

# US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

Edited by Rebecca Bornstein\*

Issue 66, May 2018 Report (Published June 2018)

## A. US-Israel Relations

- **US Embassy Move** - The US Embassy [move](#) to Jerusalem took place on May 14, amid [the deadliest day](#) of protests along the Gaza border. Many news outlets covered the day in split screen reporting that juxtaposed the embassy's opening ceremony with the protests. Later that day, Vice President Pence [delivered](#) remarks on the embassy move at a ceremony marking Israel's 70th Independence Day celebration. The former Embassy Tel Aviv building now serves as the [U.S. Embassy Branch Office Tel Aviv](#), and retains most of its functions. Thus far, the embassy move has not been coupled with action to restart the peace process.
- **Anti-BDS Legislation, Free Speech, and Settlements** - In May, Louisiana became the 25th state to [require](#) companies that contract with the state to certify that they will not boycott Israel or Israel-controlled territories (settlements) for the duration of the contract period. The American Civil Liberties Union is [challenging](#) similar laws in other states on the grounds that it [violates](#) constitutional rights to freedom of expression. Similar legislation [failed](#) in Missouri in May, and the national-level debate over the effects of such legislation on First Amendment rights continues.

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

- **The Future of the Peace Process** - There are no initiatives to restart peace talks on the table. Various reports of a possible new US peace plan [intensified](#) before the embassy move and now focus on a potential release in [late June](#). But various rumors and reports of a new plan have surfaced periodically over the last year, and a new initiative has yet to materialize. During an interview, Ambassador Friedman indicated that he continues to view peace through a [regional](#) lens and hopes that any US plan would have regional support. US-Palestinian political relations remain tense and adversarial ([reports](#) indicate that security ties remain intact).
- **Settlements** - In an interview with the Times of Israel, Ambassador Friedman [said](#) "I don't believe the settlements are illegal." The State Department did not clarify or respond to his statement. According to Peace Now, [settlement expansion](#) in the West Bank has increased,

\* Rebecca Bornstein is Director of External Relations and Researcher at the Mitvim Institute, [rbornstein@mitvim.org.il](mailto:rbornstein@mitvim.org.il). Previous issues of this monthly report can be read [here](#).

with three times the number of new housing approvals issued in the last 16 months than in the year and a half before President Trump's inauguration.

- **Gaza** - During a White House conference in March, the US, Egypt, and the UN discussed plans for a Gaza ceasefire, including a push for infrastructure development. These plans were put on "[standby](#)" in the lead-up to a new wave of protests starting in June. After the casualties at the Gaza border protests on May 14, the US [blocked](#) a UN Security Council motion expressing "outrage and sorrow at the killing of Palestinian civilians" and [calling](#) for an "independent and transparent investigation." Ambassador Friedman wrote an [op-ed](#) criticizing media coverage of the protests and embassy move. Sen. Sanders (I-VT) [responded](#) " Hamas violence does not justify Israel firing on unarmed protesters. The US must play an aggressive role in bringing Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and the international community together to address Gaza's humanitarian crisis and stop this escalating violence." Later in the month, Ambassador Haley [slammed](#) the Security Council for "failing to condemn" Palestinian rocket attacks from Gaza. Competing Security Council resolutions both [failed](#) when the US vetoed a Kuwaiti-sponsored resolution, and a US-sponsored resolution did not receive sufficient support. The month closed with tensions at their highest point in recent months, with the potential for greater conflict looming.
- **US Policy Towards Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount** - In May, Ambassador Friedman was pictured with a photoshopped image of a third temple replacing the al-Aqsa mosque. Friedman said he was not aware of the image, which was placed in front of him during a visit to the city of Bnei Brak, and his hosting organization [apologized](#) for the "cheap political act," explaining that one of its staff members put the image in front of him without approval. State Department Spokesperson Nauert [reaffirmed](#) that Friedman was unaware of the image and said that US policy is "absolutely clear: we support the status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount."

## C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - An effort by the Assad regime to [retake](#) areas in southwestern Syria from the opposition relates to the interests of the US, Russia, Israel, Iran, and Jordan. The State Department [issued](#) a statement of concern over the situation, as the operation takes place within the borders of a de-escalation zone negotiated by the US, Russia, and Jordan in 2017. The statement urged Russia to "live up to its commitments" and use its leverage over the Assad regime to halt attacks. Both Israel and the US have an interest in preventing Iranian entrenchment in the area. Some experts point out that there could be an [opportunity](#) for the US to contain Iran in southern Syria due to fears among Assad, Hezbollah, and Russia that allowing Iran to entrench its presence there would risk large-scale conflict with Israel and "undermine what they have fought for in the Levant over the past decade."
- **Saudi Arabia/Yemen** - The Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed bipartisan [legislation](#) sponsored by Senators Young (R-IN), Shaheen (D-NH), Collins (R-ME), and Coons (D-DE). The legislation has now been folded into the [proposed](#) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). If passed, it would prevent the U.S. from refueling Saudi coalition aircraft operating in Yemen unless Secretary Pompeo certifies that Saudi Arabia is taking concrete steps to reduce civilian casualties, allow more humanitarian aid into Yemen, and work towards peace. The text contains a national security waiver, but only if Pompeo lists

steps the US would take to bring Saudi Arabia into compliance. The legislation reflects growing bipartisan frustration over the Yemen war and the deteriorating humanitarian situation there.

- **Turkey** - In early May, US-Turkey relations strained over the proposed US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The NDAA contains a provision that, if passed, would temporarily halt the sale of major defense equipment to Turkey until the Defense Department [reports to Congress](#) on the impact that “increasing strains on the U-Turkey relationship, caused by provocative actions taken by the Turkish government” will have on US military and diplomatic activities. On May 24, the NDAA [passed](#) in the House and moved to the Senate for consideration. Amid this backdrop, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and Secretary Pompeo met in early June and the two agreed on a “roadmap” for the withdrawal of Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters from Manbij, Syria. The YPG responded by saying it was prepared to hold talks with the Assad regime over the future of the area. Following the US embassy move to Jerusalem on May 14, Turkey [recalled](#) its ambassadors to Israel and the US; at the end of the month, its ambassador to the US [returned](#) to his post in Washington.

## D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The Future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - On May 8, Trump [terminated US participation in the JCPOA](#) without any replacement. National Security Advisor Bolton [wrote an op-ed](#) applauding the decision. This formalizes the divide between the US and the deal’s European signatories, who want to continue to address the challenges posed by Iran with diplomacy. All other parties to the deal, including Russia and China, vowed to uphold it; Iran is now evaluating whether the deal remains in its national interest. The US position is now weakened by the fracturing of the transatlantic unity that originally led to the JCPOA. Diplomats from Europe, China, and Russia are reportedly discussing [proposals](#) for a new deal, and the EU is seeking [exemptions](#) for its companies from reinstated US sanctions, in an [effort](#) to convince Iran to in compliance with the deal until a new solution is negotiated. Secretary Pompeo demonstrated that the threat of military action against Iran is now back on the table during a speech in which he [said](#) “as President Trump said: if they restart their nuclear program, it will mean bigger problems - bigger problems than they’ve ever had before.”

## E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	Lara Friedman, " <a href="#">Trump's Jerusalem policy and Israeli-Palestinian peace.</a> " <i>LobeLog</i> , May 4, 2018
	Shalom Lipner, " <a href="#">Netanyahu's risky romance with Trump.</a> " <i>Brookings Institution</i> , May 22, 2018
Middle East	Mara Karlin and Frances Z Brown, " <a href="#">Friends with benefits: What the reliance on local partners means for U.S. Strategy.</a> " <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , May 8, 2018
	Tamara Cofman Wittes, " <a href="#">Elections in Lebanon and Iraq offer a glimmer of hope - how the US should prepare for the long term.</a> " <i>Brookings Institution</i> , May 23, 2018
Iran	Julie Smith and Jon Wolfsthal, " <a href="#">Pompeo's Iran plan is a pipe dream.</a> " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , May 21, 2018
	Katrina Manson, " <a href="#">Washington's Iran 'wish list' lacks support from allies: critics say real purpose of demands is to achieve regime change.</a> " <i>Financial Times</i> , May 22, 2018
	Ariane M. Tabatabai, " <a href="#">How Iran will determine the nuclear deal's fate.</a> " <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , May 16, 2018
	Elizabeth Rosenberg, " <a href="#">Leaving the Iran nuclear deal will have unintended consequences: Trump's actions may ultimately weaken the strength of sanctions as atool of U.S. statecraft.</a> " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , May 15, 2018

## F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
May 1	The State Department announces a joint operation between the US, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon to liberate the final ISIS stronghold in Syria
May 8	President Trump announces his decision to end US participation in the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)
May 9	The State Department releases a statement calling on all parties in Yemen to engage in UN-led political dialogue
May 11	The White House releases a statement condemning Iranian aggression against Israel and Saudi Arabia
May 14	Secretary of State Pompeo meets with Foreign Minister Sheikh bin Zayed al-Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates to discuss Iran, the Yemeni war, and the upcoming US-GCC summit
May 14	The US moves its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem
May 15	The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) releases a report regarding concluding that chlorine was used as a chemical weapon in Syria in February
May 24	Vice President Pence speaks with Egyptian President al-Sisi to support al-Sisi's release of 300 prisoners, and discuss the humanitarian situation in Gaza
May 25	The State Department condemns efforts by the Assad regime to conduct operations in southwestern Syria and Russia's moves to block UNSC resolutions to hold Assad accountable for using chemical weapons