

In Rejecting Iran Nuclear Deal, Israeli Rivals Are of One Mind

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Articles & Testimony

Lapid and Netanyahu both oppose resuming the JCPOA—but they would be unlikely to say otherwise publicly even if they supported the latest proposals.

Late one afternoon two weeks ago, a press conference with the international media was hastily called for the following morning at the Israeli prime minister's office in Jerusalem. All of the major outlets of course dropped everything, rearranged schedules and arrived early—as requested because of stringent security protocols. No matter the urgency of the prime minister's own schedule and the main topic on the agenda, Iran: The Shin Bet guards at the entrance to the aging office complex were still, inexplicably, screening journalists two hours later as Prime Minister Yair Lapid took the podium.

As expected, Lapid reiterated his opposition to any renewed nuclear agreement with Iran currently being negotiated by world powers. "Israel is not against any agreement. We are against this agreement, because it is a bad one," he said. "It does not meet the standards set by [U.S.] President [Joe] Biden himself: preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear state."

Lapid then called for the negotiations to be summarily halted and for the West to hold firm on its own red lines. He added for good measure: "All that being said, we have made it clear to everyone: If a deal is signed, it does not obligate Israel...We will act to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state."

The press conference was just one of many public and private briefings in recent weeks by senior Israeli officials on the Iran nuclear issue; especially late last month, when a renewed deal between (primarily) the U.S. and Iran looked imminent, the briefings came on a near daily basis. Despite the late summer holiday timing, the increased chatter in Israel drew considerable international attention—a sign for many that a deal was in fact close. (At this point, according to analysts, Iran is maintaining a hardline position on at least two outstanding issues, and on Sept. 5 the top European diplomat said the sides were in fact getting farther away from concluding an agreement.)

The main audience for Lapid's comments, however, was arguably not in Washington, London, Berlin, Paris or even Tehran, but rather closer to home, among the Israeli public. Amid yet another [Israeli election](https://newlinesmag.com/argument/what-if-netanyahu-wins/) (<https://newlinesmag.com/argument/what-if-netanyahu-wins/>) campaign, Iran has emerged as a central political issue wielded by opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu against the current government.

Netanyahu has repeatedly alleged (erroneously) that Lapid "supported the previous dangerous nuclear agreement" and that the government had "fallen asleep" at the wheel and "allowed" the Biden administration to renew an accord that "threatens our very existence." If he were still prime minister, Netanyahu added, he would once again go to Congress and the United Nations and "conduct an aggressive public relations campaign in the international media" against the deal. Lapid responded that Netanyahu was only "press conferences and presentations" on the issue and that he had caused untold damage not only to Israel's battle against Iran's nuclear program but the country's standing in the U.S.—a reference to Netanyahu's notorious 2015 address to Congress, where he lobbied openly against the Obama administration (after which the original nuclear deal was signed).

This highly public battle between Israel's two leading politicians serves to obfuscate one core truth: They're both opposed to renewing the nuclear accord with Iran and are employing many of the same means (albeit with clear differences in style and tone) toward this end. This is exactly what Lapid has tried to highlight, not least to the Israeli public.

"In matters of national security there is no opposition and coalition," Lapid said last week after he invited Netanyahu for a security update on the matter. "I call on the head of the opposition and everyone not to let political considerations harm our national security." Lapid in recent weeks has also dispatched his national security adviser, the head of the Mossad intelligence agency and Defense Minister Benny Gantz to Washington for high-level talks. And there has been, of course, the ongoing media blitz.

"For us [the Iran nuclear issue] is existential...and you can see, there is no political disagreement on this," one senior Israeli official told me. "There are few things [the prime minister] and the head of the opposition agree on," but this was one of them.

Netanyahu, for his part, has not relented. "I came out [of the briefing] more worried than when I went in," Netanyahu predictably told the press after his meeting with Lapid. He again demanded that more pressure be heaped on the Biden administration in order to scuttle the looming agreement.

"The pressure we applied ultimately got the U.S. out of the [original] deal," Netanyahu went on, referring to the May 2018 withdrawal from the accord by then President Donald Trump. Trump's ensuing "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran failed even on its own terms, as I previously [reported](https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/israel-to-biden-tehran-can-wait/) (<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/israel-to-biden-tehran-can-wait/>) in *New Lines*: The Iranian regime did not collapse in the face of increased economic sanctions, it did not crawl back to the negotiating table seeking a new deal on terms more favorable to the West, and according to Israeli intelligence assessments it did not halt support for its regional proxies.

The previous Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, upon taking office last year publicly said that Iran's nuclear program had reached its most advanced stage ever. Indicatively, at the same time many retired senior Israeli security officials slammed Trump's withdrawal from the original deal—and Netanyahu's campaigning for it—as causing untold [damage](https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/why-israel-sort-of-misses-the-iran-deal/) (<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/why-israel-sort-of-misses-the-iran-deal/>) to Israeli interests. Many of these same officials are the lone voices in the Israeli debate right now calling for a return to the agreement as "the least worst option."

They perhaps have that luxury, since they're not running against Netanyahu. For over a decade as premier, Netanyahu constantly painted the Iranian threat—and nuclear deal—in apocalyptic terms, replete with the imagery

of another Holocaust. He continues to do so now, in particular ahead of the November 1 election. According to one opinion poll taken late last year, the Israeli public has internalized the messaging, with a majority more supportive of military action over diplomacy to resolve the crisis.

Unsurprisingly, Lapid, Gantz and the other members of the current government are themselves opposed to any renewed nuclear deal; they are all, as the senior official told me, “saying the same thing, and they believe the same thing.” The real question—given the politicization of the Iran nuclear issue inside Israel—is whether they could come out and say anything different, even if they believed it.

It’s unclear if any renewed nuclear deal will actually be concluded before Israelis go to the polls. If not, then it’s a near certainty Israeli opposition will rumble on regardless of who emerges victorious, in tandem with Iran’s steadily advancing nuclear program.

Neri Zilber is a journalist based in Tel Aviv and an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the New Lines website (<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/in-rejecting-iran-nuclear-deal-israeli-rivals-are-of-one-mind/>). ❖

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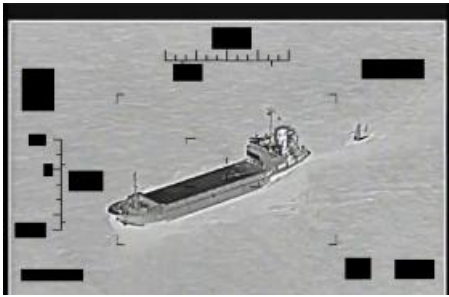
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