

# 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

- **US Embassy Relocation** - Israel's National Planning and Building Commission granted the US an exemption from the regular planning process, and issued a [permit](#) to convert the consulate in Jerusalem into a provisional embassy in time for its planned opening. The embassy is scheduled to open on May 14, coinciding with the anniversary of Israel's establishment. The move is a potential flashpoint, and US discourse on the issue includes concerns about escalation.
- **AIPAC Conference** - AIPAC's annual conference highlighted the need to include progressive American Jews in the conversation on US-Israel relations. AIPAC leaders tried to position the organization as bipartisan, speaking of "doubling down" on bipartisan outreach, and validating the progressive narrative for Israel as equally "compelling and critical." They also emphasized AIPAC's commitment to the [two-state solution](#), a move that would have been unremarkable two years ago but now distinguishes AIPAC (historically viewed as center-right) from the Trump and Netanyahu administrations, which have moved away from the longstanding two-state consensus (although AIPAC's website does claim that "[Israel and the United States are committed to a two-state solution.](#)") Despite this outreach, AIPAC encountered criticism for [failing to embrace progressive policies](#) from the leaders of organizations as J Street, T'ruah, and [IfNotNow](#).

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

- **Gaza** - State Department Spokesperson Nauert [said](#) the US is "deeply saddened by the loss of life in Gaza" after more than a dozen Palestinians died after being shot by IDF forces during the "Great Return March" protests along the border. US envoy Greenblatt [blamed](#) Hamas for "encouraging a hostile march." Senator Sanders [said](#) "the killing of Palestinian demonstrators by Israeli forces in Gaza is tragic. It is the right of all people to protest for a better future without a violent response." Sanders also urged the Trump administration to play a "more positive role" in ending the Gaza blockade.

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- **US-Palestinian Relations and The Future of the Peace Process** - Reports indicate that the long-awaited US plan is [nearing completion](#), will [not be based on guiding parameters](#) (including the two-state solution), and will instead include suggested steps for each side. US-Palestinian relations have been [deteriorating](#) for months, endangering the prospects for a successful US-brokered plan. In March, the Palestinian Authority (PA) [boycotted](#) a White House meeting on the Gaza crisis over Trump's policies on Jerusalem, and PA President Abbas [slammed](#) Ambassador Friedman with comments that the State Department referred to as "[outrageous and unhelpful.](#)" Some [reports](#) claim that the US may postpone its peace proposal to avoid an upfront rejection by the PA that would also prevent regional partners from supporting an American proposal.
- **Action at the UN** - The US [blocked](#) a draft UN Security Council statement urging restraint on the Gaza-Israel border and calling for an independent investigation into the deaths of protesters. Separately, the US again threatened to leave the UN Human Rights Council after five resolutions were passed condemning Israel. Ambassador Haley [called](#) the council "grossly biased against Israel" and "unworthy of its name."

## C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - Analysts and allies have found Trump's Syria policy difficult to track. US policy may change abruptly if Trump makes good on his surprise promise that American soldiers will leave Syria "[very soon](#)," because the US should "let the other people take care of it now." This would contradict Defense Secretary Mattis and (now former) Secretary of State Tillerson's statements that US troops will remain in Syria long enough to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State and participate in post-conflict stabilization. Trump followed his statement by placing a hold on 200 million USD in infrastructure recovery funds for Syria, [demanding more information](#) on plans for their use. An abrupt US departure would give Russia and Iran a free hand to dictate the terms of post-conflict Syria, a reality that would not serve the US interest and would also harm Israeli security interests.
- **Qatar** - Tillerson's departure as Secretary of State does not bode well for administration officials working to resolve the Gulf diplomatic crisis. While the US is still considering a united US-GCC summit this year, there are no indications that the GCC members will move near enough to reconciliation to agree to attend such an event. Tillerson attempted to mediate the crisis that broke out in 2017, and his successor, current CIA Director Pompeo, is not expected to prioritize Gulf reconciliation over the host of other pressing issues on the agenda. Senior administration officials reportedly say that the Gulf parties involved "don't see eye to eye" and are "[not ready](#)" to solve the crisis. Former US Ambassador Feierstein described the parties as "perfectly prepared" to see the conflict extend for years, and predicated a [continued "cold peace"](#) in the Gulf. Fragmentation in the Gulf continues to benefit Iran, which [is reinforcing](#) its alliance with Qatar.
- **Saudi Arabia/Yemen** - During Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Washington, Trump [said](#) that "the [US-Saudi] relationship is probably the strongest it's ever been," and focused on [growing commercial deals](#). The crisis in Yemen, and civilian casualties during the Saudi-led coalition's military operations there, were scarcely mentioned. Earlier in the year, Senator Sanders (I-VT), Lee (R-UT), and Murphy (D-CT) sponsored a resolution calling for

an end to US military support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; in March, [the resolution failed](#) in a closed Senate vote (55-44). Before the vote, Defense Secretary Mattis sent a [letter](#) urging Congress not to limit support to Saudi Arabia as it might reduce US influence, jeopardize counterterrorism cooperation, and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis.

- **Turkey** - US-Turkey relations are trending upwards, but the relationship remains complex. In early March, American and Turkish officials held a [working group](#) to strengthen cooperation and address disagreements on Syria; following the meetings, the Trump administration announced that it would ["rein in Kurdish fighters"](#) near the Syria-Turkey border, a move which some say is endangering longstanding ties with Kurdish allies for the goal of repairing US-Turkey relations. Later in the month, Trump and Erdoğan discussed increased cooperation on shared challenges, and strengthening the relationship, during a [phone call](#). Despite this upward trend, Turkey is also strengthening its ties with Russia and Iran, as those countries engage in a series of trilateral meetings on Syria. Turkish officials voiced [confusion](#) over US Syria policy at the end of the month, after Trump indicated that American troops would leave earlier than other administration officials have indicated.

## D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The Future of the JCPOA (Iran Nuclear Deal)** - State Department and National Security Council officials continue to engage with the E3 signatories of the Iran deal (Britain, France, and Germany) as Trump's May deadline to end the agreement quickly approaches. [Disagreement](#) over the Iran deal was a major factor in Trump's decision to replace Secretary of State Tillerson. The records of his nominated replacement, CIA Director Pompeo, and new National Security Advisor Bolton raise fears that the voices who might convince Trump to continue the agreement are now gone, and that the administration may end the deal with nothing in place (reverting to the pre-deal crisis with Iran). A disintegration of the deal in the absence of a clear Iranian violation may undermine US efforts to address North Korea. Trump has given his negotiating team until May 12 to ["fix the deficiencies of the Iran nuclear deal"](#) with a supplemental agreement to "impose new multilateral sanctions if Iran develops or tests long-range missiles, thwarts inspections, or makes progress towards a nuclear weapon."

## E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	<p>Dahlia Scheindlin, <a href="#">"At AIPAC, Israel's problems went unmentioned,"</a> <i>972 Magazine</i>, March 7, 2018</p> <p>Bernard Avishai, <a href="#">"Bibi Netanyahu echoes Trump on immigration,"</a> <i>The New Yorker</i>, March 12, 2019</p> <p>David Makovsky, <a href="#">"Forget the ultimate deal: Trump and Netanyahu should save Gaza for now,"</a> <i>The Washington Institute for Near East Policy</i>, March 4, 2018</p>
Middle East	<p>Amberin Zaman, <a href="#">"Erdogan, Putin, Rouhani tout alliance, eye US for next move,"</a> <i>Al Monitor</i>, April 4, 2018</p> <p>Tamara Cofman Wittes and Shai Feldman, <a href="#">"Everyone loves Israel now: There's much more to the Arab world's newfound friendship with Israel than ganging up on Iran,"</a> <i>Foreign Policy</i>, March 26, 2018</p> <p>Aaron Stein, <a href="#">"Strategic incoherence in Syria,"</a> <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, March 2, 2018</p> <p>Bruce Riedel, <a href="#">"Muhammad bin Salman's US visit marks 75 years of U.S.-Saudi ties,"</a> <i>Brookings</i>, March 12, 2018</p>
Iran	<p>Ahmad Majidiyar, <a href="#">"IRGC outlet analyzes Trump's Syria withdrawal remarks,"</a> <i>Middle East Institute</i>, March 30, 2018</p> <p>Idrees Ali, <a href="#">"U.S. general signals support for Iran nuclear deal,"</a> <i>Reuters</i>, March 14, 2018</p> <p>Ilan Goldenberg and Elizabeth Rosenberg, <a href="#">"How to save the Iran nuclear deal: A grand bargain that can satisfy both Trump and the deal's supporters,"</a> <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, March 13, 2018</p>

## F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
March 4	President Trump speaks with Egyptian President al-Sisi to discuss security, economic cooperation, Russia and Iran's support for the Assad regime, and Arab unity in the region
March 5	President Trump meets with Prime Minister Netanyahu to discuss Iran's influence in the region, the US commitment to Israel's security, and Israeli-Palestinian peace
March 12	The US presents a draft resolution to the UN Security Council demanding a 30-day ceasefire in the rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, Syria
March 13	The US hosts a conference to discuss solutions to the humanitarian and economic crises in Gaza (the PA does not attend)
March 15	The US renews support for the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces during a conference in Rome
March 20	President Trump meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss commercial ties, Iran, and Yemen
March 22	The US and Jordan inaugurate a regional counterterrorism training facility south of Amman
March 22	Deputy Secretary of State Sullivan meets Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss issues including Yemen, Iran, and a potential US-GCC Summit
March 22	President Trump speaks with President Erdoğan of Turkey to discuss regional developments and the NATO partnership