



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.

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A. Analysis

The month of October for US-Israel relations ended with a bang, although it was mostly overshadowed in the US by the American midterms, ISIS and Ebola. Jeffrey Goldberg's October 28 revelation in *The Atlantic* that a senior official in the White House [had called Netanyahu "chickenshit"](#) sealed weeks of tensions between the parties over settlement expansion plans and an official US revenge [snubbing](#) of Israel's Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon. All in all, the Obama team appears to have come out of the episode ahead. Even with a [condemnation](#) from Kerry, the insult revealed that the US had called Netanyahu's bluff on attacking Iran while painting him as a coward for utterly failing to stand up to his coalition's far right. Some called it a vindication for Obama against the Likud politician who had openly supported Romney in 2012 and who is likely [eager to see](#) the Republicans retake the Senate.

For their part, senior GOP lawmakers John McCain and Lindsey Graham tried to score political points over Obama by [decrying the administration](#) for allowing such an insult. A week earlier, Republicans similarly [lambasted](#) a White House pledge at a Cairo donor conference to contribute \$156 million to UNRWA to rebuild Gaza. A letter denouncing the pledge was drafted by Senator Marco Rubio—a potential Republican presidential candidate—and Senator Mark Kirk (R), though Democratic senator on the Foreign Relations Committee Ben Cardin [also chimed in](#).

Despite these rumblings, talk on foreign policy in the midterms almost exclusively revolved around the hotly debated topic of Obama's policies against [ISIS](#). Even Kerry's supposed [linkage](#) between lack of progress in the peace process and Islamist extremism was virtually ignored in the US. Although having [little influence on swaying voters](#), the topic of [ISIS, as well as Ebola, also overshadowed](#) traditional domestic political issues usually discussed most prominently during the election cycle.

A predicted Republican majority in the Senate come November 4 (or perhaps as late as [January](#)) will of course have ramifications on Israel and the Middle East at large. With control of

both houses, Republicans may be loathe to fund any Gazan recovery, pressure Israel, or tolerate Palestinian Authority [plans](#) to move ahead for international recognition of statehood. More immediately, the rearranged Congress could prove a stumbling block in nuclear negotiations with Iran, which may be extended beyond the [November 24 deadline](#) for a [deal](#). Republican hawks have already [expressed their opposition](#) to suspended US sanctions, and may not even be heartbroken if the talks broke down altogether. Whether they could muster the two-thirds majority vote to override a presidential veto is another matter.

Beyond Congress' reach and the shadow of elections, Obama is expected to use his last two years to make a final push on some of the most controversial issues. While many are expecting him to enact immigration reform at home, Jeffrey Goldberg's article also spoke of the administration presenting an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. Even if the ISIS debacle and the possibility of US boots on the ground remain at the forefront of US news regarding the Middle East, it is likely that Obama will try at least one last dramatic effort for a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement before throwing in the towel. An American peace plan would ostensibly lay out US positions on a borders-first strategy and security arrangements in the Jordan Valley that will probably diverge from Netanyahu's stated red line. That might increase even further the tensions between Washington and Jerusalem.

B. Article Roundup

US and the Middle East

Brookings Senior Fellow Robert Kagan and MIT Professor Barry Posen debate whether [America's grand strategy](#) in the Middle East should be more assertive or restrained. The two differed on America's core interests, historical legacy, and Obama's overall policy in the region.

US and Israel

Stephen Walt uses the chickens*^t incident to rehash the bid he made in his co-authored book *The Israel Lobby* for the US to [replace its "special relationship"](#) with Israel for a "normal" one.

In *The National Interest*, Paul Pillar implores people to stop calling the aforementioned incident a crisis. Rather, it blows the cover off the [fictitious notion that the two countries](#) are by default aligned in policy and defy the usual rules applied to any bilateral relationship.

Daniel Drezner, at the Brookings Institution, assesses that the [insult serves two purposes](#) for the Obama administration: projecting intent to demonstrate credibility, and more importantly, sending a signal to Iran that their fears over Israeli threats are exaggerated.

US, IS and Iran

The Carnegie Endowment's Michelle Dunn [prescribes a list](#) of recommendations for the government to ensure that Arab partners cease fueling extremism abroad and in their countries.

Robert Merry, the political editor of *The National Interest*, proclaims that [Obama's ISIS strategy is doomed to fail](#), that he has fallen prey to the pre-2003 Iraq War mindset of President George W. Bush, and that American troops on the ground will no doubt follow.

Michael Doran, at the Brookings Institution, warns that America's anti-ISIS coalition [emboldens](#) Iran and, in turn, alienates its Arab allies and Israel.

Leslie Gelb, the President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, ventures that the only way to beat ISIS is to [work with Assad and Iran](#). She also argued that Obama's last chance to [save his presidency](#) is to achieve a deal with Iran.

Dennis Ross, at The Washington Institute, posits that the parties in the Iranian nuclear talks should ["muddle through these negotiations"](#), beyond the deadline and without a formal extension agreement.

US and Turkey

Dan Arbell, at the Brookings Institution, analyses [the US-Israel-Turkey triangular relationship](#). He concludes that good Israeli-Turkish relations are essential to Middle East security and that the US should continue playing a central role in mediating these relations.

Liz Sly, at the *Washington Post*, depicts US-Turkish relations as an [unraveling alliance](#) that has reached a nadir as the two countries quarrel over how to fight ISIS and incorporate the Kurds.

C. Policy Profile

William J. Burns – Outgoing Deputy Secretary of State and incoming President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

[The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) announced its acceptance of William J. Burns as the think tank's [ninth president](#), beginning February 2015. The announcement marks Burns' retirement from a 33 year diplomatic career, during which he achieved the rank of Ambassador to Jordan and later to Russia before serving since 2011 as a Deputy Secretary of State. A Middle East expert and fluent in Arabic, French and Russian, he also occupied the post of the head of Near Eastern Affairs bureau from 2001-2005.

Burns has been most prominently featured in recent news for having led the US' secret [back-channel nuclear diplomacy](#) with Iran. From Kissinger to Obama's senior staff, Burns has been praised as [disciplined, self-effacing and persuasive](#)—qualities essential for a diplomat charged with reversing more than 30 years of estrangement between the United States and Iran. Throughout and after his time running the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs during Bush years, Burns had confronted the Defense Department on the value of rapprochement toward Iran.

Burns joins Carnegie at a time that it is ranked as the most #1 most innovative policy think tank out of thousands around the world. Carnegie has hailed him as a diplomatic "legend" to replace Jessica Matthews who has presided for 18 years. Despite his retirement, Burns will remain a paid [government adviser on the Iran negotiations](#), and likewise an important player ahead of the November deadline for an international agreement.

Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, who currently heads the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna, [will replace Burns](#) in his old job.