



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 for Israel's regional foreign policies as the second Obama administration takes shape – 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, briannreeves@gmail.com. Previous issues can be [read here](#).

A. Analysis and opinion

Congress shouldn't cut aid to the Palestinian Authority

By voting to reduce aid to the PA, Congressional representatives shortsightedly jeopardize Abbas' legitimacy, Israeli security and future prospects for peace.
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Following the kidnapping of three Israeli youths and Secretary of State John Kerry [hinting](#) at Hamas responsibility, U.S. congressmen were right to question the merits of the new Palestinian Authority "government of national consensus." But the House of Representatives' Appropriations Committee's decision to [approve a State and Foreign Operations bill](#) on June 24 that would slash PA aid, however, highlights the shortsighted decision-making by Congress toward Israel and prospects for peace down the road. By voting to reduce aid to the PA, Congressional representatives jeopardize Abbas' legitimacy, Israeli security and future prospects for peace.

The [bill in question](#) calls for the US to withhold funds "equivalent" to those the PA provides families of Palestinian terrorists, and to prevent dollars to any Palestinian government formed as a result of "an agreement with Hamas." Altogether, these restrictions would deny the PA some [\\$70 million of the \\$400](#) million it receives annually—a figure less than a quarter of what it was [in 2008](#). Unsurprisingly, the bill was chiefly backed by Republicans, and stands in marked contrast to the Obama administration's [support for continued aid](#) to the "technocratic" government. The bill, however, also reflects a sentiment shared by many Democrats, [AIPAC](#), and [88 of the Senate's 100 members](#). The Senate Appropriations Committee is expected to approve a sister [bill](#), after which the two chambers will put them to a general vote.

On the surface, the bill appears well grounded, especially in light of [Netanyahu's protestations](#) and Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's [charges](#) that Americans are financing PA President Mahmoud Abbas' stipends to Palestinian terrorists in prison. In practice, it would weaken an already beleaguered PA, undermining the legitimacy it has recently

garnered for the first time in years. In so doing it threatens to collapse the very institution that was created for advancing the peace process and that is demonstrating its willingness against unbearable domestic pressure to cooperate with Israel for its security and against extremism in the region.

For starters, as Sec. Kerry's spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, already pointed out, the Israeli government itself has maintained its security cooperation with the PA and in fact had transferred aid to the PA [on the same day](#) as the government was announced—a tacit admission that the lack [of any actual Hamas leaders](#) in the technocratic government permits continued relations with the PA.

Vindicating this latter point is the PA's [condemnation](#) of the recent kidnapping and its [active participation](#) in the search for Israel's "lost boys," despite Israel's [mass arrests](#) of Palestinians not connected in the affair, as well as Hamas and Israel's own controversial MK Haneen Zoabi's censure of the PA's efforts as [betrayal](#) and a [crime](#).

On a deeper level, the PA represents a moderate force among Palestinians, is often receptive to Western demands, and most of all is key to strengthening the Palestinian economy and infrastructure—ingredients widely accepted as conducive to Israel's security. Even a partial reduction in aid, as Congress is proposing, would hamper the PA's ability to pay for projects and employee salaries—a move that would further stall the economy and the Gaza Strip's long road to recovery. These benefits far outweigh the PA's less palatable practices, such as the stipends to the families of Palestinian prisoners.

Indeed, it is for these reasons that in a similar congressional climate in 2011, Brigadier General Nitzan Alon—at the time in charge of Israeli security in the West Bank—was prompted to write an article in the [New York Times](#) appealing to Congress not to cut funding to the PA. When Congress ultimately froze \$200 million in annual funds, then U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta—who has been known to criticize Obama for not taking military action in [Syria](#)—also [voiced](#) that that it was a "mistake." That aid, which largely paid for the [22% of the Palestinian work force that the PA employs](#), was not reinstated until 2013.

Congress as a whole should learn from this fruitless episode and forego plans to dwindle the PA's budget. If anything, it should be praising the PA for having managed to maintain a government of national consensus all the while fighting Hamas and combatting the glorification of terrorism. It should be offering moral support to Abbas in the face of domestic and Israeli critics. If Congress were to do this, it would strategically position the U.S. to leverage the PA's cooperative efforts and governing legitimacy—a legitimacy that Israel has long demanded—and to restart negotiations on a credible and durable path to peace.

B. Article Roundup

As a tumultuous month of June in the Middle East draws to a close, the new Palestinian Authority "government of national consensus" remains intact despite tensions with Israel over the kidnapping of three Israeli teens, clashes between PA forces and Hamas, and threats by Israel and the US to withhold funding. While Congressional committees supported the latter move, the chambers have found themselves [divided](#) on whether to cut (Senate) or increase (House) American foreign aid to Egypt in the wake of General Sisi's rise to the presidency. And amid the surprise invasion of Iraq by the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), experts and politicians took the occasion to reevaluate Obama's [foreign policy doctrine](#) while deliberating on whether and to what extent the US should help in combating Sunni extremists.

US Policy in the Middle East

The Project on Middle East Democracy released a [report indicating that the US has little to support democracy](#), governance and human rights in the MENA region for the past three years.

US and ISIS

Elliott Abrams, at the Council on Foreign Relations, chides Obama in the wake of the ISIS invasion of Iraq as "[The Man Who Broke the Middle East.](#)"

Aaron David Miller, at the Wilson Center, avers that [the Iraq War was never winnable](#), and should not be blamed on President Obama.

Sarah Chayes and Frederic Wehrey, at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, make the case for why American [counterterrorism efforts should be coupled with local reforms](#).

Anthony Cordesman, with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, supports Obama's response to, *inter alia*, send 300 military advisors to Iraq, as [the least of all bad options](#).

Barry Pavel, at the Atlantic Council, outlines a [three-pronged US strategy](#) for countering the crisis in both Iraq and Syria.

US and Egypt

Eric Trager, at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, stresses that [fear is still the all-encompassing motivator of Egyptian politics](#).

After advocating last [month](#) that the US should focus on issues rather than who is in power in Egypt, the Carnegie Endowment's Michele Dunne recommends a US strategy of [limited relations with the Sisi government](#) while ramping up programs to support the Egyptian people.

C. Policy Profile

Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich) - Chairman of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

Reeling from the ISIS offensives' incredible advance, congressmen and media turned to Representative Mike Rogers, the Chairman of the House of Representative's Intelligence Committee, for answers on how the US did not foresee this. His response was unequivocal. The army veteran and former FBI special agent wasted no time in casting blame on the Obama Administration for [ignoring intelligence from both the US and its allies](#).

In his current capacity, Rogers has advocated hawkish views on everything from Syria and Iran, to Russia and North Korea. He was among the leading voices calling for the US to heed Arab regional requests and arm Syrian groups against Assad. When it faltered, he charges, [Arab states supported conflicting and extreme factions](#), which ultimately led to the current debacle. Rogers also [supports continued aid to Egypt](#) and [opposed the recent US-Taliban prisoner swap](#) that freed Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. Now, with Rogers warning that ISIS has its eye on Lebanon, Jordan and even Israel, he is a key figure to watch over the next several months. Rogers plans to retire at the end of the year.