



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

April was a month of intense debate in Washington over the issue of Syria. As Israeli intelligence confirmed what British and French intelligence had said—and what American intelligence had hinted—that chemical weapons had been used by the Assad regime on the rebels, the Obama administration had seemingly backed itself into a corner. Last year, Obama stated unequivocally that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a 'red line' for intervention. Now, with Secretary of Defense Hagel and other US policymakers confirming the intelligence reports, the Obama administration has tried to walk back from that scenario, stating there's not enough evidence as to who used the weapons, how much was used, and how often they were used. In Washington, this triggered a fierce debate on what to do in Syria, with latest [reports](#) have Obama moving closer to arming the rebels.

For some, ignoring the Syrian conflict is a grave moral and ethical failure of the Obama administration. As former director of policy planning at the Department of State, Anne Marie Slaughter, [wrote](#): "standing by while Assad gasses his people will guarantee that, whatever else Obama may achieve, he will be remembered as a president who proclaimed a new beginning with the Muslim world but presided over a deadly chapter in the same old story." For others, the Syrian situation presents choosing between the lesser of two evils. Policymakers are concerned over the rise of jihadist groups such as Yarmouk and Nusra, with conservatives and realists quoting Kissinger's old adage on Iran and Iraq: "It's a shame they both can't lose."

It's been a busy month for Secretary of State John Kerry, who has reignited the old habit of 'shuttle diplomacy' in the Middle East, vowing to visit the region once a month during his term. He has repeatedly met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and his efforts have led many to speculate over the future of other regional initiatives, specifically the Arab Peace Initiative. The API seems to come and go in the discourse in Washington, yet this month there is a significant push forward, and an American expectation to finally get a response from Israel. With the Syria debate heating up, expect the API to join the discussion as an avenue for peace.

B. Article Roundup

US Policy towards Syria

Writing in Bloomberg, journalist Jeffrey Goldberg argues that if Assad is indeed using chemical weapons, as recent intelligence reports suggest, [Obama must act](#) to prevent further violence.

In keeping with the debate in Washington, Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institute claims in the Daily Beast that Assad's use of chemical weapons presents the [US with both an opportunity and a series of traps](#), and these should be handled with care.

The Center for American Progress details the options on the table for the US in the [wake of a likely use of chemical weapons in Syria](#). They include going to the UN Security Council and engaging with other NATO allies.

Stephen Heydemann, of the US Institute of Peace, describes the US debate over the 'red line' in Syria and [the options for international policy on the way forward](#). He also reflects on whether a solution is in sight for the humanitarian disaster in Syria.

US Efforts to Resume the Peace Process

John Kerry has been busy, traveling to Israel and the Palestinian Territories twice in three months, and pledging to do more so in the future in order to resume direct Israeli-Palestinian talk. In Foreign Policy, Staff Writer Josh Rogin details [Kerry's 'shuttle diplomacy'](#).

Writing in Voice of America, Senior Reporter Mohamed Elshinnawi chronicles the American [efforts to revive the Arab Peace Initiative](#) as a basis for a renewed peace process.

David Makovsky, of the Washington Institute, writes that the conditions under which Fayyad resigned [forces some real questions on the progress of the peace process](#) and the nature of the US support of the PA.

C. Policy Profile

Frank Lowenstein, newly appointed Senior Advisor for Middle East policy at the US Department of State

Frank Lowenstein, John Kerry's foreign policy advisor from 2005-2009, and staff director on the Senate Foreign Relations committee from 2009-2011, has left his position at Podesta Group to become [senior advisor to Secretary of State Kerry](#), focusing on Middle East affairs. A Yale graduate, Lowenstein has a history as an economist. His [work](#) at Podesta focused on "representing US corporations overseas and giving them advice on operating in foreign countries." Many see this move as a stepping stone for Lowenstein, who has been placed under the supervision of David Hale, the acting Middle East peace envoy. Indeed, putting an economist in this position mirrors Kerry's recent rhetoric about a return to focus on the Palestinian economy. Kerry has made it clear that he feels the economies in the Middle East are the most pressing issue, and appointing a longtime confidant and economic advisor to his State Department has buffered that argument.

In other personnel news, Leslie Gelb, President Emeritus of the Council for Foreign Relations, argues that [Obama's positioning of loyalists on his staff instead of conservative dissenters](#) leaves room for error in the upcoming administration.