



The Mitvim-DC Monthly

A monthly report on US policies toward Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Middle East, and Iran

Volume 4, Issue 3, March 2016

Edited by Rebecca Bornstein*

A. US-Israel Relations

- **Security cooperation and aid** - US and Israeli delegations continue to work towards a new 10-year memorandum of understanding (MoU) to continue US military assistance to Israel, as the MoU signed in 2007 is set to expire soon. While the [2007 negotiations](#) were relatively simple, this time the delegations have publicly clashed over the precise amount of aid to be provided. Analysts speculate that Prime Minister Netanyahu could have leveraged support for the Iran deal for increased funding, but that window has closed. Netanyahu recently threatened that [“if we don’t manage to reach an agreement with the current administration, we will have to reach an agreement with the next administration.”](#) a comment that was unsurprisingly [poorly received](#) in Washington.

Administration officials highlighted the fact that Obama has been trying to engage on this issue since 2013, and that while the US is prepared to [preserve Israel’s qualitative military edge](#), negotiations are taking place in the shadow of severe budgetary constraints in the US that will not change with a new administration. Regardless of this tension, two upcoming high-profile events will likely lead to a resolution of outstanding issues: Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon’s meeting with Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter in Washington, and Vice President Joe Biden’s planned visit to Israel in early March.

- **Anti-BDS Legislation Signed** - President Obama [signed the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2016](#), a bill designed to remove unfair barriers to competitive trade, despite his opposition to the conflation of Israel and [Israeli-controlled territories](#) in the bill’s “anti-BDS” provisions. Obama’s [signing statement](#) reaffirms his opposition to the BDS movement, but states that the conflation of Israel and ‘Israeli-controlled territories’ is “contrary to longstanding bipartisan US policy, including with regard to the treatment of settlements.” The signing statement also contains language used to signal that a president [will not apply a part of a law that does not comport with U.S. foreign policy](#).

* Rebecca Bornstein is a researcher at the Mitvim Institute, and can be reached at rbornstein@mitvim.org.il. Previous issues of the Mitvim-DC Monthly can be [read here](#).

Congress is currently considering several other bills that target the BDS campaign, a number of which also extend to settlements. AIPAC clearly [supports such legislation](#), but it is unclear whether the progressive community will mobilize to oppose provisions that provide additional legal protections to settlements.

- **Elections** - All five major candidates -- Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump -- affirmed their support for Israel in the context of their foreign policy proposals, but refrained from discussing the parameters of that support in great depth. Controversy during the latest Republican debate over [which candidate could most effectively broker peace](#) was fixated on rebuking President Obama's policies and provided no substantive proposals. On the democratic side, Hillary Clinton's campaign allegedly disavowed a report that it would attack Sanders for [not being 'as strong' of a supporter of Israel](#), a move which some believe reflects the fact that younger demographics are "[less likely to buy into an uncritical take](#) on Israel than older ones." All candidates voice strong support for a two-state solution.

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **The French initiative for an international peace conference** - The US appears to be downplaying the initiative by [postponing an official response](#), although the State Department confirmed that officials have reviewed the proposal and started discussions with the French. The lack of an official response indicates that the US sees the two sides as very far from even discussing the resumption of serious peace negotiations. Speculation about what the administration might do in its [final year in office](#) is intensifying, and lack of confidence in the current options suggests that a creative final attempt, such as a US-sponsored UN resolution that would outline the structure of a negotiated peace, could be more likely.
- **Quartet meeting and report** - The Quartet convened twice this month: first at a meeting in Oslo to discuss moving ahead with a multilateral framework towards peace, and then in Munich, where the principals released a statement on the non-sustainability of the status quo and [the need for a Palestinian state](#). Quartet envoys warned that the [two-state solution is slipping away](#) and called for concrete steps forward. The Quartet will now prepare a report on the '[situation on the ground](#)' that will include recommendations about the best ways to advance a two-state solution.

The objective of the Quartet's report is to begin building an international consensus on the parameters for a peace deal, but at this stage the chances of a breakthrough via the Quartet mechanism appear very slim. No timeframe has been set for a meeting in the region, and little momentum has been gained. According to an Al-Monitor report, a senior State Department Official confirmed Secretary of State [John Kerry's support for the Quartet initiative](#). Even if the US supports action through the Quartet, however, it is extremely unlikely that this will be the administration's only strategy vis-a-vis the conflict over its final year in office.

C. The Changing Middle East

- **Syria ceasefire** - Despite differing military objectives in Syria and disagreements over Bashar al-Assad's removal from power, Washington and Moscow came together to broker a "cessation of hostilities" agreement between the Syrian government and opposition groups.¹ Despite several violations, which administration officials expected, and what US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power described as an [extremely challenging](#) task, the fragile ceasefire is thus far holding.

The State Department views this as the initial step in a political transition in accordance with the [Geneva Communiqué of 2012](#); the next step, if the ceasefire holds, will be the beginning of long-term peace talks in March. The US and Russia are [co-chairs](#) of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which backs the agreement's stipulations on implementation and monitoring. While the agreement is clearly more robust than those used in previous ceasefire attempts, the lack of an on-the-ground monitoring force calls into question its viability.

- **President Obama's meeting with King Abdullah** - The two leaders met in Washington to discuss the US-Jordanian [strategic partnership](#), as well as cooperation on a range of challenges, including the Syrian conflict, the Islamic State, and Jordan's role in reducing tensions within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- **Turkey** - Vice President Joe Biden spoke with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in advance of the Syrian ceasefire. The Vice President's call focused on US efforts to [discourage Syrian Kurdish forces from exploiting current circumstances to seize additional territory near the Turkish border](#), and on urging Turkey to demonstrate restraint and cease artillery strikes in the area. Notably, the Islamic State's exclusion from the ceasefire agreement means that Turkey has continued shelling IS-controlled positions near the border.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **Iran elections** - Iran held its [first elections](#) since the nuclear deal's negotiation, and final results released by the Interior Ministry show that moderates won a majority in parliament. Within Iran, the elections were seen as a referendum on [President Rouhani's attempts to mend ties with the West](#), and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in particular. The White House has thus far reserved comment on the results, citing the [lack of international monitors](#) in Iran and the time required to verify the outcome. White House Spokesperson Josh Earnest did mention that the Iran deal [was not predicated on increasing moderation in Iran](#); in fact, a deal would be even more important if it was applied to a conservative government.

¹ The agreement excludes the Islamic State and al-Nusra front due to their designation by the UN as terrorist groups, but includes the High Negotiations Committee, the leading opposition umbrella group.

In any case, the electoral results indicate that the election of the relatively moderate President Rouhani in 2013 was not a one-off, but rather the start of a possible trend towards re-engagement with the West -- a fact that American progressives are likely to highlight in their evaluations of the Obama administration's legacy.

- **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report** - The IAEA released its first post-implementation day [report](#), which the State Department said "[demonstrates the many steps Iran is taking to implement the JCPOA and confirms the IAEA's capacity to monitor implementation.](#)"
- **Ballistic missiles and sanctions** - In January, the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions dominated headlines. The day after, however, the US applied additional sanctions on 11 people and companies involved with [Iran's ballistic missile program](#) due to testing violations. In February, Iran conducted its second ballistic missile test since the nuclear deal, and announced that it would unveil an upgrade of its [Emad](#) missile in 2016. While conservatives in the US rightly highlight this issue as a reminder that [significant problems remain](#) with Iran, this posturing is likely designed to maintain Iran's position in the region. Iran's conventional military capabilities lag behind those of other regional powers, and the containment of its nuclear ambitions has led to a perceived need for a demonstration of strength in other areas.

E. Further reading

Israel

- Eugene Kontorovich, "[Obama signs Israeli anti-boycott provisions into law, settlements and all.](#)" *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2016
- Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, "[The neglected Israeli-Palestinian peace process must be revived.](#)" *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2016
- Matt Duss, "[A recipe for shredding US credibility.](#)" *Foundation for Middle East Peace*, February 26, 2016

Syria

- Jeffrey A. Stacey "[The realist case for a safe zone in Syria.](#)" *Foreign Affairs*, February 22, 2016
- Amanda J. Rothschild, "[ISIS and Genocide: How the US talks about atrocities.](#)" *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2016

Iran

- Hamid Dabashi, "[Who is the winner and loser of Iran elections?.](#)" *Al-Jazeera*, February 29, 2016
- Alireza Ramezani, "[Is Iran really ready for foreign investments?.](#)" *Al-Monitor*, February 18, 2016
- Edalat, Abbas "[End of tough sanctions will mean the revival of Iranian Science.](#)" *The New Scientist*, February 17, 2016

Middle East

- Kenneth M. Pollack, "[Fight or flight: America's choice in the Middle East.](#)" *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2016
- The Middle East Strategy Task Force: [Security and Public Order Report](#), *The Atlantic Council*, February 18, 2016
- Brookings Doha Event: [What the US presidential election means for the Middle East](#). Qatar, February 22, 2016

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
February 8-9	Middle East Quartet envoys meet in Oslo
February 12	Middle East Quartet principals meet in Munich*
February 13	Vice President Joe Biden speaks with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu about Syria
February 16	US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power visits Israeli and Palestinian leaders to discuss the conflict
February 21	Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Mahmoud Abbas in Jordan to discuss de-escalation
February 22	US and Israel begin a week-long ballistic missile defense exercise
February 24	President Obama meets with King Abdullah of Jordan in Washington
February 26	Iran holds elections for its Parliament and Assembly of Experts
February 27	Syria ceasefire comes into effect

* The Quartet Principals include European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, United States Secretary of State John Kerry, and Deputy United Nations Secretary-General Jan Eliasson.