

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** - Despite [reports](#) that the US and Israel are close to agreement on a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) on military aid, negotiations continue. While the new ten-year aid package reportedly includes guaranteed funding for missile defense projects, it also prohibits Israeli officials from lobbying for additional funds for the duration of the agreement. Most critically, the American proposal reportedly seeks to end Israel's twenty-eight year exemption from spending aid money on [American goods and services](#). Israel currently converts 26% of aid into shekels for spending on its [own defense industry](#), and sources report that the US has offered two options for ending the exemption: a [seven-year grace period](#), or [a phased end to the exemption](#), perhaps over the MOU's last five years.
- **Election campaign** - General election campaigning is underway, and the focus on Israel seen during the party primaries has been replaced by a focus on other [domestic](#) and [foreign policy](#) priorities. Prime Minister Netanyahu has been [quiet](#) on the campaigns, likely as a result of the uproar following his perceived interference in the 2012 elections coupled with his uncertainty over both candidates. While Hillary Clinton leads in the polls in most swing states, the race has recently [tightened](#). Despite [pockets of support](#) for Trump among American voters in Israel, a [new Gallup poll](#) shows that 52% of American Jewish voters hold favorable views of Clinton, and only 23% favor Trump. Among Israelis, a [recent Walla news poll](#) shows that 38% favor Clinton and 23% favor Trump.
- **Anti-BDS legislation** - Anti-BDS legislation continues to move through State legislatures. This month, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie signed [legislation](#) that prohibits the state from investing in pension and annuity funds that boycott Israel or entities operating in Israel or "Israeli-controlled territory." The inclusion of "Israeli-controlled territory" (which includes settlements) in anti-BDS legislation is common. Indiana Gov. and Republican Vice Presidential Nominee Mike Pence received press coverage for his recent signature of Indiana's [HB-1378](#), which Israeli Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer called "the [toughest anti-BDS legislation](#) in the nation." California's State Assembly also passed the amended [AB-2844](#). A previous draft of the bill, originally called the "California Combatting BDS Act of 2016" was [criticized by California's ACLU](#) for "penalizing constitutionally-protected political speech." The revised bill, which now moves to Gov. Jerry Brown for approval, requires companies to certify that they are in compliance with State civil rights legislation, and that "any policy that they have adopted against any sovereign nation...is not used to discriminate."

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- **Black Lives Matter and Israel** - A collective of organizations associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement released a broad [policy platform](#) that includes a highly controversial foreign policy section. The platform calls Israel an apartheid state, promotes divestment campaigns to end US military aid, and accuses the US of complicity in “genocide against the Palestinian people.” BLM is an increasingly influential movement in American public discourse that has attracted significant support among progressives for its contributions against systemic racism and towards racial justice. The platform is now dividing American [progressives](#), especially in the [Jewish community](#), who support the two-state solution, oppose the [occupation](#) and Israel’s settlement building enterprise, yet [strongly disagree](#) with the platform’s language, and are repulsed by its reference to [genocide](#).
- **Planned demolitions in Susya** - Civil society organizations are increasingly involved in a campaign against the Israeli government’s latest round of planned demolitions in the Palestinian village of Susya. [JStreet](#), the [New Israel Fund](#), and the American [Union for Reform Judaism](#) have all lobbied against the move, and J Street is petitioning for Secretary Kerry to intervene. The State Department publicly opposes any demolitions in Susya, and reports indicate that it has been strongly lobbying the Israeli government [behind the scenes](#). The Israeli government’s decision on Susya has been delayed until October 30. While there is time for these efforts to gain public support, the timing of the decision means that the issue risks being eclipsed by the election in the American media.

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Israeli-Arab cooperation** - Saudi Arabian Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Anwar Eshki’s official meeting with Israeli Ambassador Dore Gold in Jerusalem elevated the issue of [Israeli-Arab cooperation](#) in American discourse. Regional instability, coupled with shared animosity towards Iran, is pulling Israel and its Arab neighbors closer together, and it is not clear what effect this will have on the Palestinian issue. Ultimately, the Arab states must decide how much cooperation they are willing to establish with Israel prior to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Meanwhile, American policymakers would do well to emphasize even greater regional cooperation in any future peace initiative, and to emphasize the linkage between advanced regional cooperation and progress in the peace process.
- **Quartet Report and settlement activity** - UN Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov [told the Security Council](#) that the [Quartet report](#) recommendations “continue to be ignored, including by a surge in Israeli settlement-related announcements and continuing demolitions.” Mladenov warned that preparations for the October 8 Palestinian local council elections are taking place in an environment devoid of any prospects for resuming negotiations. The US agrees that there has been a “very significant [acceleration of Israeli settlement activity](#)” that “runs directly counter to the conclusions of the report.” The State Department’s public criticism of Israel’s settlement enterprise has been relatively mild, as its “strong concern” does not seem to be accompanied by any tangible political cost. Recently, White House Spokesperson Josh Earnest hinted that the US may consider a [“different kind of response.”](#) although he cautioned that “we would start by having that conversation privately.”

- **A Moscow peace summit?** - Russia's Vladimir Putin [reportedly](#) told Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi that he would be [willing to host direct talks](#) between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Moscow, and Egypt's al-Sisi noted his [support](#) for such a move. The State Department [responded](#) that Secretary Kerry welcomes "any new idea, initiative, or option that can get us closer to a viable two-state solution." The Wilson Center's Aaron David Miller, former former advisor to Republican and Democratic Secretaries of State on Arab-Israeli negotiations, believes that a Russian-led effort [would not succeed](#).

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria** - The situation in Syria has dramatically deteriorated due to the breakdown of the cessation of hostilities agreement, rising violence, and increasing tensions between the US and Russia. On August 25, Secretary Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and their technical teams [met in Geneva](#) to work towards a new, enforceable ceasefire and increased humanitarian assistance. At the same time, US-Russian discussions on joint military cooperation have [stalled](#). The US is focused on the fight against the [Islamic State](#), and is sharply critical of Russia's allocation of significant military resources to Assad's forces. The White House announced that Syrian government assets - including aircraft - have been used to [target civilians and medical facilities](#), with the full support of Russia and Iran, a move that Spokesperson Josh Earnest described as "beyond the pale." Progress against the Islamic State, Earnest said, has "come in spite of the actions of the Russians who continue to engage in activities that only fuel extremism." In the meantime, Iran granted Russia use of an air base for its [military operations in Syria](#); many analysts believe that Russia is sending the US a message that it has other options for military cooperation, should the US not agree to a deal, and that the US is losing leverage in Syria. Iran was reportedly [displeased with the publicity surrounding Russia's use of its air base](#), and Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Bahram Ghasemi said that use of the airbase was temporary and has ended.
- **Turkey** - Vice President Biden traveled to Turkey in the aftermath of the attempted coup to show solidarity and attempt to improve strained Turkish-American relations. Biden met with [President Erdoğan](#) and [Prime Minister Yıldırım](#), and discussed the bilateral relationship and cooperation against the Islamic State. The potential extradition of Fethullah Gülen remains a point of contention; Turkey has submitted an official request, and the matter is now with an American federal court with the constitutional authority to investigate and process it. It is unclear whether the [extradition will be approved](#), and disagreement between the two countries over President Erdoğan's post-coup crackdown continues. Popular anti-American sentiment in Turkey is at a high point, and it includes rumors of US involvement in the attempted coup. The US has called such rumors "[utterly false and harmful](#)," and two prominent think tanks, the [Woodrow Wilson Center](#) and the [Middle East Institute](#), categorically rejected claims that their scholars were involved. Finally, the US has voiced [concern](#) about Turkish operations against Kurdish YPG fighters in areas of northern Syria that are free from the Islamic State.
- **Yemen** - The crisis in Yemen -- which began in March 2015 -- continues to spread, and Saudi-led airstrikes into northern Yemen have led to civilian casualties. In response, reports indicate that missiles from Iran are being positioned on [Yemen's border](#) with Saudi Arabia. In August, the US, UK, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia met to discuss methods for [advancing the peace process](#) on the basis of [UN Resolution 2216](#). The US also announced an increase in its [humanitarian assistance](#) to Yemen that will bring the total amount to more than \$327M for fiscal year 2016.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- Iran-US relations** - The Iran nuclear deal is again becoming a hot-button [partisan issue](#), due to the upcoming presidential election and overall contentious nature of bilateral relations. Both presidential candidates seek to establish themselves as credible, tough figures [on Iran](#). While the nuclear deal remains successful, the broader US-Iranian relationship shows no sign of rapprochement. Iran continues to increase its [cyber](#) capabilities and ballistic missile development, and low-level confrontations between the two countries continue. Most recently, U.S. Army Gen. Joseph Votel, Commander of the US Central Command, sharply criticized Iran for ["provocative" naval actions in the Gulf](#), including a recent uptick of confrontations with IRGC patrol boats at critical choke points in the Gulf.

E. Further reading

| Topic | Articles |
|------------------------|--|
| Israel / Peace Process | Dan De Luce and Paul McLeary, "Obama to Israel: Our Tax Dollars Won't Go to Your Defense Contractors." <i>Foreign Policy</i> , August 18, 2016 |
| | David Pollock, "The New Normal: Today's Arab Debate Over Ties with Israel." <i>Fikra Forum</i> , August 25, 2016 |
| Middle East | F. Gregory Gause III, "The Future of US-Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and the Power." <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , July/August 2016 Issue |
| | Aaron David Miller, "On Syria, the US is Watching Other Powers Act." <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , August 31, 2016 |
| | Kemal Kirisci, "Is Biden's Visit to Ankara the Last Chance for Turkey and America?" <i>The Brookings Institution</i> , August 23, 2016 |
| | Jim Baird, "US Nuclear Weapons in Turkey at Risk of Seizure by Terrorists, Hostile Forces." <i>The Stimson Center</i> , August 14, 2016 |
| | Joseph R. Biden, Jr. "Building on Success: Opportunities for the Next Administration." <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , September/October 2016 Issue |
| Iran | Suzanne Maloney, "Iran and the "Ransom:" It's Not About the Money." <i>The Brookings Institution</i> , August 19, 2016 |

F. Monthly Timeline

| Date | Event |
|--------------|--|
| August 17 | The US, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK welcome the announcement by the Presidency Council of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) appointing an Interim Steering Committee of the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) |
| August 21 | The State Department condemns the bombing in Gaziantep, Turkey |
| August 25 | The US, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and UK meet to discuss the situation in Yemen and ways to advance the peace process |
| August 25 | Vice President Biden meets Turkish President Erdoğan in Ankara |
| August 28-30 | Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon travels to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Ramallah |