

Why Israel (Sort of) Misses the Iran Deal

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Articles & Testimony

Given the nuclear program's advancement under the U.S. maximum pressure policy, a raft of Israeli officials now say the JCPOA was better than nothing—but rejoining it will be difficult.

In March 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Washington in a bid to rally support against a nuclear agreement with Iran that was being negotiated by then-President Barack Obama. In a notorious address to a joint session of Congress, the Israeli leader warned darkly of a repeat Holocaust facilitated by this “very bad deal” that “will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons...it would all but guarantee that Iran gets those weapons.”

Netanyahu failed to stop the deal from being signed four months later, but ultimately got his wish when President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the deal came to be known, in May 2018. Netanyahu hailed it as a “historic move” that required “courageous leadership,” later taking credit in private conversations for Trump’s decision: “We convinced the U.S. president [to exit the deal] and I had to stand up against the whole world and come out against this agreement.”

Three years later, Iran’s nuclear program is by all estimates at its most advanced stage ever, and a growing chorus of former Israeli officials have decried Netanyahu’s (and Trump’s) strategy as nothing short of calamitous: jettisoning a nonproliferation agreement that, however flawed, was working, in favor of a coercive strategy against Iran that on every parameter has failed to achieve the results confidently predicted by those who cheered on Trump.

The last to see this, however, seems to be the new Israeli government that deposed Netanyahu last summer and that appears to be repeating the same talking points put forward in 2015. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has again

come out against U.S. efforts to reengage Iran and return it to compliance under the terms of the JCPOA.

“Iran deserves no rewards, no bargain deals and no sanctions relief in return for their brutality,” Bennett said on Nov. 29. “I call upon our allies around the world: Do not give in to Iran’s nuclear blackmail.”

In renewed talks last week in Vienna, world powers and Iran predictably failed to make progress. Western officials and analysts are growing increasingly skeptical that the original deal can even be put back together, with chances mounting of a nuclear or military crisis (or both) in the Middle East. “We hope the world does not blink, but if it does, we do not intend to,” the Israeli prime minister said even before the talks resumed.

Yet the question remains: What does Israel actually want? Until very recently, there was near unanimity in official Israeli circles—at least publicly—that Trump’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA was a positive move.

Netanyahu’s enduring power, combined with constant analogies to the Holocaust, stifled any domestic debate.

Never mind that in the three years that had passed since the withdrawal, Trump’s strategy was, on its own terms, clearly not succeeding: Renewed and increased sanctions on Iran—dubbed “maximum pressure”—had not forced Tehran to capitulate and negotiate a better deal, nor had the economic damage to the Islamic Republic led to its overthrow by a restless public. To Israel’s possible surprise, moreover, Trump never followed through on threats to strike Iran directly despite growing nuclear violations and multiple attacks against Washington’s regional allies.

Bucking the official line, some Israeli security officials, many of whom were heading into retirement, admitted that the policy was a failure. “Iran is far from falling to its knees; it has not folded,” the outgoing head of the Israeli military intelligence’s research division told the Yedioth Ahronoth daily in October 2020. “It has not yet been proven that the exit from the nuclear agreement served Israel.”

This past March the outgoing deputy head of Israel’s Mossad intelligence service told the same newspaper in no uncertain terms that the situation in 2021 was worse than in 2015 and that former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s sprawling “12 demands” of Iran—including a halt to its nuclear program, missile development and support for regional proxies—was pie in the sky, “like seeking to transform the Iranians into Meretz,” an allusion to a left-wing Israeli political party.

Iran “didn’t stop their spread in the region for a moment. They are developing missiles...the deal we made [back in 2018, pushing for a U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA] wasn’t good; we are back to the same place,” he added.

As I **reported in New Lines (<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/israel-to-biden-tehran-can-wait/>)** earlier this year, an Israeli military intelligence assessment concurred: The Iranian regime was far from collapse, and the real damage to the Iranian economy resulting from Trump-era sanctions had not decreased Iran’s financial support to its regional proxies (in some cases quite the opposite). “Countries don’t collapse so quickly,” one senior Israeli security official told me at the time, adding that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei “doesn’t have to answer to anyone, and he is still advancing towards his goals.”

Most worrisome was the Iranians’ constant nuclear advancements: growing stockpiles of fissile material enriched to near military-grade levels, using more sophisticated uranium centrifuges, combined with research and development that could be put toward a bomb, all under increasingly limited international inspections. Faced with such overwhelming evidence and, crucially, Netanyahu’s ouster from the prime minister’s office in June, the dribble of dissent of previous years inside Israel has now turned into a torrent.

“The path that Netanyahu led got Iran extremely close to a bomb—as much as it isn’t nice for you to hear, what distanced Iran from a bomb was the nuclear deal,” former Israeli military intelligence head Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin said in August during a heated prime-time television debate on Israel’s Channel 12. Another former Israeli military intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Aharon Zeevi Farkash, recently admitted to the Jerusalem Post that a new nuclear deal

with Iran “will likely be worse” than the 2015 original, and yet “even such an inferior deal is better than no deal.”

During one week alone in late November, at two separate conferences, multiple former Israeli security officials who served under Netanyahu slammed the former prime minister’s policy on Iran. “Looking at the policy on Iran in the last decade, the main mistake was the withdrawal of the U.S. administration from the JCPOA, which was a historic mistake,” said former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon. “The JCPOA, it [should] have been a very different agreement but it was probably better than not having an agreement...[The withdrawal] allow[ed] the Iranians an excuse to go ahead with the project and now they are at the closest stage ever to becoming a [nuclear] threshold state.”

Former Israeli military chief Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot agreed almost verbatim, publicly saying that the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 had “released Iran from all restrictions and inspections in the deal, even if there were holes, and brought Iran to the most advanced position today with regard to its nuclear program.” Former Mossad director Tamir Pardo went even further, saying that the decision in 2018 was a “disaster”—repeating the word for impact—stemming from a “strategic outlook that has no [possibility for] atonement.”

The Biden administration came into office with the goal of returning the U.S. to the JCPOA, calling for a “compliance for compliance” approach with Iran that would put Tehran’s nuclear program “back in a box” in return for the removal of the heavy Trump-era sanctions regime. The new Israeli government initially promised to work discreetly and constructively with Washington on the Iran problem, in contrast to Netanyahu’s hysteria and bellicosity. In the last months of his reign, Netanyahu reportedly forbade senior Israeli officials from even engaging with the Biden administration on any new diplomatic outreach to Iran. And to be sure, current Israeli officials—from the National Security Council, Defense Ministry, and Foreign Ministry—are in near weekly contact with their American counterparts on the issue. Yet after an initial period of positive signals, the U.S.-Israel debate has in recent weeks devolved into a familiar pattern of public recriminations: at American naivety and softness (by anonymous Israeli officials) and Israeli unreality and belligerence (by anonymous U.S. officials).

Bennett has tacitly acknowledged the failure of the previous strategy, dating the point of Iranian nuclear advances to the past three years (i.e., since the U.S. withdrawal). Puzzlingly, though, he has not made the logical leap that the JCPOA was, in fact, a worthwhile agreement (despite its deficiencies) or that the eventual U.S. withdrawal was a mistake. Instead, Bennett’s public messaging is twofold.

First, Bennett claims he “inherited” all of the above problems from Netanyahu, who showed a disturbing gap between his Churchillian rhetoric and Chamberlainian inaction. And second, Netanyahu failed to prepare the Israeli military for an independent military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities after 2015—that is, after the original deal was signed.

Part of this is surely political. Bennett, more than most other Israeli politicians, supported the Netanyahu-Trump policy: The current prime minister traveled to Washington for Netanyahu’s 2015 address to Congress and publicly thanked Trump for the 2018 withdrawal. Most other current senior officials, even now, only criticize the damage wrought by Netanyahu on the U.S.-Israel relationship over the Iran issue, and not the damage wrought by Trump’s withdrawal from the deal.

Indeed, as recently as late last year, one Israeli government source told me there was “no daylight” between Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz on the question of “maximum pressure” on Iran. Most other Israeli political leaders—with a few exceptions—concurred. After a decade of constant apocalyptic messaging over the Iranian threat—and nuclear deal—a solid majority of Jewish Israelis still support military action over diplomacy to resolve the crisis, according to an October poll by the Israel Democracy Institute.

Gantz’s comment to me during a September interview that he could “accept” U.S. diplomatic efforts and a renewed

nuclear deal were predictably seized on by Netanyahu to blast the new government as “dangerous.” In truth, Gantz was skeptical about the chances of diplomacy working and called for a “demonstration of power” by the U.S. and a genuine “Plan B” if talks failed. Such a plan would, according to Gantz, consist of broad political, diplomatic and economic pressure imposed on Iran by the U.S., Europe, Russia and China—in other words, continued “maximum pressure.” Like most other Israeli officials in recent months, Gantz also emphasized Israeli preparations for its own “Plan C” if even this failed: military strikes on Iran. “Iran has to fear that the U.S. and its partners are serious,” Gantz told me, which is arguably closer to where Israel’s official position is right now.

The concern, as Israeli officials have repeated in anonymous briefings, is that the Biden administration is too eager to reenter talks—“diplomacy as a doctrine, not a means,” as one Israeli source told Haaretz—and will cave to Iranian demands. The non-response by the U.S. to a recent Iranian drone strike on its Al-Tanf base in eastern Syria drew howls of protest from unnamed Israeli officials for precisely this reason: as a symbol of the Biden administration’s unwillingness to use force in the Middle East.

Regardless, Israeli demands of the U.S. that it now extract—through a bit more military power and a bit more economic pain—an even better deal out of Tehran to undo the damage of the Trump years appears highly remote. Earlier this year, Israeli military intelligence rated the chances of any new deal including Iran’s malign regional activity as nonexistent and Iranian missile development as extremely unlikely—contrary to demands still aired periodically by certain Israeli officials and U.S. analysts. Today, albeit not widely publicized, in Israeli eyes the nuclear issue should be completely decoupled from the regional dimension, lest it create more bargaining power for Tehran.

“The new [Israeli] government understands that the last policy failed, but it’s stuck in the prior conception...since it doesn’t have too many other options,” Raz Zimmt, an Iran expert at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, told me. “It doesn’t want to go back to the original deal, and it may not have a military option at least for right now—so what are you left with?”

Zimmt, a former veteran Iran watcher in the Israeli military, was one of the lone voices in the Israeli security landscape who warned that the Trump-era pressure campaign would not work. A “longer and stronger deal,” as some Israeli officials still demand, “won’t happen,” he added. “It didn’t happen in the past and won’t happen in the future. Iran may even think its situation is even better now. The Iranians’ only position is a return to the original deal—and even that is a big ‘if.’”

Iran, to be sure, has only hardened its own demands, as evidenced last week during the Vienna talks—requesting not just the lifting of all Trump-era sanctions but compensation for the past few years and guarantees that no future U.S. administration will abandon the agreement. The rollback of its nuclear advances, presumably, would come only after these demands are met.

Even the Biden administration appears to be losing patience, with one senior State Department official this weekend describing the Iranian position as “not serious” amid hints at other (nondiplomatic) options. “We can’t accept a situation in which Iran accelerates its nuclear program and slow-walks its nuclear diplomacy,” the official added. “We’re obviously preparing for a world in which there is no return to the JCPOA. It is not our preference...[But if that happens] we will have to use other tools, tools that you could imagine, to try to increase the pressure on Iran to come back to a reasonable stance at the diplomatic table.”

Whether Israel is persuaded remains to be seen, to say nothing of Iran. Stiffening American spines and increasing American leverage may be possible; undoing the damage of Trump’s 2018 decision to jettison the JCPOA will likely be much harder. The first necessary step, at least for Israel, appears to be a public reckoning that it did cause massive damage, hastened the point of an Iranian nuclear bomb and, if diplomacy fails, a devastating war.

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