

Netanyahu and Obama to Review Progress on Iran

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Brief Analysis

Recent U.S. efforts to enforce sanctions and insist on strict interpretation of the Geneva agreement provide a backdrop for the two leaders' upcoming discussion of the Iran nuclear issue.

The March 3 meeting between President Obama and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu will likely focus on the U.S. framework proposal for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But another issue sure to come up is Iran's nuclear program.

In November, when Iran and the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States) announced the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) in Geneva, Netanyahu called the first-step nuclear agreement a "historic mistake." He added, "Today the world has become a much more dangerous place because the most dangerous regime in the world has taken a significant step toward attaining the most dangerous weapon in the world." On February 22, he reiterated his concerns: "The combination of enrichment, weapons, and launching abilities means that Iran is getting everything without giving practically anything." Others in Israel have also expressed concern that the JPOA may trigger erosion of the sanctions and create pressure to reach a comprehensive agreement with Iran even if the deal is weak.

What Netanyahu will say at the Monday summit is beyond the scope of this Policy Alert, which only looks at how the U.S. government views its own record at implementing the JPOA. The Obama administration believes it has taken strong actions on two fronts that should address Israeli concerns: enforcing sanctions and staying firm on key JPOA provisions.

On the first front, the Treasury Department has continued to designate additional actors regarding Iranian support for terrorism and proliferation even when these designations are politically risky. Its February 6 proliferation designations included actors from U.S.-allied countries in Europe (Germany, Spain, Switzerland) and neighboring Iran (Turkey, Georgia, the United Arab Emirates). In the administration's view, these measures show its willingness to continue pressing allies to sustain sanctions.

Washington also believes the new designations show its readiness to target important Iranian officials despite the potential reaction from Tehran. This month, three officers from the elite Qods Force were designated for "Tehran's use of terrorism and intelligence operations as tools of influence against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." In addition, Treasury believes it has shown that it will target actors based on intelligence that flies in the face of common perception. The designation of Olimzhon Adkhamovich Sadikov (also known as Jafar al-Uzbeki and Jafar Muidinov) described him as "a key Iran-based [al-Qaeda] facilitator who supports [the group's] vital facilitation network in Iran, [which] operates there with the knowledge of Iranian authorities...The network also uses Iran as a transit point for moving funding and foreign fighters through Turkey to support...affiliated elements in Syria, including the al-Nusra Front." Given how much publicity has been given to Iran's support of those fighting against al-Qaeda in Syria, Treasury received much skepticism about its judgment that Tehran was also helping al-Qaeda elements. Yet the department did not flinch from pointing out that in Syria, as in other situations, Iran often bets on every horse in the race -- it will work with every anti-American actor, even those who are killing Iran's own agents. In short, Treasury believes it has been making a strong effort to enforce sanctions.

On the second front, the administration believes it has taken a tough line on what the JPOA covers. In particular, it continues to note that the comprehensive solution envisioned by the JPOA will include limits on missiles. This point is tied to a key Israeli concern -- on February 22, Netanyahu complained about Tehran's plan "to build intercontinental missiles," arguing that the regime is currently engaged in such plans "without hindrance." On February 17 at the Vienna talks, Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman cited the JPOA's provision about "addressing the UN Security Council Resolutions," then quoted paragraph 9 of Resolution 1929, in which the council "decided that Iran shall not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches." On this basis, she said Tehran had agreed in the JPOA that talks aimed at reaching a comprehensive solution will include negotiations about Iran's ballistic missile program. The Iranian delegation complained about this issue, with Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, declaring that the talks "will be about Iran's nuclear program and nothing else." In response, White House spokesman Jay Carney reiterated, "Per the Joint Plan of Action agreed to by Iran, Iran must address the UN Security Council resolutions related to its nuclear program before a comprehensive resolution can be reached. In other words, they have to deal with matters related to their ballistic missile program that are included in the United Nations Security Council resolution."

The administration appears to believe that it being equally strict about other issues broached in the JPOA. For instance, while the interim agreement states that a comprehensive solution will "involve a mutually defined enrichment programme with mutually agreed parameters consistent with practical needs," the U.S. view is that Iran will not be in a situation where its practical needs require uranium enrichment any time soon. According to that view, the JPOA provision is consistent with a U.S. demand that Iran not enrich for years to come.

In short, the Obama administration believes it is taking a tough stance on implementation of the JPOA. Whether Israel agrees with that assessment should become clearer after Monday's summit.

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