

# Why Jonathan Pollard's Release Means Little

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

Jul 28, 2015

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**Given the current state of the region, close U.S.-Israeli security and intelligence cooperation is more vital than ever, but repairing the rift between the two governments will require much more than symbolic gestures.**

**A**lthough the Israelis have demanded his release for decades, the imminent parole of convicted Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard after almost 30 years in prison is not likely to put even a dent in the iciness between President Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu surrounding the Iran nuclear deal. And that is evidence of just how far Washington and Jerusalem have to go before they can get to the place both countries desperately need to be: cooperating closely to deal with a volcanic Middle East.

The U.S. and Israel simply do not have the luxury of continued rancor, no matter what happens to the Iran deal. Whether it is a question of monitoring Iran, holding it to account or managing Islamist chaos throughout the region, the two countries are compelled to cooperate in security and intelligence matters.

As for Pollard, his parole should be seen as little more than a footnote. While the Department of Justice said the U.S. would favor Pollard's parole, the White House was very careful not to trumpet this move as a gesture to Israel. In any case, the White House understands that the issue of Iran is viewed as existential by Israel, and Israelis see no connection between that threat and Pollard's release. Pollard apparently was due out anyway under U.S. rules mandating parole after 30 years except under extraordinary circumstances.

Much has been written about how things became so icy between Obama and Netanyahu over the impasse surrounding Iran, and recriminations have flown in both directions. Israelis claim the turning point was when the U.S. did not alert Israel about the now widely reported secret talks with Iran via Oman in early 2013. In turn, Americans assert that Netanyahu marginalized himself in U.S. decision-making when he put forward unattainable goals as key objectives in the negotiations.

But it's time to get past all that. Even absent a deal with Iran, Israel's strategic environment has changed. If in the past Israel was surrounded by states, now it is surrounded in no small measure by non-state actors like Hezbollah in what is nominally Lebanon, Jabhat al-Nusra in what was formerly Syria, Hamas in Gaza and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, a self-proclaimed affiliate of ISIS in the Egyptian Sinai Desert. This alone requires more U.S.-Israel security coordination.

The controversy over whether the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will have sufficient tools to inspect undeclared Iranian nuclear sites is also bound to draw the U.S. and Israeli intelligence communities closer. After all, it was not the IAEA that discovered Fordow mountain and Natanz. According to published reports, it was intelligence cooperation that verified existence of these facilities.

Most critically on the nuclear issue, Iran will get full legitimacy for an industrial enrichment program and stockpiling of uranium after 15 years. So who will deter Iran from making a dash to a bomb at that point? To ease Israeli anxieties that the U.S. will not act in 15 years, the U.S. should consider providing Israel with the Massive Ordnance Penetrator known as the mountain-buster and the aircraft needed to deliver it within the next 15 years.

Moreover, the U.S. and Israel will have to coordinate when it comes to the region, monitoring financial flows to Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah as Iran gains billions of dollars from the lifting of sanctions. Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew said at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week that contrary to earlier reports, Iran will have \$50 billion to extract from unfrozen bank accounts due to debts to the Chinese and others. Israeli officials have also noted enhanced oil revenue and an improved economy to suggest that Iran will have far higher levels of revenue in the years ahead. American and Israelis may use different calculations, but both agree on the principle that a significant slice of the cash infusion could go to the Revolutionary Guards to expand Iranian influence in the region.

The issue extends beyond Iranian proxies affecting Israel. It also touches on whether the U.S. will be extending more aid in general to Sunni states to contain Iranian influence in the region, including Iran's support of the Assad regime in Syria. For example, Gulf states will receive more U.S. conventional arms to offset Iran. While Israel appreciates its newfound strategic convergence with the Saudis and other Gulf states, it will always worry about preserving its qualitative military edge. Israel fears that if there is a coup in an Arab state it will be left confronting U.S. weapons in the Mideast. Suddenly, Israel will be in a position to choose between its new-found tacit security relationship with the Gulf States and threats against its qualitative military advantage.

Furthermore, Secretary of State Kerry suggested to al-Arabiya last week that the Sunni countries could outspend Iranian proxies in the Mideast. This could mean a proliferation of Sunni extremist non-state actors like al-Qaeda to counter Iranian regional ambitions. If so, non-state actors will be more awash with weapons. What will this mean for U.S.-Israel relations?

If this deal goes through, the Middle East will undergo profound changes amid an increasingly treacherous landscape. Not all of that change, of course, can be predicted in advance. Yet, we know one thing for sure. It will require the U.S. and Israel to make up and quickly.

Perhaps the only way is to authorize other players to take charge. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter visited Israel last week, but Netanyahu has refused to discuss the prospects of a security upgrade package. The prime minister sees anything that could be interpreted as compensation as weakening Israel's principled opposition as the Congressional debate unfolds over Iran.

If Obama and Netanyahu cannot rise to the occasion due to their personal enmity, perhaps they can empower Carter and his Israeli counterpart, Moshe Yaalon, to do so. Too much is at stake.

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