



## **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 Mitvim, [breeves@mitvim.org.il](mailto:breeves@mitvim.org.il). Previous issues can be [read here](#).

### **A. Analysis**

#### **The Time is Ripe to Foster Arab Regional Collective Security**

*The United States should exploit the new window of opportunity that has been opened by Arab states seeking a proactive role in combatting destabilizing forces in the region.*

The Middle East is in flux. This is evident not just on the ground where the US-led airstrikes are making gains against the Islamic State (IS) in northern Iraq. It can also be observed in the meaningful participation of several Arab states in this campaign, as well as a handful of other efforts to rout out forces of instability in the region. The time is ripe for the United States to encourage these efforts for the sake of fostering what have for too long been absent in these areas: indigenous regional collective security initiatives.

Decades of great power competition and military intervention have left the Middle East regional system highly penetrated, principally by the US, where organic regional security cooperation schemes have had scant room to flourish. While the habitual need for the US to re-secure the region may have seemed palpable to President George W. Bush given his unilateralist ideology, President Obama has over the past month made it crystal clear in his repeated [calls for Arab states](#) to play a serious role in battling IS that he is keen on a change in the entire modus operandi.

Fortunately for this strategy, what started as Arab frustration at Obama's own perceived unreliability in supporting allies (i.e. Syrian rebels, Ukraine) and Secretary Kerry's inability to broker a ceasefire in Gaza has now evolved into proactive Arab contributions toward common international objectives. These contributions were most notably seen in the mini-saga of Gaza ceasefire efforts, by which in spite of deep-seated rivalries, multiple Arab countries led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia managed to bring Israel and Hamas within range of a deal. They also include the independent UAE and Egyptian [bombing of Islamist militias](#) in Libya in late August. Most recently adding to the scoreboard, multiple Arab states and the Arab League joined in the new

US-led coalitional effort against IS, for which [Arab countries launched the first aerial strikes against IS](#).

As Arab states continue to demonstrate such initiative, if the US were to seize the moment it would guide them toward shouldering more of the security burden (and costs) of safeguarding regional stability. Naturally, this will require sustained US leadership and investment in combating the more risky sources of unrest in the region. Congressional approval to [vet and arm “moderate” Syrian rebel groups](#)—a decision that put Republicans in an [awkward position](#) of supporting the president’s strategy—will likely provide some encouragement for local populations skeptical of whether the US is still willing to stay the course.

Obama’s [admission that the US erred](#) in its initial assessment of the threat from IS may also (paradoxically) serve to restore faith among its Arab allies that it has indeed committed itself to—in the words of Obama at the UN on September 24—“[dismantle this network of death](#).” Obama fittingly used the occasion of the UNGA summit to [meet prior with the five Arab allies](#) that participated in the anti-IS campaign, as well as the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and during his speech promised to build even broader international support against the militant group.

The US might also profit from Arab regional engagement on the Israeli-Palestinian front. The events in Iraq and Syria have for a month now overshadowed the so-called epicenter of Middle East conflict. Yet the inclusion of key Arab partners such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and others could be advantageous both in ameliorating the situation in Gaza and in possibly forging ahead with a final push during the Obama presidency to resurrect the peace process.

In a geopolitical adaptation of the “give a man a fish” parable, a US strategy of countenancing Arab countries to bolster their own regional security can empower them to acquire more experience in initiating efforts to tackle the region’s most destabilizing issues. The time is ripe, and long overdue.

## **B. Article Roundup**

### ***US and Israel***

Nathan Thrall, with the International Crisis Group, classifies American policymakers on Israel into three camps—skeptics, reproachers and embracers, explains the [delusions on American diplomacy](#), and suggests several alternate policies it could adopt for more fruitful negotiations.

Nathan Brown, at the Carnegie Endowment, [challenges Netanyahu’s “lies” made](#) in his recent UN speech by equating Hamas with IS.

Michael Doran, at the Brookings Institution, [repudiates the notion](#) that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the “epicenter” of the region’s woes, underlining the IS threat and Iran’s nuclear program.

### ***US and IS***

Andrew Tabler (The Washington Institute), Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council) and others [each provide their recommendations](#) in a *New York Times* “debate” on how to counter IS.

Sarah Chayes, at the Carnegie Endowment, lays out a “non-military solution” in Iraq, such as working with Arab countries to [broker a political settlement in Iraq](#) aimed to reduce sectarianism. Relying solely on a military plan, she argues, will only attract support for IS.

Kenneth Pollack, at the Brookings Institution, praises the Obama administration for [going beyond IS to address the wider problems](#) in Syria and Iraq that facilitated IS’ rise.

Kevin Sullivan writes in *The National Interest* that for long-term solutions to the instability in the Middle East, the US must press for more [democratic reforms](#) among its Arab allies.

Micah Zenko, at the Council on Foreign Relations, [warns against issuing unrealistic promises](#) such as “destroying” IS.

Michele Flournoy, CEO of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), advocates in an interview for US-allied [Arab ground forces](#) in order to stamp out IS in Iraq and Syria.

### ***US and Iran***

Eric Edelman, Dennis Ross and Ray Takeyh stress that [Iran remains the US’ greatest challenge](#) to regional stability, mainly over its exploitation of sectarian divisions in Iraq and Syria.

Suzanne Maloney, at the Brookings Institution, asserts that [Iran has too much to lose](#) from a collapse in the P5+1 talks, and recommends for the US to be stronger in its demands.

## **C. Policy Profile**

### **Colin Kahl - National Security Advisor to the Vice President**

Vice President Joe Biden tapped Dr. Colin Kahl as Deputy Assistant to the President and National Security Advisor to the Vice President this month. A familiar face to the White House, Kahl served as [Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East](#) during Obama’s first term before leaving to teach at Georgetown University. During the interim, he also acted as a senior fellow and [Director of the Middle East Security Program](#) with the CNAS. Kahl’s impressive, Middle East-heavy resume extends to serving as top civilian Pentagon Middle East adviser between 2009-2011 during which he collaborated with Defense Secretaries Robert Gates and Leon Panetta on strengthening US interests with Israel and Gulf States while addressing threats from Iran and instability in Iraq. Biden explicitly mentioned Kahl’s background on the Middle East as a primary factor in his choice of appointment.

Among his work on Middle Eastern issues, Kahl wrote a paper while at CNAS on [containing Iran](#) in the event that it becomes nuclear. Kahl is also known for having [removed the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital](#) of Israel from the 2012 Democratic Platform, a position that may yet come to haunt the Obama administration domestically and with Israel. A major challenge for Kahl will be how he can advise his boss on taking meaningful American military action against IS while cultivating the US’ partnership with Arab countries in these efforts and defining the role of Iran in this picture. Such outcomes may have implications for issues between Israel and the Palestinians, for which Kahl will be consulted in order to determine an innovative strategy for if the administration makes a final push for peace talks.