

Israel Confronts the Iran Nuclear Deal

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Jul 24, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Israelis fear that the deal will legitimize Iran as a nuclear threshold state, embolden its highly destabilizing role in a volatile Middle East, and trigger nuclear proliferation and a conventional arms race in the region.

The Iran nuclear deal was met in Israel by an atmosphere of gloom, in stark contrast to the widespread celebration in the West and Iran. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu characterized it as "a bad mistake of historic proportions," the cabinet unanimously rejected it, and leading opposition figures joined in slamming it. Ensuing opinion polls indicated that more than 70 percent of Israelis believe the deal is dangerous and will not block Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Such reactions are not surprising, since Israelis believe the stakes are higher for them than for anyone else. Unlike the United States, Israel regards Iran and its radical axis as the most serious threat to its national security -- an assessment based squarely on Tehran's extreme ideology, its calls for eliminating Israel, its nuclear and regional ambitions, and its heavily armed proxies on Israel's borders (including Hezbollah and its estimated 100,000 rockets). Israelis do not believe the nuclear deal signifies a fundamental shift in Iran's strategic orientation, and they question the U.S. administration's resolve to block the regime's ambitions.

WHY ISRAELIS ARE CRITICIZING THE DEAL

The agreement distances Iran from the capacity to produce a nuclear weapon for the next ten to fifteen years, rolling back its capabilities and instituting measures to curb and monitor the nuclear program in a comprehensive and intrusive manner. Tehran may be discouraged from brazenly breaking out to nuclear military capabilities in the next few years, since doing so would explicitly defy major international stakeholders in a high-profile, formally enshrined agreement.

Yet buying this time and political space has come at a heavy price. The deal allows Tehran to maintain its nuclear

infrastructure and advance its nuclear technical capabilities with international help. At the same time, Iran will be invited back into the community of nations, empowered politically and financially, and ultimately legitimized as a nuclear threshold state, with license to reduce breakout time to near zero fifteen years from now amid relaxed inspections.

Furthermore, certain deficiencies in the agreement may give Iran room to push the envelope as it has done for years, encroaching on the established breakout time before the deal's expiration. Prior to year ten, Iran will be allowed to research and produce advanced centrifuges, acquire nuclear-related commodities and services, and develop ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the monitoring and verification regime will exclude short-notice inspections of undeclared sites. Iran is to be given at least twenty-four days' notice, and the International Atomic Energy Agency must inform it in advance about the purpose of requested inspections at such sites -- giving Tehran an excuse to stall and time to potentially cover up most nuclear activities, especially those that do not involve fissile material or are conducted in small facilities. Moreover, the heavier sanctions are to be lifted in a matter of months, removing significant leverage before Iran is sufficiently tested. And it is not clear that this lifting is conditioned on Tehran satisfactorily addressing all concerns regarding the "possible military dimensions" of its program, which is essential for a credible inspections baseline.

For Iran, the price seems worth paying. The regime -- which has thus far been careful not to risk the consequences of breaking out -- can see the value of putting its nuclear ambitions on hold while gaining international recognition of its program and enjoying the power-projection benefits of a nuclear threshold state, all while boosting its regional standing and normalizing its international status. In addition to extending the regime's longevity, these gains could put it in a significantly better position -- politically, financially, militarily, and technologically -- to cross the critical threshold down the line, with no guarantee that it will be stopped. In Israel's eyes, this is a highly risky gamble.

Israel also takes seriously the potential unintended consequence of cascading nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Any of the regional actors who feel threatened by Iran and do not sufficiently trust American assurances -- such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt -- may seek the same status granted to Tehran.

There is no less concern about the deal's regional implications. In a Middle East characterized by general meltdown, crumbling states, and violent sectarian strife, empowering Iran through a nuclear deal is akin to pouring fuel on the fire. The agreement represents legitimization, improved political standing, and access to considerable financial resources -- along with the \$100-150 billion to be unfrozen by international banks, Israeli intelligence estimates that Iran stands to gain several hundred billion more from sanctions relief. These gains will likely embolden the regime's destabilizing activities in the region, which are not controlled by the Iranian officials who signed the deal. Such activities include arming Shiite proxies, playing the Shiite sectarian card, supporting designated terrorist groups, fueling subversion, and launching cyberattacks. Enabling Iran to expand its support for Hezbollah or its role as a spoiler in Israel's shaky relations with the Palestinians could prove particularly challenging.

Therefore, while the deal focuses on the nuclear dimension, Israel and many of its Arab neighbors cannot ignore its prospective impact on Iran's nonnuclear policies. The agreement itself blurs some of these lines, for example by committing to lift sanctions on Iranian entities that are highly active in the realms of terrorism (e.g., the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and numerous banks) or conventional weapons. Iran will have more funds and motivation to arm itself (along with its proxies, as described above), and lifting the UN arms embargo in the next five years will only exacerbate the situation. Even apart from the potential for nuclear proliferation, major regional actors who feel threatened by Iran will seek conventional deterrent tools to counter it, creating an accelerated arms race into which Israel will inevitably be dragged. Russia will likely fuel this race on the Iranian side, and the United States on the other side by "compensating" its traditional allies.

Going forward, regional actors expect Washington to broaden the narrow focus it assumed throughout the

negotiations and adopt a comprehensive, assertive strategy to stem Iran's hegemonic ambitions. Yet Israelis question whether things will change once the agreement is implemented, since the United States will be heavily invested in the deal's success and may seek to expand cooperation with Iran beyond fighting the so-called "Islamic State"/ISIS -- possibly shifting away from its traditional allies in the process.

Perhaps the biggest concern is the belief that Washington's enforcement tools against Iran have significantly eroded. There is a broad consensus in Israel that the U.S. administration could have secured a better agreement by projecting enhanced deterrence and showing less evident eagerness for a deal. Instead, however, it consistently devalued American and Israeli military options, then presented a false binary choice between a deal and war. Leverage on Iran will now be considerably weakened, since the agreement promises to bring early sanctions relief, boost the nuclear program's cyberdefense capabilities, and complicate any future reimposition of sanctions. Indeed, the mechanism for "snapback" sanctions is cumbersome, applies to only exceptional cases of flagrant violations (i.e., undefined cases of "significant non-performance"), includes a grandfather clause that is open to interpretation, and implicitly expires after a decade. Moreover, as with any enforcement tool, applying this mechanism will require political will -- a commodity that Israelis fear may be in short supply once trade restrictions are lifted and Western officials weigh the agreement's explicit threat of Iranian noncompliance if sanctions are reimposed.

No one knows whether the deal will have a positive transformative effect on Iran over the long run. That is a hopeful bet. Whatever the case, Israelis do not believe that sufficient safeguards are in place if things go wrong.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.-ISRAELI RELATIONS

The new reality forced on Israel will limit its immediate options to highlighting the deal's dangers and deficiencies -- in diplomatic circles, the court of public opinion, and Congress -- and reinforcing mutual interests with other regional actors who dislike the deal. Plans for actively thwarting Iran's nuclear program, though still in place, will presumably have to wait so long as Tehran does not dangerously advance its capabilities.

While most Israelis agree on the deal's risks, there is a policy debate on how best to address them, especially in the American theater. Some believe that the deal is a fait accompli and fighting it head-on would exact a political price on crucial U.S.-Israel relations. In their view, Israel should instead embark on a quiet dialogue with the Obama administration to secure assurances and understandings. Conversely, the decisionmakers strongly believe that Israeli concerns are not taken seriously enough -- given the high stakes, they believe it is imperative to sound an unequivocal critical voice in the current public debate, which may ultimately lead to serious discussion of the risks.

If the nuclear deal is implemented, it will be tested over the years, but so will U.S.-Israeli relations. For now, the relationship is characterized by a clash of worldviews, but the two allies will have to seriously discuss Israel's strategic concerns once the dust settles. In particular, they should seek common ground in addressing the deal's weak links, revamping deterrence against Iran's destabilizing regional policies, providing assurances about what will happen once the deal expires, and enhancing Israel's margins of security.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Ret.), is The Washington Institute's Milton Fine International Fellow and former head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Division. He recently authored the Institute report "[Contextualizing Israeli Concerns about the Iran Nuclear Deal.](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/contextualizing-israeli-concerns-about-the-iran-nuclear-deal)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/contextualizing-israeli-concerns-about-the-iran-nuclear-deal>) ♦

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