

# Netanyahu Has Reasons To Be Worried

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Mar 4, 2015

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## Washington has left too many questions unanswered in a possible nuclear deal with Iran.

**P**rime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a strong case to the Congress about why he thinks the potential agreement with Iran on its nuclear program is a "very bad deal." Leaving aside his fears that lifting sanctions will provide Iran more resources to pursue trouble-making in the Middle East, the prime minister worries that a deal that permits Iran to be a threshold nuclear state will not prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons but actually pave the way for it to do so.

Netanyahu believes that the break-out time for producing weapons-grade uranium will inevitably be too short -- indeed, less than the year President Obama speaks about -- and that inspections of the Iranian program will necessarily be too limited and, in any case, promise no action in the face of violations. Worse, Iran will be treated like Japan or the Netherlands after the agreement expires in 10-15 years, permitting it to build tens of thousands of centrifuges and enabling it to produce a weapon at a time of its choosing.

Accepting the mantra that "no deal is better than a bad deal," Netanyahu offers the alternative of insisting on better terms and increasing the pressure on the Iranians until a more credible agreement is reached. He does not fear the Iranians walking away from the negotiating table because, in his words, they need the deal more than the U.S. and its partners.

While the Obama administration is unlikely to accept his argument that it should simply negotiate better and harder, it should not dismiss the concerns he raises about the emerging deal. Indeed, the administration argument that there is no better alternative than the deal it is negotiating begs the question of whether the prospective agreement is acceptable.

And, here, the administration needs to explain why the deal it is trying to conclude actually will prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons for the life-time of the agreement and afterwards. It needs to explain why the combination of the number and quality of centrifuges, their output, and the ship-out from Iran of enriched uranium will, in fact, ensure that the break-out time for the Iranians will not be less than one year. Either this combination adds up or it does not, but there should be an explicit answer to Netanyahu's charge that Iran will be able to break-out much more quickly.

Similarly, there should be an answer on how the verification regime is going to work to ensure that we can detect, even in a larger nuclear program, any Iranian violation of the agreement. The issue of verification is critical not just because Iran's past clandestine nuclear efforts prove it cannot be trusted but also because the administration has made a one year break-out time the key measure of success of the agreement. But we can only be certain that Iran will be one year away from being able to produce a bomb's supply of weapons-grade uranium if we can detect what they are doing when they do it.

Obviously, detection is only part of the equation. We cannot wait to determine what we will do about violations when they happen. Iran must know in advance what the consequences are for violations, particularly if we want to deter them in the first place. And this clearly goes to the heart of Netanyahu's concerns: if he had high confidence that we would impose harsh consequences in response to Iranian violations, including the use of force if we caught Iran dashing toward a weapon, he would be less fearful of the agreement he believes is going to emerge.

But he does not see that, and he fears as with past arms control agreements that we will seek to discuss violations and not respond to them until it is too late. So the administration should address this fear and prove it means what it says by spelling out different categories of violations and the consequences for each -- and then seek congressional authorization to empower this president and his successors to act on these consequences.

If applied also to Iranian moves toward a nuclear weapon after the expiration of the deal, the administration would truly be answering the most significant of the concerns that Netanyahu raised. Maybe then, this episode of U.S.-Israeli tension would be overcome.

*Dennis Ross, the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, served as a senior Middle East advisor to President Obama from 2009 to 2011. This article was made possible in part by support from the Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship. ❖*

*USA Today*

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