



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

As those supporting a robust Israeli-American partnership warily await the full consequences of Netanyahu's bungled scheme to bypass the White House and give a partisan speech to Congress during Israel's election cycle, it is important to reflect on where American foreign policy was heading just weeks prior. An epic standoff between the Executive and Legislative Branches on the conduct of Iranian nuclear talks appeared imminent as President Obama's [State of the Union Address](#) highlighted his intention to block measures that could derail a deal, while the new Republican-majority Senate appeared on its way to impose swift new sanctions.

In early January when the new Congress convened, Senate Republicans and hawkish Democrats led by Senator Menendez were well on their way to obtaining a 67-vote majority to pass a veto-proof [bill for more sanctions](#) on Iran (effective June 30) ahead of a March 1 (now March 24) deadline for a framework agreement on a nuclear deal. More than a potential victory in its own right, for Republicans the passage of such a bill represented the lowest hanging fruit (i.e. one with enough Democratic support) in a set of issues including executive orders on Cuban diplomatic relations and illegal immigration for which they have sought to thwart Obama's policy direction.

These plans regarding Iran were foiled, however, as Democrats closed ranks behind Obama following Netanyahu's newest and potentially most damaging faux pas in a [list of episodes](#) that have caused a relative crisis in the "strategic relationship" enjoyed by both countries. Democratic lawmakers, including prominent members of the Jewish community, have [expressed rebuke](#) over the move and at Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner's invitation. Quietly, sources close to AIPAC questioned the wisdom of Netanyahu's decision, while J Street and other dovish pro-Israel voices [called on Congress to delay](#) (note: not rescind) the speech. An unsuccessful, [belated attempt](#) by Netanyahu to explain himself to top Democratic lawmakers, a *Haaretz* article reporting that [Netanyahu is now considered "toast"](#) by the Obama administration and a rare [berating](#) by distinguished reporters at *Fox News*, which tends to spare Israel from criticism, all indicate that without a change in the Israeli leadership the Jewish

State's favor with the American government and a growing segment of the American public may remain on shaky grounds for the next two years.

For the immediate future, a bill on further US sanctions on Iran no longer appears possible until at least after March 24, as Senator Menendez has [withdrawn support](#) from his own bill and taken [nine pro-sanctions Democrats](#) with him.

Aside from Iran, US financial aid to the Palestinian Authority is once again in jeopardy of being slashed as the House is set to hold its first hearing on the issue on February 4. After President Abbas moved to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) with the intention of filing a case against Israel, Congressmen threatened to cut the [entire \\$440 million](#) in aid. The Senate also appears to be in favor of such a decision, with 75 Senators signing an [AIPAC-backed letter](#) on January 29 calling for a halt to all aid. The letter is however non-binding, and administration and Israeli security officials have in the past managed to convince enough Senators to withdraw support from such endeavors.

Finally, efforts in Congress to forcibly [move the US embassy to Jerusalem](#) may be played out next month, although again there is little indication that a bill could garner enough votes in the Senate to override a certain presidential veto.

B. Article Roundup

US and Israel

Jeffrey Goldberg gives a comprehensive examination of the Netanyahu's debacle, emphasizing that it is his [role as the junior partner](#) in the Israel-US relationship to maintain it, much less risk it by sneaking around corners to meddle in American internal politics.

Robert Kagan, at Brookings, gives [five reasons](#) why Netanyahu should not address Congress.

Elliott Abrams, at the Council on Foreign Relations, [rejects criticism of Netanyahu](#) over the Congress speech, arguing that he is an important voice on Iran, but thinks that it is fine that Obama will not meet Netanyahu so close to the Israeli elections.

US and the Palestinian Authority

Matt Duss, the president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, contends that [lawmakers should not cut aid to the PA](#) for taking non-violent action, warning of the message such punishment would send and how such a decision ignores the urgency for action that the Israeli government's intransigence has created.

Former Mitvim Fellow Grant Rumley, now at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, provides a detailed account of the power struggle for the PA leadership, including the ironic [rapprochement between Mohammad Dahlan and Hamas](#) that could open the door for a PA re-entry into Gaza.

US and Iran

The Center for New American Security published a policy brief on how to wisely [negotiate toward a deal with Iran](#), and how to responsibly mend relations after such a deal is reached.

Michael Singh, at The Washington Institute, [cautions against putting confidence in President Rouhani](#), whose record shows tactical disagreement with his hardliner rivals on Iran's nuclear program and regional ambitions.

David Rothkopf, at the Carnegie Endowment, argues that Obama's fixation on an Iran deal to save his foreign policy legacy is such that it can be called a "[pivot to Iran](#)," rather than to Asia.

Dennis Ross, Eric Edelman and Ray Tayekh charge that Iran's lack of commitment to the nuclear talks and its interference in Yemen prove that [Obama is not tough enough](#) on the Islamic Republic, and he would be wise to adopt the positions of his Congressional rivals.

C. Policy Profile

Ashton Carter – Nominee for US Secretary of Defense

Pending a likely confirmation in the Senate after a [hearing on February 4](#), Ashton Carter is slated to become the next United States Defense Secretary. Unlike outgoing Secretary Hagel, Carter is widely considered a defense expert and natural pick for the position. Indeed, he served as [Deputy Defense Secretary between 2011-2013](#) and was originally supposed to help advise Hagel before taking leave of the position. During this time, Carter was a vocal proponent of the administration's "pivot to Asia." He also boasts extensive academic background from the nation's top universities, and has worked in multiple think tanks including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Although not considered part of Obama's inner security clique, it is claimed this background will be critical for effectively advocating a defense vision that is reportedly more [aligned with Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates](#) than Obama's.

Concerning the Middle East, Carter notably authored a 2006 report while at Carnegie in favor of a pre-emptive US strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, while in 2008 he teamed up with Dennis Ross and the head of the conservative Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, Michael Makovsky, for a study that defied a CIA study in warning that Iran had [not in fact frozen its nuclear program](#). Likewise, he has a solid pro-Israel record.

In assuming the top Pentagon post, Carter will immediately face the [challenges](#) of staving off budget cuts, coming up with a plan to appropriately pull out troops from Afghanistan by Obama's end of 2016 deadline, maintaining robust ties with China amid growing cyber threats and redoubling NATO-backed pressure on Russia regarding Ukraine. Perhaps above all, he will be expected to promptly devise a strategy in the fight against ISIS for Obama's last two years in office, including whether to put US troops on the ground. As if this were not pressure enough, it has been widely surmised that Obama's alleged [firing of Hagel](#) was due to the outgoing secretary's foot-dragging on his Commander in Chief's vision of ramping up a physical presence in Iraq after failing to prevent the country's 2014 ISIS invasion.