, April 11 2016

Middle East

- Marina Ottaway, "[Does the Middle East Need New Borders? The Legacy of Sykes-Picot, 100 Years On](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, April 14 2016
- Ilan Goldenberg, "[Reset, Negotiate, Institutionalize: A Phased Middle East Strategy for the Next President](#)," *Center for a New American Security*, April 20 2016
- Ben Taub, "[The Assad Files](#)," *The New Yorker*, April 18 2016
- Editorial Board, "[A Moral Debt for Bombing the Doctors Without Borders Hospital](#)," *The New York Times*, April 29 2016
- Brian Katulis, Rudy deLeon, Peter Juul, Mokhtar Awad, and John Craig: "[Updating US-Saudi Ties to Reflect the New Realities of Today's Middle East](#)," *Center for American Progress*, April 25 2016
- Joseph Bahout et al, "[Saudi Arabia's Changing International Role](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 18 2016
- Sarah Yerkes, "[Could the Latest Blunder by Egypt's Sissi be the Nail in His Coffin?](#)" *Brookings Institution*, April 25 2016

Iran

- Robin Wright: "[Iran's Javad Zarif on the Fraying Nuclear Deal, US Relations, and Holocaust Cartoons](#)," *The New Yorker*, April 25, 2016
- Iran Primer, "[Kerry and Zarif on Nuclear Deal Disputes](#)," *US Institute of Peace*, April 25 2016

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
March 31 - April 1	The US hosts the fourth Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, D.C
April 4	US Energy Secretary Moniz visits Jerusalem and concludes an agreement for expanded energy cooperation with Israel
April 21	President Obama visits Riyadh for the GCC summit
April 22	Secretary Kerry meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif in New York
April 26	Gen. David Goldfein named new commander of the US Air Force by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter
April 27	Iowa's Senate approves anti-BDS legislation