

Israel Braces for U.S. Revival of the JCPOA

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The best approach for both governments is to internalize lessons from 2015 and enter a comprehensive, discreet discussion focusing on constructive ideas and realistic outcomes.

On January 26, Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi publicly warned against returning to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran or anything similar, adding that he had ordered the IDF to prepare fresh military plans for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge. For a military official to air such warnings is controversial in Israeli public discourse, yet the essence of Kochavi's remarks underscores the broad domestic consensus on three crucial points: that Tehran never abandoned its ambition to become nuclear-armed, that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) left pathways open for realizing this ambition, and that a nuclear Iran would pose a grave threat to Israel.

During his confirmation hearing a week prior to Kochavi's remarks, Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that in preparing to address the Iranian challenge, the Biden administration intended to consult with Israel and other regional allies "on the takeoff." Jerusalem welcomed this pledge and is eager to start discussing the issue; Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu tasked National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat with this mission. Ultimately, Israel hopes to convince the Biden team to refrain from returning to the original deal or, failing that, to highlight the most critical JCPOA flaws that must be fixed.

Israeli Critique

The political and defense leadership of Israel is deeply concerned about President Biden's stated plan to revive the JCPOA by going back to its original terms and then striving to make it "longer and stronger." In their view, the deal does not properly cover the three main dimensions of a military nuclear program—fissile materials, delivery

systems, and weaponization—or inspections:

- The **JCPOA sunset clauses** will ultimately allow Iran to become a nuclear weapons threshold state by legitimizing enrichment activities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deciphering-irans-latest-nuclear-messaging>) of dangerous character and magnitude and removing the international community's authority to thoroughly monitor the program as a whole, making it difficult or even impossible to prevent the regime from quickly leaping across that threshold. Even letting Tehran reach the threshold would likely inject acute instability throughout the region, including a potential nuclear arms race.
- **Iran's missiles** are solely covered by the feeble, ambiguous UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which has yet to slow the country's missile development efforts (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-flaunts-new-missile-and-jet-engine-technology>) since its adoption and is set to expire in October 2023.
- Following the JCPOA, the International Atomic Energy Agency closed the file on the **"possible military dimensions" (PMD)** of Iran's program, ignoring its own reports on the matter. Yet the archive seized by Israel (<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iran-nuclear-archive-impressions-and-implications>) in 2018 uncovered new information about the specific goals, scope, and progress of Tehran's military nuclear program. The archive's very existence reveals the regime's intention to preserve this know-how for future use.
- The **JCPOA inspection and verification regime has proven deficient** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-new-narrative-regime-not-hurry-washington-should-be>) in terms of short-notice challenge inspections of undeclared sites and the questioning of related personnel.

These factors, along with R&D on advanced centrifuges and other activities, have shifted the 2015 baseline to which the parties are supposed to return and significantly shortened Iran's timetable for reaching threshold status even if it comes back into full compliance. Israelis also fear that lifting significant sanctions in the process of returning to the deal would give financial oxygen to an unmoderated, emboldened Tehran, thereby facilitating its destabilizing activities and depriving the United States of essential leverage for reaching a better deal.

Underlying this critique is the perceived lack of Western political will to push the envelope when necessary, which in turn fuels Iranian brinkmanship. Citing historical precedent, Israelis argue that diplomacy and related incentives cannot block Tehran's path to a nuclear weapon unless they are constantly backed by robust disincentives and a demonstrated determination to follow through with them if needed—including viable military options. Israel's "gray zone" campaign against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-across-border-israels-pushback-syria>) demonstrates that such assertiveness can push back against the regime's destabilizing activities abroad and at the same time deter it from escalating in response. In contrast, the United States and its European allies appear to prefer relatively weak disincentives and have yet to exhibit the stomach for raising the stakes of Iran's escalating brinkmanship. Israel is skeptical that they will significantly increase the pressure if Tehran comes back into compliance with the JCPOA but refuses to move toward an enhanced deal.

Redrawing the JCPOA—and Drawing Redlines

Despite these concerns, Jerusalem is not rushing toward an Obama-like public spat with the Biden administration over Iran policy—it is preparing for dialogue. Israeli officials believe that once they lay out their full findings from the captured nuclear archive, they will be able to make an impact on the policies pursued by an administration that shares the goal of preventing a nuclear-armed Iran and has implicitly acknowledged the JCPOA's flaws (keeping in mind that Democratic control of both houses of Congress may limit the legislature's willingness to pressure or counter White House policy).

As the two governments approach such dialogue, Israel is emphasizing that the United States should not throw away

essential leverage in pursuit of “compliance for compliance.” At the same time, many in the Israeli policy community acknowledge that although President Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy exacted a heavy economic toll from Iran, it failed to stop the nuclear program or push Tehran back to negotiations. Some officials therefore favor a middle way of “**less for less (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/presidential-transition-event-thinking-about-next-phase-iran-nuclear-diplomacy>)**”—though Israel’s top leadership is currently not there.

Where exactly should the line be drawn between the JCPOA’s original terms and former secretary of state Mike Pompeo’s maximalist terms for an improved deal? Ideally, Iran should be denied the ability to maintain indigenous enrichment capabilities and master the nuclear fuel cycle, yet many Israelis recognize that Washington is unlikely to engage on this point because the train has long left the station. Therefore, they have focused on extending the JCPOA’s sunsets by decades and establishing an intrusive “anytime, anywhere” inspection regime. There is also broad consensus in Israel’s government on the need to ban development of sophisticated centrifuges, properly address the dangerous dimensions of Iran’s missile program, and reopen the PMD file in light of findings from the nuclear archive.

As for Tehran’s malign regional activities, the idea of addressing them through renewed nuclear talks or a parallel negotiating track is not viewed favorably by Israel, which sees the nuclear file as the most critical issue and does not want it to be overloaded. Here there is some divergence with Gulf partners, who prioritize Iran’s regional threat over the nuclear threat (though they have often coordinated with Israel in expressing opposition to full JCPOA reinstatement). Israeli officials also worry that parallel discussions could put pressure on them to curb the ongoing military pushback in Syria. In their eyes, Tehran’s regional activities should be countered primarily on the ground rather than being negotiated or given a pass for fear of undermining a nuclear settlement.

Furthermore, Kochavi’s speech highlighted the option of taking military action against Iran’s nuclear program, which Israel seriously considered in 2010-2012. Such discourse is not mere posturing. It represents a deep belief that Israel must have a last-resort military option available in case certain scenarios come to pass, such as failed negotiations and continued Iranian nuclear violations up to a critical point, or a return to the JCPOA with no moves toward a better deal, which would eventually allow for dangerous nuclear advancements as restrictions begin to sunset. Israelis doubt that the United States will act militarily if all other options to stop Iran are exhausted (e.g., diplomacy, covert/ clandestine action). Moreover, their redline has long been stricter than Washington’s—in their view, Iran cannot be permitted to acquire the capacity to come within short reach of the nuclear threshold, whereas the U.S. redline tends to be Tehran actually crossing that threshold and rushing toward a weapon.

For now, the situation is not yet at a boiling point, but it is slowly heating up. According to updated Israeli intelligence estimates recently presented to the cabinet, Iran’s breakout time (i.e., how long it would need to produce enough weapons-grade fissile material for one bomb) has shrunk to four months, and it would need around twenty-one to twenty-four months for weaponization, potentially in parallel to its high-enrichment effort (assuming it does not already have a weaponization task force at work).

Conclusion

As the Biden administration considers how to factor Israeli concerns into its developing Iran strategy, it would do well to keep the following paramount factors in mind:

- Critical Israeli national security interests are at stake, and the government is determined to protect them.
- Other regional allies are stakeholders as well and share Israel’s concerns.
- Israel’s normalization breakthrough with Arab states and its campaign to counter Iranian activities in Syria have each given the United States extra leverage against Tehran in the nuclear and regional contexts. Washington can capitalize on these assets **in numerous ways (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense->**

[manhattan-project-middle-east](#)) not enumerated here.

The Iranian file presents a major test to the Biden administration's standing in the Middle East and its relations with Israel. The best approach for both governments is to internalize lessons from 2015 and enter a comprehensive, continuous, and discreet discussion that focuses on constructive ideas and shies away from public posturing. The stakes are too high for a dialogue of the deaf.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Res.) is the Milton Fine International Fellow with The Washington Institute.

Previously, he served as head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Division and chief of staff to the minister of defense. ❖

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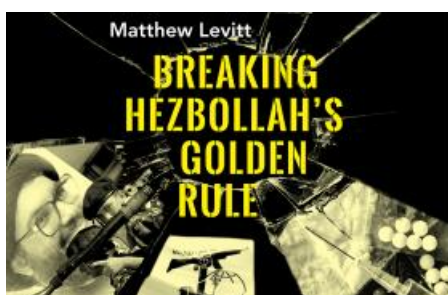
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