



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

As Israel ended 2014 in full election swing and PA President Abbas made moves at the UN, American interest briefly re-gravitated toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue while the fight against ISIS and possible Iran sanctions remained top Middle Eastern issues ahead of the convening of the new GOP-dominated Senate on January 6. The year's close will also be remembered for the release of the CIA Torture Report and for plummeting oil prices that have placed both Russia [and Iran](#) in further financial straits.

In early December, the Israeli election cycle conveniently kicked off just in time for the Brookings Institution's annual Saban Forum for which major Israeli and American leaders were invited. On the American side, expected Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton surprised some by [backing diplomacy with Iran](#), while Vice President Biden carefully stressed that there was ["no daylight" \(no ideological divide\) between Israel and the US](#), and that Israel was being kept up to date on Iranian nuclear talks. Concomitantly, Brookings expert Shibley Telhami released a survey on American attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see below), showing that a sizeable majority of Americans wanted their government to be more impartial in brokering negotiations and that American Jews largely support Israel's democratic character over its Jewish one, among other typically left-wing views.

As for the Israeli side, the contrast between Prime Minister Netanyahu's reiteration that only [permanent IDF troops in the West Bank](#) can guarantee peace and Labor Chair Isaac Herzog's progressive worldview presumably more favorable to the Obama administration has fueled speculation over the benefits of a Center-Left Israeli leadership. The possibility has also been discussed in the American Jewish community on [how it will adapt](#) to supporting an Israel under a non-Likud, more progressive leadership.

Also during the month, Congress passed an [important spending bill](#) that included \$3.1 billion in military aid to Israel plus \$620 million in joint US-Israel defense missile programs, while placing clauses to [cut aid to the Palestinian Authority](#) should it gain statehood recognition in international forums, fail to combat incitement, or permit Hamas to have "undue influence" in

the Palestinian governing body (i.e. “the unity government”). The bill also mandates that the Executive Branch report to Congress every 30 days on Iran’s compliance in nuclear talks, a measure hailed by AIPAC.

With the US sending more troops to combat ISIS and incorporate [local and regional allies](#) in the effort, Egypt appears to have firmly come back into America’s good graces as the US approved the transfer of 10 Apache helicopters to the al-Sisi government in order to [combat the ISIS-allied Sinai jihadist group Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis](#).

Congressional wariness over Palestinian Authority actions was soon justified when the PA announced on December 14 that it would [seek a UN Security Council resolution](#) on a time limit for Israeli occupation. With the US waiting to restart the peace process after the Israeli election and in no mood of condoning unilateral actions, this failed UN bid, the subsequent PA move to seek [action against Israel at the International Criminal Court](#) in the Hague and now a plan to [re-submit its statehood bid](#) to the UN Security Council will likely make the new Congress seriously consider [Israel’s most recent request](#) for it to cease all \$400 million of aid to the PA.

Regarding Iran, GOP lawmakers ramped up rhetoric, with Senator Marco Rubio demanding a Senate [up-or-down vote on any nuclear deal](#), while also boasting that they have a “veto-proof majority, to impose additional sanctions,” i.e. support from many Democrats that would override any White House veto. The Obama administration has maintained that [additional sanctions would benefit Iran’s hand in the talks](#) by putting more pressure for additional Western concessions. It has however continued to [enforce existing sanctions](#). Such Senate rhetoric may very well influence the [next round of nuclear discussions](#), set for January 15 in Geneva.

B. Article Roundup

End of Year Assessments on the Middle East

A group of experts at the Carnegie Endowment offer a New Year’s insight on [developments and trends to follow in the Middle East in 2015](#).

Aaron David Miller, at the Wilson Center, offers [five reasons for positive change](#) in the Middle East in 2015. These include a possible Iranian nuclear deal, a new Israeli prime minister, a serious Israeli-Palestinian peace process, a more proactive Iraq and continued progress in a burgeoning Tunisia.

Daniel DePetris, a routine writer in *The National Interest*, examines the [five major US peace talks failures in 2014](#). Syria, Israel-Palestine and Iran were among them.

Thomas Carothers, at the Carnegie Endowment, raises concerns over the decline in USAID (despite record-level overall foreign aid) for weakening longstanding US strategy in promoting democracy, allowing authoritarian governments to go unchecked and engendering the [same conditions that fostered Islamist extremism and civil war](#).

US and Israel/Palestine

Shibley Telhami, with the Brookings Institution, published a thorough survey on [American attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#). Telhami also wrote an [article](#) in *Foreign Policy* analyzing the results.

Dennis Ross, at The Washington Institute, [decries support for recent PA UN bids](#), including their one-sided nature on compromise, and advises US and European leaders to refrain from pressing a resumption in the peace process until after the Israeli election.

Former Mitvim Visiting Fellow Grant Rumley, now at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, explores [developments in the Abbas-Dahlan rivalry](#) and possible implications regarding Hamas and Gaza.

US and ISIS

Former US Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey, now at The Washington Institute, advocates for a “modest, enduring US military presence” to [build on the gains made against ISIS](#). He also suggests how to overcome sectarianism in Middle East states that give rise to violent non-state actors.

US and Iran

Dalia Kaye, at RAND Corporation, outlines several reasons why a [deal on Iranian nuclear talks is favorable](#), despite the deadline extensions.

Michael Singh, at The Washington Institute, examines how [falling oil prices and the threat of new sanctions](#) could give the US more leverage in the Iran nuclear negotiations.

C. Policy Profile

Avril D. Haines – Deputy National Security Advisor

The newest appointment in the White House for President Obama’s last two years in office is Avril D. Haines to the post of Deputy to National Security Advisor Susan Rice. Haines replaces Anthony Blinken, who has become Deputy Secretary of State (more on Blinken in [The Mitvim-DC Monthly, December 2014 issue](#)). A recent former Deputy Director of the CIA, Haines was a favorite for the position. She has close ties to the White House, yet she has been [praised](#) by Rice as “incredibly well-liked...across the agencies and across the government”—a quality that the Obama administration has desperately lacked.

Secretary of State John Kerry has also given her high remarks. In a [statement](#) on her appointment, he divulged that he had attempted to bring her on himself, before CIA Director John Brennan requested her as the agency’s second-in-command. Like Blinken, Haines has worked under the current Vice President Joe Biden. Between 2007-2008, she served as counsel to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during which time Biden was chair.

As a hopeful bridge between the White House and the Pentagon, Haines will be key in helping mend rifts caused by [years of ill feeling](#) and the most recent release of the [CIA Torture Report](#). Such a feat will be critical, not only for the Obama administration’s tarnished foreign policy reputation, but also America’s legacy as the reliable global military leader that has not succumbed to the polarizing and paralyzing internal wrangling seen in recent years.