



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.

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A. Analysis

It is a safe bet to assume that February was not Obama's favorite month. With so much focus on the Olympics in Russia, then to the protests in Ukraine, and then back again to Russia's developing invasion of the Crimean peninsula, it must have felt like a misplaced ode to Cold War-era days. For Obama, who has [never had a particularly warm relationship with Putin](#), it could not come at a more inopportune time.

If the Obama administration can be credited with making anything clear it is that their foreign policy is anything but clear. In Syria, Obama had no reservations about talking about red lines – enforcing them, however, was another thing. Now with the Russian invasion of Crimea many are wondering, and [criticizing](#), what the president might do. Recent polls suggest many Americans feel [Obama's perception on the world stage is increasingly negative](#); and while Americans rarely vote in domestic elections according to foreign policy objectives, they do not like when their leaders, and the American image abroad, are not respected. Now, with the Pentagon set to shrink military capacity to a pre-World War Two size and the traditional adversary of the US, Russia, growing more and more antagonistic (and [possibly violating nuclear arms agreements](#) that go back 30 years), there is an increased amount of pressure on Obama to grow more assertive.

It is a pressure Obama could well do without. Reports from DC suggest that Kerry is waiting for the right time to [introduce the president directly to the Israeli-Palestinian talks](#). It is a move consistent with previous administrations, yet unique in the sense of the timing: both Bush and Clinton and were involved from earlier stages of both their major negotiation pushes. Obama has chosen to delegate this task to Kerry, opting to enter the room at the most important hour. It is an approach designed to mitigate any additional blame traveling from Foggy Bottom to the White House, but with more and more pressure on Obama to flex his diplomatic muscle, it is an approach that could be growing more risky by the hour.

B. Article Roundup

Foreign Policy - Jon Alterman, at CSIS, argues that the [problem with the Obama Administration's foreign policy is not its goals, but rather its approach](#). In order to craft and execute an effective foreign policy, the administration needs to increase its use of leverage.

Turkey - Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Michael Koplow says the US is [getting tough with Turkey](#), and that the old Turkish tactic of blaming foreign powers for Turkish problems is unacceptable for the US.

Egypt - An interesting column in Egypt's *Al Ahram* shows how [some in the Egyptian press perceive the US's calculations in Egypt](#). Ahmed Eleiba suggests that the US understands Sisi's popularity, but is still pushing for real, palpable democratic change.

Syria - Writing for the Washington Institute, James Jeffrey argues that the [Obama Administration has misjudged its policy towards Syria](#), and that a minimalistic, armed support program would benefit US interests more than the current policy.

Israel - One final word about the Scarlett Johanssen/SodaStream debacle: Matt Duss, writing at *The American Prospect*, argues that the [US should state its goals clearly in regards to settlement boycotts](#).

Iran - George Perkovich, at the Carnegie Endowment, writes that the [only realistic approach to the negotiations with Iran](#) is establishing a precedent that can be applied to other states with nuclear ambitions, while providing insurance against a rapid Iranian nuclear breakout.

C. Policy Profile

Sarah Sewall, newly confirmed Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights

It is safe to say that Sarah Sewall, the [new Under Secretary in charge of US supervision of human rights](#) around the world, has her work cut out for her. In her official capacity at the State Department, she is charged with contributing: "to the security of the American people and nations around the world by [assisting countries to build more democratic, secure, stable, and just societies](#)." For Sewall, this will undoubtedly mean spending a lot of time in the Middle East briefing room.

Sewall is a [long-time academic](#), having founded the Mass Atrocity Response Operations Project at Harvard University in 2000, where she taught off and on until her appointment in 2014. This is not her first stint in DC, however, as she was previously a senior aide to George Marshall when he was in the Senate, afterward serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance at the Department of Defense for a few years. Sewall has a bachelor's degree from Harvard and a doctorate from Oxford.