



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

A. Analysis

The threats posed by ISIS, which dominated American politics in August, have fundamentally challenged the Obama administration's policy of retrenchment. Now, the administration appears set to embark upon a comprehensive effort to work with regional partners to combat the Islamist threat. Such devotion on this issue threatens to overshadow potential opportunities in the Israeli-Palestinian arena; however, a smart US policy would utilize this heightened engagement in the Middle East to press for renewed peace talks with regional support.

With the prospect of a sustained ISIS presence in Iraq and Syria, the option of prolonged US military re-engagement in the region has essentially become an expectation. The pressure to reorient US policy could not be more evident, as Obama himself opted for [military strikes in northern Iraq](#) on August 9—a first for the US since it pulled out 2011. Moreover, he later warned Americans that US military involvement to quell ISIS and work in other ways to restore stability to Iraq, including working with nominated Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, would likely have to [continue for the long run](#).

Obama's August 9 decision also came on the heels of criticism from leaders in both parties for not having done more to stymie the advances of ISIS in northern Iraq. Even as Obama authorized the strikes, ranking Senator John McCain [called for more military action](#). Pouncing on the administration's perceived fecklessness on Middle East policy—a perception reinvigorated by the subsequent ISIS [beheading of American journalist, James Foley](#)—McCain repeated this call, this time along with senior Senator Lindsey Graham in a [New York Times](#) opinion article. Tea Party stalwart [Senator Ted Cruz](#) also piped in, linking Russian and ISIS aggression to Obama's alleged projection of weakness.

The most crushing critique, however, came from Hillary Clinton, who in what many consider an attempt to put distance between her and the president for her own anticipated 2016 president

bid endorsed the idea that stronger prior US [intervention in Syria would have prevented the rise of ISIS](#) and that Obama erroneously has no foreign policy doctrine.

For the coming month, the most significant development to look for has already been outlined in a key [article penned by Secretary Kerry](#) in the New York Times on August 29. In this telling piece, he reveals the administration's blueprint for a "global coalition" to beat back ISIS, involving support from NATO, the UN and the "countries that are most directly threatened." At its core, this blueprint signals Obama's intention to maintain a refocused US attention on the Middle East while holding firm to his principle of international security cooperation.

This strategy seems set to overshadow all other issues in the near future, including the Israeli-Palestinian one. However, with the [termination](#) of the recent Israel-Hamas conflict bringing new ripeness for prospects of Israeli-PA cooperative efforts on managing Gaza, Obama could greatly profit by attempting to convert these prospects into renewed peace talks. Such talks would likely come up against stiff resistance from Israel if Abbas follows through with plans to seek an internationally-backed [time limit on Israel's occupation](#). It should be recalled, though, that in June the US was able to cajole Abbas into abandoning a [similar endeavor](#). An opportunity is present. After months of strained US-Israeli ties, including the recent [missile shipment episode](#), the Obama administration is in a position to utilize its upcoming collaboration with regional Middle East states to additionally garner support and cooperation in bringing greater stability to Gaza.

The US appears to already have enjoyed a legitimacy boost among regional states for its military operations against ISIS, and now the Kerry article indicates that he and Obama remain undeterred from the tongue-lashings they had received during the Gaza crisis to pursue other cooperative efforts with the same leaders who dished out the criticism. This legitimacy will be critical for any future US initiatives for regional involvement, including perhaps in advancing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations if the parties express a willingness for them down the road.

On the horizon, a main obstacle for revisiting the Israeli-Palestinian issue will be the divisive politics of the regional Cold War. Regional divisions contributed in no small part to the failure to bring the Gaza conflict to an end in a timely manner. Moreover, they revealed the limits of US influence in the region, and led Israel and various Arab States to cold-shoulder it in favor of their own de facto alliance. As [Martyn Indyk recently discussed](#) in an interview, this snubbing of the US may become the norm. It will be up to the Obama administration to prove in the coming months that the US can lead in the fight to neutralize ISIS if it is to have a chance at restoring its standing as a leader in peace efforts, as well.

B. Article Roundup

US and the Gaza Conflict

The Washington Institute convened a meeting of diplomats, rockets specialists and a former UN weapons inspector to discuss ways to [prevent the rocket rearmament](#) of Gaza militant groups.

Ed Husain of the Council on Foreign Relations asserts that [Hamas must be brought to the table in future final status negotiations](#), and that Hamas can help in the fight against Salafi Jihadis.

The Los Angeles Times Editorial Board issued a statement calling on Israel to [foster talks with Abbas](#) and the PA if it seeks to undermine Hamas in the post-ceasefire atmosphere.

Israel Policy Forum highlights two articles by Daniel Kurtzer and Dennis Ross from earlier in the month on how to [rebuild Gaza and effect a lasting ceasefire](#).

US and ISIS

The Center for International and Strategic Studies published a report on the [strategic and tactical challenges](#) for US action against ISIS.

Former US Ambassador to Iraq and Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad presents a [five-point plan to defeat ISIS](#), including seeking international support and diplomacy on neighboring conflicts.

Ron Harrison and Michael Ryan posit in *The National Interest* that the most comprehensive way to defeat ISIS beyond military strikes is to [foster a stronger, shared and inclusive Arab identity](#).

Gen. John R. Allen, at the Brookings Institution, implores the US to eradicate ISIS fully, using Mosul as a base to conduct [military strikes at the group's strongholds in Syria](#).

Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass concurs with a [US strike in Syria](#) to subvert ISIS.

Aaron David Miller, however, argues [against a strategy of attacking ISIS in Syria](#).

C. Policy Profile

Rexon Ryu – Defense Department Chief of Staff

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel tapped Rexon Ryu this month as the [Pentagon's new Chief of Staff](#). The appointment comes at a critical time especially concerning the Middle East, as the US struggles to reorient both its foreign and national security policies there in the recent turmoil. Appropriately, Ryu brings ample experience in both areas.

Until recently, Ryu, a Korean American, was serving as America's [Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations](#). Prior to that, he had worked as a foreign policy advisor for Hagel during the latter's time as Senator. Hagel alluded to his continued professional relationship with Ryu, [praising him](#) as a "proven talent when it comes to working with the interagency, Congress, and outside groups." Unlike past appointees to the position who were relatively unknown to former Defense Secretaries Panetta and Gates, Hagel is, as *Foreign Policy notes*, "clearly settling on someone he knows and trusts." In addition, Ryu has served in the State Department, including posts in Cairo and Jerusalem, and has particular expertise on issues regarding North Korea and Iran.

Already, Ryu is said to have a full plate of tasks to tackle. Chief among the issues include combatting the Islamic State, addressing the great power standoff surrounding Ukraine, and the ongoing instability in Syria. Given Ryu's endorsements from a host of former White House senior staff, however, he is viewed as a highly confident and equipped individual for these most pressing, likely long-term challenges for America.