

# US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

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## A. US-Israel Relations

- **US Embassy Move** - As May 14 approaches, US and Israeli officials prepare for the move of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. A [limited number](#) of offices will transition to the temporary embassy, including the office and staff of Ambassador Friedman. The complete move requires the construction of a new complex that is expected to take up to [six years](#); [associated financial costs](#) are unclear. A [congressional delegation](#) is expected to attend the opening, in addition to President Trump's daughter and son-in-law, Treasury Secretary Mnuchin, and Deputy Secretary of State Sullivan. Unless new developments are announced, this will be an isolated, symbolic move, unconnected to a larger peace push or announcement on the future status of Jerusalem; it may lead to responses on the ground and will elevate existing Israeli-Palestinian tensions. Progressive American organizations, including J Street and Americans for Peace Now, have criticized the unilateral context and timing of the move, although they support recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in the context of a two-state agreement.

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

- **The Future of the Peace Process** - During a trip to the region, Secretary of State Pompeo described the peace process as a [high priority](#) for the Trump administration, but did not provide new insight on how it could be restarted. Instead, he urged the Palestinians to "return to that political dialogue" with Israel. Special Representative Greenblatt announced Israeli-Palestinian progress on [electricity cooperation](#), which he called a step towards economic development, cooperation, and peace. Later in the month, Palestinian official Erekat [criticized](#) Greenblatt with a statement Greenblatt described as "empty, self-indulgent rhetoric;" US-Palestinian relations remain extremely contentious.
- **Palestinian Authority President Abbas** - US [officials](#), [former officials](#), and [American Jewish groups](#) all condemned anti-Semitic [comments](#) delivered by Palestinian President Abbas on the Holocaust at a Palestinian National Council meeting. [UN Ambassador Haley](#) described the remarks as "disgusting anti-Semitic statements from Palestinian leadership [that] obviously undermine prospects for Mid East peace;" Ambassador Friedman, former

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Ambassador Shapiro, and a host of other officials followed suit. UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Mladenov also [slammed](#) the speech; the [New York Times](#) called for Abbas to leave office. The US asked the UN Security Council to officially reject Abbas' words. Abbas later [apologized](#).

- **Gaza** - The Trump administration continues to [call](#) on Hamas to relinquish its control of Gaza and disarm. US officials largely refrained from commenting on numerous reports of the IDF opening fire against [protesters](#) during the weekly Great Return March. Following the death of a 15-year-old Palestinian, UN Special Coordinator Mladenov described the incident as “outrageous” and called for an investigation, as did the EU. Special Representative Greenblatt [said](#) Israel would investigate. Sen. Sanders (I-VT) is [coordinating](#) a congressional letter urging the Trump administration to take steps to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

## C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - In a coordinated operation, the US, UK, and France fired missiles at three military sites in Syria after a suspected chemical weapons attack near Damascus. Secretary of Defense Mattis [said](#) targets were deliberately limited to those related to chemical weapons, to signal that the US is not interested in expanding the conflict. It is still unclear how long US troops will remain in Syria; following meetings with Trump, French President Macron said he [convinced](#) Trump not to abruptly withdraw; the White House rejected this claim, and Macron [clarified](#) that neither France nor the US will remain in Syria for the long term, but that the allies share common security interests in building “a stable and peaceful” Syria.
- **Qatar** - Secretary Pompeo [called for Gulf unity](#) during his first trip to Saudi Arabia and urged Saudi leaders to [resolve](#) the dispute. Following Trump's exit from the Iran nuclear deal, there will be a stronger US interest in GCC unity. Qatar-Iran [ties continued to strengthen](#), and officials from Saudi Arabia and Qatar are [publicly sparring](#). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is reportedly contemplating a [plan](#) to dig a canal along the Saudi-Qatari border (Qatar's only land border).
- **Saudi Arabia/Yemen** - [Reports](#) that US Special Forces are engaged in helping Riyadh fight Houthi rebels on the Saudi-Yemen border sparked debate in Washington. Sen. Kaine (D-VA) called the mission “a purposeful blurring of lines between train and equip missions and combat” that contradicts past pledges to focus on US assistance on training. CENTCOM [Commander Gen. Votel](#) said “we are authorized to help the Saudis defend their border, [and] we are doing that through intelligence sharing, logistics support, and military advice.” At a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, senators [questioned](#) the administration's strategy towards the Yemen war, and whether it is doing enough to facilitate humanitarian assistance and prevent civilian casualties from Saudi-led coalition strikes.
- **Turkey** - Turkey-US relations are straining over the proposed US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). If passed, the NDAA would temporarily block the sale of major defense equipment to Turkey until the Department of Defense [reports to Congress](#) “on the impact that increasing strains on the US-Turkey relationship, caused by provocative actions taken by the Turkish government over the past year, will have on all US military and diplomatic activities currently conducted in Turkey.” Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu announced that

Turkey would [‘retaliate’](#) if the NDAA is passed in its current form. Meanwhile, Turkey and Russia are continuing to draw closer over Syria (the next round of [Astana talks](#) led by Turkey, Russia, and Iran is scheduled for mid-May), and Secretary Pompeo told Çavuşoğlu that the US is “seriously concerned” over Turkey’s purchase of Russian S-400 missile batteries, which are incompatible with NATO systems.

## D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The Future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA puts at risk the robust [international monitoring system](#) provided under the deal. If Iran also exits the deal, the international community will have less visibility into Iran’s nuclear activities, and Iran will no longer be bound by strict restrictions on its enrichment capabilities. The E3 (Britain, France, and the UK) released a [joint statement](#) affirming that they will remain parties to the JCPOA, and urging the US to avoid obstructing full implementation of the deal. The US and Europe have most successfully addressed Iranian threats when their positions are united; this public divide weakens the positions of both, and sets the US apart from the consensus reached by the P5+1 and the EU. Iranian President Rouhani said his country will remain in the deal [for now](#), while it assesses whether it remains in the national interest. This indicates that Iran is [unlikely](#) to respond with an overt “rush to the bomb,” or any clear action that would increase support for military strikes against its facilities. Instead, as several experts point out, the deal may endure a [slow collapse](#), in which Iran resumes its [pre-JCPOA strategy](#) of advancing its nuclear program in the margins between compliance and violation of its international commitments.
- **Israel’s presentation of Iranian nuclear files** - Prime Minister Netanyahu revealed Iranian [nuclear files](#) in a bid to demonstrate that the JCPOA was based on Iranian deception. A White House [statement](#) describes the findings as “consistent with what the US has long known: Iran had a robust, clandestine nuclear weapons program that it has tried and failed to hide.” Ex-officials involved in the nuclear negotiations, including former Secretary of Energy Moniz, [responded](#) by affirming that the US had long distrusted Iran, and that the purpose of the JCPOA is not trust but [strong verification measures](#). Experts who support the JCPOA [note](#) that Iran’s dishonesty about its pre-2003 nuclear weapons activities were the very reason for the deal. Former Israeli [security officials](#), including former [National Security Advisor Arad](#), responded that “at no point was there any indication” that Iran violated the agreement itself.

## E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	Guy Frenkel, <a href="#">“The Israel debate after Natalie Portman.”</a> <i>Matzav Review</i> , April 24, 2018
	Lara Friedman, <a href="#">“Trump’s Jerusalem policy and Israeli-Palestinian peace.”</a> <i>LobeLog</i> , May 4, 2018
	J Street, <a href="#">Speeches, Panels and Interviews</a> , 10th Anniversary National Conference, 2018
Middle East	Amberin Zaman, <a href="#">“Erdogan, Putin, Rouhani tout alliance, eye US for next move.”</a> <i>Al-Monitor</i> , April 4, 2018
	Kori Schake, <a href="#">“Trump’s Syria strategy actually makes sense.”</a> <i>The Atlantic</i> , April 16, 2018
	Jonathan Blitzer, <a href="#">“The Trump administration’s hard line on refugees comes under fire.”</a> <i>The New Yorker</i> , May 1, 2018
	Bulent Aliriza, <a href="#">“U.S.-Turkish tensions in Syria: the Manbij conundrum.”</a> <i>Center for Strategic and International Studies</i> , April 5, 2018
Iran	Jeffrey Lewis, <a href="#">“Bibi’s infomercial for the Iran deal.”</a> <i>Foreign Policy</i> , May 1, 2018
	Ilan Goldberg and Ariane Tabatabai, <a href="#">“The price of breaking the Iran deal.”</a> <i>Slate</i> , April 27, 2018
	Kelsey Davenport, <a href="#">“Trump’s threat to violate the Iran nuclear deal and how to respond.”</a> <i>Arms Control Association</i> , April 30, 2018
	International Crisis Group, <a href="#">“How Europe can save the Iran nuclear deal.”</a> <i>International Crisis Group</i> , May 2, 2018
	Suzanne Maloney, <a href="#">“Trump’s new national security team likely spells disaster for the Iran nuclear deal.”</a> <i>Brookings Institute</i> , April 2, 2018
	<a href="#">“Trump’s middle ground on Iran deal sanctions waivers is a myth.”</a> <i>Foreign Policy</i> , April 26, 2018

## F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
April 2	President Trump congratulates Egyptian President al-Sisi on his reelection and emphasizes the importance of protecting human rights in the country
April 3	The US pledges \$87 million in humanitarian assistance to Yemen
April 4	The US releases a statement on the first anniversary of the sarin gas attack in Khan Shaykhun, Syria, condemning the regime and Russia's backing of it
April 7	President Trump releases a statement supporting the Lebanese government and its attempt to legitimize state institutions and develop an open economy
April 10	President Trump meets with Emir al-Thani of Qatar to discuss commercial ties between the US and Qatar, GCC unity, and cooperation on counterterrorism issues
April 11	The US releases a statement condemning the Houthi missile attack on Riyadh and calling for a return to UN-facilitated negotiations to end the Yemen war
April 19	Acting Secretary of State Sullivan meets with UN Special Envoy Griffiths to discuss the framework for peace talk negotiations in Yemen as well as the humanitarian crisis
April 19	The US releases a statement celebrating Israel's independence day
April 27	Secretary of State Pompeo meets with Turkey's Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu to discuss the situation in Syria
April 27-30	Secretary of State Pompeo travels to Riyadh, Tel Aviv, and Amman