

Congressional Update: Week Ending August 18, 2017

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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

I. Congress

Congress remains on recess and will return for legislative business on September 5.

II. The Executive Branch

Although lawmakers are away, the White House and other executive agencies are busy attending to developments in the Middle East.

1) The White House

Israel Security. Top White House advisors were set to meet with a delegation of Israeli defense officials this week to discuss security arrangements in the region. Billed as routine security talks, the meetings were intended to focus on the Israelis' dissatisfaction with an agreement crafted between the United States, Russia, and Jordan that created "safe zones" in southern Syria. The "safe zones" – or "de-escalation zones" – were established around Daraa and Suwayda, Syria, which border Jordan, as well as al-Quneitra, which lies just outside the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israel says that the tripartite agreement provides Iran and its Lebanese proxy militia, Hezbollah, another foothold from which to threaten Israel's security.

The Israeli officials were meeting with Trump's Middle East envoy, Jason Greenblatt, and other officials, including senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Deputy National Security Advisor Dina Powell. White House officials stated that the talks focused specifically on security threats related to Syria and Lebanon and not on Israeli-Palestinian peace prospects. However, Kushner's inclusion in the week's talks would suggest that the topic of peace between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority would be explored. Since Kushner is tasked with securing the "ultimate deal" between Palestinians and Israelis, it is difficult to imagine he did not take the opportunity to probe the peace prospects with Israel's security brass.

2) Department of Defense

A report surfaced this week that the United States is seeking to significantly upgrade the computer systems of its Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), which is based at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. The details of the computer system are top secret, so there will likely be very little information about the costs of such upgrades. But, the Department of Defense is working with its counterpart in Silicon Valley – known as Defense Innovation Unit Experimental – which has been awarded contracts from the Pentagon worth \$100 million since June 2016. With that in mind, one can surmise that the CAOC upgrades will be a large investment for the government. Furthermore, this upgrade at Al Udeid

does not bode well for US allies in Abu Dhabi, who have openly expressed a desire to host the United States' central military command in the Middle East.

3) Department of State

Israel-Palestine Peace Process. Kushner, Greenblatt, and Powell are being dispatched to the region next week to restart peace talks between Israel and Palestine. The trio is expected to be in Ramallah, Palestine on August 24 following stops in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Israel. After Ramallah, the group is expected to travel to Egypt. While Greenblatt, the Middle East envoy, will travel on the insistence of President Trump, the State Department's spokeswoman, Heather Nauert, reiterated that the State Department is intimately involved in the effort. She said US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and other embassy staff in Tel Aviv will be providing support to the White House envoy.

Nauert was later asked if the State Department had any concerns about the possible lack of objectivity from the ambassador's participation in the peace process since Friedman's daughter recently made *aliyah* to Israel, giving her dual American-Israeli citizenship. Nauert shrugged off the question, indicating that the State Department likely would have no comment. Despite the State Department's ambivalence to the move, it is another development that appears to contradict the United States' oft-stated role as an "honest broker." While Ambassador Friedman's daughter landed in Israel to accept her citizenship, Greenblatt—another member of the diplomatic effort—announced that his own children will be moving to Israel to spend a gap year before pursuing undergraduate studies.

These examples are certainly unsavory optics for any administration trying to maintain an image of an honest broker. Greenblatt, Friedman, and Kushner all have long and intimate ties to Israel's right-wing factions and this has already proven to be an obstacle from the Palestinians' perspective.

Terrorist Designations. On August 17, the State Department issued a statement declaring it has formally designated two so-called Islamic State (IS) leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). Under the SDGT designation, Ahmad Alkhalid and Abu Yahya al-Iraqi are blocked from retrieving any property they may have within US jurisdictions or entering the United States or its territories. In addition, all US persons are prohibited from engaging in any transactions with the two men.

2016 International Religious Freedom Report. The State Department released the 2016 version of its annual assessment of the trends in global religious freedom. The report is mandated by the *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998* and, in it, the Secretary of State must describe the status of religious

freedom in foreign states and detail US efforts to support religious freedom worldwide. It is intended to be an authoritative resource for lawmakers as they craft policies, and this year's version includes assessments of 199 countries and territories.

Both Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Ambassador Michael Kozak of the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor provided remarks for the report's launch. Ambassador Kozak chose to recognize the areas of progress he observed in different regions. In the Middle East and North Africa, Kozak lauded the anti-IS efforts and the growth of religious tolerance. He cited government support for religious minorities in Morocco and Tunisia, as well as efforts in the Arabian Gulf to accommodate the construction of churches for the Christian minority communities in the UAE and Oman, as evidence of growing tolerance.

For his part, Secretary Tillerson highlighted the significant shortcomings in religious tolerance he observed in the report. During his remarks, he singled out a number of countries in the Middle East. He pointed to Egypt and Iraq as examples where the Islamic State has carried out religiously motivated violence against minorities like the Coptic Christians and Yazidis, respectively. As for state-sanctioned intolerance, Tillerson fingered Saudi Arabia for a number of violations, including strict religious legal codes and violence perpetrated toward its Shia minorities. Though not as extreme, Tillerson also singled out Turkey, Bahrain, and Sudan for refusing equal legal protections for their non-Muslim populations. Even Iran – with the Middle East's third largest Jewish population – has a record for using vague religious laws to disproportionately punish religious minorities, namely Christians and adherents of the Baha'i faith.

III. Judicial Branch

Salim v. Mitchell. On August 17, the American Civil Liberties Union announced that it had settled its lawsuit against two psychologists for their roles in implementing the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) controversial counterterrorism program. Suleiman Abdullah Salim, Mohamed Ahmed Ben Soud, and the family of the deceased Gul Rahman sued Drs. James Mitchell and John Jessen as architects of the agency's torture program. The terms of the settlement have yet to be announced. While the two-year-long court battle is too complicated to summarize here, it is notable that this is the first example of the CIA or its contractors being held accountable for its controversial programs implemented by the US government during the early years of the "War on Terror." Renditions and "enhanced interrogations" primarily targeted individuals in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia who were suspected – sometimes mistakenly – for being affiliated with al-Qaeda.