

# Congressional Update: Week Ending March 24, 2017

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Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

## I. Syria

**(1) Remembering the Victims of Syria:** On March 21, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), together with the US Holocaust Memorial, hosted a commemorative event honoring the victims of the Syria civil war and Caesar, the Syrian dissident who fled Syria with photographic evidence of the Syrian regime's war crimes. The purpose of the event was also to draw attention to the atrocities that have been perpetrated against Syrian civilians since the political protests turned to full-scale war six years ago. Large pictures of Syrian victims of the "torture machine" acted as a sobering backdrop for the speakers. Senators Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) and Ben Cardin (D-Maryland) joined their House counterparts Ed Royce (R-California) and Eliot Engel (D-New York) in denouncing the violent and criminal tactics employed by the Bashar al-Asad regime against its own citizens. In addition, Representative Engel announced he would reintroduce the *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act* (HR5732) which was passed by the House in November, 2015. It was then referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where it died in committee. The new Syria bill was introduced on March 22 (Section IV below).

Following comments by members of Congress, Al Munzer, a Holocaust survivor, warned what unchecked, state-sanctioned violence can produce and implored the United States to stand with the Syrian people. Following Mr. Munzer was a young Syrian man named Qutaiba Idlib who detailed a number of horrific experiences he and others like him faced at the hands of the Asad government.

## II. Iran

### Iran Sanctions Legislation Introduced in House and Senate

On March 23 House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) issued a press release announcing the introduction of HR1698, the Iran Ballistic Missiles and International Enforcement Act. Imposing new sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missile testing has been a legislative priority for the A-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and will be the centerpiece at its annual conference which begins on March 26. The text of the legislation and a section-by-section analysis are included in the press release.

On March 23, Politico reported that Senator Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) announced he would be introducing legislation to impose new sanctions on Iran because of its ballistic missile development, support for US-designated terrorist groups, and human rights violations. Democratic Senators Ben Cardin (Maryland) and Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey) are co-sponsors of the bill. A more complete analysis of the bill will be provided when the text is available.

Both the HFAC and SFRC have scheduled hearings on Iran, where sanctions legislation is likely to be the focus of the hearings. The SFRC will meet on March 28 and the HFAC on March 29, respectively.

### III. Friedman Nomination

On March 23, the Senate confirmed by a vote of 52-46 the nomination of David Friedman to be US Ambassador to Israel. Democratic Senators

Menendez and Joe Manchin (West Virginia) voted in favor of Friedman.

#### IV. Legislation Introduced

**Syria (HR1677):** Introduced on March 22 by Representatives Eliot Engel (D-NY) and Ed Royce (R-CA) and 11 bipartisan cosponsors, the bill would “halt the wholesale slaughter of the Syrian people, encourage a negotiated political settlement, and hold Syrian human rights abusers accountable for their crimes.” The bill has been referred to the HFAC, House Judiciary and House Financial Services Committees.

HR1677 is the reintroduction of HR5732, the Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2016 which passed the House in November 2015. HR5732 was referred to the SFRC where it died in Committee at the end of the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress.

**Prohibition on Funds for Afghanistan (HR1666):** Introduced on March 22 by Representative Walter Jones (R-NC) and seven bipartisan co-sponsors, the bill would prohibit the availability of funds for activities in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The bill has been referred to the HFAC and House Rules Committee.

**Genocide (HRes220):** Introduced on March 22 by Representative Dave Trott (R-MI) and 15 bipartisan cosponsors, the resolution expresses the sense of the House of Representatives regarding past genocides. The resolution has been referred to the HFAC. Note: The resolution’s Whereas clauses refer to the slaughter of Christians, Yazidis, Christian Muslims, and other minorities by ISIS, and to the Armenian genocide.

**US-Israel (SRes90):** Introduced on March 21 by Senators David Perdue (R-GA), Cory Gardner

(R-CO), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Susan Collins (R-ME), Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Ted Cruz (R-TX), Chris Coons (D-DE), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Gary Peters (D-MI) and Jon Tester (D-MT), the resolution recognizes the importance of the United States-Israel economic relationship and encourages new areas of cooperation. The resolution has been referred to the SFRC.

**Human Trafficking (HR1625):** Introduced on March 20 by HFAC Chair Ed Royce (R-CA) and Representative Lois Frankel (D-FL), the bill titled "Targeted Rewards for the Global Eradication of Human Trafficking (TARGET) Act, allowing the US Department of State to use cash rewards to help bring human traffickers to justice." The bill has been referred to the HFAC.

**Iran's Smuggling/Maritime Activity (HR1619):** Introduced on March 17 by Representative Ruiz, the bill would "authorize assistance and training to increase maritime security and domain awareness of foreign countries bordering the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, or the Mediterranean Sea in order to deter and counter illicit smuggling and related maritime activity by Iran, including illicit Iranian weapons shipments". The bill has been referred to the HFAC and HASC.

#### V. Hearings of Interest

**(1) Global Humanitarian Affairs:** On March 22, the SFRC held a two-part panel discussion titled “Flashing Red: The State of Global Humanitarian Affairs.” As indicated by the title, this hearing aimed to recognize the current state of affairs in humanitarian efforts in Africa and the Middle East and identify any flaws in providing humanitarian aid to the people in need. The sole witness for the first panel

was Gregory Gottlieb, Acting Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Aid at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). During the second panel, testimonies were heard from the Honorable Nancy Lindborg, President of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Yves Daccord, Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Significant time was spent discussing the humanitarian crises taking place in the Middle East. Mr. Gottlieb spent a portion of his opening statement explaining that Yemen is currently the largest area experiencing a food shortage and that 60 percent of the Yemeni population is experiencing the effects of such a shortage. Even worse, Gottlieb pointed out that seven million Yemenis would certainly not survive without the food aid that is currently being provided. Several references were also made to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, which shares with Yemen the fact that its health structures have been under attack since the first day of the conflict. The Red Cross is continually documenting such activity from a neutral standpoint, and is having ongoing conversations with all related entities about their findings.

Ms. Lindborg also offered a bleak assessment of the current situation in Yemen. She illustrated that the combination of weak governance, ineffective institutions, proliferation of corruption, lack of political legitimacy, and prolonged armed conflict have combined to create this humanitarian crisis. Further, she explained that the flow of both Yemeni and Syrian refugees threatens the political, economic, and humanitarian stability of other

countries in the region and around the globe. Mr. Daccord echoed Mr. Gottlieb and Ms. Lindborg's sentiments, but he offered four points to focus on when assessing the state of global humanitarian affairs. First, he urged the committee not to compare crises, for it can cloud decision-making. Second, he urged the members to embrace the timing and need for intervention. Third, he emphasized the specific elements present in crises that dictate whether a population can absorb "shock" like a famine (he noted the Yemeni population is not in a position to handle a shock due to exposure to armed conflict). Finally, he implored Congress members to address these complicated questions with complicated solutions.

**(2) America's Role in the World:** On March 21, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) held a hearing on "America's Role in the World" with former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. The joint prepared testimony of Albright and Hadley is here. The purpose of the hearing was to assess whether America continues to play a leadership role in the world, to assess the readiness of US defense forces, and to examine President Trump's budget, which increases defense outlays by \$54 billion but slashes the State Department's budget and international organizations crucial to US diplomacy.

A number of members of Congress are increasingly concerned about the emphasis on the military buildup at the expense of funding for diplomacy. While in theory they support increased military spending, they also believe the cornerstone of US leadership should be both hard and soft powers. Members were looking for an endorsement of this view from the witnesses; to a large extent, they received it.

Throughout the hearing, both Albright and Hadley urged the US not to retreat from the world stage. They strongly opposed the Administration's proposed 28 percent cut to the State Department budget and warned against US isolationism. Albright also warned that ignoring problems abroad, which "fester and grow", sooner or later come home to the US. Albright argued that proposed cuts to the State Department budget would undercut American diplomacy, calling the cuts "stunningly damaging". Funds for diplomacy also help to create environments where terrorists cannot prosper, she added. Hadley, chairman of the board of the US Institute of Peace (USIP), cited USIP's work in Iraq, training locals to negotiate peace among tribes as being an example of the vital work that would take a hit in the budget.

**(3) House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence:** On Monday, March 20, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence held the highly anticipated open hearing on "Russian Active Measures Investigation." The lengthy hearing featured Directors James Comey of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and Admiral Michael Rogers of the National Security Agency (NSA). The purpose of the hearing was to hear—in a public, declassified environment—the information that the US intelligence community (IC) has gathered in regards to Russia's active involvement in last year's elections.

Committee Chairman Devin Nunes (R-CA) stated that the committee wanted information regarding who, if anyone, was in consistent contact or had actively coordinated with Russian officials before, during, or after the elections. The chairman's second point of

interest involved President Donald Trump's inflammatory claim that former-President Barack Obama had Trump Tower placed under unlawful surveillance, thus Nunes was resolute in determining if President Trump or any of his campaign or staff were subjects of inappropriate surveillance. Finally, Nunes implored the two directors to address where the leaks—or unsanctioned dissemination of confidential information—is originating from.

The big news came from Director Comey as he confirmed that the FBI is investigating Russian meddling in the US elections and whether officials of either party's campaigns had links to or actively cooperated with Russian officials. The hearing was highly partisan with Democrats focusing on alleged Trump-Russia ties, while Republicans repeatedly grilled Director Comey about leaks as well as the how and why former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn was swept up in surveillance and his name subsequently released to the press.

A relevant topic of the hearing was the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) and section 702 of Title VII of that same law. FISA concerns the use of surveillance—particularly electronic surveillance—to ascertain foreign intelligence activities in the United States and section 702 sets forth the requisites for conducting such surveillance abroad. Section 702, due to what is called a sunset provision, will terminate at the end of this year and Congress will be tasked with reauthorizing this provision. FISA was discussed in the context of its usefulness and shortcomings, especially when considering US citizens are inadvertently swept up in FISA-sanctioned surveillance. Members sought to understand how the citizens' information is

protected and what the process is for naming persons in intelligence reports—otherwise known as “unmasking” the identities of these individuals. The current administration is very focused on what it calls “radical Islamic terrorism” so it is a reasonable assumption that surveillance is generously employed in counterintelligence operations. As a few of the representatives pointed out, it is crucial to understand how FISA is applied and what safeguards are in place to protect the liberty and privacy of US citizens.

## VI. At the Think Tanks

**United States Institute of Peace:** On March 20, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) hosted Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi who gave a brief lecture and participated in answering questions from the audience. USIP was able to secure this discussion with Prime Minister Abadi as he was in Washington to meet with President Donald Trump. The purpose of the discussion was to outline Iraq’s ties with the United States and further discuss the ongoing fight against ISIL.

In his opening statement, Prime Minister Abadi explained that the Iraqi Security Forces’ success against ISIL is a result of a good working relationship with rural populations of Iraqi citizens that have long been wary of state forces. Since before the US invasion of Iraq, minority communities—particularly the Kurdish people—were persecuted by the state, so the good relations between the state and the greater community is an especially positive development for the Prime Minister. In addition, Prime Minister Abadi discussed the steps his government has taken to foster hope

and reconstruction after liberation of ISIL-held territory. First, he hopes to quickly provide basic services and rebuild critical infrastructure to allow the nearly two million internally displaced people to return to their homes. Second, he was to reintegrate society and empower civilians to participate in rebuilding Iraq. He has already delegated some power to regional governments and intends to further delegate responsibilities so the general population can participate in building strong institutions. Finally, once all territory is liberated and the dust settles, Prime Minister Abadi hopes to usher in political reforms to further foster trust in the state.

The audience was eager to engage the Prime Minister and a wide range of questions were posed to him. When asked about his meeting with President Trump, Prime Minister Abadi indicated that the new administration understands and appreciates what Iraq has been able to do in the fight against ISIL and he was assured by the President that US support for Iraq will only grow. He was further asked questions about the support from the international community, plans for building an inclusive government after ISIL, the Iraqi-Saudi relationship, and more. The Prime Minister was twice asked about his stance on an independent or autonomous Kurdistan. After first ignoring the question, he drew laughter from the audience when he flashed a quick smile and said, “We will discuss that at a later time.”

**Rebuilding Syria and the Inside Syria’s Torture Machine:** On March 21, Washington, DC was busy addressing the ongoing war in Syria. First, the Atlantic Council hosted a panel discussion titled “Rebuilding Syria” in which

experts in economics and international development came together to think about reconstruction in Syria. Later that afternoon, the Chairmen and Ranking Members of both the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations joined the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for the Prevention of Genocide to host an event recognizing the crimes and atrocities suffered by Syrian civilians since the onset of the war.

The Atlantic Council's panel discussion focused on Syrian reconstruction and legitimacy and is designed as a two-year initiative to simultaneously identify what, if anything, can be rebuilt now and prior to the end of the war, and anticipate what will need to be done to address Syria's needs once a settlement is realized. The idea behind this initiative is to identify and work with prominent Syrians because they will be the key stakeholders in and prominent providers of reconstruction efforts. Omar Shawaf is one such Syrian. As a wealthy businessman and philanthropist, he made this initiative possible and hopes to further empower Syrians to identify ways to reconstruct their country. For the discussion, Faisal Itani of the Atlantic Council moderated, and four individuals with varying degrees of expertise in economics, international development, and the needs of Syria were asked to speak. The panelists included Dr. Osama Qadi, President of the Syrian Economic Task Force, Todd Diamond, Director of the Middle East at Chemonics International, Mona Yacoubian, the Former Deputy Administrator of the Middle East at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and

Bassam Barabandi, a former Syrian diplomat and the Cofounder of People Demand Change.

Three presenters addressed the same three principles of the initiative, but their individual experiences and expertise brought them to varying conclusions. According to Mr. Itani, the guiding principles of the initiative include viewing reconstruction as a "political economy problem," understanding that the United States and its allies have interests in addressing the problems in Syria, and that it is crucial to understand the political motives of every group in the country in order to sufficiently address the problems facing the state. The first three panelists delivered their assessments and suggestions and left the audience with a sense of hope that this rebuilding can be done. The final panelist—Mr. Barabandi—took a much more pessimistic view of the challenges at hand and concluded on a much more somber tone.

## **Schedule of Events**

### **Week of March 27-31, 2017**

#### **Monday, March 27**

**The Atlantic Council** will host a conversation with Representative Darrell Issa (R-California) on "Reforming the H-1B Visa System. 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. in Room HVC-200, Capital Visitor Center.

#### **Tuesday, March 28**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee** will hold a hearing on "The Budget, Diplomacy, and Development," focusing on the president's

recent budget proposal and its impact on US foreign assistance. Speakers include Stephen Krasner, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Danielle Pletka, Senior Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and Former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, R. Nicholas Burns.

10:00 a.m. in 2172 Rayburn Bldg.

**Senate Foreign Relations Committee** will hold a hearing titled "The View from Congress: US Policy on Iran" with Michael Singh, Lane Swig Senior Fellow, Managing Director, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), and Honorable Martin Indyk, Executive Vice President, the Brookings Institution. 10:30 a.m. in 419 Dirksen.

### Wednesday, March 29

**House Armed Services Committee** will hold a hearing on "Military Assessment of the Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East." The witness will be Army Gen. Joseph Votel, Commander of US Central Command. 10:00 a.m. in 2118 Rayburn Bldg.

### Wednesday, March 29

**House Foreign Affairs Committee** will mark up several bills and resolutions including HR390, Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017; and HR672, Combating European Anti-Semitism Act of 2017. 10:30 a.m. - 2172 Rayburn

**House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Middle East/North Africa** to hold hearing titled "Testing the Limits: Iran's Ballistic Missile Program, Sanctions, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps" with Kenneth Katzman, Ph.D., Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, Congressional Research Service; and Michael Eisenstadt, Kahn Fellow, Director of Military and Security Programs, WINEP. 2:00 p.m. in 2172 Rayburn

### Think Tanks

#### Monday, March 27

**The Brookings Institution and the Center on the US and Europe** will hold a discussion on "Islam in France," focusing on the "root causes of radicalization in French society." Speakers include Philippe Le Corre, Visiting Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Center on the United States and Europe, Shadi Hamid, Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Center for Middle East Policy, Hakim El Karoui, Project Director at the Institut Montaigne, and Dominique Moisi, Senior Counselor at the Institut Montaigne

#### Tuesday, March 28

**Atlantic Council** will host a discussion on "The Russian Military in Ukraine and Syria: Lessons for the United States". Discussants TBA. 4:00-5:30 p.m. at the Council.

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