



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. Previous issues can be [read here](#).

A. Analysis

Much in the way of US Middle East foreign policy occurred in the month since the November 4 US midterm elections. An extension on Iran nuclear talks, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's resignation and the battle against ISIS all preoccupied American lawmakers and foreign policy experts, leaving little patience for addressing Israeli-Palestinian tensions and the controversial "[Jewish state bill](#)."

As expected, with a small chance of achieving a comprehensive nuclear agreement on November 24 with Iran, Republican Senators and their hawkish Democratic allies berated the Obama administration for having ever partially suspended sanctions on the Iranian regime. Apparently [spurred on by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu](#), Republicans demanded new and renewed sanctions, with Illinois Senator Mark Kirk threatening to pass a bill on such a matter in January as the new Congress convenes. To this end, incoming Republicans issued a [joint statement](#) calling for an immediate, "comprehensive inspection of suspected nuclear development sites." Senate Foreign Relations chair Robert Menendez (D) also promised to join Senator Kirk come January, while the [American Israel Public Affairs Committee](#) (AIPAC) called on Congress to pass more sanctions legislation.

Another development that may soon be impacted by the Republican victory in the midterms is the vacancy of the chief post in the Defense Department following Chuck Hagel's exit. [Comments from a senior White House official](#) that Hagel was "just not the man for the job" only confirmed widespread speculation that he was in fact ousted from the Defense Secretary position for [failing to comply](#) with Obama's expectations for the position.

On Middle East policy, Hagel may be remembered for advocating American [boots on the ground](#) against IS, and, interestingly, for having defied an [initial bad rap](#) in the Jewish community to end up proving to be a "[true friend of Israel](#)." Now, as [potential appointees clamor to disqualify themselves](#) from the nomination for a job [considered to be that of a yes-man](#), Republican

senators have found themselves in a position to dictate a "broad re-examination of U.S. national-security policy as part of the confirmation process for [Hagel's] successor."

This congressional oversight of the Defense Secretary nomination process will likely be but one of many attempts by critics of Obama's Middle East policy to push the US in a more hawkish direction on Iran talks and in combatting IS. Two Democrats in Congress have recently advocated contributing [American Special Forces](#) to the fight against IS—a development coming on the heels of a Pentagon announcement that 1,500 more advisory troops would be sent to Iraq.

Obama appears to be serious about trying to finally [rebalance US foreign policy toward Asia](#); however, between a future showdown with Congress on these issues and a new decision to [increase America's role in Afghanistan](#) to prevent an IS-like scenario, it seems the Middle East will continue to preoccupy him for a bit longer.

B. Article Roundup

US and Iran

Suzanne Maloney, at the Brookings Institution, supports continued diplomatic negotiations and notes that the longer Iran waits, the more [financial constraints will undermine](#) its bargaining position.

George Perkovich, at the Carnegie Endowment, advocates a continuation of nuclear talks and [without resumed sanctions from Congress](#), unless Iran makes a provocative move.

President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass outlines why [even an imperfect deal with Iran](#) is worth pursuing.

Patrick Clawson and Mehdi Khalaji, at The Washington Institute, analyze what the economic and political [implications of an Iran deal](#), noting that it would likely strengthen relations between Iran and the US, but that it would also likely strengthen Ayatollah Khamenei's hand to the detriment of President Rouhani.

US and Israel

The Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy held a [panel discussion on the "future of the Two-State Solution."](#) Tensions in Jerusalem, regional turmoil and unilateral moves from both parties were examined. The panelists agreed that the "Oslo model" has run its course and that the US role as broker has no substitute in the foreseeable future.

Dennis Ross opines that the [US should formulate a code of conduct](#) between Israeli and Palestinian leaders to prevent the tensions in Jerusalem from escalating further. Later, this code would be utilized to build a more stable peace process for a two-state solution.

US, IS and Syria

J Dana Stuster, at the National Security Network, implores Obama to maintain his “strategic patience,” and [refrain from drawing the US into the Syrian civil war](#), as a CIA paper suggests.

Elliott Abrams, at the Council on Foreign Relations, [briefs a US House committee](#) on policy options for Syria and Iraq, including how to address the refugee crisis, mitigate benefits to Iran from fighting IS, and lead a ground coalition—with more US aid—into both countries.

Michael O'Hanlon, at Brookings, calls on the US to propose a [formal alliance with Iraq](#) in the fight against IS. This would help unite Iraq's sectarian communities against a common foe, while giving the US a greater role in promoting equitable power sharing in the Iraqi government.

Thomas Sanderson, at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, argues the [best deterrent against ISIS](#) is radicalization prevention.

C. Policy Profile

Anthony Blinken – Nominee for Deputy Secretary of State

President Obama [tapped](#) Anthony “Tony” Blinken to be the next Deputy Secretary of State, following the resignation of William J. Burns (see [The Mitvim-DC Monthly – November issue](#)). Still awaiting approval from the Senate after a [grilling confirmation hearing](#), Blinken currently serves as Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor. More important, he is considered [part of Obama’s “inner circle,”](#) a much-speculated coterie that was mentioned often in the media as a group that outgoing Defense Secretary Hagel was never able to penetrate.

In his current post, Blinken has been a vocal defender of Obama’s policies, as he did [before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) regarding the Assad regime, Iran negotiations, and Russian aggression in Ukraine. Particular criticism has leveled at him over the administration’s failure to prevent the rise of ISIS and its invasion of Iraq. Blinken is also widely considered to be [pro-Israel](#)—an observation not lost on his fellow [Jewish kin](#).

Before coming to the White House, Blinken was a [senior fellow](#) at the Center for New American Security and the Center for Strategic and International Studies—positions that earned him the role of Democratic staff director of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations under then Senator Joe Biden.

As lawmakers return from their Thanksgiving holiday to consider Blinken’s nomination, it is clear that Blinken will continue to be a key player in shaping Obama’s foreign policy. With two years left, and tough decisions ahead on the level of US commitment against IS and a possible Iranian nuclear deal in the air, Blinken’s counsel is expected to have no small impact on the Middle East region.