



## The US and Us: The Mitvim-DC Monthly

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*The US and Us: The Mitvim-DC Monthly* is a monthly report on US-Middle East issues. Each report includes an analysis, a roundup of commentaries, and a profile of a major US policymaker. The series is of particular importance at a time in which personnel changes and policy re-evaluations regarding Israel and the Middle East are taking place.

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### A. Analysis

Arriving 48 hours after the expiration date, the framework agreement on Iran's nuclear program belatedly ends a tumultuous month surrounding Israel's 17 March election. Beginning with Prime Minister Netanyahu's contentious Congressional address, the month of March saw divisions in the US-Israel relationship ignite in successive recriminations between the two countries' leaders, and in the halls of Congress.

The most dramatic US takeaway from the Israeli election turned out not to be Netanyahu's stunning comeback victory, but his [renouncing of support for the two-state solution](#) and fearmongering about Arabs voting in "droves," which the [administration condemned](#). Even now, relations between the countries have not returned to the status quo ante since the ensuing fallout from Netanyahu's audacious [backtrack statements](#) were President Obama's call for a "reassessment" in Israeli-Palestinian peace policy. Between US signals that it will [not shield Israel](#) at the UN, rumors of a new American peace initiative on the way and the likelihood of Netanyahu forming a hard right-wing governing coalition, a [rocky road ahead seems inevitable](#) for the fellow heads of state.

The extent of this Israeli-American squabble becomes more acute in light of claims of Netanyahu meddling in domestic US affairs. Unconfirmed reports showing that [Netanyahu had Israel spy on the Iran talks and then pass information onto the Republicans](#) refueled these suspicions. It also substantiated assessments surrounding the Congress speech that he is actively undermining the bi-partisan nature of pro-Israel support on Capitol Hill. Discourse on this worrying trend enveloped the American Jewish community. Some questioned whether AIPAC could continue to function at its expected capacity in an atmosphere where the [topic of Israel is so polarized](#). Tellingly, the traditional pro-Israel standard bearer [urged Obama](#) to take Netanyahu's post-election volte-face as sincere at the same time as speakers and community members at the annual J Street conference [implored the US administration not to back down](#) from its toughened stance against the re-elected Israeli leader.

As US-Israel and intra-Jewish ranks widened, so too did those between Democrats and Republicans in the lead-up to the 31 March deadline on an Iranian-P5+1 framework agreement. A [GOP letter from 47 senators to Iran](#) implicitly warning that a Republican president may nullify a final deal sowed a new level of division between the Senate and the White House. Nevertheless, [hawkish senate Democrats signaled they would still face off](#) against their party's leader if the framework agreement was not signed or was too weak.

That scenario now looks a bit less likely, now that the [details of this agreement](#) have been unveiled and were largely met with cautious approval in [Democratic and even some Republican circles](#). Senate Republican drivers for tougher Iran sanctions legislation will thus find it harder to muster the 67 votes needed to override a presidential veto. Even some Democrats still in support of such a measure have asked for it to be [amended so that it does not undermine](#) the talks ahead of the 30 June deadline for a final deal. The nearest date to watch is 13 April, when Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) will try to pass legislation that would endow Congress with the power to review and potentially reject the terms of such a deal.

As negotiations for a final agreement enter a new chapter, Obama will have to decide how to appropriately respond to expected attempts by Netanyahu and Congressional opponents seeking to check and perhaps derail the course he has set out for. All the while, leaders and political experts will have to contemplate the ramifications of a genuine US-Iran detente—a development that without full rapprochement will complicate matters in a region now dogged by conflicts in two failed states and a looming military faceoff between Iran and US allies in the Arab League.

## **B. Article Roundup**

### ***US-Israel Relations***

The Washington Institute's Executive Director Robert Satloff debates Former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Friedman in a paper on [whether Israel is an asset or a liability](#).

Elliott Abrams, at the Council on Foreign Relations, scolds Obama for disproportionately [attacking Netanyahu](#) for his pre-election comments towards Arabs and settlements policy.

Robert Satloff, at The Washington Institute, [beseches Obama and Netanyahu](#) to mend relations soon, noting troubling trends facing the special relationship including the disparity between Democratic and Republican support for Israel.

### ***US and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process***

Ilan Goldenberg, at the Center for a New American Security, published a comprehensive paper on the [2013-2014 Israeli-Palestinian negotiations](#), which includes lessons for the future.

Matthew Duss, at the Foundation for Middle East Peace, argues that carrots are not insufficient for inducing Israeli support for moving beyond the status quo, noting that [unconditional US support for Israel has disincentivized](#) Israel to change its more controversial policies.

Aaron David Miller calls Netanyahu and Obama's public arguments on the former's comments regarding Palestinian statehood a [soap opera](#), noting that this game of recriminations will continue without providing real substance in Obama's final years in office.

### ***US and Iran***

Experts from a [number of think-tanks respond](#) to a *Washington Post* prompt on what to do now that a framework agreement has been reached.

William J Burns, at the Carnegie Endowment, implores US diplomats to conceive an [Iran deal in the context of a broad Middle East strategy](#) while negotiating rigorously to mitigate imperfections.

Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, Iran experts under multiple administrations, contend that beyond a nuclear deal, Obama should consider [Iran as a future potential ally](#), and discuss Iran's potential role for the US if it re-enters the international community.

Suzanne Maloney, at the Brookings Institution, raises several [challenges that lie ahead on finalizing an Iran agreement](#). The parties' divergent press statements reveal some problematic discrepancies that signify grueling negotiations to come.

John Allen Gay, an expert on Iran for *The National Interest*, cautions that while the joint statement on an Iran deal looks good, the US should take care [not to allow for ambiguities](#) in the agreement's language, something Iran has historically exploited.

## **C. Policy Profile**

### **Robert Malley - Special Assistant to the President for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region**

A man who needs no introduction for those familiar with US diplomacy in the Middle East, Robert Malley will on 6 April become Obama's [special assistant in all matters concerning the wider region](#). Malley is likewise stepping down from his post as [senior director of the National Security Council](#), where among other things he counseled Secretary Kerry's team during the Iran negotiations.

As is to be expected, Malley's appointment has raised concern in [some pro-Israel circles](#). Malley's blaming of Barak for the [failure of the Camp David 2000 negotiations](#) confirmed prevailing suspicions of his anti-Israel partiality while serving as an intimate advisor during the Oslo process as Executive Assistant to President Clinton's National Security Advisor (1996-1998) and later Special Assistant to Clinton for Arab-Israeli Affairs (1998-2001). In 2008, he was [again embroiled in controversy](#) after meeting with Hamas—an action that prompted the Obama presidential campaign whom he had been advising to distance itself from him.

Having directed the Middle East Program at the [International Crisis Group](#) for over a decade (2001-2014) and having worked with the White House at the NSC for a year now, Malley's critics would be hard pressed to find someone with more expertise for the position. But with Obama running out of patience with Netanyahu and showing an eager determination to strike

an Iran deal in June, Malley's appointment appears to foreshadow a more confrontational effort by the administration toward Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians. With Kerry having lost considerable reputation among the parties during this summer's Gaza conflict, perhaps Obama may be mobilizing diplomatic expertise and preparing envoys for a more direct venture into brokering talks. A US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian framework agreement is still rumored to be presented once Israel's new governing coalition is formed.

In his new capacity, Malley will likely help craft policies incorporating stronger Arab participation in the region concerning the ongoing ISIS threat and increased Iranian-Saudi competition, while finalizing an Iran nuclear deal. However, this engagement with Arab partners could translate to Israeli-Palestinian matters, for which he might advocate stronger inclusion of the Arab Peace Initiative.