



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 the Mitvim Institute, breeves@mitvim.org.il. Previous issues can be [read here](#).

A. Analysis

Following weeks of rhetorical escalation ahead of Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to Congress on Iran, the tense relations between the US and Israeli administrations looks to be overshadowing all other foreign policy issues, the impending Department of Homeland Security shutdown and even the usually jovial hype surrounding the annual AIPAC conference. Even some of Israel's most bipartisan supporters, such as Dennis Ross, have essentially joined the ranks of [J Street](#) and the American Zionist Left in echoing the [growing](#) Israeli domestic dissent in refusing to [admit his \(Netanyahu\) mistake](#) and postpone the address out of considerations of Israeli elections and diplomatic protocol.

Since February 15, when House Majority Leader John Boehner (R) [confirmed](#) in a Fox News interview that he had intentionally kept President Obama in the dark about the invitation to Netanyahu, senior administration officials have deplored and tried to [undercut the visit](#) until most recently. National Security Advisor Susan Rice notably called Netanyahu's overall conduct ["destructive" because of the partisanship it was injecting](#) into the "strategic relationship." More concrete, some [34 Democratic congressmen and senators](#) have decided to follow Vice President Biden's lead in deciding not to attend the speech altogether. Complicating matters, Netanyahu [rejected an invitation by Senate Democrats](#) to meet prior to the speech, although he later [agreed](#) to meet with both parties following it.

Days before the speech, tensions appeared to ease in time for the AIPAC Conference in Washington, DC. John Kerry ["welcomed"](#) the Prime Minister's visit. In separate speeches at the conference, Netanyahu and American Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power made [conciliatory comments](#) toward their respective ally. Many Americans, too, appear to have revised their opposition to the speech. A [poll](#) on February 17 showed that 63% of Americans thought the congressional invitation was a bad idea; a [March 1 poll](#) now reveals that number closer to 48%. On the other hand, those supporting the invitation also fell, from 33% to 30%.

Nonetheless, the real challenge in the US-Israel relationship still lies ahead as Congress brings a vote on whether to levy [tougher sanctions](#) on Iran in lieu of a framework agreement on its nuclear weapons program. Even some of Netanyahu's most outspoken American critics in the "Speechgate" episode have conceded that he [has a case](#). Kerry's [dismissal](#) of those in Israel opposing a deal for not "know[ing] the details" appears to have been just a precursor to an administration effort to sway lawmakers by [targeting Netanyahu's credibility](#) specifically. Moreover, despite reported progress in the P5+1 talks, an agreement looks [unlikely](#) be made before the March 24 deadline, leaving Congress to pass the sanctions bill, which Obama has already stated he will [veto](#).

Consequently, the rhetorical standoff between the two administrations is poised to continue in the coming month. What is not clear, however, is if the partisan gap that the Netanyahu speech has torn open in US-Israel relations will have lingering repercussions beyond the Iran debate in the halls of Congress.

B. Article Roundup

US and the Middle East

Former Ambassador to Israel Martyn Indyk, now at the Brookings Institution, wrote a two-part series ([Part one](#) and [Part two](#)) on how to reformulate US Middle East policy to effectively address challenges such as Iran and ISIS. The plan is premised on "returning to its traditional allies in the region," including Israel.

US and Israel

Michael Cohen and Matthew Duss, at the Foundation for Middle East Peace, provide a 7-part report on the growing [crisis between the US and Israel](#), and how it can be resolved through concerted US action to broker a two-state solution.

Dennis Ross, at The Washington Institute, proposes that the US gives [reassurances to Israel](#) on Iran by spelling out the consequences it is willing to impose in the case of Iranian violations in a nuclear deal.

US and Netanyahu's Speech to Congress

Jeffrey Goldberg, at *The Atlantic*, analyzes why Netanyahu's true intention for the speech is to [woo Israeli voters](#), and justifies his assertion that Netanyahu sees Obama as an "adversary."

Elliott Abrams, at the Council on Foreign Relations, accuses the Obama administration of [orchestrating the crisis](#) surrounding Netanyahu's speech in order to help Netanyahu lose his election, prevent Israel from affecting the Iran policy debate, and diminish Israel's popularity among Democrats.

Dove Zakheim, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, charges that Netanyahu's actions have [already destroyed chances](#) of new sanctions on Iran.

US and Iran

Ilan Goldenberg and Robert Kaplan, at the Center for New American Security, outline what might transpire [if the Iran talks fail](#). This may include possible Israeli airstrikes, a return to cyberwarfare, and various scenarios based on how the breakdown is received in Iran.

Robert Einhorn, at Brookings, offers a comprehensive list of measures [for a nuclear deal to be effective in deterring Iran](#).

C. Policy Profile

Dianne Feinstein - Senator and Former Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

Of all the senators and congressmen who have vowed to skip Netanyahu's upcoming speech, Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-California) is not one of them. And yet, the senior stateswoman made headlines after deploring the Israeli Prime Minister on [CNN](#) television for his recent behavior. Asked for opinion about Netanyahu's claim that he came to Congress on behalf the Jewish people, Feinstein [retorted](#), that such a comment was "arrogant," noting "the Jewish community is like any other community, there are different points of view." On attending the speech, Feinstein curtly offered, "I intend to go and I'll listen respectfully; I don't intend to jump up and down."

As a member and recent former chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee (2009-2015) Feinstein's voice is profoundly influential as to the Senate Democrats' stance on the Iran talks. Thus far, she has [strongly supported](#) giving these talks latitude, calling for sanctions only if Iran violates an agreement. As a [Jew](#), Feinstein's rebuke resonated particularly with Jewish lawmakers and liberal members of the Jewish community.

For those counting the number of empty seats at Netanyahu's speech as a way interpreting the extent of Democratic discord, Feinstein's remarks display why the story is more complicated. Most of Capitol Hill's key lawmakers will still likely show up to the speech--perhaps for their constituents or because they do not support a boycott of the speech--but it does not mean they condone it.