



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 race by proponents of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to win over enough senators and representatives to prevent a veto-proof two-thirds majority in Congress preoccupied news media throughout August, until [September 2](#) when the deal's supporters secured over one-third (34 so far) of the Senate chamber. Until the September 4 announcement of opposition to the deal by [Senator Ben Cardin](#) (D-MD) rumors had it that the pro-deal camp would even attain enough seats (40) for a [filibuster](#).

This success by proponents in the Senate and perhaps [even the more lopsided Republican-dominated House](#) is revealing insofar as it highlights the failure of the opposition in one of the most high stakes congressional foreign policy battles in over a decade. Principally, the 60-day review period of the deal was informally supposed to be used to build opposition to the deal, but [had the opposite effect](#), including both in congress and [among the American people](#). The prevailing opinion holds that amid the [highly polarized](#) anti-deal conservative campaign, Democrats largely closed ranks with party lines, while [coordinated visits](#) from emissaries of the other P5+1 countries helped convince undecided lawmakers that no deal would indeed spell an end to the sanctions regime.

The other major implication of the opposition coming up short on votes was that it also represented a failure by the opposition lobbying effort, most notably led by AIPAC. Despite [vastly outspending its rivals](#), including J Street in a [contentious Jewish community standoff](#), it has essentially lost one of its most defining battles, and at a time when in an increasingly polarized Congress its influence on Democrats is now often challenged. Some [commentators](#) on the left and [right](#) have claimed the opposition's loss has [weakened AIPAC's clout](#).

Notably however, while AIPAC's shortcoming was in some cases equated with a weakening of the pro-Israel and Jewish voice, the bi-polar campaign surrounding the congressional vote has throughout highlighted [American Jewish](#) and [Israeli expert](#) support for the deal. Even relatively infrequent followers of the Iran deal debate likely read articles or heard of White House talking points [referencing](#) this support. To that end, this Jewish, pro-Israel backing of the deal, led by J

Street, helped mitigate the characterization of the Obama team's victory as a zero-sum gain over Israel and the Jewish People.

While it is [debatable](#) whether AIPAC completely lost as a result of this campaign, Prime Minister Netanyahu surely has. His own provocative railings [against the deal](#) were well known, and were frequently repeated by Obama administration [officials](#) as they themselves tried to [fight](#) the portrayal of the JCPOA as detrimental to Israel's security.

Looking [ahead](#), as the House prepares to vote on the deal on September 11 and the Senate on September 17, Republican lawmakers appear poised to ratchet up Iran sanctions by [passing separate legislation](#)—measures which US state legislatures may similarly [follow](#). Such legislation speaks to more than just the GOP's base, but to concerns by Democrats, as well, that the divide on the debate surrounding the JCPOA has prevented Congress from considering meaningful, bi-partisan supplements the deal that would reflect the American public's concern for increased funds to the Iranian regime's coffers.

The Obama administration will likely continue its mini-campaign (see Section C) to reiterate its support for Israel regarding the JCPOA (indeed, on September 2, "Israel" was mentioned [27 times](#) in Kerry's last speech). Obama himself has hinted at [increasing military assistance](#) to Israel from \$3.1 billion to \$3.5 billion annually. Similarly, the administration is currently engaged in efforts to [mollify Gulf concerns](#).

As for longstanding speculation on a renewed American focus on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, recent [comments by Kerry on MSNBC](#) that the administration has not given up but will need to "get through the next weeks before we start talking about the rest of the agenda" seem to suggest cautious interest in indeed revisiting the issue. The "next weeks," however, are in this political climate far away, and offer ample time for Israel and the US to either weather the storm on this particularly sensitive policy rift, or to allow destructive, hyperbolic rhetoric to dictate the course of their relations.

B. Article Roundup

On Strengthening the Iran Deal

Robert Einhorn, at the Brookings Institution, proposes [six measures to strengthen](#) the JCPOA so that Iran is prevented from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Measures include various methods of cooperation with European partners and the IAEA, and demonstrations of reaffirmed commitment to the region.

Shai Feldman, at Brandeis University, and Ariel Levite, at the Carnegie Endowment, imagine a host of [scenarios of the aftermath](#) of the JCPOA's implementation. Uncovering fatal flaws in each of them, they paint a final picture where Congress works with a receptive Obama government to pass legislation mitigating weaknesses in the deal.

Dennis Ross, at The Washington Institute, and General David Petraus charge that, in the pursuit of strengthening the deal, Obama must emphasize the US' willingness for the military option to maintain [deterrence after 15 years](#) when the P5+1 inspections regime winds down.

Ray Tayekh, at the Council on Foreign Relations, posits that in order to strengthen the Iran deal, [Congress could reject it](#) and work with Obama to impose harsher demands, and pledge support for the modified version. Tayekh's colleague, CFR President Richard Haass, in contrast supports the deal, though [on condition that the US adopts policy supplements](#) while ratifying the JCPOA. Examples of supplements include US commitments to containing Iran and responding militarily to violations of the deal, and semiannual White House reports to Congress.

US and the Middle East

Aaron David Miller, at the Wilson Center, outlines how President Obama has [plagued his foreign policy with overambitious commitments](#) for which he cannot deliver. With the Iran deal, he is again making this mistake by over-selling its merits.

Foreign Policy Group Editor David Rothkopf, discusses the overarching [dangers of Obama's doctrine](#) toward the Middle East, particularly US inaction in the face of the humanitarian disaster in Syria, ISIS aggression and Iran's expected rising global influence. Obama's "overabundance of caution" hurts US credibility and avoids necessary risks that could open up opportunities.

Martyn Indyk, at the Brookings Institution, assesses the Middle East after the Iran deal's probable ratification. While contending that solving the Israeli-Palestinian issue and other disputes [may become easier with renewed regional focus](#), he downplays Iran's growing influence due to visceral Arab Sunni opposition. A related speech of his is also featured.

C. Policy Profile

Adam J. Szubin - Acting Under Secretary of Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence

In the ongoing effort by the US to curtail Israeli opposition on the JCPOA, the White House [recently dispatched](#) Adam Szubin, the administration's so-called [sanctions chief](#), to Israel to vouch for the deal as the best option for preventing an Iranian nuclear bomb. Szubin, who's title officially is the Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, in the Department of Treasury, was himself [a key player in the US delegation in the P5+1 negotiations](#) with Iran. Moreover, he helped [craft the Obama administration's Iran sanctions](#) in the first place.

Since coming to the Treasury Department after Harvard Law School and several years working on terrorism and financial crime issues in the Justice Department, Szubin also helped implement the US endeavor to [cut off finances](#) to the al Qaeda-backed Somali group, al Shabab. He also helped construct sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Crimea.

Equipped with these credentials, the Jewish undersecretary spent three days in Israel meeting with Israeli National Security Advisor Yossi Cohen, Minister for Energy and Infrastructure Yuval Steinitz, and Director-General of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dore Gold, while also participating in roundtable discussions with Israeli think tanks. The discussions [focused on familiar topics](#) of how the deal will prevent Iranian nuclear capabilities, next US steps on combatting Iranian aggression in the region and strategic cooperation with Israel in the "intelligence, financial and diplomatic arenas." The Treasury Department has since [reiterated](#) that Iran is "the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and destabilizing force in the region."

As one of Obama's key point men on sanctions, one should anticipate more prominent appearances by Szubin as the JCPOA almost surely will be implemented over the coming year.

Concerning Israel, Szubin's trip does not appear to have had much of an effect on stymying Prime Minister Netanyahu's [efforts against](#) the deal, although Dore Gold has since [backtracked](#) in claiming that the Israeli government was merely interested in pointing out the implications of the JCPOA, rather than working to derail it. Whatever may be Israel's official position on US acceptance of the deal, until Congress' window to block the deal has officially passed, and perhaps even beyond that it seems the JCPOA will remain a vocal source of division between the US and Israeli governments.