

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

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A. US-Israel Relations

- **Election campaign** - Hillary Clinton's significant [lead in the polls](#) in October has led analysts to focus on the potential policies of a Clinton White House, including towards [Israel and Iran](#). Many Clinton supporters see her as [pragmatic](#) on Middle East issues, and do not expect significant policy innovation on Israel/Palestine. On Iran, Clinton would likely balance a [tough line](#) on regional aggression with an attempt to build on the bilateral communications established since the Iran deal. On the Republican side, House Speaker Paul Ryan declined to campaign for Trump in the month before the elections, instead focusing on Congressional races. The congressional focus is shared by many donors, [including Sheldon Adelson](#). Trump's divisive policies have led many Jewish conservatives to [turn away from him](#), particularly due to fears that his campaign incites a [surge in antisemitism](#). In Israel, recent polling by the Israel Democracy Institute shows that a majority of the [Israeli public \(43%\) prefers Clinton](#) (vs 26.5% for Trump), even though Jewish-Israeli voters overwhelmingly believe that Clinton would exert greater pressure on Israel to return to negotiations with the Palestinians.
- **Amona settlement announcement** - The State Department condemned the announcement of new settlement construction in the West Bank as "another step towards cementing a [one-state reality of perpetual occupation](#)." The new housing units are meant for the residents of the Amona settlement, which Israel's Supreme Court has ordered to be dismantled. Condemnations of settlement announcements have become a regular part of the US-Israel relationship, and most diplomatic pressure is applied behind closed doors. The US is not expected to make any policy changes on settlements until [after the election](#), and Prime Minister Netanyahu is reportedly worried that American action prior to the end of President Obama's term - i.e. a UN Security Council resolution on settlements - could "endanger the entire [settlement enterprise](#)."
- **Anti-BDS legislation** - The trend of anti-BDS legislation on the state level continues. Most recently, Pennsylvania's [legislature](#) passed [HB 2107](#), a bill that makes it illegal for companies contracted by the state to participate in any boycott activity. It is common for anti-BDS legislation to group Israel and settlements together, and HB 2017's reference to "a jurisdiction where the Commonwealth is not prohibited... from engaging in trade or commerce" can also be used to prohibit the [boycott of settlement goods](#). The bill awaits the signature of Gov. Tom Wolfe. A recent article in the Jerusalem Post traces some of the [origins of the anti-BDS legislative movement](#), which will likely continue throughout the US over the next year.

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B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Obama parameters?** - The window for potential action on new American [parameters for the two-state solution](#) or other steps towards Israeli-Palestinian peace opens shortly after the November elections. The [possible benefits of introducing Obama parameters](#) include greater clarity over a final-status agreement, the solidification of an international consensus on key issues, and renewed momentum. Parameters could be introduced as a presidential speech, and then potentially enshrined in a [new Security Council Resolution or endorsed by a relevant international forum](#). There is growing [discussion within the US](#) and [Israel](#) over if and what potential action the Obama administration may take before leaving office. In addition to parameters, these options include authoring a UN Security Council Resolution on final status issues, or opting not to [veto a potential resolution](#) against continued settlement building.
- **UN action on settlements** - The UN Security Council [Special Session on Illegal Settlements](#) included representatives from [Americans for Peace](#) now and [B'Tselem](#), and attracted a great deal of attention in the US. State Department Spokesperson Ernest Vasquez expressed [gratitude](#) for the efforts of non-governmental organizations like B'Tselem. On settlements, he said "We strongly, clearly and consistently reject these activities which erode peace efforts." In response to Israeli criticism of B'Tselem, the State Department said "it is important that governments [protect the freedom of expression](#), and create an atmosphere where all voices can be heard. We are troubled by instances anywhere in the world where these principles are threatened."
- **UNESCO resolution and Jerusalem** - A group of Jewish members of Congress [condemned](#) UNESCO's resolution on "Occupied Palestine," which refers to Jerusalem holy sites by Muslim names only. The US opposed the resolution, and State Department Spokesperson Mark Toner criticized it, saying that the UNESCO resolution is one of many "[recurring, politicized resolutions](#) that do nothing to advance constructive results on the ground."

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - Syria remains in an urgent humanitarian crisis. Russia is reportedly preparing for a [new military assault](#) on Aleppo, and Syrian regime forces and rebels are locked in combat, as rebels attempt to break the siege over the city. Although the US formally suspended US-Russia bilateral engagement on Syria, both parties are engaged in [multilateral discussions](#) in Geneva, in an attempt to expand an earlier, temporary "[humanitarian pause](#)" in Aleppo into a larger ceasefire. This latest round of talks has yet to produce any new action, and mounting civilian casualties have led to widespread accusations of war crimes.

UN Special Envoy de Mistura was [appalled](#) by the indiscriminate rocket launches of armed opposition groups near Aleppo, and Secretary of State John Kerry and US United Nations (USUN) Ambassador Samantha Power have both accused Russia and the Syrian regime of war crimes. New [reports](#) prove that 'elements of the regime' have used industrial chlorine, a [chemical weapon](#), against the Syrian people several times since 2015. National Security Council Spokesperson Ned Price "condemned in the strongest possible terms the regime's abrogation of its responsibilities" under the Chemical Weapons Convention, and said that

"Russian military and economic support to Syria" [enables such violations of international law](#) by Assad.

Foreign policy experts looking towards a potential Clinton presidency are focused on what new steps her administration could take; there is a consensus that she would [increase US military engagement](#) under the belief that resolving the Syrian war is critical to the war on terrorism, and that the US must [amass more leverage](#) to achieve a political solution. Clinton has spoken of [increasing targeted airstrikes](#), providing additional support to Kurdish and Sunni rebels, and "[creating a coalition no-fly zone](#) in the air coupled with safe zones on the ground." The Obama administration's Syria policy faces widespread criticism, and there is a need for a stronger discussion on alternative actions. To that end, former CIA official and independent presidential candidate Evan McMullin has put forth a series of Syria proposals, including [no-fly zones, humanitarian safe zones, and increased arms to moderate opposition fighters](#).

- **Yemen** - American involvement in Yemen is increasing, amid growing tensions with Iran and Saudi Arabia over their respective actions in the country. The US Navy recently conducted three "[limited self-defense strikes](#)" against Houthi-controlled radar sites on Yemen's Red Sea coast. The State Department [downplayed](#) the event, asserting that they were "very specific strikes" taken in response to direct maritime provocations (the targeting of US vessels in nearby waters) that "do not indicate support for [Saudi] coalition operations in Yemen." US officials believe Iran is supplying weapons to the Houthis, [including coastal defense cruise missiles](#) like the ones fired at US ships. US Naval Forces Central Command announced that the US and partner nations have intercepted five weapons shipments from Iran. Amid growing civilian casualties at the hands of the Saudi-led coalition operating in Yemen, the US has reduced support to the coalition, and is conducting an additional review of its role [this review is discussed in detail in the Saudi section below]. According to the UN, Yemeni civilians have reportedly [exhausted all of their survival strategies](#), and hunger is mounting. The US is engaged in ongoing efforts to reach a [peaceful political resolution](#) to the war but efforts to enforce a ceasefire have yet to succeed.
- **Iraq/ISIS** - On October 17, an Iraqi-led coalition initiated an offensive to retake Mosul from the Islamic State. The coalition recently entered the outskirts of Mosul, with the support of American military advisors and a [US-led coalition](#). State Department Deputy Secretary Blinken has been engaged in meetings to prepare for what comes after the liberation of Mosul, including [humanitarian assistance and stabilization support](#). The US is now engaged in planning the fight to retake Raqqa, which senior Defense Department and military officials say must begin soon to [disrupt the planning of possible attacks](#) against the West.
- **Saudi Arabia** - The controversial [Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act](#) (JASTA) is now public law in the US, despite claims by Republican members of Congress that they would rewrite the bill after overriding President Obama's veto. The State Department remains concerned that the bill, which allows relatives of the 9/11 victims to sue the Saudi government, potentially leaves individual American service-members vulnerable to reciprocal lawsuits abroad. JASTA, and the animosity toward the Saudi government that propelled it, has been called "a reflection of the [growing weakness of America's oldest alliance](#) in the Middle East that goes well beyond 9/11." Indeed, the bilateral relationship weathers constant criticism over oil interests, human rights, and, increasingly, the war in Yemen.

In early October, Saudi planes mistakenly bombed a funeral in Yemen, causing hundreds of civilian casualties. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, NSC Spokesperson Ned Price announced that "[US security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check](#)... In light of recent incidents, we have initiated an immediate review of our already significantly reduced support to the Saudi-led coalition, and are prepared to adjust our support so as to better align

with US principles, values, and interests." Price and USUN Ambassador Samantha Power called on the coalition to immediately commit to a ceasefire agreement. There is skepticism within the policy community over this review, however, and some believe that it is designed to buy time instead of creating clarity or new policy outcomes.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran-US relations** - The future of the Iran deal, and the shaky bilateral communications that have emerged in its wake, will face a new test as both countries look towards upcoming presidential elections (Iran's will be held in May). The effects of the Iran deal will play a role in both elections:

In the US, the Iran deal remains a partisan issue. Trump has called it the "worst deal ever," although this hasn't resonated strongly with the electorate. Threats by right-wing organizations that Congressional supporters of the deal would pay a heavy electoral price have not materialized, and there is speculation that conservative Jewish groups have "held their fire" due to their wariness towards the dangers of Trump presidency (including anti-Semitic incitement). Clinton has committed to continuing "vigorous enforcement" of the deal and implementing a broader strategy to confront Iran's actions in the Middle East. Despite this divide, there is a cold consensus in DC that the Iran deal is working: skeptics point to Iran's regional aggression and ballistic missile tests, but no longer base their criticism on nuclear weapons.

Within Tehran, pre-election debate centers on whether sanctions relief has improved the economy, Iran's global standing, and the chances of increased international trade through deals like the ones underway with Boeing and Airbus. While the deals remain in process, despite opposition in the US Congress, Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg reported that delivery dates are "a year, two, three downstream." This may make it more difficult for moderate Iranians who support the deal to demonstrate its tangible benefits before the election.

Regardless, the incoming American and Iranian administrations will have to decide how to manage a challenging bilateral relationship. Some analysts urge the current administrations to protect the progress made by institutionalizing their relationship, which currently depends on the top-level Kerry-Zarif working relationship.

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	<p>Dan Arbell, "Does Obama really have a November surprise planned for Israel and the Palestinians?" Brookings Institution, October 17, 2016</p> <p>Daniel Kurtzer, "Sleight of hand: Israel, settlements, and unauthorized outposts," Middle East Institute, October 2016</p> <p>Philip Gordon, "The crisis in US-Israel relations: Are Washington and Jerusalem drifting apart?" Foreign Affairs, November/December Issue</p> <p>Michael Herzog, "The Israeli-Palestinian Arena - what could be done short of an agreement?" Fathom, October 2016</p> <p>Armin Rosen, "Jewish Voters are in love with Hillary's Pragmatism. What does that mean for Mideast policy?" Tablet, October 2016</p>
Middle East	<p>CAP Middle East Team, "Leveraging US Power in the Middle East: A Blueprint for Strengthening Regional Partnerships," Center for American Progress, October 2016</p> <p>Marc Lynch, "What's really at stake in the Syria debate?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 10, 2016</p> <p>Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, "Memo to the next president: avoid the 'vision thing' in the Mideast," Politico, October 31, 2016</p> <p>Aron Lund, "Constructively Ambiguous: Hillary Clinton may intervene more in Syria, but don't assume she's a hardened interventionist." Carnegie Middle East Center, Oct 17, 2016</p> <p>Daniel L. Byman, "Truly winning the battle of Mosul," Brookings Institution, October 18, 2016</p> <p>John Allen and Charles Lister, "Bring Syria's Assad and his backers to account now," Washington Post, October 21, 2016</p>
Iran	<p>Martin Chulov, "Amid Syrian chaos, Iran's game plan emerges: a path to the Mediterranean," The Guardian, Oct 8, 2016</p> <p>Ariane Tabatabai, "How to ensure the Iran nuclear deal survives the next president," The New York Times, October 20, 2016</p> <p>Michael Wilner, "The coming shift: Hillary Clinton's plans for Israel and Iran," Jerusalem Post, October 27, 2016</p> <p>Dan de Luce and Molly O'Toole, "Democrats will have Trump to thank for getting a political pass on the Iran nuclear Deal," Foreign Policy, October 24, 2016</p>

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
October 5	John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov discuss Aleppo, despite the formal break in bilateral cooperation on Syria
October 6	John Kerry says that Russia and the Assad regime's actions in Syria require a war crimes investigation
October 9	John Kerry spoke with Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince and foreign minister on Sunday to reiterate the United States' "deep concern" about an airstrike on a funeral gathering in Yemen
October 14	The UN Security Council holds a special session on Israeli settlements
October 17	An Iraqi-led coalition, assisted by American military advisers, begins an offensive campaign to retake Mosul from the Islamic State
October 20	John Kerry meets with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir to discuss Yemen and Syria
October 26	President Obama has a call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss Syria and regional issues
October 30	The Iraqi-led coalition enters Mosul, with the support of the US
October 31	John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif receive the Chatham House Prize for their conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal