



Congressional Update Week Ending March 10, 2017

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I. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Approves Friedman Nomination

On March 9, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) approved the nomination of David Friedman to be US Ambassador to Israel by a vote of 12-9. The proceedings on the vote can be viewed [here](#). All Republican members and one Democrat, Senator Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey), voted for Friedman.

Senators Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), Tim Kaine (D-Virginia), and Tom Udall (D-New Mexico) spoke bluntly about their opposition to Friedman's nomination. Senator Cardin said that "There are those who are trying to divide us and make Israel a partisan political issue" and "I don't believe that Mr. Friedman can be that unifying person." Senators Kaine and Udall agreed with Cardin's assessment, adding they believed Mr. Friedman to be "unqualified" for the position. Full Senate confirmation is likely to occur sometime next week.

II. Congressional Reaction to the New Travel Ban

The reaction in Congress to President Donald Trump's New [Executive Order](#) on the travel ban has been mixed. Senator Chuck Schumer (D-New York) [denounced](#) the ban on the Senate floor, calling it "misguided" and "against what America is all about," adding, "I fully expect the President's new Executive Order will have the same uphill climb in the courts that the previous version had."

On March 7, a group of Democratic senators introduced legislation that would block implementation of the Executive Order, which restricts individuals from certain countries from entering the United States (see below).

III. State Department Releases Annual "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016"

On March 6, the State Department [released](#) its 41st annual Human Rights Report, which provides a detailed account of human rights situations in nearly 200 countries for the year 2016. In a departure from long-standing tradition, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did not publicly announce the report, opting instead for an off-the-record briefing. This drew criticism from Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) and representatives of human rights groups. Human Rights Watch Washington Director Sarah Margon [said](#) Tillerson's absence "reinforces the message to governments, rights activists, and at-risk minorities that the State Department might also be silent on repression, abuse, and exploitation." Traditionally, the Secretary of State holds a public press conference to announce the release of the report, which is submitted to Congress. This was the first time in the report's 41-year history that the Secretary of State has taken such a low profile in announcing its release.

IV. Legislation Introduced

Iran

Iran/Robert Levinson (SRes85). Introduced on March 9 by Senators Bill Nelson (D-Florida) and Marco Rubio (R-Florida), the resolution “calls on the Government of Iran to fulfill repeated promises of assistance in the case of Robert Levinson, the longest held United States civilian in our Nation’s history.” The bill has been referred to the SFRC. As of March 10, the text of the resolution was not available.

An identical bill, [HRes185](#), was introduced in the House by Representatives Ted Deutch (D-Florida) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida). The bill was referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC).

Iran’s 1988 Massacre of Political Prisoners (HRes188). Introduced on March 9 by Representatives Michael McCaul (R-Texas), Ed Royce (R-California), Eliot Engel (D-New York), Barbara Comstock (R-Virginia), Tom McClintock (R-California), Bill Keating (D-Massachusetts), Brad Sherman (D-California), Don Young (R-Alaska), and Judy Chu (D-California), the bill would “condemn the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the 1988 massacre of political prisoners and calling for justice for the victims.” The bill has been referred to the HFAC.

Other Legislation

War Powers (HR1448). Introduced on March 9 by Representatives Jim Himes (D-Connecticut), Peter Welch (D-Vermont), Seth Moulton (D-Massachusetts), Ruben Gallego (D-Arizona), and Kathleen Rice (D-New York), the bill would “prohibit funds available for the United States Armed Forces to be obligated or expended for introduction of the Armed Forces into hostilities.” The bill has been referred to the HFAC and the House Armed Services Committee (HASC). As of March 10, the text of the bill was not available.

Pakistan as State Sponsor of Terrorism (HR1449). Introduced on March 9 by Representatives Ted Poe (R-Texas) and Dana Rohrabacher (R-California), the bill would “require a report on the designation of Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism.” The bill has been referred to the HFAC. As of March 10, the text of the bill was not available.

US Assistance/Deported Persons (HR1471). Introduced on March 9 by Representative Glenn Grothman (R-Wisconsin), the bill would “suspend assistance to countries denying or delaying accepting aliens ordered removed from the United States.” The bill has been referred to the HFAC. As of March 10, the text of the bill was not available.

No US Troops to Syria (HR1473). Introduced on March 9 by Representatives Gwen Moore (D-Wisconsin), Jamie Raskin (D-Maryland), and Nydia Velazquez (D-New York), the bill would “prohibit the deployment of members of the Armed Forces to Syria for

purposes of engaging in ground combat operations.” The bill has been referred to the HASC. As of March 10, the text of the bill was not available.

Blocking Implementation of the Revised Travel Ban (S549). On March 7, Senators Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut), Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont), Patty Murray (D-Washington), Tom Carper (D-Delaware), Maria Cantwell (D-Washington), Jeanne Shaheen (D-New Hampshire), Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York), Chris Coons (D-Delaware), Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisconsin), Ed Markey (D-Massachusetts), Cory Booker (D-New Jersey), and Chris Van Hollen (D-Maryland) introduced “a bill to block implementation of the Executive Order that restricts individuals from certain countries from entering the United States.” The bill has been referred to the SFRC. As of March 10, the text of the bill was not available.

Prohibit US Assistance/Terrorism (S532). Introduced on March 6 by Senator Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) and no cosponsors, the bill would “prohibit the use of United States Government funds to provide assistance to Al Qaeda, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and to countries supporting those organizations.” The bill has been referred to the SFRC. As of March 10, the text of the bill was not available.

V. Hearings

(1) Senate Foreign Relations Committee. On March 9, the SFRC held a [hearing](#) titled “Resolving the Conflict in Yemen: US Interests, Risks, and Policy.” This aptly named hearing brought in three foreign policy experts to explain the ongoing conflict in Yemen, assess risks and interests of the warring sides, and offer possible policy prescriptions. Testimonies were heard from [Thomas Joscelyn](#), Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies; Dr. Dafna Rand, former Deputy Assistant Secretary at the State Department and current Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the National Defense University; and the [Honorable Gerald Feierstein](#), Director of the Center for Gulf Affairs at the Middle East Institute and former US Ambassador to Yemen. Members of the committee posed many tough and complex questions to the witnesses about Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s interests in the conflict, the role of the United States in arming the Saudi government, US humanitarian aid, the threat of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and other current challenges.

Saudi Arabia. The witnesses generally agreed that for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the establishment of a pro-Saudi government in Sana’a was extremely important for national and border security. The Houthi rebels have shown the willingness and capacity to fire munitions across the border, targeting Saudi civilians. In the greater context of Saudi national security, the committee repeatedly questioned the witnesses about the necessity for the United States to agree to sell arms to the Saudi government. Some witnesses stated that the procurement of more precise and effective weaponry would mitigate the risk of civilian casualties and collateral damage, while others argued that it was not that Saudi Arabia

lacked the precise weaponry, but that the military has practiced questionable targeting strategies.

Iran. There was clear consensus about Iran's aspirations in the Yemen conflict. Committee members and witnesses alike concluded that Iran would be content with two possible scenarios. First, the Yemen conflict could rage on and Iran would have another arena in which to antagonize the KSA. Second, the Yemen war could be settled militarily and a Houthi government constructed in Sana'a, with which the regime in Tehran would try to build an alliance, would serve ultimately as a threat to Saudi Arabia. With either result, Iran would satisfy its desire to grow its regional influence and threaten the security of the KSA. As one senator summed it up, it is a low-risk, high-reward strategy for raising Iran's profile in the geopolitics of the Gulf.

(2) Elaine C. Duke Nomination Hearing. On March 8, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs [convened](#) to hear the [testimony](#) of Elaine Duke for her nomination as Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Ms. Duke has a long history in government management; she served as Under Secretary of DHS for both the Bush and Obama Administrations. She was generally well received and it appears she will make it through the confirmation process with little meaningful resistance. This hearing was notable for two reasons. First, the questions posed to Duke were representative of Congress's renewed focus on issues like border security and drug proliferation—a shift from the focus of anti-terrorism that preceded DHS's foundation. Second, only three Republicans appeared at the hearing to question Ms. Duke; the rest of the panel seats were held by Democrats. Democratic senators asked the toughest questions and even requested a second round of questioning, indicating the Democratic Party has adopted a strong posture to the Trump Administration and aims to prolong nomination efforts, even for candidates as well received as Elaine Duke.

VI. Upcoming Events in Washington, DC, March 13-21, 2017

Monday, March 13

The Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East will host a panel discussion on "Regional Perspectives on US Policy in the Middle East." Panelists include Dr. Kristin Diwan, Senior Fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, Dr. H.A. Hellyer, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Dr. Haykel Ben Mahfoud (via Skype), Nonresident Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Dr. Karim Mezran, Senior Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, and Dr. Nicola Pedde, Director of the Institute for Global Studies, Rome. The panel will be moderated by Ms. Mirette F. Mabrouk, Deputy Director and Director for Research & Programs at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Discussion begins at 3:00 p.m. at the Atlantic Council (*Registration required.*)

The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) will hold a discussion on “Trump’s Ban 2.0: Justified or Discriminatory” with Jamal Abdi, Policy Director, National Iranian American Council; David Bier, Immigration Policy Analyst, CATO Institute; and Amanda Frost, J.D., Professor of Law and Director of the Doctorate of Juridical Science Program, American University College of Law. Barbara Slavin, Acting Director of the Future of Iran Initiative, Atlantic Council, will moderate the discussion. 1:30 p.m. in 2168 Rayburn House Office Building. *(Registration Required.)*

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) will host a discussion, “Northern Ireland’s Lessons for Israeli Palestinian Peace.” Panel two, titled “Implications for Israeli-Palestinian Peacebuilding,” will feature Rami Dajani, Moderator, USIP; Joel Braunold, Alliance for Middle East Peace; Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, USIP; Father Josh Thomas, Kids4Peace; and Dr. Sarah Yerkes, Brookings Institution. 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. at USIP. *(Registration Required.)*

Tuesday, March 14

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) will hold a session on the “Trump Administration’s Immigration Policies.” 1:30 p.m. at CSIS, 1333 H Street, NW. *(Registration Required.)*

The US Institute of Peace will hold a discussion titled “Why Tunisia Should Matter to the New US Administration” with Tunisian Foreign Affairs Minister Khemaies Jhinaoui and Michael Yaffe, Vice President of the USIP Center for Middle East and Africa, 3:00 p.m. at USIP. *(Registration Required.)*

Wednesday, March 15

Washington Post Live will hold a panel discussion on “The First 100 Days: Halftime Report,” providing an analysis of President Trump halfway through his first 100 days in office. 9:00 a.m. at 1301 K Street, NW. *(Register at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-live/>)*

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a hearing on Syria titled “Six Years of War in Syria: The Human Toll” with Drs. Farida, Abdulkhalek, and Rajab, Syrian doctors, Aleppo, Neal Keny-Guyer, Chief Executive Officer of Mercy Corps, and The Rt. Hon. David Miliband, President and CEO International Rescue Committee. 11:00 a.m. in 419 Dirksen Senate Office Building.

The House Armed Services Committee will hold a hearing on the Middle East titled “Military Assessment of the Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East” with General Joseph Votel, Commander, US Central Command. 10:00 a.m. in 2118 Rayburn House Office Building

Thursday, March 16

The Atlantic Council will hold a discussion on “America’s Role in the World: Congress and US Foreign Policy” with Representatives Seth Moulton (D-Massachusetts) and Brand Wenstrup (R-Ohio). 9:00-10:30 a.m. at the Atlantic Council. *(Registration Required.)*

Friday, March 17

The Atlantic Council will host Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Illinois) to discuss America’s Role in the Middle East and the world. He will be introduced by Governor Jon Huntsman, Jr. and the discussion will be moderated by Amb. Frederic C. Hof, Director of the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Discussion will begin at 8:30 a.m. at the Atlantic Council. *(Registration required.)*

Future Event

Tuesday, March 21

The Atlantic Council will host a discussion titled “Rebuilding Syria: Reconstruction and Legitimacy” with Abdallah Al Dardari, Senior Adviser for Reconstruction and Rehabilitation at the World Bank Group; Mona Yacoubian, former Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Middle East, US Agency for International Development; Bassam Barabandi, former Syrian Diplomat and Co-Founder of People Demand Change; and Omar Shawaf, a Syrian activist. Faysal Itani of the Atlantic Council will moderate the discussion. 12:30 p.m. at the Atlantic Council. *(Registration required.)*