

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

- **“Greater Jerusalem” Bill** - US pressure [reportedly delayed](#) a Knesset vote on a bill to [annex specific settlements](#) into a Greater Jerusalem municipality. A senior administration official [commented](#) that “the US is discouraging actions that it believes will unduly distract the principals from focusing on the advancement of peace negotiations. The Jerusalem expansion bill was considered by the Administration to be one of those actions.”
- **Anti-BDS Legislation and Free Speech** - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is advancing the first major [case](#) that challenges anti-BDS legislation on free-speech grounds. Meanwhile, proponents of such legislation were caught off guard earlier this month, when Texans applying for [state hurricane relief](#) were asked to promise not to boycott Israel before receiving aid (the requirement was later [cancelled](#)). J Street Vice President Rachel Lerner described the incident as “embarrassing and [harmful to Israel](#) [...] it puts support for Israel on the opposite side of free speech.” The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) described the requirement as “misguided and constitutionally problematic.” Despite growing concern over free-speech considerations, states continue to pass similar bills and executive orders. In October, governors signed executive orders (EOs) in [Maryland](#) and [Wisconsin](#) barring anyone who boycotts Israel from doing business with the state. The Maryland EO applies equally to “Israel and its territories,” barring those who boycott settlement goods from state business.

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Palestinian Reconciliation Efforts** - Following the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, Special Representative Greenblatt said that it is essential that the Palestinian Authority assume full and unhindered civil and security responsibilities in Gaza, and that Hamas must accept the [basic requirements of the Quartet principles](#) in order to play any role in a Palestinian government. These principles include committing to nonviolence, recognizing the State of Israel, accepting previous agreements and obligations (including disarming terrorists), and committing to peaceful negotiations. Senior White House officials applauded [Egypt’s continued mediation efforts](#).

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- **Economic Development and Peace** - The American focus on Palestinian economic development includes a [\\$10 million project to support the water sector in Jericho](#). According to US Consulate Spokesperson Clayton Alderman, “the US government invests in water and wastewater infrastructure to improve the daily lives of Palestinians and enhance the prospects for lasting peace.” Greenblatt confirmed that “a key element in the peace process is a prosperous economy.” Israel’s Finance Minister Kahlon and Palestinian Prime Minister Hamdallah [met for talks](#) as part of the US-led initiative to improve economic relations.
- **UNESCO Withdrawal** - The US notified UNESCO of its [decision to withdraw](#) from the organization over “mounting arrears at UNESCO, the need for fundamental reform in the organization, and continuing anti-Israel bias at UNESCO.” Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that Israel would also leave the organization. The US decision is largely [symbolic](#); it already lost UNESCO voting privileges in 2013 and will now seek non-member observer status.

C. The Changing Middle East

- **The GCC Crisis** - The Trump administration [acknowledges](#) that the GCC crisis undermines productive regional engagement, and that Iran benefits from the division. Secretary of State Tillerson says that the US plans to support the emir of Kuwait’s diplomatic efforts, but has not invited the parties to the White House because [“there is not a strong indication that the parties are ready to talk yet.”](#)
- **Saudi Arabia** - Following State Department approval of a [possible sale of a THAAD anti-missile defense system](#) to Saudi Arabia (at an estimated cost of \$15 billion), Congress has 30 days to object before the sale proceeds. The [Defense Security Cooperation Agency](#) said that the sale “furthers US national security and foreign policy interests, and supports the long-term security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region in the face of Iranian and other regional threats.”
- **The Islamic State** - The House Committee on Armed Services held a hearing on [“Securing the Peace after the Fall of ISIL,”](#) that included current and former policy officials and experts. The testimony included a focus on political and economic reconstruction to prevent another insurgency or failure of the Iraqi state. The recapture of Raqqa has become a partisan issue, with [Trump claiming](#) that “because you didn’t have Trump as your president, it was a big difference,” and that the Islamic State is “giving up, they’re raising their hands [...] nobody’s ever seen that before.” Meanwhile, Former Defense Secretary Ash Carter told CNN that the plan to capture Raqqa [“was laid out two years ago,](#) and has been executed pretty much in the manner and the schedule that was foreseen then.”
- **Syria** - Tillerson and UN Special Envoy for Syria de Mistura met to “discuss next steps” towards a resolution to the Syrian war. Both committed to “de-escalate the violence and support the Geneva process called for under UN Security Council Resolution 2254,” but the Geneva process unfortunately shows no sign of new energy, and the parties have no new leverage over the conflict. Tillerson said that the US “wants a whole and unified Syria with no role for Bashar al-Assad in the government,” but State Department Spokesperson Nauert later equivocated, saying that “we do not see a Syria in the long run with the Assad regime running it [...] but ultimately that will be a Syrian-led decision.” The validity of an authentic “Syrian-led decision” is sharply undermined by demographics: after years of war, vast numbers of Syrians who oppose Assad have been killed, internally displaced, or fled the country.

- **Yemen** - The war in Yemen continues, with relatively little media exposure. A limited [Congressional push](#) sought to call on Trump to end US military assistance to the Saudi-led coalition's activities in Yemen. The first iteration of [H. Con. Res. 81](#) directed Trump to remove US armed forces from Yemen, except those engaged in operations against al-Qaeda affiliates. But pressure from the House of Representative's leadership led to a [new resolution](#) scrapping the "removal of armed forces" clause, urging support for the Saudi coalition, and calling on countries to "take appropriate and necessary measures against Iran, including the interdiction of Iranian weapons to the Houthis."
- **Kurdish Referendum** - The US cited bad timing for its decision not to support the Kurdish independence [referendum](#), which Tillerson described as [a distraction from the fight to defeat the Islamic State](#). Following the referendum, Iraqi security forces clashed with Kurdish fighters. Reports that some Iraqi forces fought with equipment provided by the US caused an uproar. Senator McCain described the situation as [totally unacceptable](#), and emphasized the longstanding US-Kurdish friendship and lack of a broader US Middle East strategy (a fault that McCain attributed to the Obama administration).

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - Trump's decision not to certify Iranian JCPOA compliance to Congress by October 15 opens a 60-day window in which Congress can introduce legislation to re-impose nuclear sanctions on Iran. Doing so would effectively kill the deal without any evidence of an Iranian violation. [International support](#) for the deal remains strong among P5+1 signatories and allies, and EU High Representative Mogherini reportedly made clear that [there is no interest in reopening or renegotiating](#) the deal, and that non-nuclear concerns with Iran should be addressed in a parallel track that does not jeopardize the JCPOA. Recent [CNN polling](#) indicates that two-thirds of Americans prefer that the US not withdraw from the deal.

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	Simone Zimmerman, "In America, self-declared Nazis can get state aid. Israel boycotters increasingly can't." <i>Haaretz</i> , October 23, 2017
	Shalom Lipner, "Is Trump ruining the US-Israeli relationship?" <i>Brookings Institution</i> , October 10, 2017
Middle East	Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Mapped: the last Islamic State stronghold in Syria." <i>Foreign Policy</i> , October 4, 2017
	Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "The Middle Eastern roots of nuclear alarmism over North Korea." <i>War on the Rocks</i> , October 3, 2017
	Melissa Dalton, "Empowering sustainable partners in the fight and aftermath in Syria's Deir Ezzor." <i>Center for Strategic and International Studies</i> , October 16, 2017
Iran	Shireen Hunter, "The real causes of America's troubled relations with Iran." <i>Lobe Log</i> , October 16, 2017
	Suzanne Maloney, "Why Trump's decertification of the Iran deal matters." <i>Brookings Institution</i> , October 13, 2017
	Kelsey Davenport, "Trump sets US up to violate Iran deal." <i>Arms Control Association</i> , November 2017
	Elizabeth Rosenberg and Ilan Goldenberg, "If Trump won't certify the nuke deal, he should do this instead." <i>Foreign Policy</i> , October 10, 2017

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
October 6	The State Department approves a possible \$15 billion sale of THAAD missiles to Saudi Arabia
October 10	The State Department holds a briefing on efforts to counter Hezbollah
October 12	The US informs UNESCO of its decision to withdraw from the organization and seek to establish a permanent observer mission
October 13	Trump releases a new Iran strategy
October 14	Trump speaks with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia on Iran, GCC cooperation, and other regional issues
October 16	US and Israeli officials convene for the 32nd session of the US-Israel Joint Economic Development Group (JEDG), the annual economic policy dialogue
October 20	Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Tina Kaidanow travels to Israel, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq
October 20-26	Secretary of State Tillerson travels to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, India, and Switzerland
October 21	Trump announces that Syrian Democratic Forces have successfully recaptured Raqqa
October 25-29	Jared Kushner makes an unannounced trip to Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt
October 26	House of Representatives Unanimously Approves New Sanctions on Hezbollah
October 30	The White House commends the decision of Masoud Barzani not to seek an additional term as President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the vote of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament to distribute presidential authorities to other Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) institutions