

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

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A. US-Israel Relations

- **Elections** - Donald Trump's [electoral upset](#) shocked the DC policy community, including many Republicans. The President-Elect is tasked with unifying the country after the long and bitter campaign cycle, but his early appointments of Sen. [Jeff Sessions](#) (Attorney General) and the "alt-right's" [Steve Bannon](#) (chief strategist) have raised alarm from the [Anti-Defamation League](#) and others about racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and islamophobia in the new administration. Trump's other key security appointments include Rep. [Mike Pompeo](#) as CIA director, [Lt. Gen. \(ret.\) Michael Flynn](#) as National Security Advisor, and [General \(ret.\) James Mattis](#) as Secretary of Defense. Trump's foreign policies remain largely unclear, and while he is largely beholden to a single party or group, he has thus far established a hard right-wing cabinet, with the exception of Gen. Mattis.
- **Israel policy** - Trump's positions on Israel have been [inconsistent](#). After walking back an early campaign suggestion that Israel should [recompense the US](#) for its military aid, he now holds that the recent US-Israel Memorandum of Understanding should not prevent the provision of additional funds. Two of Trump's [Israel advisors](#) believe that the two-state solution currently "appears impossible," a statement that runs counter to decades of American policy. David Friedman, [Donald Trump's senior adviser on Israel](#), supports annexation and settlement, and serves as the president of an American organization that [financially supports the settlements enterprise](#). There is indication that the Trump administration could seriously back away from the two-state solution and legitimize a one-state reality of occupation. There are two signs, however, that Trump may take another approach: his business acumen and ideological flexibility. Trump has his own ambition to make "[the ultimate deal](#)" by resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and he has proven that he is not an ideologue (following a meeting with Gen. Mattis, for example, Trump announced that he had [changed his position](#) on torture). Mattis has [cautioned that settlements are unsustainable](#), and is in a position to guide Trump's thinking. Eventually, Trump will need to choose between following a Republican establishment that is largely [uninterested in the two-state solution](#), or charting a new course, perhaps by focusing on [a top-down approach](#) to final status issues.
- **BDS and American views on the settlements** - Trump's Israel advisors advocate for increased [diplomatic and legislative](#) action to counter BDS activity against both Israel and the settlements, and say that "the false notion that Israel is an occupier should be rejected." State-level legislative action continues, and Ohio's House of Representatives recently passed [HB 476](#), a bill that would require companies who work with the state to explicitly declare that they will not engage in boycott activity. Like many other state bills, HB 476 applies equally to "Israeli-controlled territories" (including

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settlement goods). There is a potential tension between anti-BDS bills that include the settlements and American public opinion. According to a recent [Brookings Institution survey](#), Americans remain highly polarized along party lines on the issue of settlements, but 60% of Democrats and 31% of Republicans support imposing “some economic sanctions or more serious action” if Israel builds new settlements.

- **Rep. Keith Ellison and criticism of Israel’s policies** - [Rep. Ellison’s](#) candidacy for [DNC chair](#) ignited debate on the scope of legitimate opinion towards Israel’s policies. Ellison advocates [ending the Gaza blockade](#) and halting settlement construction in East Jerusalem, positions that J Street describes as “[perfectly consistent](#) with the views of the majority of American Jews and many in the Israeli security establishment.” Ellison recently came under fire for a [2010 speech](#) in which he said “we can’t allow another country to treat us like we’re their ATM,” and that “United States foreign policy in the Middle East is governed by what is good or bad through a country of seven million people.” The [Anti-Defamation League’s CEO](#) called his views “deeply disturbing and disqualifying,” and major Democratic donor [Haim Saban](#) called him “clearly an anti-Semite, anti-Israel individual.” Ellison [responded](#) with a letter rejecting anti-Semitism and promising cooperation. J Street describes the continued attacks on Ellison as an effort to silence [legitimate positions](#) on Israel, saying “there are now respected voices challenging hardline positions, which, we believe, seriously endanger Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state and rarely show regard for the rights of Palestinians.”

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Obama parameters?** - President Obama’s window of action on the two-state solution is now open. Top options remain: a speech on [parameters](#) for a final status agreement, potentially later introduced to a non-binding international forum; abstaining from or supporting a Security Council resolution on settlements; or a speech by Secretary Kerry warning Israel of the consequences of continued occupation. Obama is reportedly wary of any action that would [put the incoming Trump administration on the defensive](#). At the end of November, the US House of Representatives passed [H.Con.Res.165](#), opposing Security Council actions that “seek to impose solutions to final status issues, or are one-sided and anti-Israel.”
- **International peace initiatives** - Despite [rejection by Netanyahu and the election of Trump](#), French officials confirmed that they still plan to host a peace conference in December or January in order to keep the issue on the agenda. If Obama issues parameters, such a conference could seek to establish them as international consensus. UN Middle East Envoy Nikolay Mladenov urged action towards peace, telling the [Security Council](#) that “proponents of settlement expansion feel emboldened” and that the two-state solution is deeply threatened.
- **Israel’s legalization (*hasdara*) bill** - The US administration has publicly opposed Israel’s “legalization bill,” which would [retroactively legalize settlement outposts](#) built on private Palestinian land, and have urged the government to reconsider it before it becomes law. State Department Spokesperson Elizabeth Trudeau called the bill “a [dramatic advancement of the settlement enterprise](#),” and a break from “longstanding Israeli policy of not building on private Palestinian land” which “we hope does not become law.” [UK Foreign Office Minister Tobias Ellwood](#) also urged the Israeli government to reconsider the bill, as did the [Government of Sweden](#).

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - Secretary Kerry is spearheading a [‘long shot’ diplomatic effort](#) to reach an agreement with Russia to end the [bombing of Aleppo](#) and allow in vital humanitarian aid. There is little indication that this round of talks will succeed, especially given Moscow’s motivation to hold out for negotiations with Trump, who has praised Putin and seeks a closer relationship with Russia. Russia’s own upcoming elections may motivate increased aggression in Syria, in an effort to establish a foreign policy success during the campaign. The humanitarian crisis has led France to call for an “immediate” UN Security Council meeting, and the [White House](#) has condemned violence against civilians “organized and executed by the Assad government with the willing support of the Russians and the Iranians.”
- **The Islamic State** - The military campaign against the Islamic State continues. Local ground forces, with coalition support, have retaken much of the [populated territory](#) previously held by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The Global Coalition to Counter ISIL is engaged in planning towards operations and reconstruction in Mosul and efforts to [isolate and liberate Raqqa](#). It is unclear how a Trump administration will address Syria, but Trump has indicated that he will focus primarily on targeting the Islamic State, and not on Assad, and that he is skeptical about [arming moderate opposition groups](#).
- **Yemen** - The Saudi-led coalition continues to lead airstrikes in Yemen after an [attempted 48-hour ceasefire](#) crumbled in mid-November. Both the State Department and the UN expressed concern over the formation of a [new Houthi government](#) and its role in peace talks. Following dialogue with Saudi Arabia and the UN, Kerry announced that he is working towards a stable ceasefire and political process, and that “in the next days, we may be in a position to [move the process forward](#)” in Yemen.
- **Saudi Arabia** - Senators McCain and Graham have proposed an amendment to the controversial [‘Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism’](#) (JASTA) act, which is intended to allow relatives of the 9/11 victims to sue the Saudi government. The amendment narrows the scope of the bill, in an effort to protect American service members from being targeted by [reciprocal legislation](#) abroad. The State Department has pledged to [work with Congress](#) on the issue, which has increased friction in the US-Saudi relationship. Reports indicate that Riyadh is pleased with the [hard line on Iran](#) taken by Trump and appointees Flynn and Pompeo.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran-US relations** - The Iran deal increased the breakout time it would take Iran to develop a nuclear weapon, and enhanced the ability of the international community to monitor sensitive facilities. Despite Trump’s campaign promise to “tear up” the deal, security experts in both the [US](#) and [Israel](#) believe that it is working, and Kerry is focused on [preparing the case for the incoming Secretary of State](#) that the deal is in America’s national security interest. Given Trump’s full agenda and Iran’s compliance with the deal, there is a compelling case for leaving it in place, while potentially taking a harder line on ballistic missile testing and other Iranian actions. Meanwhile, the US Senate voted unanimously to [extend the president’s authority to impose nuclear-related sanctions](#) on Iran, a move intended to ensure that the US could quickly re-impose sanctions if Iran violated the deal.

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	<p>Robert D. Blackwill and Phillip Gordon, "Repairing the US-Israel relationship," <i>Council on Foreign Relations</i>, November 2016</p> <p>"Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a two-state settlement", <i>International Crisis Group</i>, November 2016</p> <p>Martin S. Indyk, "President Trump's options for Israeli-Palestinian dealmaking," <i>Brookings Institution</i>, December 1, 2016</p> <p>Tony Karon, "Obama's best chance to influence the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will come after he leaves office," <i>Vox</i>, November 25, 2016</p> <p>Aaron David Miller, "Beyond the Trump-Netanyahu Honeymoon: 4 Things to Know About U.S.-Israeli Relations," <i>The Wall Street Journal</i>, November 10, 2016</p>
Middle East	<p>Maha Yahya "What a Trump or Clinton Presidency Could Mean for the Middle East," <i>Carnegie Middle East Center</i>, November 2, 2016</p> <p>Andrew J. Tabler and Dennis Ross, "A Syria policy for Trump: How Washington can get to a settlement," <i>Washington Institute</i>, November 28, 2016</p> <p>David Remnick, "Obama reckons with a Trump presidency," <i>New Yorker</i>, November 28, 2016 Daniel L. Byman, "Truly winning the battle of Mosul," <i>Brookings Institution</i>, October 18, 2016</p> <p>John Allen and Charles Lister, "Bring Syria's Assad and his backers to account now," <i>Washington Post</i>, October 21, 2016</p>
Iran	<p>Martin Chulov, Nahal Toosi, "Iran deal critics to Trump: Please don't rip it up," <i>Politico</i>, November 16, 2016</p> <p>Ali Vaez, "Taking the lead," <i>International Crisis Group</i>, November 25, 2016</p> <p>Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, "Moving Forward on Iran," <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, November 16, 2016</p> <p>Geranmayeh, Ellie. "Will Donald Trump Destroy the Iran Deal?" <i>The New York Times</i>, The New York Times, November 25, 2016</p>

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
November 8	US Presidential elections
November 17	The Small Group of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL meets in Berlin to discuss operations and planning in Mosul and Raqqa
November 20	Attempted 48-hour Yemen ceasefire announced
November 21	Kerry speaks with Saudi Foreign Minister al-Jubeir on attempts to reach a ceasefire in Yemen
November 21	The UN Security Council meets to discuss Syria
November 22	Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov speak about Syria and efforts to work towards a new cessation of hostilities agreement
November 28	The Global Coalition to Counter-ISIL holds a Plenary Meeting