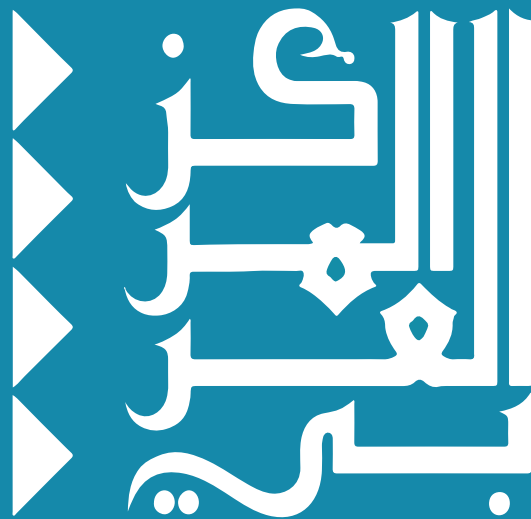


Congressional Update: Week Ending June 2, 2017

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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

I. Congress

The House and Senate were in recess this week for the Memorial Day holiday. The Senate will return to session June 5 and the House will get back to work the following day. Both chambers continue investigations into Trump-Russia connections and, with other more pressing concerns on the horizon, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) issues may take a back seat for the next few weeks.

In the House, Chairman of the Financial Services Appropriations Subcommittee, Rep. Tom Graves (R-Georgia), proposed an ambitious plan for the House to pass an omnibus appropriations bill before Congress starts a month-long recess on July 31. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has also called on Congress to raise the US-debt ceiling by the same deadline.

With these issues coming up, MENA may not be the center of attention for House members over the next few weeks. But, here are some items on the radar in the **House**:

Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017: Prior to recess, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) voted to refer **S. 722** to the Senate floor. Fifty-one members signed on to cosponsor the bill, essentially ensuring its passage in the upper chamber. As it moves to the House, the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) or the House Financial Services Committee (HFSC) may move to hold hearings on potential Iran sanctions.

Recognizing the Commencement of Ramadan:

On May 26, Rep. Eddie Johnson (D-Texas) introduced **H. Res. 371** that recognizes the commencement of the Muslim holy month, Ramadan, and commends Muslims around the globe for their faith. Johnson had four cosponsors—including both Muslim Congressmen (Rep. Keith Ellison [D-Minnesota] and Rep. André Carson [D-Indiana])—but it is unclear if HFAC will consider the nonbinding resolution or if it would be supported by a majority of members.

Should the House consider and pass the resolution, it could help ease tensions in the Muslim-American community, whose members feel spurned by Secretary of State Tillerson's expected decision not to hold a State Department reception in honor of this month of fasting and spiritual renewal.

Palestinian International Terrorism Support

Prevention Act of 2017: Rep. Brian Mast (R-Florida) introduced a bill just before the Memorial Day recess aimed at sanctioning foreign entities or governments that provide material support to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), or any affiliated or successor groups (**H.R. 2712**). There was already good reason to believe it would pass the HFAC—despite its targeting of a US ally, Qatar—and likely the House floor. But now, following a run of bad press, House members may be more aware of Qatar's alleged activities and move to hold hearings to determine the scope of Qatar's connection with Hamas.

US-Saudi Arms Deal: Democratic and Republican members alike are alarmed that President Donald Trump agreed to a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi rulers. Saudi Arabia is involved in a brutal war in Yemen and many members are concerned about the use of US weapons and equipment to further decimate Yemen. Members of Congress in the House and Senate have introduced legislation voicing discontent about the deal, and some are now calling for congressional hearings to demand a more intensive probe into it. If members have their way, the HFAC will likely hold hearings on the matter, as it has oversight on arms deals.

Hezbollah: HFAC Chairman Ed Royce (R-California) announced a hearing set for June 8 on Lebanon's Hezbollah. The hearing—titled “Attacking Hezbollah's Financial Network”—is set to find additional tools to target the group's resources and its ability to benefit from the international financial system despite its terrorist designation.

Here are some issues that could be taken up in the **Senate:**

US-Saudi Arms Deal: Three senators supported their House counterparts and proposed legislation before Memorial Day that could force a vote in Congress on the arms deal inked between President Trump and the Saudi government. Momentum against the deal is growing, so it is possible that the SFRC could hold a hearing on the use of US weapons in the

Saudi campaign in Yemen and elsewhere before the planned June vote.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): The SFRC is scheduled to hold a closed hearing on June 5 on the capabilities of ISIL beyond Iraq and Syria. While this is closed for security purposes, a contact close to the SFRC said the committee could follow up with a declassified hearing of the same nature later in June.

Taylor Force Act: A contact close to the SFRC spoke confidently of the prospects of seeing the *Taylor Force Act* passed this year. Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) reintroduced **S. 474** earlier this year and the source expects to see hearings held to debate the topic. The act is named after the combat veteran who was killed in Israel by a knife-wielding Palestinian. The argument is that the Palestinian Authority (PA) incites such attacks by allegedly paying terrorists and their families large salaries for perpetrating attacks, so the United States should condition any and all aid to the PA on halting such payments. The act was previously introduced in September 2016, but it did not make it out of committee and had to be reintroduced in this Congress.

II. The White House

Jerusalem Embassy Act Waiver: On June 1, President Trump followed longstanding tradition and signed off on keeping the US embassy in Tel Aviv. According to the *Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995*, the US embassy is mandated to be maintained in Jerusalem.

However, under Section 7 of the law, the president has the authority to sign a waiver postponing the move six months at a time. Since the law's enactment, every president—Republican and Democrat alike—has signed the waiver, irking pro-Israel hardliners but assuaging the fears of Arab allies regarding such a move.

To many voters, this is another broken campaign promise by the Trump Administration. The White House communications team, however, said the president still insists on moving the embassy and this decision is merely to “maximize the chances” of reaching a negotiated peace settlement between Israel and Palestine.

Paris Climate Deal: On June 1, the Trump White House also issued its verdict that the United States would not remain in the Paris climate agreement signed by the Obama Administration. The United States joins only Nicaragua and Syria on the list of nations entitled to sign the agreement but opting out.

Commemorating Ramadan: As mentioned above, Secretary of State Tillerson opted out of holding a reception to mark the beginning of the Muslim holy month. Tillerson did issue a brief statement wishing Muslims around the world a “peaceful and blessed Ramadan.” President Trump issued a separate statement, though it struck a different tone as he chose to reiterate calls for Muslims to combat extremism.

Immigration Order: On June 1, the Trump Administration requested that the Supreme Court put a temporary stay on lower courts' freeze of his executive order excluding citizens of six countries that have Muslim majorities from entering the United States. If the stay is adopted, the Department of Homeland Security could begin denying entry to citizens of those countries. However, Trump also requested a full hearing on the legality of the order in question, but it likely will not be heard until this fall.

III. Around the District

The Future of Iranian Power in the Middle East: On May 30, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) hosted an event to discuss the launch of AEI's J. Matthew McInnis's new monograph titled *The Future of Iran's Security Policy*. The monograph is billed as an “analytical tool kit to better manage conflict with Tehran and understand and combat the Islamic Republic's destabilizing agenda in the Middle East.” Joining McInnis for the discussion were Lt. Gen. Thomas J. Trask of US Special Operations Command, Vice Adm. Ret. Mark Fox (formerly of US Central Command), and AEI's Frederick W. Kagan.

The key findings in McInnis's report—which were reinforced by Trask and Fox—indicate that threat perception is the overarching driver of Iran's policies in the region. Further, the United States is the single greatest contributor to Iran's threat perception, thus it has an

overwhelming influence on the Islamic Republic's policy calculations. This theme, combined with an understanding of the Iranian regime's worldview—however different that may be—is helpful to policy makers, McInnis argued. He believes that too many times, policy makers have viewed Iran as irrational and sporadic in its decision-making process, when it is actually quite rational and predictable—though in ways unfamiliar to the West. Without offering specific policy prescriptions, the panel closed in arguing that policy makers—should they adopt this new model of understanding Iran—could more efficiently counter Iran's nefarious activities and better leverage US influence to change the Iranian regime's tactics in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East.

Changing US Policy in Afghanistan: On May 31, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a discussion on US policy in its longest lasting war. This discussion was, in part, to review the findings of a recent paper titled *US Policy in Afghanistan: Changing Strategies, Preserving Gains* and to assess what strategies the Trump Administration should pursue as it concludes its Afghanistan policy review. The coauthors of the aforementioned policy paper—Ashley Tellis of Carnegie and Jeff Eggers of New America—were joined in the discussion by former US Ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad, former US Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Daniel Feldman, and former Pakistan Ambassador to the United States Hussain Haqqani.

After 17 years of military involvement in Afghanistan, the United States must take a close look at its objectives in Afghanistan and its strategies for reaching those objectives. Tellis and Eggers outlined a two-track policy recommendation and set forth six steps the United States could implement under the recommendation. The policy prescription is to simultaneously ensure strong and sustained support for the Afghan Security Forces and revitalize efforts to reach a political settlement to the conflict. The steps the United States should pursue include the following: crafting a unified civil-military strategy guided by a strong, empowered US ambassador to Kabul; taking a direct role in initiating conversation with the Taliban; encouraging a national Afghan dialogue that aims to identify possible terms of a political settlement; seriously considering the need to target and strike the Taliban in Pakistan; pressing Pakistan to disrupt Taliban sanctuaries within its borders; and revisiting collective regional cooperation toward Afghanistan and its struggles.

Is Countering Violent Extremism Measurable?

On June 2, New America hosted a panel discussion to explore whether there are currently tools available to accurately measure the effectiveness of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts. Over the last few years CVE has been identified as a tool for identifying and addressing root causes of terrorism. To discuss the current capacities for measuring success and future tools and resources that might help, New America assembled the following panel: Muhammad

Fraser-Rahim, Executive Director North America of Quilliam International; Ben Dubow, COO at Omelas; Jonathon Morgan, CEO of New Knowledge and Founder of Data for Democracy; and J.M. Berger, Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at The Hague.

The panelists all seemed to agree on two points: extremism has yet to be universally defined and, because of that, it is difficult to implement and measure. Three of the four panelists were social media experts who have spent considerable amounts of time trying to study how radicalization takes place via social media platforms. While they did not study “de-radicalization” – the intended approach of many CVE programs – they tried to measure instances of “disengagement,” or when an individual might stop following extremist accounts on Twitter or refrain from retweeting radical remarks.

Ultimately, the panel agreed that the community-based outreach and engagement programs that law enforcement and federal agencies use now likely are not effective means of producing measurable effects in CVE. Rather, these experts seek to utilize the internet and social media – what one described as “a proxy for reality” – to offer counter narratives and induce disengagement. Current efforts, the panelists agreed, are probably useless on ISIL propaganda because so much focus has been on deleting ISIL accounts. Instead, efforts are now underway to test global counter narratives and apply the disengagement approach to supporters of the al-Qaeda affiliate, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.

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