

Congressional Update: Week Ending July 14, 2017

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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

I. Congress

1) Legislation

Calling for Release of Unjustly Detained US Citizens. On July 10, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) introduced **S. Res. 216**, which calls on the government of Iran to release the US citizens and legal permanent residents it is holding in custody. It was referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) for further consideration.

Disapproval of UNESCO's Naming of Hebron. On July 11, Representative Alcee Hastings (D-Florida) proposed **H. Res. 433**, which would demonstrate the House members' dissatisfaction with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) decision to declare the Israeli-occupied Palestinian city, Hebron, a "Palestinian World Heritage Site in Danger." The language of the resolution decries the United Nations for its alleged bias against Israel and, if adopted, would illustrate the belief of the House of Representatives that any future resolution offered by the United Nations or its affiliated agencies should be refused if it is deemed "anti-Israel." The resolution was referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) for further consideration.

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) FY 2018. Much of the House's activity this week focused on fleshing out details of the Defense Department's funding authorization bill for fiscal year 2018 (**H.R. 2810**). After deliberation on the floor, representatives agreed to adopt four sets of amendments—en bloc—totaling nearly 90, and a number of them relate to the Middle East. Under several amendments, the executive branch would be obligated to produce reports on US interests in the region. For example, reports on Syria include assessing ISIL's capabilities in Syria and notifying Congress of any settlement reached with Russia on the status of Syria. Additionally, reports would be required on a range of Iranian behavior in the Gulf and the executive branch would be required to further scrutinize a proposed sale of arms to Turkey. Some amendments specifically bar the appropriation of funds, an exercise by members of Congress in utilizing the "power of the purse." Should the NDAA pass as amended, the United States would legally be prevented from closing down the Guantanamo Bay military prison or providing certain air defense systems to US-backed Syrian opposition forces.

State and Foreign Operations Appropriations FY 2018. The House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs released a draft of its proposed 2018 budget. This budget provides funding for the State Department and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The subcommittee agreed on a budget of \$47.4 billion, representing a decrease of 14 percent from those departments' current budgets; it is worth noting that this is not nearly as steep as the 37 percent cut proposed by the White House. Provisions in the draft agreed upon by subcommittee members provide funding for nonlethal and economic support for Syria, Jordan, and

Egypt. Further, the language of the bill requires the secretary of state to produce a report detailing a US strategy for engaging with North Africa.

This version of the funding bill specifically targets Palestine as well. As of now, the bill retains restrictions on the Palestinian Authority (PA) and demands that the PA limit payments to imprisoned Palestinians and their families. The provisions would also prevent the United States from providing financial support to any Palestinian government that includes Hamas and would limit Palestinian representation in the United States should the PA pursue or support an investigation of Israel by the International Criminal Court. This bill will now be considered by the full House Appropriations Committee.

2) Nominations

There was a flurry of activity this week aimed at filling out the president's administration—a task in which President Donald Trump has been historically slow. Mark Greene was unanimously approved—by voice vote—by the SFRC to serve as administrator of USAID. The SFRC also hosted the Honorable David Steele Bohigian and Ray Washburne for their confirmation hearings to serve as the executive vice president and president, respectively, of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). The same committee also heard testimony from Jay Patrick Murray and Kelley Eckels Currie in support of their nominations to serve as US representatives to the United Nations. These are highly regarded and uncontroversial nominees, so they will likely get quick votes in committee before moving to a full Senate vote.

Christopher A. Wray engaged the Senate Judiciary Committee this week for his highly anticipated hearing as nominee to serve as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In the wake of former FBI Director James Comey's firing, lawmakers were eager to probe Wray about his independence from President Trump. He made a positive impression on the committee and he appears to have bipartisan support for the job.

3) Congressional Hearings

Taylor Force Act. On July 12, the SFRC met to discuss the plausibility and effectiveness of suspending US financial assistance to the PA in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in an effort to coerce the PA to end the practice of paying salaries to the families of incarcerated or deceased Palestinians. Supporters of this strategy say that the PA is responsible for convincing young Palestinians to carry out violent attacks against Israelis by promising financial rewards to them or their families. This idea has most recently been introduced in two similar pieces of legislation; both were crafted in the name of Taylor Force, a US veteran who was stabbed to death in Israel by a Palestinian.

To discuss the necessity and value of the proposed legislation, the committee heard testimony from the Honorable Elliott Abrams of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Honorable Daniel Shapiro, former ambassador to Israel. The witnesses agreed that the withholding of financial assistance could serve as leverage for prompting the PA to end the payments. However, while Abrams supported a blanket cut of assistance—save for one hospital in Jerusalem—Shapiro was focused on utilizing very specific cuts in funds allotted to the PA and avoiding cuts to any of the numerous nongovernmental programs operating in the West Bank. While it is still unclear what form the legislation will take, it is a foregone conclusion that Congress will produce some kind of bill this summer targeting US assistance to the PA.

2017 Trafficking in Persons Report. On July 13, the SFRC met to review the recently released report of trafficking in persons. The annual report is compiled by the State Department and identifies countries by the number of person being trafficked compared to the countermeasures each government employs to deter such activity. To review the details of the report, the SFRC heard testimony from Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan and from Susan Coppedge, who is the US Ambassador-at-large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

The State Department's report defines three tiers of countries, depending on compliance with standards set forth in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000; the TVPA was just reauthorized on July 12 by the House of Representatives and will move on to the Senate. Tier 1 countries are in full compliance with those standards, while Tier 3 countries do not meet the minimum standards, nor are they making significant efforts to meet the standards of the TVPA. Countries listed simply under Tier 2 have not met all of the established standards, but the governments of those countries are pursuing steps to observe quality anti-trafficking measures. Tier 2 Watch List countries teeter on the edge of falling to Tier 3; these countries do not meet the TVPA standards and there continue to be numerous cases of trafficking.

No Arab state enjoys Tier 1 placement. The majority of Arab states are placed in Tier 2, while four countries are on the Tier 2 Watch List. Iran and Syria find themselves in Tier 3 while Somalia, Libya, and Yemen are "Special" cases due to the fracture of their central governments.

Counterterrorism. On July 13, the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence held a hearing to discuss the evolution of al-Qaeda. Later that day, a newly created Task Force on Denying Terrorists Entry into the United States held a hearing to discuss the extremist diaspora that is forming following the fall of ISIL.

The expert witnesses on al-Qaeda included Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute, Jennifer Cafarella of the Institute for the Study of War, and Dr. Seth G. Jones of the RAND Corporation. The witnesses unanimously concluded that al-Qaeda was far from weakened, as many seem to think. Rather, the extremist group has coopted this sentiment and capitalized on the West's focus on the defeat of ISIL. Al-Qaeda's leadership is rebranding and cultivating their base of fighters, expanding their ideological hold, and biding their time. If the United States does not develop a comprehensive plan to combat the ideology as a whole, the threat will remain in some form.

The Task Force invited witnesses Thomas Joscelyn of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Robin Simcox of The Heritage Foundation, and Dr. Colin P. Clarke of the RAND Corporation for their expert testimonies. It was the opinion of the witnesses that following the physical defeat of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, thousands of foreign fighters will either return to their respective home states or continue to another Islamist battlefield such as Yemen or Libya. It is estimated, Simcox claims, that five to six thousand Europeans fought alongside ISIL and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq. Many of these indoctrinated European citizens would potentially return home and radicalize others in Western Europe. Clarke argued that because of this influx of extremists reentering Europe, the United States must stay vigilant and allocate sufficient resources to prevent foreign fighters from penetrating its borders.

America's Interests in the Middle East and North Africa. On July 13, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) held a hearing on President Trump's fiscal year 2018 budget request, with a particular focus on the MENA region. The hearing featured two witnesses: Stuart Jones, a former US ambassador to Iraq and Jordan and currently Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and Maria Longi of USAID's Bureau for the Middle East.

Many of the members of the subcommittee voiced concerns over President Trump's budget request in their opening remarks. Representatives Brad Schneider (D-Illinois) and Lois Frankel (D-Florida) expressed particularly critical positions against the proposed request. Despite this, both witnesses gave praise to the request in their written testimonies, stating that it would further the United States' interests in the region through continued financial aid to allies, such as Jordan and Israel, and strongly support US programs and initiatives. Ambassador Jones and Ms. Longi both espoused the view that the proposed budget would promote stability while still using taxpayer funds "wisely." Representative Adam Kinzinger (R-Illinois) pushed back against some of the witnesses' statements and suggested that "soft power," like developing and improving educational programs in the region, is essential to the maintenance of stability for the future. President Trump's budget instead prioritizes military resources for the defeat of ISIL, rather than educational resources as long-term investments in the MENA region.

II. Trump Administration

Gulf Crisis. The Trump Administration actively engaged with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states this week. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson shuttled around the region—visiting Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—in an effort to mediate the ongoing GCC crisis. While in the Gulf, Tillerson secured a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Qatar in the fight against terrorism financing. This MoU was the first of its kind, undercutting a major complaint of the Saudi-led bloc that has imposed a siege on Qatar. While Tillerson engaged the GCC in its neighborhood, Secretary of Defense James Mattis remained stateside to meet Bahrain’s Minister of the Interior, Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa.

Immigration Order. The Trump Administration is reportedly calling on other countries to provide even more information about citizens who are seeking visas to the United States. This move is criticized by some as an effort to extend President Trump’s “travel ban.” That very ban was dealt a slight blow this week when a federal judge in Hawaii again ruled against President Trump and expanded the definition of “close relatives” who are exempt from the immigration order, such as grandparents.

III. Around the District

Turkey: A Year after the July 15 Coup Attempt. On July 10, the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (commonly referred to by its Turkish acronym, SETA) in Washington, DC held a day-long conference consisting of two panel discussions and a keynote speaker. The conference generally appeared to be a forum for one side of Turkish politics to air grievances against the other. For example, during the first panel discussion on the coup attempt, panelist Hakan Yavuz of the University of Utah suggested that Fethullah Gülen—an exiled Islamic scholar and vocal opponent of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party—orchestrated the coup by activating dissident groups within the Turkish police force and military. The keynote speaker, General Yaşar Güler, echoed this sentiment and offered harsh criticism of the Gülen movement. These accusations have been made repeatedly by those close to the Turkish government, although many note that little evidence has been provided.

The final panel was most relevant to US foreign policy, however, as it focused on Turkish foreign and military policy following the coup attempt. The panel included Ambassador James Jeffrey (who had served in Turkey), Colonel Richard Outzen of the US Department of State, Nurşin Güney of Yildiz Technical University, and Murat Yeşiltaş of the SETA Foundation. Following the coup attempt, the Turkish military was significantly weakened, according to Outzen, but since then, it has made great strides to restore its capabilities and has alleviated US concerns about Turkey’s ability to operate in the Syrian conflict. The panelists seemed to agree that the future of US-Turkish relations looks strong as the two countries unite to foster stability in Syria and to undermine the lingering threat of Iran and its proxy groups in Syria.

The US-Tunisia Strategic Partnership and Its Importance to Regional Stability. On July 11, the Heritage Foundation hosted Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed while he was in Washington drumming up support for Tunisia's fledgling democracy. Chahed detailed both the successes his government has achieved and the remaining difficulties facing Tunisia. Despite the presence of corruption and national security threats, the prime minister implored the United States to stand with Tunisia; Chahed drove home this point in a number of meetings with lawmakers. As Chahed illustrated, Tunisia is a shining example for the rest of the Arab world but it requires continued US support—both financially and militarily—to further stabilize its democratic institutions and grow the economy. In delivering the closing remarks, Senator John McCain expressed his unequivocal support for Tunisia. Like Chahed, he was discouraged by President Trump's proposed cut in support for Tunis, but he was resolute in his belief that lawmakers on both sides of the aisle will join together to preserve US aid to the Tunisian government.

The Human Cost of the Gulf Crisis. On July 11, the Embassy of Qatar hosted Dr. Ali bin Smaikh al-Marri, chairman of the National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) in Qatar, to discuss the humanitarian toll the ongoing crisis is having on the people in Qatar. The NHRC is an autonomous organization within Qatar tasked with monitoring the human rights of those within Qatar's borders and of Qataris abroad. Dr. al-Marri noted that there have been numerous assessments of the economic and political repercussions of the GCC siege on Qatar, but analyses of the humanitarian impact are lacking. For example, "mixed" marriage families—those that consist of a Qatari national and a national of one of the belligerent countries—have been torn apart as the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt have recalled their citizens from Qatar. Actions like this have also uprooted students, laborers, and those seeking medical care. Al-Marri was adamant that such actions violate a number of international human rights agreements.

Dr. al-Marri's presentation is indicative of a change in strategy for Qatar in Washington. As was mentioned previously, Qatar signed an MoU with the United States, agreeing to counter terrorism financing measures. In addition, the Qatari ambassador to the United States reportedly took to the Capitol to meet with a number of congressional staffers this week in an effort to extol Qatari efforts and emphasize the same human rights concerns raised by al-Marri. During those meetings, the ambassador impressed his audience and, according to sources on Capitol Hill, elicited genuine sympathy for the Qatari government's point of view in this crisis.

Challenges in US-Iran Policy. On July 12, the Middle East Institute hosted a conference to assess the outlines of US policy towards Iran and the strategies undertaken to further that policy. There were several panels throughout the day, but Senator Chris Coons (D-Delaware) made his way from Capitol

Hill to deliver the keynote address. Coons detailed, among other things, four policy prescriptions he would like to see Congress and the White House pursue. First, he urged the Trump Administration to remain committed to upholding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the Iran nuclear deal. Leaving the agreement would isolate the United States and unnecessarily close a critical communication channel with the government of Iran. Second, he said that sanctions related to nonnuclear behavior are a legitimate tool that should be incorporated into US policy, Coons argued. He noted that he was an original cosponsor of **S. 722**, Countering Iran's Destabilizing Act of 2017, which would levy sanctions on Iran for its human rights record and support for terrorist groups around the Middle East. The third pillar of Coons's strategy ensures that the United States maintains and enhances cooperation with allies in the region. He specifically named allies like Israel and the United Arab Emirates as states that Washington should continue to support. Finally, Coons urged the United States—particularly the president and his administration—to tailor its rhetoric and actions to the Iranian government, not the Iranian population. Failure to distinguish between the Iranian people and the fiercely conservative ruling regime will block any avenue for reaching closer relations with Iran, Coons stated.