

Israel Hoping for Shift in US Iran Policy from Diplomacy to Deterrence

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Articles & Testimony

A veteran Israeli security and intelligence official explains why the Biden administration must reinvigorate oil sanctions and demonstrate a commitment to act militarily.

With Israelis already consumed with a new election campaign, Israel's national security establishment—the men and women responsible for countering threats to the Jewish state—will welcome President Biden's visit with a mix of hope and fear. They hope that the American leader brings with him a dramatically different approach to the Iran nuclear challenge; they fear, however, that the president will persist in a policy that may have made sense when he took office 18 months ago but has since lost any relevance.

This marks an important change for Israeli defense and security professionals. From the start of the Biden administration, Israeli security institutions acknowledged the rationale guiding Washington's desire to return to the Iran nuclear deal—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—on a “compliance for compliance” understanding with Tehran. This is not because the professionals thought the JCPOA was a brilliant diplomatic achievement; on the contrary, they recognized the huge and dangerous flaws in the deal. Rather, this is because they put a higher premium on the time that a renewed agreement would provide for Israel—both independently and with its allies—to better prepare for a potential reckoning with an Iran bent on achieving military nuclear capability.

But mid-2022 is a lot different than early 2021. Over the past year and a half, Iran has dragged its feet on diplomacy, refusing even to meet face-to-face with the Americans, while quietly advancing its nuclear program. Today, with centrifuges that are much more advanced than the ones they had when the nuclear deal was reached in the Obama administration, Iranians enrich uranium to 60 percent—a far cry from the 3.75 percent limit they accepted in the JCPOA. This is a small step away from 90 percent enrichment, the level which produces weapons-grade fissile

material. And to hide their activities, the Iranians recently announced the removal of critical cameras and surveillance equipment installed by the International Atomic Energy Agency at their key facilities, essentially leaving the world in the dark as to their real nuclear progress.

Iran's boldness extends beyond the nuclear realm into its regional strategy. From Lebanon to Syria to Yemen, they have invested heavily in building a network of terrorist cut-outs and militia proxies, who they have provided with advanced military capabilities, such as weaponized drones and precision-guided missiles. Israel looks across the border and sees more than 100,000 missiles and rockets in Hezbollah's inventory; Gulf states have already suffered drone and cruise missile attacks on civilian targets, including airports and oil installations.

Setting aside the details of the deal itself, why did Iran agree to the original JCPOA in 2015 but reject Biden's offer to return to the agreement? The answer is simple—Iran today is no longer under the pressure that it felt seven years ago. Indeed, the record of diplomacy with Iran is clear: without pressure, the Iranians agree to nothing.

Today, Iran feels very little pressure to compromise. With energy prices sky-high, Iran has found buyers for its sanctioned oil that—even with discounts—has produced a windfall for the only institution that really matters in the country, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which supervises the clandestine oil trade. Meanwhile, the Biden Administration has held off on penalizing recipients of Iran's illegal exports for fear of worsening the energy crunch that has already driven gas prices to unprecedented levels.

Iran feels very little pressure on its nuclear program, too. It has violated commitment after commitment, on enrichment, centrifuge development and production of uranium metals, without any repercussions from the international community.

And in terms of its regional military activity, Iran operates undeterred. The only response to Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has been defensive upgrades in the targeted countries' anti-missile and anti-drone capabilities. Iran itself suffered no direct cost for its unprovoked attacks.

In light of all this, an assessment crystallized in the minds of most Israeli security professionals that the current US approach would probably not work. They reached the conclusion that only the application of massive additional pressure on Iran will convince the mullahs to compromise.

Applying pressure is something the West knows how to do. During the George W. Bush administration, when the US deployed a huge number of troops into next-door Iraq, fear of an American military invasion compelled the Iranians to suspend their nuclear weaponization program. And the application of massive economic pressure by the US and its European partners during the early years of the Obama administration is what forced the mullahs to the bargaining table and eventually into the original JCPOA.

Israel's security professionals believe now is the time to return to a policy of pressure. Only if Iran's leaders truly believe that something more valuable is at risk than the nuclear program—namely, the very stability of the regime—will they be open to compromise.

This can only be achieved if America can instill a sense of fear in Iran. This requires American contingency planning and military training operations to convince Iran that the US commitment to act militarily to prevent its nuclear progress is real.

At the same time, a policy of pressure would include reinvigorated sanctions, especially in the fields of energy and finance. This has to include a willingness to target Chinese purchases of Iranian oil, which may run counter to the short-term desire to tamp down gasoline prices but is necessary to convince Iran that the cost of its nuclear brinkmanship will not be tolerated.

And a policy of pressure would require extensive coordination—political, military, economic and diplomatic—with a

wide array of countries. These need to include traditional allies and partners in Europe and the Middle East as well as the ring of countries that surround Iran—Turkey, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, even Afghanistan—that control the land bridges to the Islamic Republic and whose assistance in enforcing sanctions can make a huge difference.

Admittedly, this is a tall order. A policy of pressure on Iran is dramatically different from the one adopted so far by the Biden Administration, which hoped that benign diplomacy would push the Iran problem down the road. At a time when the world is focused on Russia's war against Ukraine, rising anxiety over Chinese ambitions in the Pacific, and deepening fear of a global recession, it will be tough to convince the White House to invest the time, resources and energy to orchestrate this complex and potentially risky initiative.

But one thing the advocates of a pressure policy have in their favor is that staying the course—letting Iran proceed on its current path—is bound to be worse for US interests. If America doesn't get its hands dirty now with restoring deterrence to its relationship with Iran, the Tehran leadership may decide to move forward to 90 percent enrichment, at which point Iran becomes a nuclear threshold state. Without American action before then, Israel will feel isolated, alone and compelled to consider measures to prevent what it would view as a strategic catastrophe, measures whose reverberations no one can confidently predict. All Israelis, regardless of their politics, hope America leads the world in preventing the Iran nuclear problem from crossing that dangerous line.

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