



The Mitvim-DC Monthly

A monthly report on US policies toward Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Middle East, and Iran

Volume 4, Issue 4, April 2016

Edited by Rebecca Bornstein*

A. US-Israel Relations

- **Security cooperation and aid** - Negotiations over the terms of a new 10-year memorandum of understanding (MoU) on US military assistance to Israel continue. During a meeting with visiting Republican senators, PM Benjamin Netanyahu [backtracked on his threat](#) to drag negotiations into the next President's term in office. The senators also warned against postponing a deal. This followed Vice President [Joe Biden's trip to Israel](#), during which he announced that the US would not be offering a better deal (the proposed MoU already includes a [significant increase](#) to Israel's sizable aid), and urged Netanyahu to move towards finalizing an agreement. [Biden's visit](#), which also included a trip to Ramallah, was largely colored by a stabbing attack that killed an American graduate student not far from the Peres Peace Center, where Biden and Shimon Peres were meeting.
- **Cyber and military cooperation** - Even as the debate over military aid continues, security cooperation continues to grow. This month, the US and Israel entered an agreement to [increase cyber defense cooperation](#). A meeting between US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon to conclude the agreement also contained a broad discussion on regional security issues. Earlier in the month, the countries concluded a [joint military exercise](#), in which over 1,000 troops joined IDF counterparts to practice defending Israel from [ballistic missile attacks](#).
- **Anti-BDS legislation** - Many legislative efforts to counter BDS are underway in the US. In March, resolutions condemning or opposing BDS advanced through state legislatures in [Georgia](#), [Florida](#), [Indiana](#), and in [Arizona's senate](#). The Israel Alliance Foundation and The Israel Project [lobbied](#) for the legislation in Georgia, and the Zionist Organization of America [guided constituents](#) to lobby state lawmakers in Florida. Some legislative efforts contain non-binding condemnations of BDS, while others seek to prohibit state procurement with companies engaged with BDS. Several

* Rebecca Bornstein is a researcher at the Mitvim Institute, and can be reached at rbornstein@mitvim.org.il. Previous issues of the Mitvim-DC Monthly can be [read here](#).

of these efforts have received criticism for potentially [infringing on constitutionally protected speech](#), or for [legitimizing the settlements](#) in their definitions of Israel. Countering BDS also remains a foreign policy issue; in March, US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro spoke at *Yedioth Ahronoth's* anti-BDS conference, in which he highlighted the significant [resources](#) dedicated to countering BDS.

- **Elections** - Electoral politics were on full display at AIPAC's annual conference, where leading candidates discussed their commitments to further strengthening the US-Israel relationship. Donald Trump's speech, which received numerous standing ovations, was widely [criticized](#) as being contradictory and inflammatory, and his attacks on President Barack Obama earned [condemnation](#) from AIPAC. On the democratic side, Bernie Sanders' absence focused the spotlight on Hillary Clinton. Her speech resonated with an audience that is typically skeptical of democratic candidates. Clinton's address was [less well received](#) by the progressive camp, which noted the [dissonance](#) in tone and content between her more critical [2010](#) and more hawkish [2016](#) speeches. Many analysts saw Clinton's speech as part of an effort to [distinguish her policies](#) from those of President Obama. Both Clinton and Ted Cruz attacked the BDS movement at AIPAC, with Cruz [suggesting](#) that it may be 'illegal behavior.'
- **Leahy letter and State Department inquiry** - US Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and ten democratic congressmen sent a [letter](#) to Secretary of State John Kerry requesting a State Department investigation into alleged 'gross violations of human rights' by security forces in Israel and Egypt, the two countries that receive the most US military aid. The [Leahy law](#) prohibits the US from funding, equipping, or training foreign military forces who commit human rights abuses or war crimes. The letter requests an investigation and 'appropriate action under the law' in case the allegations trigger the Leahy law. Notably, while the legislation prohibits aid to a [particular foreign military unit](#) involved in human rights abuses, it does not ban all funding. Regardless of its outcome, the attention garnered by this high-profile letter marks a shift from the recent campaign-cycle rhetoric towards Israel and the Middle East. The State Department is now tasked with investigating and replying to Leahy's request.

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Obama's final year** - There is growing speculation over the steps Obama may take during his [final year](#) in office to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. [According to senior officials](#), the strongest options under consideration are a [United Nations Security Council resolution](#) or a presidential [speech](#) that would outline parameters for a future peace deal. Security Council action could build an international consensus on the issue, whereas a speech -- a purely unilateral move -- could overcome the lack of a strong international consensus, and later be adopted by other countries. The focus on these options, neither of which directly involve Israelis or Palestinians, reflects the administration's growing concern over what [Martin S. Indyk described](#) as "the very real likelihood that the two-state solution could die on their watch."

- **The French initiative for an international peace conference** - The US has yet to publicly respond to the French initiative, [which is said to include](#) a preparatory meeting in the spring and a summer conference in Paris. The French are now engaged in consultations with various international actors regarding their initiative. While the US has reviewed the document, it has not participated in any public meetings on the initiative. When questioned about the lack of a formal response, State Department [Spokesperson John Kirby said](#) that the US believes that both Israelis and Palestinians need to take “affirmative steps” to prove they are willing and able to advance a two-state solution, and that the effort “has to start with them.” Meanwhile, Foreign Minister [Jean-Marc Ayrault](#) announced that France will not automatically recognize Palestine should its effort fail, backtracking on the words of his predecessor, Laurent Fabius.
- **Quartet meeting and report** - Quartet envoys met in Jerusalem to prepare a [report](#) intended to provide the groundwork for renewed peace talks that address obstacles to a final status framework. The US participates in the process but has not given it much focus in press conferences and briefings; this is likely a reflection of the belief that multilateralism cannot succeed if the two parties are not fully committed to a two-state solution. In a recent [Security Council briefing](#), Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov discussed the Quartet’s efforts, as well as the current trends that are counterproductive to renewed talks, including the recent wave of stabbings and the continued expansion of the settlement enterprise.

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria:** The ceasefire implemented on February 27 (including all parties except ISIS and the al-Nusra Front) maintained a fragile hold during March. Monitoring is conducted by a joint US-Russian team based in Geneva. US officials described the March 27 reconquering of Palmyra by Assad’s forces (with Russia’s support) as a [‘good thing’](#) and positive step against the Islamic State. Administration officials, however, differentiate sharply between the immediate goal of defeating ISIS and the [long-term goal](#) of removing Assad from power. While the US will support any victories against ISIS, especially in strategically significant cities, it has not changed its belief that Assad is [responsible for the war](#) and that the only viable resolution is a political process that involves his departure.
- **Russia’s troop withdrawal** - Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of the imminent withdrawal of most of Russia’s Syria-based troops [surprised both Washington and the Assad regime](#). The White House confirmed that Washington was not given [direct advanced notice](#) of the move that reflects Russia’s calculation that its strategic objectives - including shifting the war’s balance in favor of Assad - have largely been achieved. Over the last month, the US has alluded to Russia’s ‘increasingly constructive’ role in maintaining the ceasefire, as Moscow’s [increased military focus](#) on ISIS-controlled territories aligns with US objectives. It is likely that US and Russian operational and political maneuvering will not conflict, although tensions over Assad’s stay in power will certainly resurface if the diplomatic process moves to its next phase.

- **The Obama Doctrine** - Jeffrey Goldberg's insightful article on President Obama's [foreign policy decision making](#) has prompted [a number of responses](#). The article covers Obama's priorities and goal to reverse President Bush's military overextension in the Middle East. Among other insights, Goldberg highlights Obama's desired 'pivot to Asia' - and the obstacles to it - in addition to his views on the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine and the use of force. Despite divergent views within the administration, Goldberg writes that Obama "generally does not believe a president should place American soldiers at great risk in order to prevent humanitarian disasters, unless those disasters pose a direct security threat to the United States." This calculation helps to explain the president's policy towards Syria. Obama's decision making in the Middle East, writes Goldberg, is based on a strong aversion to unnecessary military overextension, as it would harm the American economy, limit its reach in other areas, and place service members at risk in situations that do not pose a direct threat to American national security.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran elections** - Iran's recent elections, while not politically transformative, are viewed in Washington as a [validation](#) of President Rouhani's strategy of re-engagement with the West, including the nuclear deal. Many American experts argue, however, that the [future](#) of US-Iran relations will remain highly [contentious](#) in the short term, and that the electoral results should not inspire great confidence in Iranian [democracy](#). Despite the success of the nuclear deal, and the direct dialogue that has emerged in its aftermath, policymakers in Washington will likely remain skeptical of the chances of a rapprochement with Iran. A White House Press Statement mentioned that the elections took place "against the [backdrop of a lack of transparency](#), censorship of the media, Internet, and text messages, and an intimidating security environment that limited freedom of expression and assembly." Even so, President Obama focused on people-to-people connections in a [nowruz message](#) that touched on Iran's reintegration with the global economy and the potential to expand goodwill between the citizens of both countries.
- **Ballistic missiles** - The Iran deal reduced tensions on the nuclear front, but the enduring conflict between Iran and the West can be seen in Iran's continued testing of ballistic missiles. This show of military strength is intended for both a domestic and international audience. The US is [taking a hard line](#) on ballistic missile testing: in March, the administration called for a United Nations [Security Council meeting](#) on the issue, and the [Treasury imposed new sanctions](#). Congress is currently developing possible bills for additional sanctions.

E. Further reading

Israel

- The Editorial Board, "[Mr. Netanyahu's Lost Opportunities](#)", *The New York Times*, March 14, 2016
- Michael Wilner, "[Threat of US Action at UN Security Council Impacting Israel Defense Aid Negotiations](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, March 31, 2016

Middle East

- Jeffrey Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)," *The Atlantic*, April 2016 Issue
- Maxim A. Suchkov, "[What Russia Won by Withdrawing from Syria](#)," *Al-Monitor*, March 23, 2016
- Julianne Smith, "[CNAS Press Note: Russia Withdraws from Syria](#)," *Center for a New American Security*, March 15, 2016
- Daniel L. Byman, "[Shifting U.S. Interests in the Middle East](#)," *The Brookings Institute*, March 2, 2016
- William Danvers, "[Building a New Foundation for Stability in Libya](#)," *Center for American Progress*, March 9, 2016
- Yochi Dreazen, Paul McLeary, and David Francis, "[Chaos Outside of Turkish President Erdogan's Washington Speech](#)," *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2016
- Foreign Policy Program, "[Global Challenges and Turkey's Goals for the Year 2023 - An Address by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey](#)," *The Brookings Institute*, March 31, 2016

Iran

- Tyler Cullis, "[The Iran Deal After Obama](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, March 7, 2016
- Graham Allison, "[Is Iran Still Israel's Top Threat?](#)" *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2016
- Wilson Center Middle East Program, "[Analyzing the Results of the February 26 Iranian Elections](#)," *The Wilson Center*, March 2, 2016
- Kathy Gilsinan, "[Who Really Won Iran's Elections?](#)" *The Atlantic*, March 3, 2016

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
March 9	Vice President Biden conducts meetings with both PM Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin
March 10	Vice President Biden has a phone conversation with MK Isaac Herzog
March 14	Russia announces the withdrawal of the majority of Russian troops from Syria
March 17	The US Department of Defense (DoD) and the Israeli Ministry of Defense (MoD) conclude an agreement on increased cybersecurity cooperation
March 20-22	AIPAC holds its annual policy conference
March 27-30	Quartet envoys conduct meetings in Jerusalem
March 28	PM Netanyahu appoints Dani Dayan consul general in New York
March 31	Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visits Washington D.C.