



## **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. This report is prepared by Brian Reeves, a Visiting Fellow at Mitvim, [breeves@mitvim.org.il](mailto:breeves@mitvim.org.il). Previous issues can be [read here](#).

### **A. Analysis**

The final proposal of the Iran nuclear deal, presented on [14 July](#) and scheduled to be voted on in Congress in mid-September after the August recess, has unsurprisingly prompted rancorous around-the-clock lobbying on both sides. The domestic American debate of the past three weeks has raised important questions on the Democratic mainstream's overall policy agenda in the Middle East, while competing Israel lobbies have taken center stage to sway key undecided senators. Most of the focus on Israel has likewise concerned the deal and Prime Minister Netanyahu's anticipated efforts to persuade US lawmakers to oppose it.

As it stands, opponents of the deal have chipped away at the talking points of President Obama, Secretary of State Kerry and Energy Secretary Ernst Moniz by devising potential alternatives to congressional support (i.e. how to reject it while possibly keeping the sanctions regime in place), and by underlining Iran's [ability to cheat](#) around the edges and to expand its proxy wars. Proponents have also articulated the case for the deal, emphasizing the singularity of the deal on the nuclear issue and seeking backing from [CIA officials](#), diplomats and prominent individuals to respond to the onslaught.

In the critical pursuit to obtain a veto-proof two-thirds majority in both congressional chambers against the deal, undecided members of the more evenly split Senate, have unsurprisingly received the spotlight. To date, some of these senators (e.g. [Schiff](#), [Boxer](#)) have now rallied behind the deal. Influential Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY), who is slated to become the Senate Minority (Democratic) Leader, has however remain loathe to make a decision, and reports on his leanings are conflicting.

That many of these senators are Jewish with reputations of championing pro-Israel causes has by no means gone unnoticed. AIPAC and J Street are often referenced together in numerous articles for their competing efforts to woo these senators, undecided representatives and the public at large. Jewish polling of the community's opinion on the deal finds definitively greater support of it ([49% in favor, 31% against](#)), in contrast to polls of the general American populace

([opposing results](#) based on the framing of the question). J Street has likewise used these figures, as well as its own [polls](#) (60% in favor, 40% against) to advocate its case. Conversely, the AIPAC [battle against the administration](#) on this issue is seen by many of its backers as a defining test for the organization's raison d'être: to sway lawmakers in key battles to make Israel's safety and security an integral part in their decision making.

Interestingly both groups, which each claim to have Israel's best interests at heart, have not used their lobbying clout to persuade fellow Americans, who [overwhelmingly oppose compensating Israel](#) for the Iran deal, to change their minds and advocate to Congress to increase the amount and quality of its annual aid package.

The greatest lobbying efforts, though, have been carried out by the Obama [administration itself](#), which has simultaneously taken its case abroad to secure the [backing of the UN](#) and win the grudging [support of the Gulf states](#). These latter moves have served to partially combat opponents' claims that the deal can be discarded for a better one and that it jeopardizes allies in the region.

The main wrench in this international endeavor is undoubtedly Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. [Open disputes](#) between his government and the Obama team reflect fundamental differences in approach to Middle Eastern regional security—a divide similarly observed between Republican and Democratic stalwarts. Not even [Jonathan Pollard's pending release](#) (an American sweetener to Israel) made a ripple in the standoff. Now bolstered by an endorsement from [Opposition Leader Herzog](#), the question over Netanyahu's extensive campaign in the US against the deal is not whether it will happen, but how his strategy will take form.

Thus far, it appears the Obama administration will be saved from a veto-proof majority in Congress. The real test for the Iran deal for Americans, however, is whether it paves the way to a more stable Middle East region that concomitantly preserves its national interests, which will remain entwined to a large degree with those of its allies. Until the product of the deal begins to manifest and either the US or Israel modifies its positions, the daylight between the two nation's governments will likely continue to broaden to ever-challenging lengths.

## **B. Article Roundup**

### ***In Support of the Iran Deal***

Experts at the Center for American Progress conclude that the deal is preferable to its alternatives. To [ensure effective implementation](#), however, Congress should augment the budget for US intelligence monitoring, boost security cooperation with the Gulf states and Israel, and maintain the international consensus on the need to constrain Iran.

Richard Nephew, at the Brookings Institution, qualified his support of the deal by focusing on key issues. A [delay in Iran's breakout time](#) under the deal critically hampers its progress, while [omissions in the text](#) confirm that a removal of sanctions—imposed for the express purpose of preventing Iran from going nuclear—does not extend to its entities and military organizations.

Miles Kahler, at the Council on Foreign Relations, attacks "the illusion of a better bargain," noting that the multilateral nature of the sanctions imposed on Iran could vanish, the risk of greater sanctions could bolster internal Iranian support for the regime, and the regime could

[shift the burden](#) of any such sanctions away from its core supporters and onto the general population.

Matthew Duss, at the Foundation for Middle East Peace, champions the deal as a [triumph of diplomacy](#) over the lingering Bush-era truism of war as the more definitive option.

### ***In Opposition to the Iran Deal***

Eric Edelman, at the Johns Hopkins University, and Ray Takeyh, at the Council on Foreign Relations, argue that P5+1 [concessions on all major issues](#) went beyond US red lines and that Congress should reject the deal to force Obama and America's allies to return to the table.

Annie Fixler and Mark Dubowitz, at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, analyze how the sunset clause (after 15 years Iran will be able to enrich uranium) and snapback clause (immediate reimposition of sanctions if Iran violates deal) [are fundamentally flawed](#). Jonathan Schanzer, also at FDD, adds that supporters of the deal are just as [blindly relying](#) on CIA assessments as early supporters of the Iraq war did regarding its alleged possession of WMDs.

Michael Singh, at The Washington Institute, warns that lifting sanctions as part of the Iran deal would [relieve pressure on Iranian intercontinental weapons production](#) and sharing, which threaten US interests and would compel America to take costly military action.

Experts at the Heritage Foundation contend that there *is* a better [alternative to the nuclear deal](#). Congress should block the deal to enable the next president to negotiate a better one, while the US should maintain what sanctions from its allies it can, restore credibility with regional allies and articulate through a congressional resolution that preventative military action will be taken if Iran continues on its path to build nuclear weapons.

### ***Reticent on the Iran Deal***

Robert Satloff, at The Washington Institute, challenges both President Obama's warning that a rejection of the deal would lead to war and the idea that a "better deal" could be reached. Iran, he argues would [regardless likely stick to the agreement](#) to safeguard P5+1 concessions, while Obama and Congressional Republicans would go to court over control of sanctions suspension.

Jon Alterman, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, finds few words of praise for the overall deal, but weighs the consequences of rejecting it, including a possible [erosion of US financial clout](#).

David Rothkopf warns that President Obama's [claim that the deal is not "transformative" for the Middle East is incorrect and dangerous](#). If the administration does not soberly assess the changing alliances and the US' own altered behavior in the region, then the deal, no matter what may accomplish, will weaken the America's position.

### ***US, Iran and the Middle East***

The Atlantic Council released a [report](#) by Bilal Saab arguing that an Iran deal necessities [a new containment strategy](#) in the Middle East. To best preserve influence in the region but avoid becoming entrenched, the US should adopt a cooperative strategy with regional states that prevents Iranian hegemony yet does not appear to gang up on it and spur an arms race.

Experts at The Washington Institute assess the [regional implications of an influx of cash](#) to Iran pending an agreed upon Iran deal. With it, Iran could buoy the Assad regime, outmatch the US in spending and influence in Iraq, expand Hezbollah's international operations, bankroll Hamas and Fatah militants, and overall reinforce the narrative of its ascent and America's decline.

Stephen Walt, at Harvard University, evaluates that what is most concerning about the nuclear deal is not Iran potentially cheating, which would presumably be against its self interest, but that [hardliners in Iran, the US and Israel will try so much to poison US-Iran relations](#) (including via a new US containment strategy) so as to stymie any broader political benefits.

### ***US, Iran and Israel***

James Traub, at the Center on International Cooperation, predicts that if Congress blocks the Iran deal, [liberals will blame Israel](#) for "a generation."

Shibley Telhami, at the Brookings Institution, asserts that Prime Minister Netanyahu's ardent opposition to the nuclear agreement will have [little effect in Congress](#) and will make it difficult for him to adapt in the event the deal is not blocked.

## **C. Policy Profile**

### **General Joseph Dunford – Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**

As July came to close, General Joseph Dunford was nominated Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to near universal acclaim. Dunford is scheduled to [replace](#) General Martin Dempsey on 1 October for the top military post. Dunford has until now [served](#) as the commandant of the Marine Corps. During his service, he headed the first Marine regiment that crossed into Iraq in 2003 and led the scaling back of US troops from Afghanistan between 2013-2014. Dunford holds master's degrees from Georgetown and Tufts University.

The Iraq War veteran brings considerable expertise on plans to combat ISIS, but he has also expressed reservations over the Iran deal, at odds with the White House. Although emphasizing Russia as the greatest threat to US defense, at his confirmation hearing he also [attributed](#) some 500 American soldier deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan to Iran's regional activities. He has additionally given [warnings](#) that the Iran deal will enable the Islamic Republic to financially back its proxies "more than in any time in the past." These critiques more broadly reflect Dunford's stated opposition to US military presence in the Middle East. Such a reduction, he cautions, would create opportunities for Iran to further its "hegemonic goals."

These and other comments indicate that, once in his new post, Dunford may be vocal advocate for increased military involvement in Iraq and Syria—training of local forces by US military advisors, greater advanced weaponry purchases, potential for US "boots on the ground"—as well as redoubled pressure on Iran against its conventional activities in the region. With the Iran deal generating so much unease among the US' allies in the neighborhood, a reinforced American commitment to Middle East stability and deterrence against Iran seems likely to cement this desired policy direction championed by the incoming Chairman.