



Congressional Update

Week Ending February 24, 2017

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Congress has been in recess this past week in observance of Presidents' Day so capitol Hill has been relatively quiet. The House and Senate will reconvene on Monday, February 27. On Tuesday, February 28, President Trump will address a joint session of Congress.

I. Travel Ban Redux

According to press reports, such as [Fox News](#), [CNN](#) and [USA Today](#), President Trump is expected to announce his new travel ban next week. The revised travel ban is a new and revised version after US federal courts blocked the January 27 [Executive Order](#), "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States."

While the text is not available to the public, reportedly the revised ban will continue to target the seven predominantly Muslim countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, and Libya. However, the new travel ban will differ in that it will no longer direct US authorities to single out and reject Syrian refugees when processing new visa applications. Moreover, green card holders and dual citizens of the United States and any of the seven countries are exempt.

II. Syria

Corker-Cardin Letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson Regarding Syria War Crimes: On February 23, in reaction to a recent [report by Amnesty International](#) accusing the Bashar al-Assad regime of atrocities in Syrian prisons, Senators Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) and Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, respectively, sent a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asking for an update on US plans to demand accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the Syrian civil war.

"In light of Amnesty International's report and the exhaustive documentation by Caesar and other courageous Syrians, we respectfully request that you work to ensure Assad, Russia, and Iran are made to answer for the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria," the letter states. "We also ask that you provide an update on the steps the Administration is taking to document war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, and planned U.S. support to the accountability process that must be part of a political agreement to end the war." The full text of the letter is [here](#).

In addition to Corker and Cardin, the letter was signed by Senators Todd Young (R-Indiana), Marco Rubio (R-Florida), Cory Gardner (R-Colorado), Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey), Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire), Chris Coons (D-Delaware), Tom Udall (D-New Mexico), Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut), Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), Edward J. Markey (D-Massachusetts), Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon), and Cory Booker (D-New Jersey).

Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire) Calls for a Syria Study Group: On February 22, Senator Shaheen, a member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, as well as the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs, requested that Congress create a [Syria Study Group](#), similar to the Iraq Study Group established in 2006, to conduct “a top to bottom review” of US Syria policy.

The request, sent to Senators Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont), the Chairman and Ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs, comes as a time that the Pentagon is nearing the end of a 30-day review of the US government’s strategy to counter Islamic State strategy, ordered by President Trump. The review has reportedly considered recommending sending conventional ground forces to Syria for the first time. Shaheen said “such an effort would ... allow Congress to support a policy approach that closes the current gap between U.S. goals and concrete U.S. commitments while ensuring that any escalation of U.S. involvement is not undertaken for its own sake but is part of a strategy to achieve critical U.S. objectives in Syria.” The Iraq Study Group—a bipartisan 10-person panel created by Congress—released the December 2006 report calling for a significant increase in the number of US military personnel embedded with the Iraqi army. That review, she said, “was only made possible” with funding support by the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee.

III. Designating the Muslim Brotherhood a Terrorist Organization

As reported in the [January 26 Congressional Update](#), bills have been introduced in the Senate and House which would designate the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).

Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act of 2017: [S68](#) and [HR377](#). Introduced on January 9 by Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) in the Senate and Representative Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Florida) in the House, the bills would designate the MB a foreign terrorist organization. The bills have been referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) and to the House Judiciary Committee, respectively.

The two bills would require the secretary of state to provide a report to 12 congressional committees within 60 days of the designation that:

(1) indicates whether the MB meets the criteria for designation as a foreign terrorist organization under Section 219(a) of the Immigration and Nationality Act; and,

(2) includes a detailed justification as to which criteria have not been met, if the secretary of state determines that the MB does not meet the criteria referred to in paragraph (1) of the Act.

Sponsors of the bills said when they introduced them that they had the support of President Trump. Rumors abound that President Trump is considering an executive order to declare the MB an FTO. The president is facing opposition from the CIA and intelligence community, so it remains unclear if he will do so by executive order. If Congress passes legislation designating the MB an FTO, the president more than likely would sign the bill into law, despite the objections of the CIA. Trump has demonstrated no confidence in the intelligence community and has ignored much of their advice.

President Trump does not share the perspective of the former Obama Administration, which did not view the MB as a foreign terrorist organization. The MB has denounced terrorism, and longstanding US policy has viewed the MB as a legitimate political party. While some individuals of the MB have been designated as terrorists, the MB, writ large, is not seen as a terrorist organization. The [Project on Middle East Democracy \(POMED\)](#) has published a timely background piece, which President Trump may find useful, on the problems of designating the MB a foreign terrorist organization.

IV. Senator McCain Secretly Travels to Syria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia

Over the congressional recess Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) secretly traveled to northern Syria to speak with American military officials and Kurdish fighters involved in the push to drive the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) out of Raqqa.

The trip occurs as the Trump Administration is debating plans for an accelerated military campaign against ISIL, including whether and how to incorporate Kurdish forces, as it finalizes a 30-day Pentagon review called for by President Trump. The trip has angered members of the alt-right, who see McCain as undermining President Trump and his ability to conduct foreign policy. McCain's trip also was not well-received by the Trump Administration as McCain, in recent days, has increased his criticism of the Trump Administration's foreign policy, leading the New York Times to [label](#) McCain as "the Critic in Chief" of President Trump.

McCain also visited Turkey, where he had a ["warm and constructive"](#) meeting with President Erdoğan, who has been pushing President Trump not to arm the Syrian Kurdish forces despite the fact that US military leaders view the Kurds as a vital ally in the fight against ISIL. McCain also

visited Saudi Arabia, where the idea of deepening bilateral relations was discussed. His visit comes days before a new round of UN-brokered peace negotiations on Syria in Geneva.

V. Political Potpourri

Democratic National Committee (DNC) Chairmanship Race: Democrats traveled to Atlanta, Georgia this past week to vote on the next [DNC chair](#). Currently the race to head the DNC is limited to three candidates: Representative Keith Ellison (D-Minnesota), former Labor Secretary Tom Perez, and South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg. While Ellison and Perez have been neck and neck for some time, party leaders are growing uncomfortable with what is increasingly being seen as a debate between those associated with President Obama and Secretary Clinton (Perez) and those associated with the campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders (Ellison). That tension has left the door open for newcomer Buttigieg, who performed well in the Wednesday night candidates' debate. The DNC is set to vote on Saturday, February 25, and the race is tightening. It is unlikely that any of the three candidates will claim victory in the first round; rather, several rounds of voting are anticipated before a leader is chosen. Should Ellison, the only Muslim member of Congress, emerge as the winner, he has said that he would resign from his congressional seat.

VI. At the Think Tanks

Opportunities for Opposition in Israel: Promoting Democracy, Equality, and Peace in a Challenging Environment. On February 23, the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution held a presentation followed by questions and discussion with Member of Knesset Ayman Odeh, who is also head of the Joint List and Secretary General of the Hadash Party. Dr. Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow at Brookings and Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, served as moderator.

MK Ayman Odeh discussed the importance of the Joint List as a voice for Palestinian citizens in Israel. As the third largest faction in the Knesset, he said that the four united Arab parties can, in fact, sway elections. Indeed, Odeh noted that such political involvement is not only a form of political expression for the Palestinians, but also a way to influence politics in Israel. He said that real peace and democracy in Israel cannot be achieved without the full participation of its Palestinian citizens, who represent about 20 percent of the total population of the country. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, continues to delegitimize the Palestinians in the Israeli political arena and paints them as the enemy. If the Israeli political elite genuinely wants democracy, Odeh maintained, then they must see the Palestinians as legitimate and natural allies; but this will not happen if the sole and overarching goal of Israeli leaders is to hustle for power in the Knesset.

Odeh explained that the Joint List parties need to keep reaching out to other constituencies and building coalitions, such as with the Israeli Meretz Party, a left-wing group that opposes the occupation and supports full equality of Arab citizens. Where the Palestinian political leaders have failed, he said, is in reaching out to Mizrahi Jews, who trace their history to Arab countries and are culturally Arab. However, there is now an activist movement in the Mizrahi community that supports the Joint List. Israeli public opinion is important as well, with polls showing that the majority of Israelis support two states. Odeh said that if one state is imposed, Israel would legitimize the illegal settlements and transform large settlement blocs such as Kiryat Arba, near Hebron, to a town akin to urban Tel Aviv. He added that with the two-state approach, Israel and Palestine could eventually decide to confederate. He also talked about the more than 40 unrecognized Bedouin villages of the Negev, most of which were established before 1948. Israel continues to deny them electricity and running water. The Israeli government has plans to raze the village of Umm al-Hiran, in particular, and recent demonstrations against the plans have seen violence and killings by the Israeli police. Odeh himself was injured during one of these protests in January and had to be hospitalized briefly.