

# Congressional Update: Week Ending August 4, 2017

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## I. Congress

The Senate used the first week of August to confirm dozens of presidential appointees and pass some important pieces of legislation. But, with the collapse of Affordable Care Act repeal efforts in late July, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) has decided to throw in the towel and release members for August recess. The House and Senate will resume legislative activities on Tuesday, September 5.

### 1) Legislation

*Taylor Force Act.* ACW published an article this week discussing a revised version of a bill – **S. 1697** – that conditions US assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA) on its efforts to “end violence and terrorism against Israeli citizens and United States citizens.” Since then, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) voted to amend and adopt the bill. Several of the amendments were offered by Democrats and appear to soften the bill’s language, reducing the impact of the PA’s isolation on the rest of the Palestinian people. Senator Tom Udall (D-New Mexico) offered an amendment that affords the secretary of state the ability to exempt any project deemed “of importance” from a funding cut. Additionally, Senators Tim Kaine (D-Virginia) and Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) amended the bill to allow for any appropriated funds that are withheld from the PA to be reinvested in other nongovernmental projects within the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The *Taylor Force Act* will receive further consideration on the Senate floor after the August recess. While the schedule is uncertain, the prospects for this bill becoming law are clearer; there is broad, bipartisan support for the bill, so it will likely be a major priority when Congress returns.

*Israel Anti-Boycott Act.* This week, a crucial cosponsor of **S. 720** – a bill that would potentially outlaw one’s right to participate in boycotts of the state of Israel – dropped her support for the legislation. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York), an original cosponsor and potential future presidential candidate, withdrew her support for the bill due to constituent concerns that the bill would harm citizens’ First Amendment right to free speech. Although Senator Gillibrand opposes boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) efforts against Israel, she said that concerns raised by activist groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and Jewish Voice for Peace indicate the need to reshape the bill.

The proposed legislation has come under fire in recent weeks and Gillibrand is simply the most notable lawmaker to balk at the bill’s language. Senator Ben Cardin (D-Maryland) – ranking member on the SFRC – has entertained the idea of amending the bill in light of the aforementioned concerns. Although the bill may undergo some changes, it is unlikely Congress will forego the legislative effort completely. Like the *Taylor Force Act*, there is broad, bipartisan support for the *Israel Anti-Boycott Act*, and the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has placed the passage of this bill atop its legislative agenda for this Congress.

## 2) Nominations

The Senate confirmed over 60 presidential nominees before leaving town. Some notable confirmations for foreign relations include **Mark Green**, Administrator for the United States Agency for International Development; **Nathan Sales**, Coordinator for Counterterrorism for the State Department; **Carl Risch**, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs; **Ray Washburne**, President of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC); **David Bohigian**, Vice President of OPIC; and **John Desrocher**, Ambassador to Algeria.

## II. Around the District

Over the last week, DC think tanks have held important events on issues in the Middle East that tend to receive less coverage. As detailed below, Iraqi Kurds, Iraq's Yazidi community, and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were afforded valuable coverage this week.

*The Kurdistan Region: Strategic US Ally in a Tough Neighborhood.* On July 28, the *Washington Times* partnered with Kurdistan 24 to host a symposium to discuss all aspects of the upcoming referendum on establishing a free and independent Kurdistan. The event included multiple panels on issues such as the future of an independent Kurdistan and current security challenges in the region.

The panelists included both US and Kurdish government officials, former military officials, and policy experts. The first panel was composed of former US generals who discussed security issues in Iraqi Kurdistan. Their positions were clear: an independent Kurdistan would be a valuable ally to the United States in a tumultuous region characterized by creeping Iranian influence. Retired General Jay Garner stressed that the Kurds were the only group that wants the United States to maintain a presence in Iraq. The United States could stand idly by and watch the Kurdish region become an Iranian proxy, he cautioned, or it could get involved ensure Iraqi Kurdistan becomes a stable and valuable US ally. Retired Brig. General Ernie Audino was also concerned with Iran's growing influence in Iraq. He posited that a strong and independent Kurdistan prevents and contains Iranian expansionism in both Iraq and the Middle East more broadly. The panelists had positive words for the official fighting force of Kurdistan, the Peshmerga, and the continued effort by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to defeat ISIL.

The second panel concerned the independence referendum and the future of Kurdistan. Representative Trent Franks (R-Arizona) spoke at length, urging a prospective independent Kurdistan to protect the Yazidi Christian minority and allow for the group to exercise its own self-determination. Franks stressed his full support for an independent Kurdistan – breaking from official US policy that supports a unified Iraq – assuming it maintained democratic values. The governor of Kirkuk, Najmaldin Karim, discussed Iraq's oppression of the Kurdish region and explained the Kurds' willingness to provide support and security for the internally displaced persons (IDPs) without help from the Iraqi central government. Like others, former Ambassador Peter Galbraith also emphasized the role that an independent Kurdistan would play in the region – it would mirror many of the United States' interests in the region, especially in preventing the spread of Iran's influence in Iraq.

*Stabilizing Iraq and Justice for the Yazidis.* On August 1 and 3, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Hudson Institute held events, respectively, to discuss the future of Iraq's minority groups after the fall of ISIL. The USIP event included remarks by Ambassador William Taylor, Vice President of USIP; Iraqi Ambassador to the United States Fareed Yasseen; and Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the Kurdistan Regional Government's representative to the United States. The event also included a panel discussion featuring Vian Dakhil, a member of the Iraqi Council of Representatives; Knox Thames, special advisor for religious minorities for the US Department of State; William Warda, chairman of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities; and Sarhang Hamasaeed, director of Middle East Programs for USIP.

Taylor opened the event by outlining the atrocities committed against ethnic minorities in Iraq and the need for alleviating tensions between sectarian and ethnic groups. Yasseen also detailed the long, cruel history of minority persecution in Iraq and followed with recommendations for stability and peace in the country. He stressed the need to stabilize, rebuild, and provide humanitarian aid to the affected areas while encouraging individuals to return to their homes and villages. Abdul Rahman spoke on justice and accountability for those responsible. She urged the international community to not only speak out against the crimes committed, but to hold the perpetrators accountable. She acknowledged the KRG's role in stabilizing northern Iraq, but she pressed Iraq's central government to support its minority communities with more physical and legal protections. While Abdul Rahman stressed the need for involvement from the Iraqi central government, the broader theme of the panel was clear: a decentralized government in Iraq is needed to prevent future ethnic strife. Self-governance will allow minority groups to provide for themselves while peacefully coexisting with each other.

The following panel elaborated on recommendations for a future free of ethnic tension and violence in Iraq. Thames outlined the role of the United States, indicating that the protection of minority communities should be part of the government's national security framework. He encouraged minority communities to reconcile with each other after tragedy. Warda and Hamasaeed echoed Thames's sentiment and both discussed the need for an active security strategy in the region that would protect those IDPs trying to return home.

The Hudson Institute's event echoed much of what was covered by the previous event. Hudson's senior fellow, Eric Brown, was joined by Pari Ibrahim, executive director of the Free Yazidi Foundation, and Naomi Kikoler, deputy director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide. The group also assessed efforts—or lack thereof—to hold ISIL members accountable for their crimes of genocide and spoke on how to ensure the safety of vulnerable minority communities as Iraq rebuilds.

The panelists went into great detail about the atrocities inflicted on Iraq's Yazidi community. They also echoed many of the same points raised in the previous event: the safety of minorities in Iraq must be safeguarded, IDPs must be reintegrated, and communal and political tensions must be addressed at the grassroots level within and between ethno-religious communities. Ibrahim and Kikoler were quite frank in their assessments of the US and international community's response to the Yazidi genocide, saying that the world has failed the Yazidi people only 70 years after making a pact to ascertain that genocide would never be replicated. Moving forward, Ibrahim and Kikoler stressed the need for the

international community to hold ISIL members accountable and see that justice is administered. Ibrahim expressed her frustration with these efforts thus far; not a single ISIL perpetrator has been convicted of war crimes, despite her and others' efforts to collect testimonies from Yazidi victims.

For the United States, Kikoler outlined a number of steps officials should pursue to promote the safety and stability of Iraq's minorities. She stressed that the remaining grievances that allowed for the rise of ISIL in the first place must be addressed. Demilitarizing minority communities will be crucial for people feeling safe to return to their homes and begin reconstructing both the infrastructure and the communal bonds. To do this, the United States must view the safety of minorities as part of its national security calculus.

***Gaza Approaching a Boiling Point?*** On August 3, the Middle East Institute brought together an array of experts to discuss the options Palestinians and Israelis have to help prevent renewed violence as the political and humanitarian crisis in Gaza continues to deteriorate. Further, they explored how the United States and the international community could bring the question of Gaza back into regional deliberations and the peace process. The panelists for this discussion included Tareq Baconi, policy fellow of *al-Shabaka* magazine, Lara Friedman, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, Christopher McGrath, acting director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and Natan Sachs, director and fellow of The Brookings Institution.

McGrath spoke about the dismal conditions affecting Gaza's population. He noted that UNRWA crafted a report in 2012 that assessed the living conditions in the Gaza Strip by the year 2020. Since then, conditions have only declined and UNRWA has had to amend its projections, painting an even grimmer picture of what 2020 holds for the people in Gaza. Baconi, Sachs, and Friedman went on to discuss the Palestinian, Israeli, and US perceptions of the Gaza crisis, respectively. Baconi assessed that internal division in Palestinian politics, combined with President Donald Trump's election and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) row, have had an adverse effect on conditions in Gaza. Since PA President Mahmoud Abbas decided to escalate tensions between Ramallah and Gaza earlier this year, Fatah rival Mohammad Dahlan is being reintegrated into Gazan politics, forcing Abbas to backtrack and consider reconciling with Hamas in Gaza. Dahlan has support from many regional actors, so Baconi predicted his ascension, if it comes to fruition, could potentially help resolve some aspects of the conflict.

Sachs illustrated that the current status quo is terrible for both the Palestinians in Gaza and the Israelis. But, Israelis are split on what exactly they should do to alleviate the problems. Some advocate a military campaign to unseat Hamas in Gaza, while others believe the best option is to endorse a unified West Bank and Gaza Strip and relax the Israeli blockade on Gaza. The latter option is increasingly popular among Israelis, Sachs noted, but many view it as impossible while Abbas is at the helm of the PA. So, many turn to Dahlan—who has extensive ties to many political and security officials in Israel—as a leader with whom Israel can work to alleviate the problems in Gaza.

Friedman argued that the United States and international community have stood by idly as Israel conducts the world's largest experiment in history of human behavior on 2.1 million Gazans. When it comes to policy, she was pessimistic that anyone in the Trump Administration knows if the president

endorses a Gaza strategy or not. She lauded President Trump for maintaining aspects of former President Obama's strategy toward Gaza, but she generally decried the US policy community's failure to develop a viable plan for a resolution to the crisis in Gaza. Moving forward, Friedman urged the policy community to start discussing Gaza as a final status aspect of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not as an independent problem to be addressed on its own.