



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

- **Security cooperation and aid** - Five months of negotiations have yet to yield a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) governing US aid to Israel. Several [US and Israeli officials reportedly disclosed details](#) of the talks to Reuters, including confirmation that Israel seeks up to \$10b more funding than the current 10-year MOU provides for and guaranteed funding for missile defense projects currently funded by Congress on an ad hoc basis. This demand has reportedly been rejected by US negotiators. In the meantime, the US House of Representatives passed the [2017 National Defense Authorization Act](#), which [adds \\$459m](#) to aid Israeli missile defense systems. The bill, which includes a wide scope of spending on American defense priorities, now moves to the Senate. The White House has reportedly [threatened to veto](#) the bill over [unnecessary spending](#) and other strategic disagreements on military priorities unrelated to Israel.
- **Election campaign** - Ted Cruz's withdrawal from the race was followed by Donald Trump securing the delegate count required for the Republican nomination. Sheldon Adelson is reportedly [poised to contribute](#) more to Trump than he has to any previous candidate. On the Democratic side, Sanders reportedly plans to push for [revisions to the party platform on Israel](#) during the convention, with an emphasis on the elevation of Palestinian rights and a [more even-handed approach](#) to the conflict. Sanders' delegates to the platform drafting committee include Cornel West, James Zogby, and Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN), who are known for their advocacy for Palestinian rights. The [divide within the Democratic party](#) on this issue comes at a time when party unity is also threatened by the long campaign between Clinton and Sanders; the Republicans, despite their own deep divides over party ideology, have a clearer opportunity to rally around their apparent candidate during their own convention.

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Previous issues of this monthly report can be [read here](#).

- **Anti-BDS legislation** - The [New Jersey State Senate](#) passed anti-BDS [legislation](#) that prohibits state pension and annuity funds from being invested in organizations that boycott Israel or “Israeli-controlled territory,” referring to settlements. This is part of a [large-scale legislative effort](#) against BDS across the US. In many cases, these legislative initiatives conflate Israel with all of its settlements. In the non-governmental sector, the United Methodist Church made headlines in May for [rejecting](#) several pro-BDS resolutions that called for the Protestant church to “divest from companies engaging in business with Israel over its treatment of Palestinians.”

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **The French initiative** - Following several months of speculation, the State Department [confirmed](#) that Secretary Kerry will travel to Paris to participate in the French-hosted ministerial meeting on Middle East peace. Kerry played a relatively low-key role in the talks, and also [met separately](#) with Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault to discuss cooperation against the Islamic State. The US has been hesitant to endorse the French initiative, due to its preference for direct negotiations, and has not decided what role it might play in the process. Still, Kerry’s presence in Paris reflected a willingness to explore new efforts to reboot the failed peace process. Kerry confirmed that in support of the two-state solution, the [US will work with the French, Egyptians, Arab world, and global community](#) to explore ways to promote a final status agreement.
- **The Arab Peace Initiative** - The State Department responded to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s comments on the Arab Peace Initiative (API) by reaffirming its relevance. Spokesperson John Kirby said that the API “can play a [critical role](#) in advancing peace in the region,” but that any progress towards a two-state solution requires leadership on the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Kirby said that to date, the two parties have failed to demonstrate “in real ways, not just rhetoric, that they are willing to take the [steps necessary](#) to get to a two-state solution.”

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - The effectiveness of US Syria policy, including the [International Support Group for Syria](#) (ISSG), has been [criticized](#) as the death toll in Syria continues to mount and [specific areas](#), including Aleppo, descend into renewed violence. The Geneva-based [US-Russian Coordination Cell and the UN Operations Center](#) have a limited ability to enforce the cessation of hostilities agreement on the ground in Syria. Following a recent ISSG meeting, Secretary Kerry announced that all involved parties - including Russia and Iran - have agreed on a basic framework for a [united, nonsectarian Syria](#) that includes a transitional governing body in accordance with the Geneva process. [August 1](#) is the target date for agreement on a full transition framework in accordance with [UNSCR 2254](#), the resolution calling for a ceasefire and political settlement to the war. The feasibility of this target date depends on the ability of the US and Russia to enforce the ceasefire.

- **Egypt** - Kerry visited Cairo for [talks](#) with President al-Sisi. The agenda had a strong regional focus, including US and Egyptian policy developments in Syria and Libya. Egypt's [security and economic challenges](#) were also addressed. Kerry expressed his appreciation for the Egyptian president's recent statement of support of [advancing Arab-Israeli peace](#) and leadership on promoting a regional solution to the conflict.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Gaining domestic support for the deal** - The Obama administration's [strategy](#) for winning support for the Iran deal came under fire; in response, White House Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes [wrote a post](#) on the administration's Iran strategy and timeline for engagement. Rhodes [clarified](#) that Rouhani's election marked a sea change on Iran's willingness to engage with the US on the nuclear issue. American conservatives also attacked funding for promoting the deal, including the roles of Ploughshares and J Street. In response, Ploughshares President Joe Cirincione [reaffirmed](#) his organization's commitment to reducing the Iranian nuclear threat, and J Street responded that "in 2015, J Street [publicly announced](#) that it raised \$5.5 million for a major campaign to support the Iran deal, and we were opposed by organizations, including AIPAC, that raised \$20-30 million. We're proud of our work to support diplomacy."
- **Post-JCPOA business with Iran** - Last month, Tehran accused the US of not doing enough to promote business with Iran following the implementation of the JCPOA. New [guidance on post-JCPOA business with Iran](#) by the US, UK, France, Germany, and the EU encourages companies to approach their governments with sanctions-related concerns instead of forgoing opportunities. The document also addresses Iran's responsibility to "create an environment conducive to international investments particularly regarding compliance with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations." [FATF recommendations](#) are designed to "combat money laundering and terrorist financing, as well as the financing of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." Recent recommendations of the FATF focus on "Iran's failure to address the [risk of terrorist financing](#) and the serious threat this poses to the integrity of the international financial system." Regardless of Iran's JCPOA compliance, this could dissuade foreign companies from engaging in commercial activity in the country.

E. Further reading

Israel/Peace Process	Ilan Goldenberg, Major General (Res.) Gadi Shamni, Nimrod Novik, and Col. Kris Bauman, " A Security System for the Two-State Solution. " <i>Center for a New American Security</i> , May 31, 2016
	Matthew Duss, " Presidential race shifts discourse on Israel-Palestine. " <i>Middle East Institute</i> , June 1, 2016
	Martin Indyk, discussion moderated by Mehdi Hasan, " Should the US be neutral on Israel-Palestine? " <i>Al Jazeera</i> , May 12, 2016

	Steven Cook, "On the road in Israel," <i>Council on Foreign Relations</i> , May 31, 2016
Middle East	Linda Robinson, "Assessment of the politico-military campaign to counter ISIL and options for adaptation," <i>Rand Corporation</i> , 2016
	Jeffrey Goldberg, "Is there a Hillary doctrine?" <i>The Atlantic</i> , May 13, 2016
	Nick Danforth, "Could different borders have saved the Middle East?" <i>The New York Times</i> , May 14, 2016
	David Ignatius, "The US can't fix it: James Clapper on America's role in the Middle East," <i>Washington Post</i> , May 10, 2016
Iran	Suzanne Maloney. "Is the Iran deal unraveling? Think again." <i>Brookings Institution</i> , May 20, 2016
	Robert Einhorn and Richard Nephew, "The Iran nuclear deal: Prelude to proliferation in the Middle East?" <i>Brookings Institution</i> , May 2016
	Lincoln Bloomfield Jr and Ramesh Sepehrrad, "What Washington doesn't get about Iran," <i>National Interest</i> , May 31, 2016

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
May 15	Secretary Kerry traveled to Riyadh to discuss Syria and other regional matters with King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud
May 17	International Syria Support Group met in Vienna
May 18	Secretary Kerry met with Egyptian President al-Sisi in Cairo
May 18	Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Charles Rivkin traveled to Jerusalem and Ramallah
May 20	Secretary Kerry met with Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu in Brussels
May 20	US Special Envoy Amos J. Hochstein traveled to Saudi Arabia and Lebanon to discuss the global energy market
May 21	Assistant Secretary Rose traveled to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates to discuss missile defense and other security issues