



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

No doubt the center of focus on US-Middle East policy in June, the Iran nuclear negotiations were doomed to be extended past the 30 June deadline ever since Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made a surprise statement on 23 June outlining seven “red line” conditions completely contradicting the terms of the 2 April [Framework Agreement](#). Now, while experts and pundits attempt to decipher the aging leader’s true intentions and talks enter a second final lap, it is still unclear whether a deal will be reached by the [new deadline on 7 July](#).

Also seemingly inevitable, anticipation for a final deal brought a new round of controversy between Israeli leaders and their American counterparts. Former Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren received much of the spotlight for his remarks in an [Op-Ed](#) rebuking President Obama for “abandoning” Israel. Although not exclusively on Iran, the opinion piece, as well as his similarly themed [new book](#), *Ally*, were seen by many as strategically published ahead of the agreement on an Iran deal, after which Congress would have thirty days to approve before it was signed. With the talks having been extended too close to Congress’ August recess, if they continue past 9 July legislators will have 60 days to review it, and to hear more soundbytes from Israeli dissenters.

For its part, Congress has been increasing pressure on the administration to close any loopholes in a future deal that would allow Iran to covertly continue its weapons program at full speed. If Obama gives in on some of Khamenei’s red lines, Obama may face overwhelming [opposition from Republicans and Democrats](#) promising to scupper a deal in such a scenario.

Although reaction over Oren’s comments escalated with the State Department categorically [refuting](#) its substance and Prime Minister Netanyahu refusing to disavow them, the episode merely added fodder to the longstanding disagreements on Iran between the two countries’ administrations, which came to a head when Obama’s office reportedly [denied Netanyahu a meeting](#) before 30 June after it had been circulated in the Israeli press that such an invitation had been extended. Concomitantly however, [reassurances](#) by US Chief of Staff General

Dempsey that Israel would be receiving aircraft, arms and cybertechnology corroborates the widely held expectation that a US agreement with Iran will come with a sweetener to Israel in the form of military aid. This aid is key to preserving Israel's qualitative military edge, especially considering that GCC countries were given similar offers at the May Camp David summit. Moreover, the US demonstrated goodwill by [refuting the legitimacy](#) of the recent UN Gaza report.

Israel last month also received backing in Congress against the BDS movement when a bill was passed that will make [discouraging support for BDS a key objective](#) in any trade talks with the EU. This legislation was conveniently signed into law right as multiple incidents pertaining to BDS generated [growing concerns](#) in Israel and the American Jewish community.

That being said, this Congressional effort notably found dissent within progressive Zionist Jewish groups who [contested](#) that it conflated boycott of Israeli settlements with being anti-Israel (Note: their position is not an endorsement of a settlement boycott itself). Tellingly, the White House recently [echoed similar sentiments](#). Adding to this internal US Jewish dissent, a newly released J Street [poll](#) found that Jewish support for an Iran deal actually exceeds that of the general American populace. This large, progressive Jewish American base may provide crucial backing for Obama regarding Iran in the weeks to come when lawmakers deliberate on whether to accept a deal.

Whether Obama would adopt the progressive Jewish base's positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue is another matter entirely. With France indicating it would impose [sanctions against Israeli settlement products](#) ahead of its own plans for a peace initiative, Obama could eventually exercise the long speculated option of presenting his own conflict management parameters. Furthermore, by omitting any mention of sanctions on settlement goods, he would essentially play the role of "good cop," leaving room down the road to demand Israeli compromises.

B. Article Roundup

US and Iran

Robert Einhorn, at the Brookings Institution, highlights that the stipulations for accepting a deal as outlined by Democratic and Republican lawmakers and administration officials is actually [virtually on par](#) with the Obama administration's positions.

Elizabeth Rosenberg and Dr. Sara Vakhshouri, at the Center for a New American Security, feature a report proposing [recommendations on how to make an Iran deal more credible](#) by clarifying and directing sanctions removal in a way that dissuades Iran from defecting.

James Acton, at the Carnegie Endowment, asserts that to break the impasse on nuclear negotiations, the P5+1 countries [should not seek a "confession" from Iran](#)—a sensitive, psychological concession with little value—but rather merely push it to divulge factual information on its nuclear activities.

Various experts at the Center for American Progress outline five criteria for a sound nuclear deal, including the less emphasized stipulation that it allows the US to [continue combatting Iranian support for terrorism](#) and human rights abuses.

Dennis Ross, at The Washington Institute, emphasizes that content in any Iran deal is paramount, especially [making clear the consequences](#) of Iran reneging on its commitments.

US, Israel and the Michael Oren Episode

David Rothkopf, at the Carnegie Endowment, defends the character of Michel Oren, his friend, before taking apart his book's assertions on American Jews and US policy and noting that Oren's work importantly [reveals the nature of misconceptions](#) popular in the Israeli government.

Steven Cook, at the Council on Foreign Relations, also acknowledges his friendship with Oren, before taking swipes at the opinions expressed in his publications, particularly the belief that before Obama there was "no daylight" between the US and Israel. He warns that the adoption of [such unrealistic views will be harmful](#) to the Israel-US relationship.

Matthew Duss, at the Foundation for Middle East Peace, disputes Oren's Op-Ed and counsels Democratic candidates not to hesitate to [voice constructive criticism](#) toward Israel during the 2016 presidential campaign.

US and the Middle East

The Brookings Institution convened its [2015 US-Islamic World Forum](#) in Doha. Videos from the forum can be viewed [here](#). Highlights of plenary sessions include The Role of Iran in the Region, Ending Civil Wars, Strategic Priorities for the United States and the Middle East.

Phillip Gordon, until recently at the White House and now at the Council on Foreign Relations, defends Obama's Middle East policy against charges that it caused the region's current upheaval. He also offers [five core guidelines](#) for preserving US interests in the region, including preventing Israeli-Palestinian escalations.

C. Policy Profile

Brookings Institution Debate: Should the US Put Boots on the Ground to Fight ISIS?

The Brookings Institution held its [first debate](#) ever, themed on whether the US should launch its own ground offensive against ISIS. More than a mere exchange of ideas, the debate may help sway White House officials on such a fateful decision that will likely define the remaining year and half of Obama's presidency.

Advocating for putting boots on the ground was [Michael O'Hanlon](#) (Brookings) and [Michael Doran](#) (Hudson Institute). Opposing the measure were [Jeremy Shapiro](#) (Brookings) and Senator [Chris Murphy](#) (D-Connecticut), the latter of whom is drafting an amendment to forbid such a decision without prior congressional approval.

The in-favor argument largely rested on the desire to exploit the policy alignment between the US, Iran, Russia and many Arab states in opposing the jihadist organization. O'Hanlon also keenly cautioned that the US would be safer to tackle the problem definitively and immediately, rather than risk Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi losing power and leading to further instability in Iraq.

The other side of the debate called into question the utility of military intervention in the Middle East at all, noting the track record of the past decade. Further, a ground campaign, which al-Abadi ostensibly would oppose, would also likely disincentivize non-military solutions that could otherwise prove more durable.

In Intelligence Squared fashion, a before-and-after poll of the audience was taken. Before the debate, a two-thirds majority of the audience voted against this option. That dynamic remained largely unchanged, with slightly more people voting “no” to US ground operations afterwards. Those wishing to decide for their own can watch the debate in its entirety [here](#).