



The US and Us: The Mitvim-DC Monthly

Volume 3, Issue 6, June 2015

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

Leading up to the [one-month mark](#) before an Iranian nuclear agreement is supposed to be reached on 30 June, American leaders and lawmakers scrambled to provide safeguards against the US signing a faulty or undesirable deal. The Iran issue however did not monopolize US attention in the Middle East during the month of May. Attention reshifted to ISIS following the jihadist group's gains in [Ramadi](#) and [Aleppo](#). Israel, too, was given the spotlight as the US confronted international efforts to marginalize it and as disagreements between the Obama and Netanyahu governments over the two-state solution persisted.

After weeks of compromise and not small amount of posturing, Obama signed the bill bestow upon Congress the ability to [review and potentially reject a nuclear deal with Iran](#). Nevertheless, Congress is [unlikely to muster enough support to thwart a deal](#), as the alternative to an agreement at this point threatens a breakdown in diplomacy and international sanctions. Fittingly, a mid-month poll found that while most Americans do not trust Iran to keep its word by itself, the [majority ultimately do support a deal](#) reflecting the agreement on the table.

As May drew to a close, a major hurdle to a deal was cleared after the P5+1 countries agreed to an automatic mechanism that would ["snap back" sanctions](#) in the event that Iran violates or renegs on a future deal. In a less positive development, Iran's nuclear stockpile has now reportedly grown, [refuting Obama's claim](#) that Iran's program had been "frozen."

With an Iran deal in reach, concern in the US for Israel continued to manifest. Attempting to allay these concerns was [Obama's speech](#) to a Jewish congregation in DC where he reaffirmed his commitment to Israel and noted his personal stake in an Iran

deal that stands the test of time. Secretary Kerry will likely voice similar rhetoric during his upcoming [speech to the American Jewish Committee](#) on 8 June.

Despite this, Netanyahu's belated verbal [commitment to a two-state solution](#) after the new Israeli government was formed perpetuated the public discord between the two leaders. Nevertheless, a clear conciliatory trend was observed in Obama's decisions to [threaten to veto](#) a [French proposal](#) on a two-state solution and recognizing Palestine, and later to [block a document](#) mandating a UN conference on (Israeli) nuclear disarmament in the Middle East.

Such gestures may soon be compounded by "sweeteners" in the form of arms and aid money from the US that [Israel is planning to request](#) in the event of an Iran deal—much like the GCC countries were offered at a recent [summit in Camp David](#). And yet, as France stands prepared following an Iran deal to issue an [18-month ultimatum on a two-state solution](#), Obama will be positioned to either back a modified version of this plan or to present at least some parameters of his own. Indeed, as June begins his quote on Israel's Channel 2 that it was [becoming more difficult to continue defending Israel](#) at the UN from European initiatives stands in stark contrast to his earlier tone. Moreover, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah has hinted that the French UN proposal had been drafted in coordination with the US.

Though an air of uncertainty hovers around the Iran talks, the signs overwhelmingly point toward an Obama turning up the pressure on Netanyahu soon after they are over.

B. Article Roundup

US and Iran

In a policy note by Michael Eisenstadt, at The Washington Institute, he covers the various means for ensuring deterrence from an Iranian nuclear breakout, and warns that [if Iran is not absolutely convinced it will suffer intolerable consequences](#) from a violation, it will continue to inch toward acquiring a weapon despite international monitoring.

Philip Gordon, at the Council on Foreign Relations, defends the Lausanne nuclear agreement, arguing that [there is no "better" Iran deal](#) than what it outlines.

US and Israel

Henry Siegman, a former head of the American Jewish Congress and current president of the U.S./Middle East Project, calls on Obama in the New York Times to abandon faith in Netanyahu for fruitful bi-lateral negotiations and [support a UN-sponsored peace process](#) instead.

Tamara Cofman Wittes, at Brookings, recommends that Netanyahu should reciprocate Obama's gesture and begin his own post-reelection tour to the US. With an Iran deal looming and with relations strained over his spotty commitment to peace, such an action by Netanyahu to Israel's best friend and ally could prove a [symbolic victory that serves Israel's own strategic interests](#).

Michele Fournoy and Ilan Goldenberg, at the Center for a New American Security, strategically [penned a piece in Haaretz](#) appealing for Obama and Netanyahu to mend ties. Working together, Israel could "red team" US policy on Iran and give insights on ameliorating US strategy. The authors also recommend a 10-year military aid deal to Israel and for the sides to choose senior officials to lead efforts to rebuild the relationship.

US and the Middle East

David Rothkopf, at the Carnegie Endowment, dissects the GCC Camp David summit, noting that Obama's comments at it highlighted before his Arab counterparts and others listening his flawed strategy in "doing too little" by [relying on "other people's armies"](#) to combat ISIS.

Several Washington Institute experts propose that to shore up allies in the Middle East and to counter Iran and ISIS, the US must [reshape its approach toward Syria](#) by militarily providing a safe haven in the country for opposition political and armed forces.

The Carnegie Endowment [discusses with Jeffrey Goldberg](#) his [interview with Obama](#). Goldberg was relieved by Obama's comment that he has a personal stake in the Iran negotiations' success, and defends Obama's disagreements with Israel as indeed stemming from his close identification with the prevailing liberal Jewish perspective. Goldberg however expressed concern that Obama appears naïve on progress against ISIS and Iran's increased spending on regional military pursuits if sanctions are rolled back.

US and ISIS

Anthony Cordesman, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, asserts that for the US to effectively roll back ISIS the Obama Administration must truly entertain [transparent and meaningful debate on its policies](#) so that it can prove and therefore gain support for its efforts from Congress and the American people.

Richard Sokolsky and Daniel Adams, at the Carnegie Endowment, caution against succumbing to growing support for another US deployment to the region to fight ISIS. Rather, the US should [maintain its policy of encouraging local allies to lead](#) the effort on the ground.

C. Policy Profile

Thomas A. Shannon – Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (expected)

Following a surprise announcement on 27 March from current Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman that she will resign after the 30 June Iran nuclear deal deadline, [officials in the State Department have indicated](#) that Thomas Shannon, a career diplomat, is expected to take over her post as its third highest ranking member.

Shannon, a former ambassador to Brazil and an expert particularly in Latin America, may be a puzzling replacement for Sherman, who has been a key US diplomat during the Iran nuclear negotiations and who herself was selected partially on this merit to replace Iran negotiations veteran [William J. Burns](#). Taken together, the departures of Sherman, Burns and senior advisor on Iran [Jake Sullivan](#) represents an expertise loss that have already led some in the White House to [voice their concern](#).

Currently serving as a [Counselor of the State Department](#), Shannon arguably has a demonstrated record beyond the Western Hemisphere, yet it is unknown whether he will also be assuming Sherman's responsibilities regarding Iran, especially so close to the aforementioned deadline. The implication for this uncertainty lies in the expectation even if a final deal is reached before Sherman steps down, someone with intricate knowledge of the negotiations will need to be ready at the helm for the long road ahead on navigating relations with the Islamic Republic and enforcing the deal.

Perhaps Shannon's anticipated appointment signals that the Obama Administration indeed believes it is within reach of a final agreement, that the Under Secretary of State will after its signing no longer need to be so personally involved. Whichever becomes the case after 30 June, if Shannon does receive the post, he will nevertheless be charged with weighing in on Iran, as well as helping formulate US foreign policy on Israel, ISIS and America's overall role in the Middle East during the final one and half years sealing Obama's presidential legacy.