

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 Relocation** - The State Department [announcement](#) that the US Embassy will be moved to Jerusalem by May is a significant acceleration from the previous timeline; last month Vice President Pence announced that the move would happen by the end of 2019. The interim embassy will house Ambassador Friedman and a small group of core staffers. Prime Minister Netanyahu described the announcement as a “great day for Israel”; President Abbas called it another [obstacle](#) to future peace efforts. Several former officials criticized the administration for not coupling the Jerusalem announcement with a broader peace push or acknowledgement of Palestinian aspirations, including former Middle East negotiator [Aaron David Miller](#). Former Ambassador Shapiro [urged](#) the administration to “do what it failed to do in December” and contextualize the Embassy move in a larger vision of a two-state peace plan before it takes place on May 14.
- **Anti-BDS Legislation/Free Speech** - The Israel Anti-Boycott Act ([S. 720](#)) is under debate in the Senate, following concern about its effects on constitutionally-protected free speech. Anti-BDS legislative efforts have been underway on the state level for years, but are only recently receiving national-level attention. Legislative action on the state level continues. The ACLU is challenging specific bills, including [an Arizona bill](#) that forbids the state to contract with companies that boycott Israel or with “persons or entities doing business in Israel or in territories controlled by Israel” (settlements). In February, StandWithUS, the Israel Project, and the Israel Allies Foundation [filed court documents](#) challenging ACLU’s suit.
- **US-Israeli Foreign Policy Dialogue** - The first US-Israeli Foreign Policy Dialogue took place in Washington. The dialogue [readout](#) references “issues of mutual interest in the Middle East and across the globe” but does not specifically address Iran, Syria, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – major topics for both American and Israeli foreign policy strategists. It does reference a list of topics that includes shared interests in the Indo-Pacific, cooperation with the Organization of American States, and social media technology.
- **Ahed Tamimi** - Israel’s detention of Ahed Tamimi has entered the civil society discourse on US-Israel relations. J Street [responded](#) with “the answer isn’t arresting a 16 year old girl, it’s ending a 50-year occupation.” The organizations IfNotNow and All That’s Left [launched a petition in support of Tamimi](#), drawing support from hundreds of young American Jews. In February, comedian Sarah Silverman [shared on twitter](#) a petition calling for Tamimi’s release, sparking debate.

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B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **The Future of the Peace Process** - In a recent interview, Trump indicated that [neither Israelis or Palestinians](#) are looking to make peace. Rumors of an impending peace initiative continue to build; although UN Ambassador Haley [predicted](#) that “neither side will love or hate” the plan, the US has not addressed substance, or [reports](#) that it could include recognition of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem. Palestinian Authority negotiator Saeb Erekat wrote an article in the New York Times [saying Trump had disqualified America from being the sole broker](#) and questioning whether that “opens an opportunity to seek peace by other paths or means the end of any chance for peace.” Meanwhile, a month after the administration announced sizable cuts to UNRWA, over 100 [members of Congress](#) urged Trump not to reduce funding on the grounds that it would “reduce Washington's ability” to work towards a two-state solution.
- **US-Palestinian Relations** - Relations between the Trump administration and the Palestinian Authority are frosty. This reality sharply contrasts with the spirit of potential that characterized the relationship one year ago. Aside from public criticism related to the Jerusalem embassy move, UN Ambassador Haley and President Abbas clashed at a UN Security Council meeting. While Abbas called for an international Middle East peace conference in mid-2018 and [slammed the Trump administration](#) for its policies on Jerusalem, Haley responded that “I assure you that path will get the Palestinian people [exactly nowhere](#) toward the achievement of their aspirations.” On Gaza, the White House released a statement [blaming Hamas for continued crisis](#).

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Israel/Iran/Syria** - In February, the first direct confrontation between Israel and Iran in Syria took place, prompting concern over potential military escalation, and illuminating the need for the US to develop a clear strategy towards Iran's presence in Syria. The State Department, White House, and Department of Defense [issued statements](#) supporting Israel's right to defend itself, but no administration official followed through with a trip to Israel or substantive joint statement. In Washington, both the readout of the first US-Israeli Foreign Policy Dialogue (which occurred two days after the incident) and a call between Trump and Putin omitted any reference to Iran or Syria.
- **Syria** - US officials are assessing new [reports](#) that Assad continues to use chemical weapons on Syrian civilians, and weighing potential responses. Assad is also [limiting the humanitarian aid](#) allowed into Ghouta. The UN Security Council ordered a [ceasefire](#) across Syria that was immediately broken. Later, instead of a thirty-day national ceasefire, Russia called for daily humanitarian ceasefires from 9AM-2PM, which the State Department [dismissed as a "joke."](#)

- **Qatar** - The administration is reportedly strategizing over a potential united GCC summit later this year, which would send a message to Iran and strengthen the regional position of the US and its allies. But a united GCC summit appears increasingly unlikely as the Qatar-GCC split reaches nine months without resolution. Trump reportedly plans [bilateral meetings](#) with senior leaders from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in March and April, in a high-level effort to resolve the split. In the meantime, several key US Ambassadorships in the region, including in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, remain vacant.
- **Saudi Arabia/Yemen** - In a push to clarify America's role in the Yemen conflict, Senator Sanders (I-VT), Lee (R-UT), and Murphy (D-CT) submitted a [draft resolution](#) calling for an end to US military support for the Saudi-led coalition on the grounds of the War Powers Act, which requires Congress to authorize prolonged military action overseas. US support to Saudi Arabia began under the Obama administration.
- **Turkey** - Several high-profile [meetings](#) took place in February, including between Secretary Tillerson and Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and President Erdoğan; a [joint statement](#) was issued on mutual security commitments and stabilizing Syria. Tension remains over military actions in Syria: Turkey criticizes US [assistance](#) to Kurdish fighters near the Syria-Turkey border, and the US criticizes Turkey's targeting of Kurdish fighters and military activity in Afrin.
- **Lebanon** - In Beirut, Secretary Tillerson called Hezbollah a [growing threat](#) to Lebanese security and urged calm in regard to recent Israel-Lebanon tensions focused on both territorial and maritime borders. The State Department is restarting attempts to [mediate](#) the maritime border dispute that it conducted from 2012-2016.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The Future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - The Director General of the IAEA confirmed that [Iran is implementing its commitments](#) under the JCPOA and that if the agreement failed, it would be a "great loss" for nuclear verification and multilateralism. The recently-published State Department/USAID [Joint Strategic Plan](#) includes a commitment to "work with the Congress and our European allies to fix the flaws in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and continue to hold Iran strictly accountable to its agreed-upon commitments." According to [talking points shared with the New York Times](#), American diplomats in Europe have been instructed to ask their counterparts to agree to "a commitment to renegotiate limits on missile testing by Iran; an assurance that inspectors have unfettered access to Iranian military bases; and an extension of the deal's expiration dates." European JCPOA signatories are pushing for an attempted, separate [follow-on](#) deal to address elements of Iran's ballistic missile testing. Meanwhile, the European External Action Service is coordinating how it could respond if Trump exits the deal, including [blocking regulations](#) that could protect European firms doing business with Iran. It is not clear, however, that the deal could survive a US withdrawal; if it does not, international oversight into Iran's nuclear activities would immediately shrink.

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	<p>Daniel Shapiro, "As Syria and Iran Threaten Israel, America Signals Its Ally Is on Its Own." <i>Ha'aretz</i>, February 13, 2018</p> <p>Charles Lister, Bilal Y. Saab, Eran Etzion, Gönül Tol, Paul Salem, Randa Slim and Yousef Munayyer, "The Syrian-Iranian downing of an Israeli fighter jet." <i>Middle East Institute</i>, February 12, 2018</p>
Middle East	<p>David Ignatius, "How the U.S. can 'get to yes' with Turkey." <i>The St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>, February 17, 2018</p> <p>Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian and Rhys Dubin, "Qatar's ramped-up lobbying efforts find success in Washington." <i>Foreign Policy</i>, February 6, 2018</p> <p>Aaron Stein, "Strategic incoherence in Syria." <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, March 2, 2018</p>
Iran	<p>Vali Nasr, "Iran among the ruins." <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, March/April 2018</p> <p>Derek Chollet and Ilan Goldenberg, "The Trump team's blinkered obsession with the Iran deal is poisoning the well." <i>Foreign Policy</i>, February 9, 2018</p>

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
February 2	The State Department released a statement supporting protests in Iran and condemning arrests
February 10	The State Department called for an end to Iranian escalation of violence over Israel's border with Syria
February 10-11	National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster travelled to Turkey and met with İbrahim Kalın, Deputy Secretary General and Spokesperson of the Turkish Presidency
February 11-16	Secretary of State Tillerson traveled to Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Kuwait. He led the US delegation to the Ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in Kuwait and participated in the Iraq Reconstruction Conference
February 12	The State Department and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted the first US-Israel Foreign Policy Dialogue in Washington, DC
February 14	Secretary of State Tillerson signed a five-year Memorandum of Understanding with Jordan on foreign assistance
February 16	The US and Turkey released a joint statement reaffirming their commitment mutual security and defense and stability in Syria
February 23	The State Department released a statement announcing the opening of a new US embassy in Jerusalem in May
February 24	A UN Security Council resolution called for thirty-day ceasefire in Syria and immediate access for humanitarian agencies