



The Mitvim-DC Monthly Report

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The Mitvim-DC Monthly is a monthly report on US-Middle East issues. Each report includes an analysis, a roundup of commentaries, and a policy profile or summary of a policy event. 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. Previous issues can be [read here](#).

A. Analysis

Events of the last month showed the trends that will shape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2016. The peace process remains broken, and the tenuous status quo is characterized by frequent violence. No serious diplomatic alternative has emerged in the wake of the Obama administration's announcement that it would not launch large-scale peace talks before the November 2016 elections. In the coming months, the administration is likely to focus on encouraging smaller scale confidence-building measures between the two parties, in order to preserve the possibility of the two-state solution when serious negotiations resume in the future.

President Obama, during his [December meeting](#) with President Rivlin, reportedly said that the lack of progress towards peace limits Washington's ability to defend Israel abroad. US officials consistently reaffirm their commitment to protecting Israel's interests in international forums. However, during his meeting with Rivlin, [Obama reportedly explained that Secretary of State John Kerry defended Israel](#) by "telling his colleagues overseas, especially in Europe, that he was trying to advance the peace process and asking them to please not interfere," but that this argument has been significantly weakened by the lack of progress evident during Kerry's latest trips to Jerusalem and Ramallah.

In the non-governmental sector, AIPAC began to prepare its 2016 agenda and organize its March conference. The organization's legislative agenda for the coming year is likely to focus primarily on [countering the BDS movement](#). To that end, AIPAC released a statement linking the recent [European Union \(EU\) decision to label Israeli settlement goods](#) to the greater BDS campaign and pressing for American action on this issue in negotiations with the EU over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Agreement (TTIP). The [linkage between BDS and the European labeling decision has been rejected by J Street](#), which maintains a strong policy against BDS but supports "labels that accurately distinguish between products made in the state of Israel and those originating in the territory over the Green Line."

Also in December, the first Ha'aretzQ/New Israel Fund conference attracted significant attention from the American media and policy community, and [President Obama recorded an opening message](#) commending the newspaper's role in Israel's democracy. The conference's content and media success [challenge AIPAC's dominance](#) on shaping the American discussion on Israeli policy, and highlight a growing appetite for alternative perspectives on Israeli society and security.

Finally, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) increased its focus on right-wing incitement and gave particular attention to condemning the 'foreign agent' campaign released by Im Tirtzu. ADL's [swift condemnation of the campaign](#), which targeted five left-wing NGO leaders as 'agents of foreign governments' and attacked their sources of funding, shows that issues previously seen as internal to Israel are attracting greater attention in the US. This is due primarily to the increasingly extreme rhetoric of Im Tirtzu and other groups (ADL deemed the video "[a form of incitement which crosses the line into hate speech](#)"), and growing sentiment among liberal Jewish Americans that these actions stand in [stark contrast to American values](#).

B. News Roundup

US and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

- David Remnick of the New Yorker published "[Negotiating the Whirlwind](#)," an analysis of Secretary of State Kerry's career that includes his frustrations over the peace process, and the growing perception among US policymakers that "Israel, along with the occupied territories, is headed toward becoming a unitary state that is an impossible entity to manage."
- Roger Cohen, of the New York Time, writes about the [lasting effects of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the steps the US can take to reverse them](#), including publicizing its view of a territorial compromise on the basis of the 1967 lines, with agreed swaps, seeking leverage in its opposition to settlement growth, and closing American tax loopholes that benefit Israeli settlers.

US Policy towards Russia and the Syria Crisis

- Speaking on the administration's Syria policy, State Department Spokesperson John Kirby reports that "[nothing has changed about our view that Assad cannot be the future of Syria](#): that you can't have a unified, pluralistic, nonsectarian Syria where people feel safe and secure with Assad still in power."
- Laura Rozen, in Al-Monitor, provides a [roundup of each presidential candidate's proposed policies for Syria](#), including military strategy, combating the Islamic State, and accepting refugees.
- Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinkin says that the [chances of crafting a political transition in Syria are better than "at any time during this crisis,"](#) due

largely to Russia's heightened leverage with Assad as a result of its consistent support.

- Fred Kaplan writes in Slate on [President Obama's foreign policy legacy](#). He pinpoints potential signs of progress in Syria, but argues that prolonged conflict may overshadow the administration's other foreign policy achievements.
- Josh Rogin writes in Bloomberg View on the [Syrian government's efforts to reach out to Washington's power brokers and gain influence](#). He also writes on the sharp divide within the Obama administration on whether to first prioritize the fight against ISIS or insist on Assad's immediate removal from power.
- Sonor Cagaptay and James F. Jeffrey, of the Washington Institute, argue that [the US must press hard for a compromise solution to the Syrian war](#) that will circumvent greater escalation in the Russia-Turkey crisis.

US and the Iran Deal

- Emma Borden and Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution write on [expectations for the next few months of the Iran deal's implementation](#). The conclusion of the IAEA's investigation into the military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program moves the deal closer to "Implementation Day." After this point, if the IAEA certifies that Iran is upholding its commitments under the JCPOA, the international community will begin to relieve some nuclear-related economic sanctions.
- Anthony H. Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies writes on [the implications of Iran's recent missile tests](#). He says that it was "clear that the United States tried to put limits on Iran's missile activities in the JCPOA and Iran refused," and attributes recent tests to Iran's attempt to bolster its conventional military status, potentially as the result of pressure from hardliners in the IRGC.

C. Policy Event Summary

"Syria: Steps toward Peace or Deepening Intractability?" The Brookings Doha Center -- 8 December 2015, Doha, Qatar

The Brookings Doha Center held a panel titled "Syria: Steps toward Peace or Deepening Intractability?" on [the impact of outside actors on the Syrian war](#). Among other issues, the panel addressed inclusiveness in Syria peace talks. This highlights a major US policy challenge: how to support a strong coalition of Syrian opposition groups while excluding the terrorist and extremist organizations that have become major players on the ground.

The Brookings Doha panel featured a lengthy discussion on the scope of participation in international peace talks, and specifically on the structure of talks in Riyadh in mid-December. The Riyadh talks were an attempt to unite the Syrian opposition behind a [single body and a statement of principles that will form the basis for possible peace negotiations with the Syrian government next year](#). Charles Lister of the Brookings Doha Center said that the inclusion of the Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, in addition to dozens of other opposition groups, “marks a shift” in US and Western Syria policy. His analysis was that their inclusion represents a recognition that, regardless of ideology, these groups are “too popular and too powerful” in Syria to be barred from the negotiating table.

The United States previously expressed concerns about Ahrar al-Sham’s links to al-Nusra front and past history of joint operations with al Qaeda affiliated groups, but has not listed the group as a terror organization. Many analysts, [including Colum Lynch and John Hudson, believe that this indicates an open door for possible future cooperation](#). Speaking at the Doha panel, Noah Bonsey, senior analyst on Syria at the International Crisis Group, highlighted the difference between armed Islamic revolutionary factions and armed Salafi-jihadi groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra. He argued that unlike Salafi-jihadi groups, Ahrar al-Sham and similar groups would [uphold an inclusive approach to non-Muslim minorities, and would not pursue a transnational agenda](#). Regardless, negotiating with a growing body of powerful Syrian opposition groups will remain a foreign policy challenge for some time to come.