



The US and Us: The Mitvim-DC Monthly Report

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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 edited by Rebecca Bornstein, a researcher at the Mitvim Institute, rbornstein@mitvim.org.il. Previous issues can be [read here](#).

A. Analysis

Toward the Netanyahu-Obama Meeting: The Future of the Two-State Solution

Following months of speculation, [Obama administration officials have confirmed](#) that the prospect of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unlikely during the remainder of the administration's term in office. This is significant; a similar position has not been adopted since the [Clinton administration's first term](#). Meanwhile, the US and Israel are preparing for [Netanyahu's visit to the White House](#) on November 9, which will likely focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, implementation of the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and increased security cooperation.

The administration's remarks on a negotiated solution came during an [on-the-record conference call previewing Netanyahu's upcoming visit](#), when Rob Malley, National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf, [reported](#) that "the president has said we have to reach a realistic assessment that there will not be a comprehensive final status agreement in the remainder of his term, and there likely may not be meaningful negotiations between the two sides." This analysis reflects the total deterioration of the peace process. With the prospect of a US-negotiated comprehensive peace agreement seemingly off the table, administration officials have shifted their focus to laying the groundwork for future efforts and for preserving the two-state solution. President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu will likely focus on [de-escalation](#) and confidence-building measures, with the US emphasizing its belief in a two-state framework and [urging Netanyahu](#) to [take action](#) to demonstrate that Israel is committed to the same. Meanwhile, international actors are considering alternative paths towards a resolution of the conflict, potentially [including action through the UN](#).

In the region, the recent wave of violence strains the tenuous status quo between Israel and the Palestinians and calls into question the continued viability of the two-state solution. While the US continues to support Israel, there is concern in Washington that Israeli inaction on the peace process will lead to [long-term negative consequences](#).

Despite the lack of progress towards peace, American officials remain committed to restoring ties with Israel after the Iran deal and enhancing security cooperation. In October, the JCPOA was officially adopted and the tension over it appeared to fizzle. [Israel's Atomic Energy Commission has endorsed the deal](#), Israeli policymakers have signaled their desire to move forward, and Congressional discussions have turned towards pro-Israel legislation and an increased aid package designed to reaffirm the durability and scope of bilateral security cooperation.

To that end, last week, the US House of Representatives adopted a [resolution condemning alleged incitement by the Palestinian Authority](#). A [similar resolution](#) is under consideration in the Senate, and both Republicans and Democrats [pledge to push legislation](#) designed to further enhance US-Israel cooperation. Congressional Democrats have expressed their desire to reset relations after Netanyahu's [March speech to Congress opposing the Iran deal](#). Last week, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-T) welcomed the visit and said "[I'm not just willing, I'm enthusiastic to try to get back on the same page.](#)"

Security cooperation will be a top issue during Netanyahu's visit, and forefront will be renewing a Memorandum of Understanding on a 10-year military aid package to Israel. Military aid currently totals \$3B per year, and Reuters recently reported that [Israeli officials have requested an additional \\$2B](#). Analysts predict an increase, although likely not of the measure requested, as a result of the Iran deal. Israel is concerned that sanctions relief for Iran will prompt increased backing for its proxies in the Levant, and the US appears willing to provide security reassurances through [increased funding](#).

The inclusion of a visit to the [Center for American Progress](#) (CAP) on Netanyahu's schedule indicates that the willingness to engage in more constructive dialogue exists on both sides. Netanyahu is aware that he alienated Democratic and progressive allies by speaking before Congress against the Iran deal without White House invitation and immediately prior to Israel's own elections. Recent polling data in the [Mitvim Institute's 2015 Israeli Foreign Policy Index](#) demonstrates that this view is shared by Netanyahu's constituents. The index shows that 41% of Israelis believe that the state of Israel's relationship with the US is poor, and has deteriorated over the past year. It also reveals that Israelis view the promotion of ties with the US as a [top foreign policy priority](#).

Netanyahu's CAP visit provides an opportunity to backtrack on the increasingly partisan nature of the US-Israel relationship. While many progressives welcome this reset, others have [opposed](#) the visit on the grounds that it legitimizes Netanyahu's policies in regard to the Palestinians. CAP does however, have an opportunity to shape its questions for the Prime Minister in a way that goes beyond basic talking points and into the substance of what, if any, concrete action Netanyahu is poised to take to ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not settle into a one-state solution.

B. News Roundup

US and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes, NSC Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf Rob Malley, and Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro [participated in a briefing call in advance of Netanyahu's visit to the White House](#). The transcript of the call represents current US policy positions on relations with Israel in the wake of the Iran deal, as well as the administration's priorities regarding the peace process.

Natan Sachs, of the Brookings Institution, writes in Foreign Affairs on [anti-solutionism and Israeli foreign policy](#). He explains Israel's preference for the status quo on the Palestinian issue and on Iran as a "strategic conservatism" that reflects a lack of faith in presently available alternatives. Given the lack of progress towards peace, Sachs recommends that the US focus on evaluating how short-term Israeli and Palestinian policies will prejudice a future deal, and on pressuring both sides to make choices that will safeguard the viability of future negotiations.

Colum Lynch writes in Foreign Policy that even after signals to the contrary, [the US is not pushing for UN action towards a peace deal](#). He weighs the potential of UN action, the involvement of Jordan and other countries in managing the conflict, and previous US statements to its allies in support of pushing for progress through the UN.

Walter Russell Mead, writing in Foreign Affairs, reviews Jonathan Rynhold's book ["The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture."](#) This book details US public opinion and delineates major trends, including the gradual shift of Israel's core US support from the left to the right. It is well-positioned to serve as a reference for analysts of the US-Israel relationship.

Nahal Toosi of Politico writes on what analysts can expect from [Netanyahu's upcoming trip to Washington](#). She focuses specifically on the political will among Democrats, Republicans, and Netanyahu to move forward from the break over the Iran deal.

US Policy and the Syria Crisis

Frederic Hof, at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, writes in Politico that the [US must urgently reexamine its Syria policy](#) in order to avoid the situation languishing well into the next administration's term in office. He writes that the Islamic State should be countered with a professional ground combat component provided by regional powers that operates with coalition aircraft, and that this would open up space in central and eastern Syria for an [all-Syrian national stabilization force](#) that the US would have to take the lead in creating.

Maxim Trudolyubov and Michael Kofman of the Wilson Center [deconstruct the US-Russia impasse over Syria](#), and conclude that significant bilateral cooperation is impossible in light of opposing views on Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy and the focus of

military action. Russia's military campaign focuses on the coterie of fighters around Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama, who are unaffiliated with the Islamic State.

Eugene Rumer, director of the Carnegie Endowment's Russia and Eurasia Program, writes that the [US-Russia disconnect makes it necessary to resort to the P5+1 mechanism](#). The P5+1 forum currently enjoys the trust built over the course of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Rumer says that using it would insulate the US from charges of unilateralism and potentially harness Russia's military presence in Syria under the umbrella of multilateralism. This would likely require the US to seriously modify its position on the timing of Assad's departure from power. However, Rumer writes that recent US statements suggest flexibility on this issue, and that postponing discussion on Assad could create a real coalition that would achieve the US's key goals of defeating the Islamic State and achieving a political solution to the Syrian war.

Stephen M. Walt of the Harvard Kennedy School writes in Foreign Affairs about [US policy towards the Islamic State](#). He argues that US efforts to "degrade and destroy" ISIS could backfire by enhancing its prestige and bolstering its claim to be Islam's staunchest defender. Walt instead recommends relying on local actors to contain the group while the US stays in the background.

Ariel Cohen, of the Heritage Foundation, writes in the National Interest that [the US and Russia must clarify the rules of engagement in Syria](#) and establish proper military communication channels in order to avoid escalation or full-blown proxy conflict.

US and the Iran Deal

Michael Rubin and co-authors write for the American Enterprise Institute on [a new, challenging phase of American policy in the Middle East](#) following the adoption of the JCPOA.

C. Policy Profile

New Speaker of the House Paul D. Ryan

John Boehner's retirement announcement prompted a heated leadership struggle among congressional Republicans. Paul D. Ryan emerged from the fray, and on October 21 a [strong majority of anti-establishment conservatives in the 'House Freedom Caucus'](#) voted in favor of his speakership bid. The consensus created by the vote enabled Republicans to avoid a major leadership crisis, and Ryan was officially nominated and elected the following week.

It is clear that Ryan will continue the Republican party's strong support for Israel. Tevi Troy, former Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy and White House Jewish liaison in the George W. Bush administration, said "I am excited to have the [outspokenly pro-Israel Paul Ryan](#) serve as Speaker. His mentor was Jack Kemp, who successfully pushed for the GOP to be the pro-Israel party it is today." It remains to be

seen if he will differ at all from Boehner on Israel policy. In any case, Netanyahu's upcoming trip provides Ryan with an opportunity to reduce the partisan tensions introduced by Boehner's invitation to Netanyahu last spring.

Some Jewish Democrats question Ryan's alignment with the interests of American Jewish voters. Greg Rosenbaum, Chairman of the National Jewish Democratic Council, called Ryan's voting record and politics "[far out of step with the American Jewish community](#)." He continued to say that Ryan moved even further right by "capitulating to the so-called House Freedom Caucus, and one of their specific demands on blocking immigration reform, [which] only shows that the Republican-controlled congress is going to alienate Jewish voters even more under Speaker Ryan." Ryan recently declared that he would [oppose advancing comprehensive immigration legislation](#) until after next year's presidential elections.

Given his background, it is likely that Ryan's initial focus will be on the budget and other economic issues. Ryan has announced that "we are not going to have a House that looks like it looked the last two years...our party has lost its vision, and [we are going to replace it with a vision](#)." Republicans and Democrats alike will see what this vision looks like over the coming months, as Ryan demonstrates his priorities and effectiveness as Speaker.