

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

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A. US-Israel Relations

- **The Nation-State Law** - Israel's Nation-State Law affects Israel's minority communities and democracy -- and also its foreign and diaspora relations. Former US Ambassador to Israel Shapiro [explained](#) "what has set off opposition to the law is primarily what it lacks: any reference to Israel as a democracy, or the equality of all of its citizens," affecting Israel's balance between its Jewish and democratic characteristics. To this end, the New York Times published an op-ed [questioning](#) "did Israel just stop trying to be a democracy?" American conservative Rabbi Wernick [wrote](#) that after the passage of the law and the [arrest](#) of a conservative rabbi in Haifa, "I do not believe we can talk about a "gap" between Israel and the Diaspora. It is now a canyon." Alan Dershowitz also [criticized](#) the law, warning that it would exacerbate a widening rift with diaspora Jews.
- **US-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act of 2018** - The Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced the US-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act of 2018 ([S. 2497](#)). S. 2497 authorizes funding for the security assistance to Israel provided by the 2016 US-Israel Memorandum of Understanding. It also authorizes expanded cooperation in many fields, including peaceful space exploration and bilateral counter-UAV projects, and authorizes the transfer of precision-guided munitions. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee rejected a proposed amendment by Senator Paul (R-KY) seeking to end US military aid to Israel and Egypt gradually over a 10-year period and immediately suspend all economic aid to the Palestinian Authority. The Senate is expected to [vote](#) on S. 2497 in early August.
- **Anti-BDS Legislation, Free Speech, and Settlements** - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) called on US senators to [oppose](#) the Israel Anti-Boycott Act ([S. 720](#)), introduced by Senators Cardin (D-MD) and Portman (R-OH) in March. The bill was originally introduced in March 2017, and concerns about its relation to constitutionally-protected freedom of speech have delayed its passage. The debate over constitutionally protected free speech and anti-BDS legislation has intensified in 2018, as state-level laws requiring state contractors to certify that they will not boycott Israel or "Israel-controlled territory" (settlements) begin to be implemented and challenged.

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B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **A Trump Peace Plan?** - Debate over the possible content and timing of a Trump peace initiative often distract from the reality that there is no peace initiative on the table, and administration officials have repeatedly said that they are in no rush. In July, President Trump's son-in-law and advisor Kushner said "when the time is right, we'll put it out." So far, the administration has pursued two approaches towards peace, without success. The first approach is an 'outside in' model that seeks to leverage regional support into momentum capable of steamrolling Palestinian objections. In July, Saudi Arabia and other key Arab countries said that they will not support a peace plan that does not include a [Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem](#) or [address the right of return](#). This contradicts reports that Saudi Arabia may pressure the Palestinians to accept a plan they find unacceptable. The administration's second approach has been a Gaza-first model. But US funding for Gaza remains frozen, and efforts by US envoys to raise funds for economic and humanitarian projects from Gulf states in June reportedly [failed](#), due to the consistently deteriorating political and security situation on the ground. The Trump administration threatened to [abandon](#) its focus on economic development in Gaza after political bickering and a lack of progress.
- **The Crisis in US-Palestinian Relations and Gaza** - The crisis in US-Palestinian relations continues, and all American aid to the Palestinians remains frozen pending review. As a result, Palestinian officials have reported that local humanitarian groups, contractors, and coexistence groups that work with USAID have [scaled back](#) their activities. 70 Members of Congress signed an [open letter](#) calling on the Trump administration to "immediately restore all US funding for humanitarian aid in Gaza, including all USAID and UNRWA funding under policy review by the State Department." Meanwhile, UN Special Coordinator Mladenov issued a [statement](#) on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, said the [World Bank will allocate \\$90 million](#) to Palestinians, and urged Trump to resume funding to UNRWA. Kushner, Greenblatt, and Friedman wrote an [op-ed](#) blaming Hamas entirely for the situation in Gaza, and saying that "the world is moving forward, but bad choices are causing Palestinians to fall further and further behind."

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Qatar/Gulf Dispute** - The Trump administration hopes to convene Gulf leaders in October for a summit aimed at easing the year-old dispute with Qatar and potentially establishing an ["Arab NATO."](#) The UAE-Saudi-Bahrain-Egypt blockade on Qatar continues, and Emirati Foreign Minister Gargash recently [said](#) that if the dispute cannot be resolved, it should be seen not as a crisis, but "as the new state of affairs." Qatar continues its policy of [simultaneously](#) strengthening relations with the US and with Iran. Effects of the GCC dispute on US foreign policy were seen when Qatar recently [sided](#) with European signatories to the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal). Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have [backed](#) Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

- **Syria** - American officials [applauded](#) Israel's rescue of 800 Syrian [White Helmets](#) and their families before an imminent attack by Assad. The rescue mission was coordinated with the US While the mission was a success, Syria's broader future remains bleak. Trump and Putin spoke about [Syria](#) in their highly controversial Helsinki meeting, in which Trump allowed Putin to take the lead on a host of international issues and failed to hold Russia accountable for interference in the 2016 elections. Following the meeting, many analysts assessed that Israel was [correct](#) to invest in its bilateral relationship with Russia, as "Russia alone is calling the shots in Syria." In mid-July, Russia and the US "agreed to [secure](#) the Golan Heights frontier with Israel," but Russian Ambassador to Israel Viktorov [said](#) that Russia will not force Iran to withdraw its forces from all of Syria. With military and diplomatic cover from Russia, Assad continues to win ground in southern Syria. At a UN Security Council Briefing, Ambassador Haley reported that Russia is [still not upholding](#) its commitment to maintain a de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria. In Congress, Rep. DeSantis (R-FL) convened a [hearing](#) on recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. A [previous resolution](#) by DeSantis and other Republicans to recognize Israeli control of the Golan Heights was rejected by the Republican leadership in May.
- **Turkey** - US-Turkish political tensions are increasing. The Treasury Department [sanctioned two Turkish officials](#) "with leading roles in the unjust detention" of US Pastor Andrew Brunson. Senators Corker (R-TN) and Menendez (D-NJ) introduced bipartisan [legislation](#) in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to restrict loans from international financial institutions to Turkey until the Turkish government "ends the unjust detention of US citizens," including Brunson. Former US Ambassador Edelman co-authored an [op-ed](#) asking the Trump administration to assist three Turkish employees of the US State Department detained by Erdoğan's security apparatus. At the end of the month, [leaks](#) suggested that the US will postpone the delivery of F-35 fighter aircraft to Turkey, pending an assessment of US-Turkey relations. The US remains concerned about the delivery of a S-400 missile system from Russia to Turkey, as the S-400 is not interoperable with NATO defense systems, and "could provide a way to [steal F-35 technology](#)." Secretary of Defense Mattis [said](#) that the tensions have had "no impact on US-Turkey military operations at this time."

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran Policy** - Countering Iran has become a primary foreign policy goal of the Trump administration. The administration initiated a [pressure campaign](#) targeting the Iranian regime, while seeking to distance it from the Iranian people (in one of many examples, Secretary Pompeo [said](#) "the regime in Iran has been a nightmare for the Iranian people.") European JCPOA signatories are still working to save the deal, and a group of ten US senators who opposed the JCPOA wrote a [letter](#) to them warning "we would find it particularly troubling if you sought to evade or undermine American statutes." J Street described the letter as a [bullying embrace](#) of Trump's drift towards war with Iran. Trump's policy is disjointed, with his [all-caps threat](#) towards Rouhani followed by an offer to meet Iran's leaders [without preconditions](#). Pompeo later said that the offer does include [preconditions](#); meanwhile Iran laid out its [own preconditions](#) for any meeting, including a US return to the JCPOA and no new sanctions. Former Middle East Negotiator Aaron David Miller said Trump's offer to meet "has nothing to do with Iran or coherent US policy" and is simply "another effort to [dominate the narrative and distract](#)."

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	Susie Gelman, " If Trump Believes Key to Peace is Rebuilding Gaza, Why Is He Cutting Off All Aid? ", <i>Newsweek</i> , July 27, 2018
	Staff Writers, " Averting War in Gaza ," <i>International Crisis Group</i> , July 20, 2018
	Michael J. Koplow, " About Those State Department Maps ," <i>Israel Policy Forum</i> , July 12, 2018
	Michael Young, " What Would Happen if the United States Were to Recognize Israel's Sovereignty Over the Golan Heights? " <i>Carnegie Middle East Center</i> , July 26, 2018
Middle East	Jennifer Cafarella, " Don't Get Out of Syria ," <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , July 11, 2018
	Dina Esfandiary and Ariane M. Tabatabai, " Will China Undermine Trump's Iran Strategy? " <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , July 20, 2018
	Steven Heydemann and Michael E. O'Hanlon, " Here's What a Trump-Putin deal on Syria Could Look Like ," <i>Brookings Institution</i> , July 16, 2018
Iran	Suzanne Maloney, " Iran Isn't taking Trump's Twitter Bait—For Now ," <i>Brookings Institution</i> , July 26, 2018
	Dr. Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, " Will China Undermine Trump's Iran Strategy? " <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , July 24, 2018
	Mahsa Rouhi, " Iran Hawks Should Be Careful What They Wish For - Pushing for regime change in Tehran could put Qassem Suleimani in power ," <i>Foreign Policy</i> , July 19, 2018
	Alex Vatanka and Robert Reasoner, " Trump's Unconvincing "Hearts and Minds" Strategy on Iran ," <i>Middle East Institute</i> , July 30, 2018

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
July 5-8	Director of Policy Planning Hook and Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Ford visit Saudi Arabia to “convey the Administration’s Iran policy”
July 9-10	Secretary Pompeo meets with leaders in the United Arab Emirates to discuss bilateral relations and the need to resolve the Gulf dispute
July 10	The State Department designates the Iran-backed al-Ashtar Brigades (AAB) a Foreign Terrorist Organization
July 10-20	Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Kaidanow visits Saudi Arabia to discuss defense trade
July 12	Secretary Pompeo meets with Saudi Foreign Minister al-Jubeir in Brussels to discuss Iran and Yemen
July 15	The State Department releases a statement calling the 2016 Turkish coup attempt an attack on democracy
July 17-18	Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Singh travels to Turkey to discuss enhancing bilateral trade
July 18	Secretary Pompeo meets with UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen Griffiths and thanks him for his efforts to advance a diplomatic solution to the situation in Hudaydah, Yemen
July 22	Secretary Pompeo sharply criticizes the Iranian regime during his remarks at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library’s Supporting Iranian Voices event
July 22	The State Department releases a statement congratulating the evacuation of more than 400 members of the Syrian Civil Defense from Southwest Syria following a humanitarian operation involving Israel and Jordan