



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 edited by Rebecca Bornstein, a researcher at the Mitvim Institute, rbornstein@mitvim.org.il.

Previous issues can be [read here](#).

A. Analysis

The Iran Deal and the Future of the Peace Process

The contentious 60-day Congressional review of the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) ended on September 17 without Congress passing legislation to prevent implementation of the deal. Despite continued [opposition](#), October 19 will mark the deal's "Adoption Day." The JCPOA's [success](#) in Congress means that the Obama administration will eventually be able to waive [nuclear-related](#) sanctions on Iran. A State Department-led [implementation team](#) will be tasked with coordinating US efforts and ensuring that Iran complies with its obligations.

The spotlight will now shift to Tehran. Iran must undertake crucial nuclear steps before the deal's eventual "Implementation Day," predicted by US officials to occur in six to nine [months](#). No final [date](#) has been set, as implementation is contingent upon the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) certifying that Iran has fulfilled all relevant obligations, including [removal](#) of 98 percent of its enriched uranium, shutting down its underground enrichment facility, and rendering inoperative the core of a plutonium-capable reactor. Iran's first step is to complete an initial [IAEA investigation](#) by October 15.

The broader US policy discussion on Iran will now shift from evaluating the deal to ensuring that Iran's progress is monitored and verified, but some ardent critics of the JCPOA vow to keep [fighting](#) it. After failing to block the agreement, some Republicans have launched a [multipronged offensive](#) designed to undermine the deal. On September 27, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy announced legislation that would re-link the nuclear issue to the broader conflict with Iran by prohibiting any sanctions relief until Iran pays [court-ordered damages](#) to the families of terror attack victims.

While AIPAC's lobbying strategy failed to convince Congress to block the deal, former State Department Middle East Negotiator Aaron David Miller says that the [organization will remain influential](#), and that even a strong lobbying group cannot veto the efforts of a determined president. Indeed, AIPAC membership and funding spiked after AIPAC's other losses over the

decades (including on proposed arms sales to Israel and loan guarantees). Following this loss, AIPAC must decide whether to move on from the issue or drop support for democratic lawmakers who voted in favor of the deal.

The US-Israel relationship strained under the weight of disagreements over the deal, and US policymakers remain especially sensitive to Netanyahu's involvement in American domestic politics. This tension is unlikely to dissipate in the leadup to Netanyahu and Obama's November meeting in Washington, even as the White House and Democratic lawmakers consider a broad legislative [package](#) designed to maintain Israel's [qualitative edge](#), in addition to ensuring the security of Gulf allies and Iran's adherence to the deal. The potential inclusion of [bunker-busting bombs](#) in the package for Israel (which Israel may not want to accept) is likely designed to bolster the perception of a credible military option and compel Tehran to comply with the JCPOA.

With the JCPOA out of Congress and the United Nations General Assembly over, some attention will now shift to the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the continued viability of a two-state solution. The chances of large-scale US involvement in the stagnant [peace process](#) appear slim, and no significant announcements have been made in the UN General Assembly. Notably, Obama's speech did not include reference to either Israel or the Palestinians, and the crux of Abbas's highly anticipated speech fell short of the ['bombshell'](#) expected. His declarations were [largely symbolic](#), and did not include an end to security cooperation with Israel or the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority. In regard to the peace process, [Netanyahu's speech](#) also rang hollow, as his offer to restart direct negotiations with Abbas was unsupported by any new policies that could jumpstart real progress.

Even with tensions at a high, it is unlikely that US policymakers will unveil a large-scale diplomatic effort in the coming months. The recent meeting of the Middle East Quartet focused on [regional involvement](#), including the significance of the Arab Peace Initiative, and the coming months will show whether the Quartet's new efforts succeed in restarting serious talks or promoting concrete steps on the ground.

B. News Roundup

US and the Iran Deal

Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, a former senior foreign policy correspondent for Bloomberg News, writes in Politico about the ["inside story" behind the Obama administration's Iran diplomacy](#). Lakshmanan covered the path to the deal over the past seven years.

Stephen Walt writes on the need to [maximize the Iran deal through continued engagement](#). He takes to task those who once criticized the deal for its sole focus on the nuclear crisis, and now insist that it not be a starting point for progress with Iran on other contentious issues. Walt argues that striving to build on the JCPOA will increase its chances of success, and allow the US greater leverage on other regional matters.

Richard Nephew, at the Arms Control Association, points out that public attention has focused on Iran's known nuclear program, but experts generally consider [the possibility of a covert program](#) to be most alarming. He explains the technical measures in the JCPOA that prevent Iran from pursuing a covert program and improve the international community's ability to detect any illicit activity.

David Makovsky, at the Washington Institute, writes on the need to [repair the US-Israel relationship](#). He proposes that both sides take specific action: the US by further strengthening security cooperation, and Netanyahu by going on a “listening tour” on Capitol Hill during his November trip to Washington, in order to reestablish ties and mitigate the effects of his March speech to Congress, which occurred without the administration’s approval and alienated some legislators.

US and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Natan Sachs, at the Brookings Institute, examines US policy options and the [dilemmas of the Israeli-Palestinian impasse](#). He notes that “publishing a US framework agreement now is likely to meet stiff resistance from both parties, and the damage will likely dissipate long before serious negotiations are resumed. Key principles could therefore be set forth as useful long-term goals to which all parties can, in time, recommit, and with which all short-term steps should be made commensurate.”

Khaled Elgindy, also at the Brookings Institute, writes that the collapse of the peace process “architecture” constructed since the Oslo Accords does not preclude the [possibility of a peaceful two-state solution to the conflict](#). He evaluates the key trends that will shape decision making, and explores alternative ways forward. Both Sachs and Elgindy write for “Debating Israeli-Palestinian Futures,” a new blog series by the Brookings Institute.

Nathan Brown, of George Washington University and the Carnegie Endowment, writes that the [US must adopt new strategies towards the conflict](#). He argues that the peace process has enabled, rather than overcome, many challenges to a two-state solution, and that incremental solutions are the only way forward. Specifically, he says that the US should concentrate on “people who have been ignored (such as those in Gaza) and arenas that have been devalued (international organizations and legal mechanisms).”

US Policy and the Syria Crisis

Philip Gordon at the Council on Foreign Relations (and until recently at the White House) writes on the need to rethink [US policy on Syria](#). Russia’s deployment of forces in Syria bolsters Assad’s rule and means that the US must reassess its policy of applying pressure in order to convince Assad to negotiate his departure.

Steven Simon of Dartmouth College and Andrew Weiss of the Carnegie Endowment speak to PBS on [whether Russia’s military priorities in Syria should concern US policymakers](#). Weiss voices concern over Syrian military presence in the Levant, but considers Putin’s action impulsive. He draws parallels between this and Russian military action in Ukraine. Simon focuses on the tactical elements of military action and predicts a low risk of collision, due to Russia and the US concentrating their action in different sectors.

David F. Gordon at the Center for a New American Security analyzes ways in which [the US could leverage Russia’s involvement](#). Gordon writes that Syria need not become a new focal point for US-Russia tensions, and that Obama has an opportunity to leverage Moscow’s involvement in order to weaken ISIS, and seek a diplomatic end to the war. Unfortunately, the chances of a US-Russian negotiated settlement are weakened by strong disagreement over Assad’s stay in power.

C. Policy Profile

Stephen Mull, Lead Coordinator for Iran Nuclear Deal Implementation

On September 17, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the appointment of Stephen Mull as Lead Coordinator for Iran Nuclear Implementation. Following the 60-day Congressional review period, the deal will come into effect by October 19. As head of the Department of State-led coordination team, Mr. Mull is tasked with ensuring that the “[nuclear steps Iran committed to in the JCPOA are fully implemented and verified.](#)”

While the State Department has the lead role, its team will be supported by an interagency effort that includes all relevant federal departments and agencies (including the Departments of Treasury, Energy, Homeland Security, Commerce, Justice, and Defence, in addition to the intelligence and law enforcement communities). As the lifting of sanctions is contingent upon concrete nuclear steps by Iran, the interagency team’s first priority will be to monitor and evaluate Iran’s progress. If satisfactory steps are taken, the team will later be responsible for ensuring that the US and its partners fulfil their obligations in respect to nuclear-related sanctions. The high profile of this issue and continued political pressure against the JCPOA, despite its adoption, mean that the implementation team will face extensive scrutiny to produce and verify its findings before any steps are taken to alleviate sanctions.

Mr. Mull is a [member of the Senior Foreign Service](#) with significant experience handling crisis response coordination and operations. The appointment of an individual with this background indicates that JCPOA implementation will remain a “whole of government” high-profile issue as the agreement moves into the implementation phase. Mr. Mull also has issue-based experience; most notably, he focused on Iran’s nuclear program as Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary of Affairs from 2008-2010. In this role, Mull played a key role in [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929](#), which imposed additional nuclear-related sanctions on Iran, and marshalling support for its adoption by the Council. He has also worked with the [U.S. Mission to the IAEA](#) to press for full accountability in Iran’s nuclear program. Mr. Mull holds a BS in International Politics from Georgetown University.