

Iran Still Looms Large in Israel's Threat Perception

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Brief Analysis

Israel and Washington should jointly address the perceived lack of U.S. deterrence against persistent Iranian and proxy threats, conclude the ten-year military assistance package as soon as possible, and launch a strategic high-level dialogue under the next administration.

July 14 marked one year since the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement with Iran. This article is part of *a series of PolicyWatches* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twi-series-on-the-jcpoa-at-one-year>) assessing how the deal has affected various U.S. interests.

Israel's war drums against the JCPOA have quieted down over the past year, but this does not mean it has come to terms with the agreement. Jerusalem continues to view it as a highly problematic deal, one that presents long-term dangers in the nuclear field and short- to medium-term dangers in the regional and conventional military fields. Developments since July 2015 have only heightened these concerns, not alleviated them.

Obama administration officials often speak as if the deal enjoys significant support within Israel's defense establishment. At a Senate hearing in late February, Secretary of State John Kerry hammered this point by claiming that Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot had admitted the previous month that the deal removed an existential threat from Israel. Yet the general's nuanced remark was taken out of context and presented inaccurately. According to Eisenkot, the deal is a "strategic turning point" that contains "many risks but also opportunities." While the nuclear challenge is now long-term -- the general noted that "within fifteen years...we will have to place Iran in high-priority monitoring of its nuclear program, and ask questions about possible secret channels" -- Tehran will threaten Israel via Hezbollah and other proxies in the short term, likely increasing their funding and capabilities.

In fact, from an Israeli strategic perspective, shared by the vast majority of the defense establishment, the Iranian-led axis continues to pose the most serious threat to Israel's national security, even more than the Islamic State (IS). While the latter group is no less hostile to Israel and is hardly overlooked, the Iranian axis is led by a weighty regional power that has merged its quest for regional hegemony with nuclear ambitions and has the tools to advance both. Tehran does not allow regional turmoil to blur its hostile focus on Israel, openly calling for the country's destruction time and time again while persistently fostering belligerent proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza.

Israelis believe the Obama administration does not fully share this threat perception. They are also deeply concerned about the apparent self-erosion in U.S. deterrence of Iran, including since the JCPOA, with Washington repeatedly giving Tehran room to pursue its destabilizing behaviors without significant consequences. For Israel, this seems to be the cumulative result of several factors: an (understandable) U.S. focus on leading the coalition to fight IS, an overblown concern about pushing Iran away from the JCPOA, and an apparent tendency to rest on the deal's laurels. Coupled with President Obama's broader worldview -- represented by his recent call for Saudi Arabia and Iran to "share the neighborhood" -- U.S. policy is being interpreted as tolerating Iran's antagonistic regional role at the expense of America's traditional allies.

The Nuclear Field

Speaking recently at the Herzliya Conference, Israel's director of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Herzi Halevi, noted that Iran's nuclear program "is limited for the coming years, yet the nuclear vision is there." Indeed, it is difficult to find anyone in Israel's decisionmaking and defense circles who believes that Tehran has given up its nuclear ambitions. Israelis acknowledge that the JCPOA sets back Iran's nuclear capabilities, buying a number of precious years, but these restrictions will be lifted down the road, and Iran has been permitted to keep much of its nuclear infrastructure.

Israeli intelligence assesses that Iran will largely abide by the deal's terms over the next few years in order to reap maximal benefits. After that, however, it will likely begin testing the agreement's limits, especially following Transition Day, scheduled for no later than October 2023. At that point the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is supposed to issue a "Broader Conclusion" that all of Iran's nuclear materials and facilities are for peaceful purposes, and that it is not engaged in any undeclared nuclear activities.

Even if Iran remains in compliance over the deal's entire length, Jerusalem is deeply concerned about the consequences ten to fifteen years from now. By then, most restrictions on the nuclear program will have been lifted and Iran's breakout time to weapons-grade material will shrink to weeks, then days. Israelis do not bet their money on the deal transforming the Islamic Republic, so what is to stop an empowered Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold once most of the deal's terms expire? Sufficient U.S. deterrence is not assured, so Israel believes it must foster its own capabilities to deal with this grave future threat. Immediately after the JCPOA was reached, the IDF issued [its first-ever public strategy paper \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-idf-strategy-goes-public\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-idf-strategy-goes-public). Although that document does not directly mention the Iranian nuclear threat (mainly because the IDF does not expect it to come to fruition in the next few years), it clearly has that threat in mind when it calls for enhancing deterrence and maintaining preparedness for potential preemptive strikes against "countries with no joint border" with Israel.

The conduct of the IAEA and the P5+1 over the past year has only heightened Israel's long-term concerns. In December, the IAEA Board of Governors closed the investigation on the "possible military dimensions" of Iran's past nuclear activities, despite the agency's damning "Final Assessment" that preceded this decision. Since then, IAEA reports have [contained less detail \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preserving-the-jcpoa-means-sending-iran-the-right-deterrent-signals\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preserving-the-jcpoa-means-sending-iran-the-right-deterrent-signals) than pre-JCPOA reports, eroding confidence in the

monitoring regime. Meanwhile, Iran has apparently continued its efforts to procure illicit nuclear technology and materials (e.g., the carbon fiber used to manufacture centrifuge rotors), and stalled the implementation of the agreed procurement channel for dual-use items.

The Non-Nuclear Field

Since finalizing the JCPOA, Iran has significantly increased its defense budget, launched a weapons procurement spree in Russia, and begun accepting delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missile components from Moscow. Moreover, it has test-fired long-range missiles in violation of the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and suffered no consequences.

Meanwhile, Israel has been closely following Iran's activities in neighboring Syria. While Jerusalem has no interest in being drawn into that war, it does not want Iran to establish a permanent, dominant presence there, since that could allow Tehran to continuously arm Hezbollah and establish an active military or terrorist front, especially on the Golan Heights. Israel has already thwarted numerous attempts to transfer strategic weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria; in December, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu publicly acknowledged these actions for the first time. It has also taken steps to foil hostile moves by Iran and its proxies in southern Syria, including a January 2015 strike in the Golan that reportedly killed a general from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and several Hezbollah operatives. For now, separate actions by Israel and Syrian rebel groups have put a damper on Iran's ambitions in the south, but they could be rekindled, so Israel stands ready to take further preemptive and preventive action if necessary.

Israel has discussed these concerns with Russia in the past year, as the two countries established an effective deconfliction mechanism for Syria. During meetings with President Vladimir Putin, Netanyahu elicited [understandings regarding Israel's "redlines," \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israeli-russian-coordination-in-syria-so-far-so-good\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israeli-russian-coordination-in-syria-so-far-so-good) including Iranian and Hezbollah threats in the Golan and strategic weapons transfers.

In military terms, Hezbollah is still considered Israel's biggest challenge given its huge arsenal of well over 100,000 rockets. Israelis do not believe Hezbollah is seeking another military confrontation at the moment given its deep investment in the Syria war, its domestic challenges in Lebanon, and Israel's successful deterrence since the 2006 war. At the same time, the group has been transforming into a professional army as it gains valuable military experience in Syria and continues to receive Iranian armament. Israeli intelligence warns of Iranian designs to use some of the funds gained from the lifting of nuclear sanctions to supply Hezbollah with more advanced rockets, emphasizing improved accuracy that could enable them to hit sensitive military and civilian targets in Israel. The IRGC's deputy commander recently boasted that the massive rocket arsenal in Lebanon will help destroy Israel, while IDF generals have publicly warned of serious devastation in Lebanon should Hezbollah test Israel again.

Iran's fingerprints are also visible in Gaza. While its ties with Hamas were strained in recent years due to policy differences over Syria, Tehran never fully stopped its military support to the group (or other Gaza factions), smuggling weapons into the territory and helping locals develop a modest defense industry of their own. For its part, the Hamas military wing has consistently sought closer relations with Iran, and the political leadership recently signaled a move in that direction as well, with Hamas Politburo deputy chief Mousa Abu Marzouk going out of his way to praise Tehran's unparalleled support.

Last but not least, Iranian cyberattacks on Israel have not receded under the JCPOA. In January, Israel experienced one of the largest such attacks on its electricity grid, believed to be linked to Iran. In leaked comments from a closed briefing soon after the JCPOA was reached, General Halevi reportedly stated, "If you ask me whether we are going to have war with Iran in the coming ten years, I will surprise you by answering that we already have a war with Iran, a

technological war." He also warned that Iran is closing the gap with Israel in this war.

Conclusion

Given the lack of reassurance about Iranian threats and U.S. deterrence against them, Israel has taken matters into its hands post-JCPOA in an effort to enhance its regional posture. It has established friendly working relations with Moscow, struck a reconciliation deal with Turkey, and, most important, drawn closer to key Arab actors who share its concerns, resulting in unprecedented security cooperation.

In the bilateral relationship with the United States, Israel has expressed its concerns most thoroughly in dialogue regarding the memorandum of understanding on a new ten-year military assistance package to Israel. While both governments have been careful not to frame the MoU as "compensation" for the Iran deal, it is clearly designed to address Israel's threat perceptions vis-a-vis Iran and its proxies, especially in the fields of air capabilities, missile defense, intelligence, and cyber capabilities. It is in both parties' interest to conclude the MoU as soon as possible.

Looking ahead, Israel and Washington (perhaps under the next administration) should consider establishing an extensive high-level dialogue and working groups on the long- and short-term challenges posed by Iran. These discussions should focus on enhancing nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence, defining Iranian violations of the JCPOA and their consequences, identifying concrete short-term measures to meet the long-term nuclear challenge, addressing Hezbollah's military threat, and defining where bilateral interests might converge and diverge in the region. In this context, Israel's improving relations with Arab neighbors are an asset for the United States as well, providing additional options in a volatile region overshadowed by Iranian ambitions.

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