

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

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A. US-Israel Relations

- **Jerusalem Announcement Aftermath** - US Embassies throughout the [Middle East](#) and [North Africa](#) [limited non-essential](#) operations and issued new [security](#) notices after Trump's Jerusalem announcement. At least 17 [senators](#) criticized the timing of the announcement as detrimental to peace, but many congressional officials were [silent](#). While Acting Assistant Secretary Satterfield said in a [press briefing](#) that the US position on Jerusalem's boundaries and sovereignty was unchanged, in the same [interview](#), UN Ambassador Haley said both that the final status of Jerusalem was between the parties, and that "the president took Jerusalem off the table" (Trump later [tweeted](#) that he had indeed taken Jerusalem, "the toughest part of the negotiation, off the table.") Meanwhile, the international community consolidated its position that Jerusalem remains a final-status issue for negotiation. On the ground, [41 rockets](#) were fired into Israel from Gaza in less than a month, and clashes resulted in [at least 12 casualties](#).
- **Anti-BDS legislation** - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) [filed a federal lawsuit](#) challenging law in Arizona that requires companies to submit written certification that they do not boycott Israel in order to receive state contracts. The ACLU is also pursuing a case in [Kansas](#). The ACLU bases its lawsuits "on the First Amendment, which protects the right to participate in political boycotts."

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **The Future of the Peace Process** - Trump's tweet that he took "[Jerusalem off the table](#)" invalidates his claim of "[not taking a position of any final status issues.](#)" Trump's administration has not released any further statement on parameters for peace, indicating that no larger, forthcoming peace plan was coordinated with the announcement. American leverage with the Palestinians has been reduced to almost nothing, and [other countries](#) are positioned to use the situation to increase their own international standing. Russia condemned Trump's announcement, voted in favor of the "Status of Jerusalem" UN resolution, and offered to take over the role of "[honest mediator.](#)" Practically, Israel is highly unlikely to accept such an offer, and Russia may not truly want it, but diplomatically, the move bolsters the perception of Russian influence in the region vis-a-vis the US. In order to recover influence and advance towards peace, the US should release an informed, nuanced announcement that addresses the Palestinians and a future peace

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deal - but Trump's tweets indicate that this is unlikely. China is also increasing its involvement, including by hosting the [Palestinian-Israeli Peace Symposium](#) in December -- although Beijing has clarified that it is not looking to replace the US as mediator.

- **US-Palestinian Relations** - Palestinian Authority President Abbas announced that the Palestinians [will not accept](#) US peace mediation or a US peace proposal following Trump's announcement. Trump responded that the US may [withhold funding](#) to the Palestinians because they are "no longer willing to talk peace." Ambassador Haley said that the administration wants to stop funding the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), until the Palestinians "return to the negotiating table." Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly warned Trump that cutting UNRWA aid would hurt Israel, while publicly supporting such a move. Meanwhile, the PA temporarily [recalled](#) its envoy to the US for internal consultations over Trump's Jerusalem announcement, and to discuss future relations with the US. Palestinian officials have refused meetings with all American political officials (including Special Envoy Greenblatt) since Trump's announcement.

C. The Changing Middle East

- **National security strategy** - The Trump administration released its [National Security Strategy](#). According to the document, "for generations the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been understood as the prime irritant preventing peace and prosperity in the region. Today, the threats from jihadist terrorist organizations and the threat from Iran are creating the realization that Israel is not the cause of the region's problems. States have increasingly found common interests with Israel in confronting common threats." Throughout, the document criticizes the Obama administration's policies towards Iran, especially the JCPOA (nuclear deal). Brookings Institution [experts](#) assessed the strategy, as did Former Bush-Administration Deputy National Security Advisor [Elliot Abrams](#) at the Council on Foreign Relations.
- **Qatar diplomatic crisis** - Several Republican members of Congress requested that Secretary of State Tillerson [declassify](#) the US-Qatari counterterrorism agreement signed in 2017. The agreement was intended to significantly increase Qatar's commitment to counterterrorism and help facilitate a resolution of the dispute between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and several other countries. That dispute is now six months old, and [Turkey and Iran](#) are continuing to expand their relationship with Qatar to compensate for the Gulf states. Recently, Saudi Arabia [permanently closed](#) its land border with Qatar, and is reportedly [barring Qatari citizens](#) from pilgrimage. Early in December, Secretary Tillerson called on Saudi Arabia to "[be more thoughtful](#)" regarding their engagement with Qatar and Lebanon, and participation in the Yemen war, but reconciliation does not seem forthcoming, and Qatar's shift away from Saudi Arabia and towards the Iran-Turkey axis is likely to intensify.
- **Saudi Arabia/Yemen** - Defence Secretary Mattis [defended](#) US efforts to prevent civilian casualties in Yemen, a move that was criticised by former officials. Former Middle East negotiator Aaron David Miller said that "this guy's too smart to believe this [...] the US under both Obama and Trump is enabling a [Saudi disaster](#)," in reference to the many civilian casualties resulting from the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes. The US provides the coalition with aerial refueling, intelligence sharing, and training intended to improve accuracy and reduce civilian casualties. On the humanitarian front, the State Department announced that "aggressive" US diplomacy caused Saudi Arabia and its coalition to [open Hodeidah port](#) for crucially needed humanitarian and commercial assistance, and to move four US-funded cranes to help offload supplies.

- **Syria** - Russia is planning two days of Syrian peace talks in Sochi in late January. Many Syrian opposition groups [will not attend](#) in protest of Russia's military involvement and support to Assad's forces, and as they believe that the Sochi talks will further strengthen Assad's political hand. It is unclear if UN Special Envoy de Mistura will attend -- he is strongly opposed to "parallel processes" that further weaken the Western-led Geneva process. The Trump administration continues to [back the Geneva process](#), as did the Obama administration, despite its [lack of progress](#) and consistently declining influence. The State Department released a statement noting the "obstructionism and procrastination" of the Syrian regime delegation in the latest round of Syria talks in Geneva, and urging the parties to commit to Geneva as "[the only venue](#) for the Syrian political process." Militarily, Russia is beginning to [draw down](#) its troops but plans on maintaining a permanent presence in Syria; this will have implications for the US and Israel.
- **Turkey** - Turkish President Erdoğan called Trump's announcement on Jerusalem "unacceptable," and took a leading role in opposing it at the UN. But one aspect of US-Turkish relations thawed, as the countries [mutually lifted](#) visa restrictions and reinstated regular visa services at in-country missions. Bilateral tensions continue on other issues, including Syria and the [protests in Iran](#).

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Protests** - Protests that began in [Mashaad](#) are spreading throughout Iran's [towns and cities](#). Many top analysts [caution](#) that the US response (including statements of solidarity with the protesters) must be measured and careful. Overenthusiastic involvement, especially tweets from Trump, divert attention away from the protests themselves and may enable Iran's hardliners to refocus attention against the US, or give credence to claims from Russia and Iran that "[external interference](#)" is fueling the protests. European partners to the JCPOA have more leverage with Iran at this point, given their joint work to protect the deal, and they are better-positioned than the US to compel the Iranian government to avoid a harsh crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. Analysts point out that the US can make clear that "[punitive measures](#)" will be taken against officials responsible for violence against peaceful protesters, warn [social media companies](#) not to comply with Iranian censorship, and that in order to actually show "[such respect for the people of Iran](#)," Trump should to [lift the blanket travel ban](#) imposed on the entire country (in a letter to the UN, Iranian officials accused Trump and Pence of [inciting](#) Iranians "to engage in disruptive acts" via twitter, and added that the US had displayed hostility toward Iranians, including "by banning ordinary Iranian citizens from entering the United States.") A senior administration official [noted](#) Iran's concern for its global image, and cautioned that regarding protests, "the norm, in this case is: don't kill peaceful protesters."
- **The future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - In mid-January, Trump must decide whether to sign an extension of the suspension of nuclear-related sanctions associated with the JCPOA (the sanctions waivers must be renewed every 120 days). By that time, Congress was expected to have [prepared a bill](#) to "recalibrate the threshold at which US sanctions could be restored against Iran." Republican senators are working with the White House and consulting European JCPOA signatories in order to propose a "fix" to the deal, but have indicated that the bill will not be ready in time. Experts caution that [scrapping the JCPOA](#) by reimposing nuclear-related sanctions could play into Tehran's hands and undermine protests. In a joint briefing, EU High Commissioner Mogherini [reaffirmed](#) that the deal is "a key strategic priority for European security but also for regional and global security," and Secretary Tillerson affirmed a "joint effort to fully enforce that agreement." When Ambassador Haley called an [emergency meeting](#) at the UN to focus on protests, European allies also focused on the "major setback" that the international community would face if the JCPOA is derailed.

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	<p>Jennifer Rubin, "Trump's Jerusalem decision is a foreign policy move without purpose." <i>Washington Post</i>, December 11, 2017</p> <p>Lara Friedman, "Key Take-Aways from UNGA Vote on Jerusalem: Facts vs Spin." <i>Huffington Post</i>, December 27, 2017</p> <p>"Trump's Statement on Jerusalem: Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts." <i>Mitvim Institute</i>, December 2017</p> <p>Reza Marashi, "Iran's hard-liners aren't only ones empowered by Trump's Jerusalem move." <i>Al-Monitor</i>, December 13, 2017</p>
Middle East	<p>White House National Security Strategy, December 2017</p> <p>Bruce Reidel, "Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?" <i>Brookings</i>, December 18, 2017</p> <p>Ilan Goldenberg, "Here's how both Obama and Trump stoked the Saudi-Iranian rivalry." <i>Foreign Policy</i>, December 7, 2017</p> <p>Michele Dunne, "In Egypt, the United States can make a difference when it comes to protecting principles." <i>Carnegie Middle East Center</i>, December 8, 2017</p>
Iran	<p>Ariane Tabatabai, "Donald Trump doesn't understand what's happening in Iran." <i>The Atlantic</i>, January 1, 2018</p> <p>Michael Crowley and Eliana Johnson, "Iran protests could move Trump to kill nuclear deal." <i>Politico</i>, January 2, 2018</p> <p>Wendy Sherman, "Lead Negotiator In Iran Deal: Trump Is 'Misreading Situation.'" <i>Time</i>, January 4, 2018</p> <p>Richard Nephew, "Triggers, redlines, and the fate of the Iran nuclear accord." <i>Arms Control Association</i>, December 2017</p>

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
December 6	President Trump delivers his announcement on Jerusalem
December 8	Secretary Tillerson participates in the International Support Group for Lebanon ministerial meeting
December 9	Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi announces the complete liberation of all Iraqi territory from ISIS control
December 13	The JCPOA Joint Commission meets for the seventh time to oversee the implementation of the agreement.
December 18	Trump releases his administration's National Security Strategy
December 18	Vice President Pence's office announces the postponement of his trip to Israel and Egypt until January
December 19	The State Department condemns the "reckless" Houthi missile attack on Riyadh and calls on Iran's IRGC to stop "arming and enabling" the Houthis
December 21	The UN Security Council passes the "status of Jerusalem" resolution
December 29	State Department Spokesperson Nauert releases a statement condemning the arrest of peaceful protesters in Iran