

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

Edited by Rebecca Bornstein*

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A. US-Israel Relations

- **Security cooperation and aid** - A decisive round of talks on a new ten-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) governing US aid to Israel is [underway](#) in Washington. The proposed package includes an unprecedented [missile defense](#) commitment, and faces a final obstacle: the status of a 1980s-era [exemption](#) that allows Israel to reserve 26 percent of military aid for domestic spending. The exemption was initially intended to allow Israel to develop its defense industry, and American and Israeli sources [report](#) that the administration seeks to phase it out over the next ten years. This would bind Israel to standard terms that require aid recipients to spend the funds on American products and services. Despite opposition, it is expected that Israel will [yield](#) to this request, and that the deal will result in the largest American aid package to date. In the shadows of the high-profile negotiations, regular security cooperation continues, and the US and Israel recently held an intensive [missile defense war game](#).
- **Election campaign** - Party conventions formalized the nominations of [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Donald Trump](#) and opened the door to general election campaigning. Trump's deep reliance on fear politics and [erratic](#) foreign policy suggestions are criticized even within his own party, and early polling shows [Secretary Clinton in the lead](#). The [Democratic platform](#) contains strong support for Israel, [opposition](#) to UN pressure, and an emphasis on direct negotiations towards a two-state solution. For the first time, the 2016 platform also refers directly to the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state. [Polling data](#) indicates that supporters of both Clinton and Sanders support Palestinian statehood; Trump supporters oppose it. The 2016 [Republican platform](#), unlike the 2012 version, does not make [reference](#) to the two-state solution or future of the Palestinians at all, and includes hardline support for Israel and criticism of BDS.
- **Anti-BDS legislation** - Over [20 state legislatures](#) have taken up anti-BDS bills, amid concerns that some bills may violate constitutionally-protected [freedom of speech](#). The strength of the movement against BDS was evident during the party conventions, but Republicans and Democrats differ on their policies towards the movement. While the Democratic [platform](#) opposes "any effort to delegitimize Israel" through BDS, the Republican [platform](#) says that BDS is "anti-Semitic in nature and seeks to destroy Israel." It also calls for continued legislative action against efforts "to limit commercial relations with Israel, or persons or entities doing business in Israel-controlled territories [including settlements]." During the Republican convention, two organizations hosted "A Celebration Honoring [Pro-Israel State Legislators](#)," an event that emphasized anti-BDS [leadership](#).

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B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **French initiative** - Secretary Kerry met separately with French [Foreign Minister Ayrault](#) and Palestinian Authority [President Abbas](#) in Paris to discuss a range of issues, including the French and Egyptian initiatives, but made no new policy announcements. The US formally supports but has done little to advance the French initiative, and it is unclear whether a series of planned working groups will significantly strengthen the effort. The next ministerial meeting is scheduled to be held in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.
- **Quartet Report** - The recent [Quartet report](#) indicates the zone of agreement between the major actors in the international community regarding obstacles to the peace process, but [lacks](#) innovative policy recommendations. In regard to potential next steps, a senior State Department official said “we are open to having the Security Council welcome the report, but ... we are [not looking for](#) serious, substantive, Security Council action.” The report’s consensus against settlement building can serve as a legitimizing factor for US criticism of Israel’s settlement policy. The State Department recently commented on expanded settlement construction, saying “as the Quartet report highlighted, this is part of an ongoing process ... that risks [entrenching a one-state reality](#) of perpetual occupation and conflict.”

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - The recent UN [Secretary-General’s report](#) on Syria describes a ceasefire plagued by violations, and continued fighting that threatens humanitarian supply lines. The Geneva process is stalled and close to collapse, as the Geneva-based US-Russian coordination cell has been unable to enforce the ceasefire. American and Russian teams are now discussing [new proposals](#), on the basis of talks held between Russian [Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary Kerry](#) in Moscow. Discussions focus on sharply increasing [military and intelligence cooperation](#), including coordinated [air attacks](#) against the Islamic State. In Washington, last month’s internal State Department dissent [letter](#) has ushered in several new [strategy proposals](#) towards Syria. Al-Nusra’s reported split from Al-Qaeda has not changed American policy towards the group; the White House announced that [Nusra leaders](#) maintain the intent to conduct eventual attacks against the West, amid growing concern about al-Nusra’s growing capacity for external operations.
- **Turkey** - The attempted military coup on July 15 and subsequent domestic crackdown sent Turkey reeling, and focused attention on the country’s relations with NATO, the US, and the European Union. While President Obama offered [assistance](#) to President Erdogan’s coup investigation, several [tensions](#) have surfaced in the bilateral relationship. These tensions span from Turkey’s willingness and ability to contribute to [NATO missions against the Islamic State](#), heightened [anti-American sentiment](#) in Turkey, and the potential [extradition](#) of Fethullah Gülen, who resides in Pennsylvania and is wanted by Erdogan for his alleged role in the attempt. American analysts raise concern that Erdogan may be [overdoing](#) a post-coup purge, with negative effects on [democratic values](#), the rule of law, and the humanitarian rights of political prisoners.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran deal** - One year ago, the P5+1 and Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In its [first year](#), the deal's challenge was implementation. Could a sensitive agreement between adversaries move from the Viennese negotiating table into Iran's sensitive Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant? On that point, most [American](#) and [Israeli security officials](#) agree that the first year has been a [success](#). The deal has significantly limited Iran's nuclear infrastructure, increased its ['breakout time'](#), and increased international inspections in Iran. Current discussion centers on whether progress made on the nuclear issue will positively influence the broader scope of US-Iran relations, which remain [highly contentious](#). Little progress has been made on Iran's use of Hezbollah as a proxy actor, continued support for Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria, [cyberattacks](#), and [ballistic missile tests](#).
- **Sanctions** - The lifting of nuclear-specific sanctions has been criticized both by Iranian officials who feel that the US is not doing enough to encourage business development, and American officials who fear funding for items with potential dual-use military purposes. This month, the House passed a bill [blocking aircraft sales to Iran](#), potentially undercutting a Boeing deal with Iran Air worth \$17.6 billion. The bill now moves to the Senate. A host of other American sanctions on Iran remain in place, including those related to [ballistic missile](#) tests. Senators Collins (R-ME) and Nelson (D-FL) coordinated a bipartisan letter to President Obama urging the maximum application of [non-nuclear sanctions](#) against Iran. The US has conveyed to Iran that JCPOA compliance is insufficient to attract private-sector business, and to that end Iran made a high-level political commitment to a [Financial Action Task Force](#) (FATF) [Action Plan](#) to address its deficiencies in anti-money laundering activities and terrorist financing. As a result, the FATF has suspended countermeasures against Iran for ten months, but the US continues to monitor the issue, specifically in the case of [terrorist financing](#).

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	<p>Martin Kramer, "Israel and the Post-American Middle East: Why the Status Quo is Sustainable." <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, July/August 2016</p> <p>Sarah Yerkes, "Obama's exit calculus on the peace process." <i>Brookings Institution</i>, July 27, 2016</p> <p>Steven Simon and Dana H. Allin, "Trump, Clinton, and Israel: What is Next for Washington and Jerusalem." <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, July 11, 2016</p>
Middle East	<p>Michèle Flournoy and Ilan Goldenberg, "A four-point strategy for defeating the Islamic State." <i>Washington Post</i>, July 8, 2016</p> <p>Nathan Brown and Dimitris Bouris, "The Middle East Quartet's Quest for Relevance." <i>Carnegie Europe</i>, July 20, 2016</p> <p>New York Times Editorial Board, "The Secret Rules of the Drone War." <i>The New York Times</i>, July 9, 2016</p> <p>Yochi Dreazen, "In Coup's aftermath, new rifts between US and Turkey." <i>Foreign Policy</i>, July 17, 2016</p> <p>"121 Experts call on President Obama to Visit Tunisia," a letter published by the <i>Project on Middle East Democracy</i>, July 27, 2016</p> <p>Steven Heydemann, "US-Russian Cooperation in Syria Can't Stop at Counter-terrorism." <i>Brookings Institution</i>, July 19, 2016</p>
Iran	<p>Sharon Squassoni, "Step by Step: The Iran Deal (JCPOA) Proceeds Slowly." <i>Center for Strategic and International Studies</i>, July 14, 2016</p> <p>Ilan Goldenberg and Elizabeth Rosenberg, "A Year Later, the Iran Deal is Alive and Well." <i>The National Interest</i>, July 15, 2016</p> <p>Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Inside the plan to undo the Iran nuclear deal," <i>Politico</i>, July 15, 2016 Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Inside the plan to undo the Iran nuclear deal." <i>Politico</i>, July 15, 2016</p> <p>Edward Levine, "Under the Big Top: Congress and the Iran Nuclear Agreement." <i>Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation</i>, July 14, 2016</p>

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
July 1	The Middle East Quartet releases its new report
July 9	Secretary of Defense Carter meets with Turkish Minister of Defense Işık on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Warsaw, Poland.
July 15	Secretary Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov meet in Moscow to discuss Syria
July 21	Call between Vice President Biden and Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim
July 21	The Expanded Small Group of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL / Daesh meets in Washington
July 26	US participates in a Trilateral meeting on next steps in Syria with Russian officials and UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura
July 29	Secretary Kerry meets with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed in New York
July 30	Secretary Kerry meets with PA President Mahmoud Abbas in Paris