



## The Mitvim-DC Monthly Report

*Volume 3, Issue 12, December 2015*

*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 edited by Rebecca Bornstein, a researcher at the Mitvim Institute, [rbornstein@mitvim.org.il](mailto:rbornstein@mitvim.org.il). Previous issues can be [read here](#).

### A. Analysis

The Obama administration's November announcement that it would [not launch large-scale Israeli-Palestinian peace talks](#) during its final year in office reflects the total breakdown of the peace process. Next November, Americans will elect their next president. While the precise role of foreign policy in the elections has yet to be determined, it is clear that the events that unfold during this interim period will set the tone for the next administration's Middle East policy.

In the absence of final-status negotiations, the Obama administration is prioritizing [continued engagement with Israeli and Palestinian leaders](#) and the identification of [concrete steps](#) for confidence building and de-escalation that could set the groundwork for future talks and safeguard the viability of the two-state solution. Recent statements by senior administration officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, reflect the seriousness of the American perception that current trends -- including violence, settlement activity, and demolitions -- are ["imperiling the viability of a two-state solution."](#)

A key rift between US and Israeli policymakers centers on the viability of the status quo, which has produced the trends mentioned above. Netanyahu's policy towards the Palestinians is sometimes described in Washington as a ["strategic conservatism"](#) that favors the status quo over accepting the risks of action.

Netanyahu demonstrated that he has no intention of changing this position during a late November meeting with Kerry, during which he reportedly said that [Israel would not take any steps](#) to strengthen the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank -- such as providing economic benefits and advancing Palestinian infrastructure and construction in Area C -- until some later point after the security situation improved.

Netanyahu's proposal that the US recognize construction in exchange for proactive Israeli steps was [rejected out of hand](#), in keeping with the long-standing US policy position opposing Israeli settlement activity beyond the 1967 lines. The Obama administration's frustration with Netanyahu's lack of action is clear, and US officials clearly view the costs of inaction as greater than the risks of taking serious steps towards a two-state solution (please refer to Section C for more on this topic).

Given the tempestuous past year of US-Israel relations, and the lack of progress towards a two-state solution, it is unsurprising that the partisan divide on Israel continues to deepen within the US. Recent polling data shows that Netanyahu's [favorability rating](#) rests at 51% among Republicans and only 18% among Democrats, seven points lower than at the end of 2014. Whether this trend continues depends largely on whether the Israeli government takes concrete action to rejuvenate the stalled peace talks and affirms a willingness to move beyond the status quo.

## **B. News Roundup**

### ***US and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict***

Allen L. Keiswetter of the Middle East Institute analyzes [the Middle East and the 2016 Presidential Elections](#), including the role of foreign policy in the elections and President Obama's legacy on Middle East policy.

Nancy Lindborg of the US Institute for Peace writes on [four concrete steps](#) that the international community can take to safeguard the possibility of the two-state solution, including strengthening NGOs and civil society leaders. The recommendations are based on her recent visit to the region, which included a Mitvim - USIP roundtable.

The Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy released [American Attitudes Toward the Middle East and Israel](#), a public opinion poll by Shibley Telhami. Polling includes data on partisan views towards the US-Israel relationship and the influence of the Israeli government in American politics.

Former National Security Advisor Samuel M. Berger, who recently passed away, was featured in a Frontline article on [crucial moments in the US-Israel relationship](#) and the future of bilateral relations.

### ***US Policy towards Russia and the Syria Crisis***

Former U.S. ambassador to Georgia and Kazakhstan William Courtney, now of the RAND Institution, [analyzes Russia's intervention in Syria as a component of Moscow's regional and global ambitions](#). He explores alignment in US and European positions towards Russia, as well as the possibility of the West working with Russia to "foster a transition in Syria to more stable, broad-based political arrangements.

In Foreign Policy, Keith Johnson and Julia Ioffe discuss Turkey-Russia tensions after Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet. Johnson evaluates [whether Russian anger will be tempered by strategic considerations](#), especially in light of a planned \$12 billion bilateral project designed to ship gas across the Black Sea to Turkey and eventually onward to Europe. Ioffe writes about empire and strategic framing: this is a real, military [conflict between Russia and a NATO member-state](#), but Russia has been careful to keep its scope bilateral.

Olga Oliker and Jeffrey Mankoff of CSIS discuss US and Western policy towards Russia. Their conversation spans from [Washington's goals in engaging with Russia to creative efforts to manage the relationship](#).

Matthew Duss of the Foundation for Middle East Peace writes on [the Syrian refugee question](#) as it relates to national security and American identity.

### ***US and the Iran Deal***

Amy J. Nelson of the Council on Foreign Relations writes on [the future of the Iranian nuclear deal](#). Ensuring Iran's short-term compliance has been a major policy priority, but Nelson writes that US policymakers should also be working towards ensuring that Iran upholds its obligations after the original deal expires.

Henry Kissinger spoke at CSIS on Iran and the future of the Middle East. He discussed his concerns over the regional implications of the nuclear deal, and also the balance between [limiting Iranian imperialism and engaging in dialogue on peace and security](#), which requires examining the elements of Iranian foreign policy that are compatible with American security and objectives.

## **C. Policy Event Summary: The Brookings Institution's Saban Forum on US-Israel Relations**

On December 4-6, the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy held its 12th annual Saban Forum, titled "[Israel and the United States: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow](#)." The high-profile policy conference included remarks from former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Secretary of State John Kerry, and focused on "the future for Israelis and Palestinians, Iran's role in the Middle East, spillover from the war in Syria, and the global threat posed by the Islamic State and other violent jihadi groups."

The conference is especially notable given the turbulence of the last year in US-Israel relations, and implications for the future. It is also significant in the context of the 2016 Presidential Elections, as Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton's views were undoubtedly calibrated to reflect the tone that her campaign will take on Israel in the coming months. Unsurprisingly, she prioritized increasing [the military dimension of the bilateral relationship](#). On Iran, Clinton, who has espoused a "distrust and verify" philosophy towards enforcing the nuclear deal, said that the military option should not be taken off the table as the US verifies Iran's compliance.

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Clinton and Kerry were firm in their view that the costs of the status quo are unbearable. Clinton announced that "[inaction is not an option and a one-state solution is no solution, it is a prescription for endless violence](#)." Kerry also warned that "[the status quo is simply not sustainable](#)," as he discussed the risks of sliding towards a one-state reality. He discussed potential steps -- [including halting settlement growth and increasing Palestinian civil authority](#) -- that the US believes Israel should take to ensure that the two-state solution remains possible.

The Saban Forum also featured a moderated discussion with former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and MK Yair Lapid on [restoring order in the Middle East](#). Lapid began by raising his proposal of a regional solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would commence with a summit in Cairo or Riyadh. Hadley voiced support for this proposal, in theory, as a regional forum would take advantage of [shifting perspectives and alliances within the region](#), especially the "emerging convergence of interest" between Israel and the Sunni Arab states.

However, Hadley's response illuminates a gulf between Israel and the US on issues of prioritization and sequence: both want to stabilize the Middle East, but the US prioritizes ending the Syrian civil war and defeating the Islamic state. In addition, while Lapid advocates for quick action towards a regional solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from his position in the opposition, the Netanyahu coalition does not share this view or sense of urgency. Unfortunately, Lapid's position and US priorities in the Middle East mean that the regional solution is unlikely to gain momentum in the current political climate.