

# US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

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Issue 67, June 2018 Report (Published July 2018)

## A. US-Israel Relations

- **Anti-BDS Legislation, Free Speech, and Settlements** - The House Foreign Affairs Committee [passed](#) an [amended](#) version of [H.R.1697](#) (“the Israel Anti-Boycott Act”). The legislation “prohibits US companies from participating in boycotts promoted by international organizations, like the UN, that target US partners, like Israel.” Experts assess that the bill would “[penalize American institutions and companies](#) that participate in international boycotts of Israel and its settlements in the West Bank.” In Kansas, an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawsuit against a state-level ‘anti-BDS’ law was [dismissed](#) after the state amended the legislation. The ACLU argued that the law, which required state contractors to certify that they would not boycott Israel, was unconstitutional. The amended legislation applies only to businesses with contracts over \$100,000, and not to individuals. This case is part of the growing [debate](#) over the relationship between such legislation and constitutionally protected free speech.
- **US Withdrawal from the UN HRC** - Ambassador to the UN Haley [announced](#) US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), citing anti-Israel bias. Past Democratic and Republican administrations have criticized the HRC for its selectivity and bias, but opted to remain engaged and exert influence from within the council. Israel [welcomed](#) the decision, although some Israeli officials raised [concerns](#) that the decision will make it harder to block [two upcoming initiatives](#): publication of a list of companies operating in settlement areas, and a commission of inquiry on violent clashes on the border between Israel and Gaza.

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

- **US-Palestinian Relations** - US-Palestinian relations remain dysfunctional, and officials continue to exchange criticism in the press; recently, PLO Secretary General Erekat [accused](#) the US of “creating a state of destabilization and confusion in the West Bank.” The Palestinians remain opposed to the introduction of any US peace initiative. In June, Special Representative Greenblatt and Trump’s son-in-law and advisor Kushner traveled to Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar to discuss Gaza and [US peace efforts](#), but did not have any meetings with Palestinian officials during the trip.

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- **US aid to the Palestinians** - The Trump administration froze aid to the Palestinians, pending review. This includes funding through UNRWA, and seven former ambassadors sent a [letter](#) to Secretary Pompeo warning that UNRWA cuts would have national security implications for Israel and Jordan. State Department Spokesperson Nauert said that "[no decision has been made](#) on UNRWA funding at this point [...] we continue to express our concerns about the mismanagement of UNRWA." Meanwhile, In [testimony](#) before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Satterfield reported that the administration's Fiscal Year '19 request includes development and security assistance funding for programs in the West Bank and Gaza even though overall US assistance to the Palestinians is halted under review. Satterfield said the request "will give us the flexibility to provide assistance to the Palestinian people, consistent with the [Taylor Force Act](#) and other provisions of law, *should our review determine it is in our interests to do so.*" The [Israel Policy Forum](#) (IPF) analyzed the funding situation and explained that currently "the US is not spending any money in the West Bank and Gaza, irrespective of what pool it comes from and irrespective of which entity distributes and uses the funds".
- **Gaza** - Sen. Feinstein (D-CA) [criticized](#) Trump for cutting humanitarian assistance to Gaza "by \$305 million — nearly two-thirds of the UN' budget for food aid and schools." Feinstein warned that Gaza's economy is on the brink of collapse, and called on Trump restore aid to Gaza and take a leading role in reconstruction, in addition to demanding a halt to Israeli settlement construction. While US aid is frozen under review, Greenblatt and Kushner's Middle East trip included fundraising for regional aid to Gaza. The administration has not released any new peace initiative and is reportedly increasing its [focus on Gaza](#) in July.

## C. The Changing Middle East

- **Qatar/Gulf Dispute** - The Gulf diplomatic crisis is almost a year old, despite past efforts by former Secretary Tillerson to mediate a resolution. Last month, Treasury Secretary Mnuchin praised Qatari Foreign Minister al-Thani for increased cooperation on [counter-terrorism financing](#). Qatar is managing to increase its ties with the US at the same time that it continues to develop its relationship with Iran, which largely compensated for the burdens resulting from Saudi policies to isolate Qatar; Qatar and Iran have continued to increase their bilateral ties over the past months. The Trump administration first fanned the flames of the rift, and subsequent attempts to mediate were stalled by contradictions between Trump and Tillerson. Last month, Secretary Pompeo said that the rift [benefits Iran](#) and should end.
- **Syria** - At the end of June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned of a [looming catastrophe](#) in southern Syria, as a result of Syrian and Russian military operations in the region. Ambassador Haley said the military strikes "[unambiguously violate](#)" the de-escalation arrangement in the region, and that "we expect Russia to do its part to respect and enforce the ceasefire it helped establish." [France](#) also called on Russia to "enforce the commitments it made with regard to the ceasefire in southwestern Syria." The [State Department](#) declined to comment on a [reported new ceasefire](#) deal, but confirmed that Secretary Pompeo had spoken to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, as well as [Jordanian King Abdullah II](#). Representatives from the Astana process (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) met in Geneva with UN Special Envoy for Syria de Mistura on the formation of a [Syrian Constitutional Committee](#). The next international meeting in the '[Astana format](#)' will be held on July 30-31 in Sochi.

## D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The Future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - Following US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the deal's other signatories (France, Germany, the UK, China, Russia, and Iran) affirmed their commitment to it. As of now, the deal remains in force, without US participation. But the reimposition of American sanctions increases the chances that the deal will crumble without any other agreement in place. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is pursuing a campaign of "[maximum economic and diplomatic pressure](#)" on Iran. Joint State Department - Treasury Department teams of senior officials are visiting different parts of the world to "explain the full snapback of our sanctions and warn governments and the private sector of the risks of continuing to do business with Iran." The campaign has been described by Brookings Institution experts as "an [economic offensive](#) intended to collapse the Iranian government." Secretary Pompeo and State Department Director of Policy Planning Hook said that US strategy "is not about changing the regime, it is about changing the behavior of the leadership in Iran to comport with what the Iranian people really want them to do." The transatlantic rift on how to approach JCPOA and overall strategy toward Iran continues.

## E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	Senator Dianne Feinstein, " <a href="#">Donald Trump Policies are Hurting Palestinians and Middle East Peace Prospects.</a> " <i>USA Today</i> , June 27, 2018
	Michael Koplow, " <a href="#">Your One-Stop Guide to the Palestinian Funding Issue.</a> " <i>Israel Policy Forum</i> , July 5, 2018
	Ilan Goldenberg, " <a href="#">Kushner's Peace Plan Is a Disaster Waiting to Happen The last thing Israelis and Palestinians need now is another failed blueprint. Stabilizing Gaza is more important.</a> " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , June 25, 2018
	Adam Entous, " <a href="#">Donald Trump's New World Order: How the President, Israel, and the Gulf states plan to fight Iran -- and leave the Palestinians and the Obama years behind.</a> " <i>The New Yorker</i> , June 18, 2018
Middle East	James Jeffrey, " <a href="#">Erdogan's Victory Could Actually Improve US-Turkish Relations.</a> " <i>Washington Institute for Near East Policy</i> , June 27, 2018
	Tamara Cofman Wittes, Steven Heydemann, and Adrianna Pita, " <a href="#">The Politics of Reconstruction in Syria.</a> " <i>Brookings Institution</i> , June 6, 2018
	Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, " <a href="#">How Qatar Weathered the Gulf Crisis.</a> " <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , June 11, 2018
	Aaron Stein, " <a href="#">The Roadmap to Nowhere: Manbij, Turkey, and America's Dilemma in Syria.</a> " <i>War on the Rocks</i> , June 29, 2018
	Kemal Kirisci, " <a href="#">How to Read Turkey's Election Results.</a> " <i>Brookings Institution</i> , June 25, 2018
Iran	Suzanne Maloney, " <a href="#">Trump Tightens the Screws on Iran's Oil.</a> " <i>Brookings Institution</i> , June 29, 2018
	Mark Perry, " <a href="#">Mattis's Last Stand is Iran.</a> " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , June 28, 2018

## F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
June 4	Secretary of State Pompeo meets Turkish Foreign Minister Çavusoğlu in Washington to discuss the Turkey-US Working Group on Syria
June 5	The State Department releases a statement welcoming counter-ISIS operations by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria
June 11	Secretary Pompeo releases a statement on developments in Hudaydah, Yemen and calls on all parties to work with the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Yemen to support humanitarian access and a political process
June 14	The State Department issues a statement voicing concern over Syrian government operations in southwest Syria within the de-escalation zone, and calling on Russia to fulfill its commitments in accordance with UNSCR 2254
June 19	Ambassador Haley announces that the US is withdrawing from the US Human Rights Council
June 19-23	Senior Advisor Kushner and Special Representative Greenblatt travel to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and Israel for discussions on bilateral cooperation with each country, the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
June 24	President Trump congratulates Turkish President Erdogan on his reelection
June 25	The State Department condemns a Houthi missile launch directed at Riyadh, from Yemen
June 25	The US and Israel sign an agreement to establish a US-Israel Center of Excellence in Energy, Engineering, and Water Technology
June 26	Secretary Pompeo meets with Qatari Foreign Minister al-Thani to discuss counterterrorism, countering terrorist financing, and the Gulf dispute