



Contextualizing Israeli Concerns about the Iran Nuclear Deal

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Without doubt, the Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding Iran's nuclear program, reached between Iran and the P5+1 this April in Lausanne, is a significant milestone. Nonetheless, many questions about this framework remain unanswered: by its very nature, an understanding such as this one is not a formal, signed agreement, and the United States and Iran have already interpreted key terms in divergent ways.

Given the strategic significance and time frame of the negotiated accord, its consequences can be fully judged only in years to come. For now, however, a proverbial ocean separates the views of the U.S. and Israeli leaders on the prospective accord. For U.S. president Barack Obama, the emerging deal is a “historic opportunity” that could be his crowning foreign policy achievement. For Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the deal is a “historic mistake.” As relations between the two governments almost certainly approach rougher waters, it is important to contextualize their differences. In effect, one must seek to understand how these two close allies can view the same agreement so differently.

Extensive discussions with Israeli and U.S. officials reveal the core elements of the U.S.-Israel disagreement to be differing threat perceptions, divergent worldviews and regional assessments, as well as a deep deficit of trust. Indeed, the roots of Israeli unease can be found as much in the context surrounding the deal as in its specific terms.

Perceptions and Assumptions about Iran

As one would expect, the United States views Iran through the lens of a global power. According to this perspective, the United States does not feel *directly* threatened by Iran but rather sees some of Iran's behaviors as threatening or challenging to U.S. interests and allies in the Middle East. By contrast, Israel views Iran as its most serious and direct strategic threat. Specifically, Israel considers Iran a regional power that expresses its revolutionary ideology—an ideology that negates Israel's right to exist—in both nuclear and hegemonic ambitions. On Israel's border with Lebanon to the north, Israel has watched Iran arm its proxy Hezbollah with more than 100,000 rockets aimed at Israel. Facing such an enemy, Israel naturally sees greater risks than does the United States—and tends to attach more weight to these risks than to potential opportunities. At the same time, Israel believes that Iranian ambitions present such a major strategic challenge to regional stability and beyond as to merit a stronger international response than what is

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now being offered—embodied both in the emerging deal and the arena outside nuclear diplomacy.

Of course, not all U.S. and Israeli perceptions necessarily diverge. Both countries seem to share the assumption that Iran's agreement to a deal would not represent a strategic decision to abandon its decades-long desire to ultimately become a nuclear-armed state. Indeed, this is an ambition in which Iran has invested decades of development at enormous cost—both actual and in terms of sanctions and isolation. From an Iranian perspective, nuclear capabilities—whether fully realized or threshold capabilities—afford the regime an insurance policy for its survival as well as enhanced political standing and a magnified ability to project power. Israelis therefore wonder if President Obama's repeated references to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's alleged fatwa¹ forswearing nuclear weapons under Islam are misplaced. Even as a pressure tactic against Iran, it strikes Israelis as sending the wrong message: that is, that the United States buys into the Iranian pretense that it seeks a peaceful program, while the overwhelming evidence has pointed to the contrary.

As for the deal's essence, what has taken shape is an agreement that mostly curbs and monitors Iran's infrastructure and capabilities yet does not dismantle its ability to produce a nuclear arsenal. By contrast, such a dismantling did apply to the deal Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi accepted in 2003 (notwithstanding the fact that the Libyan nuclear program was less advanced than is the Iranian program). As Henry Kissinger noted earlier this year at a U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing:

Nuclear talks with Iran began as an international effort, buttressed by six UN resolutions, to deny Iran the capability to develop a military nuclear option... [They] are now an essentially bilateral negotiation over the scope of that capability through an agreement that sets a hypothetical limit of one year on an assumed breakout.

The negotiations have also failed by their own standard, thus far, to transform the program in a compelling, demonstrable way into a peaceful one meeting Iran's "practical needs"—that is, those oriented exclusively toward the production of nuclear energy and other peaceful purposes.

Judging the deal's specific terms from this perspective, Israel regards the Lausanne framework as essentially legitimizing Iran's status as a nuclear-threshold state. In other words, Iran will ultimately be allowed to reach the critical breakout point associated with the production of weapons-grade enriched uranium, facilitating an unimpeded move to the bomb. The long-term implications of this status for Israel's national security are profound, including the possibility that other regional actors would seek a similar status, triggering a dangerous cascade of regional proliferation.

There is an open question whether a nuclear deal will empower Iranian moderates² and spur a political transformation as the country rejoins the community of nations. While such long-term potential exists for a relatively youthful Iranian society, no one can really know whether it will happen—nor would one be wise to bet on such an outcome. For his part, Obama has expressed hopes for such a shift, but he has emphasized that the deal is not predicated on it and highlighted the tools the United States could use if the situation goes awry. The general view in Israel is much less optimistic, centering on the perception that a deal is more likely to empower Iran's aggressive hardliners, who now wield much power behind the scenes of President Hassan Rouhani's comparatively temperate presidency. In any case, Israel would not stake its vital national security interests on hopes or outside assurances, especially while facing a much greater threat and possessing much slimmer margin of error than the United States.

Given Iran's ambitions and lengthy track record of dishonesty in its nuclear activities, Israel assesses that the Islamic Republic will test the deal's limits, exploiting whatever space is provided, including technicalities and vague areas, to incrementally stray from its terms. Assuming the deal meets its stated goal of lengthening Iran's breakout time (the time it would take to acquire enough fissile material for one weapon) from the current two to three months to one year, for a duration of ten years—although Israeli experts calculate that the "one year" touted by the Obama administration would actually amount to nine to ten months³—in reality Iran could erode the agreed breakout time in that first decade. It could do so, for example, if allowed to use the "limited R&D"

permitted under the agreement in order to complete the advanced centrifuges long under development.⁴ Iran might also gradually deviate from other areas of the agreement, although likely beneath the threshold of what would clearly constitute significant noncompliance so as to evade a harsh response.

Further on, once the deal's key terms expire in its second decade, Iran will be positioned to move toward a bomb *at a time of its choosing*. President Obama acknowledged—and Israelis took note—that beginning in year thirteen, Iran's breakout time would shrink “almost down to zero.” This is because, under the deal's terms, in the second decade Iran will gradually but significantly be allowed to expand its enrichment program to industrial size, its current nuclear infrastructure having remained in place, including at its fortified Fordow plant. Permitted advances will include many more and much faster types of centrifuges and higher enrichment levels, all while sanctions have been lifted. In addition, other military aspects of the Iranian program, including delivery capabilities (i.e., ballistic missiles) and an accounting of past activities related to weaponization, are insufficiently covered by the emerging deal or excluded entirely. Concern in Israel has likewise focused on potential cooperation between Iran and North Korea in the fields of missile and nuclear proliferation, given the deep North Korean involvement in the Iranian missile program and North Korea's role in the Syrian military nuclear program in the last decade.

Regarding the deal's timeframe, the U.S. administration contends that ten to fifteen years is far more time than any military option could achieve, and that this window will allow for much greater knowledge about the Iranian program while U.S. deterrent tools remain in place and while Iran's political orientation may transform to the positive. Israel, however, questions the implicit binary choice—deal or war—excluding other possibilities. From an Israeli perspective, ten to fifteen years are no more than a blink of an eye, and during this period, Iran will not only retain its significant nuclear capabilities, but a best-case scenario in which Iran begins to transform politically may well not materialize. Therefore, to effectively cut off every pathway to an Iranian bomb, as the United States asserts the deal will do,⁵ requires intrusive inspection

and verification *and* credible U.S. and international deterrence. Israel has serious doubts about the present credibility of both of these critical protections.

As far as the inspection and verification regime is concerned, while the deal broadens its scope in some important ways, covering its supply and production chain for years, Iran hitherto strongly rejected “anytime, anywhere” inspections, including both short-notice inspections and inspections in suspect military sites, perhaps beyond limited “managed access” (as well as interviews of Iranian scientists).⁶ Such inspections, however, are essential if the United States and its international partners hope to deter, discover, and ultimately block a “sneak out” to a weapon. After all, according to intelligence reports and detailed accounts by the International Atomic Energy Agency, many past suspected Iranian weaponization efforts have been carried out in military sites to which IAEA access has been denied. Also, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a military entity that holds outside sway in the nation's politics and economy, has played a key role in developing the Iranian nuclear program. Allowing Iran to maintain facilities that are off-limits to inspection or to evade short-notice inspections would provide space for continued weaponization efforts while undermining the IAEA's authority in other global theaters. The already enormous challenge of exhaustively inspecting an area covering the entirety of Iran—and for more than a decade—is exacerbated by the absence of a full accounting of Iran's past nuclear activities, including the production of centrifuges and the program's possible military dimensions (PMD). In other words, there is no complete *baseline* for inspection. Furthermore, Israelis worry about the challenge of enforcing a deal in the likely vast “gray areas” characterized by vague criteria, inconclusive evidence of infractions, doubts about the significance of suspected violations, and disagreements among international parties to the deal.

It remains to be seen whether the United States will stick to the positions articulated by senior officials, according to which the final deal *must* include full inspections of all suspected sites and address the IAEA concerns regarding PMD.⁷ However, if under the agreement, inspection and verification cannot provide sufficient confidence in the timely discovery

of certain violations, the essential “lines of defense” against Iranian breakout or sneak out will be weakened and more onus will fall on the certainty of an effective response at any time. This inevitably leads to a discussion of the most critical of elements in this equation—U.S. leadership and deterrence.

Israeli Perceptions of U.S. Leadership and the Obama Doctrine

With respect to the U.S. administration’s overall foreign policy, Israelis believe it deviates from a long tradition of American leadership. They see the “Obama doctrine” as limiting the U.S. military footprint while refocusing its regional involvement, as engaging adversaries while prioritizing cooperative rather than coercive measures, as relying heavily on multilateralism and coalitions and placing a heavier security burden on local actors—all while seeking to eventually shift focus to other regions. As a result, Israelis perceive the Obama administration’s attitude as lacking in assertiveness, especially in its application to a volatile Middle East and in the U.S. approach to Iran’s regional role.

When it comes to the Iran nuclear deal, Israel feels the United States has squandered its leverage. In Israeli eyes, a credible, stable diplomatic outcome can ultimately result only by attaching incentives offered to Iran to effective coercion based on two elements: powerful sanctions that persist until the Iranian program is physically rolled back—or until a significant shift in Iran’s behavior occurs—alongside what is the backbone of this diplomatic approach, a credible military option.

On the first aspect, sanctions, the JCPOA is unclear about the duration, pace, and conditionality of sanctions relief. Israel, for its part, is skeptical about the prospects of gradual, protracted phasing out of sanctions. It appears that a significant portion of international sanctions (executive U.S. and EU sanctions as well as sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council) will be lifted once the IAEA has verified that Iran has complied with the key demands of the deal. Technically, this can happen in a matter of months. Israel therefore fears the sanctions regime which took years to build, will collapse rather quickly amid widespread international desire to do business with Iran

(international business entities are already lining up). Furthermore, Israel is concerned about the feasibility of reimposing sanctions based on broad international consensus, certainly as quickly or automatically as is implied by the administration’s term “snap-back.” Building such a consensus would be an extremely difficult proposition, especially if the threshold for snap-back is insufficiently defined and once major international actors are reintegrated into the Iranian market. And it is hard to see, in the event of a U.S. bid to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions, Russia and China accepting the precedent of withholding their Security Council veto powers.

Regarding the second aspect of effective coercion, the United States has consistently devalued its own military option, a devaluation that has weakened its effectiveness as leverage—and also Israel’s own military deterrence vis-à-vis Iran. The administration has framed any conceivable military option as “war,” implicitly evoking Iraq-style boots-on-the-ground rather than a targeted operation. In reality, only for Israel would a U.S. strike likely bring about war, assuming Hezbollah responds with massive firing of rockets into Israel. And whereas Washington has consistently highlighted the military option’s limited effectiveness, Israelis believe the U.S. military could set the Iranian program back many years, far beyond what the administration has said publicly. Finally, and drawing on the above claims, the administration has projected absolute reluctance regarding the use of military force. This sense, in addition to the president’s reneging on his own declared red-line over chemical weapons use in Syria,⁸ has led to a wide perception in the region—including in Israel and Iran—that the U.S. military option is essentially off the table, save for an extreme circumstance. In the wake of the JCPOA, the administration has tried to correct this perception by highlighting its overwhelming military superiority. These statements fail to address the core concern, however, which involves not the extent of U.S. capabilities but rather U.S. *political will*. Indeed, Russian president Vladimir Putin’s announced decision to lift the ban on delivering S-300 air-defense systems to Iran symbolizes the deal’s potential to erode *both* the sanctions and the military option.

Fair or unfair, America's traditional allies in the region, who feel they have to live with the consequences of a nuclear-threshold Iran, expect more of the United States. They do not accept the contention of U.S. war fatigue, or the fact that Iran does not pose a strategic threat to the U.S. homeland, as a sufficient explanation for eroded U.S. deterrence. After all, the United States, not Iran, is the superpower, and these allies have long propped their national security doctrines on robust American backing and deterrence. Nor does the U.S. leadership of the coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) pacify their concerns regarding U.S. assertiveness toward Iran—quite the contrary.

The administration's constant refrain that "the only alternative to this deal is war" only reinforces Israeli doubts about U.S. deterrence. The seeming implication of this claim is that, absent a deal, Iran will surely accelerate its program to the point of forcing the United States to wage war to stop it. But why would Iran rush forward in such a way, risking a U.S. military response—which it has been hitherto careful to avoid—unless it believed the United States was *unwilling* to use military force? The United States, in this formulation, seems more deterred by the prospect of war than Iran is, and may indeed avoid it if faced with a hard choice. To Israeli ears, therefore, the oft-repeated U.S. assurance that "no deal is better than a bad deal" rings hollow. What they hear instead is "any deal is better than no deal."

The Regional Dimension

Differences between the United States and Israel extend to perceptions of a nuclear deal in the broader regional picture. Here, the United States argues that the nuclear dimension should be separated and prioritized: it is the most dangerous reality and, absent a solution, will exacerbate all other regional challenges. Washington also reasons that a grand bargain with Iran seeking to resolve all issues is impossible, and that shooting for the moon would preclude obtaining the more important, limited nuclear deal. On the flipside, the United States suggests that achieving a nuclear breakthrough—added to converging interests regarding ISIS—might open avenues to broader U.S.-Iran regional understandings and cooperation.

In the eyes of Israel and major Sunni Arab powers, Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions are not only inseparable but mutually reinforcing. *Both* therefore warrant strong U.S. deterrence. Instead of deterrence, though, Israel and the Sunni Arab states see that, for the sake of reaching a nuclear deal, the United States—against a backdrop of regional meltdown and out of fear U.S. interests might eventually be targeted by Iranian terrorist proxies—has granted Iran considerable room to pursue destabilizing policies toward its goal of regional hegemony, mostly but not exclusively along hot Sunni-Shiite fault lines. Ultimately, they believe eroded U.S. deterrence may enable the advancement of Iranian nuclear and regional ambitions alike. They contend that a weak nuclear deal could, in turn, further embolden Iran and its proxies to pursue threatening regional policies, fueled by significant funds released as sanctions are relaxed. On this count, regional actors give no credence to Washington's optimistic assessment that in a postdeal era Iran will change priorities and overwhelmingly direct these funds toward fixing the economy and other internal reforms. Iran did not refrain from investing in its regional ambitions and proxies while under sanctions, and whereas Iran's impact in the region is not measured merely in the amount of funds it makes available, it will in any case have significant residual funds to enhance and intensify these investments.

During the nuclear talks, regional actors have watched Iran carry out a long list of threatening and destabilizing activities, all met with a feeble U.S. response. Such actions have included Iran's arming of numerous Shiite proxies, which the Islamic Republic has guided in military operations in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It has also supported regional and global terrorism networks, sponsored designated terrorist groups (Hezbollah and Hamas), and plotted terrorist acts, such as the thwarted 2011 plan to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. Iran has likewise fueled subversive activities across the region and carried out cyberattacks, such as a major one in 2012 against the Saudi oil company Aramco. As a result, Iran has contributed significantly to the weakening of state frameworks and the stoking of sectarian fires in the region. It increasingly fills the void in Iraq through Shiite domination and maintains a sphere

of influence in Syria,⁹ where it preserves the Bashar al-Assad regime, supports its atrocities, and aspires to establish an active front with Israel and Jordan. These Iranian activities have driven Sunni elements into the arms of Sunni jihadist forces in Iraq and Syria. In Lebanon, Iranian meddling is conducted through Hezbollah—a virtual state within a state—as exemplified by the group’s preventing the election of a new president for the last year. In Yemen, it has been arming and funding the Zaydi Shiite Houthi rebels, who toppled a pro-American government and conquered a strategic Red Sea port. Iranian subversion threatens the stability of Gulf countries, and its military support for Hamas fuels tensions in Gaza,¹⁰ while Iranian leaders vow to reproduce Gaza in the West Bank by arming the area’s Palestinian militants.

Israel also does not take lightly Iran’s frequent public calls to eliminate it, calls that have persisted alongside the nuclear negotiations. (Several months ago, Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei tweeted nine ways to achieve this goal.)¹¹ While Israel regards these calls with added seriousness given its assessment that the emerging deal does not effectively block Iran’s pathway to the bomb, it feels they are being shrugged off by the international community as mere rhetoric meant for domestic consumption or to express unrealistic “visionary” goals.

There is no denying the considerable challenges and some noteworthy setbacks to Iran’s regional policies, especially in Syria and Yemen, but these are the result of independent regional backlashes and are insufficient to reverse Iran’s regional posture. Indeed, a nuclear deal that emboldens Iran will only solidify this posture. In the view of traditional U.S. regional allies, Washington’s passive and accommodating response to the Iranian behaviors just described, as well as its overall incoherent response to the Arab Spring, does not necessarily represent a decline in U.S. power but rather a manifestation of a widening gap in worldviews and interests. They have noted Obama’s expressed hopes of Iran becoming “an extremely successful regional power” and of the omission of Iran’s hegemonic ambitions and terrorism sponsorship from the latest Worldwide Threat Assessment by U.S. national intelligence agencies.

No side would claim that Iran and the United States share a value system. In fact, they differ on nearly every major front: regional stability, the use of violence, nonsectarianism, inclusiveness, liberalism, democracy, and human rights. In words and deeds, Iran continues to relate to the United States as its political and cultural rival, if not its enemy. However, the U.S. administration appears to regard Iran more as part of the long-term regional solution than the problem. Perceiving the region’s turmoil, with its extreme violence, sectarian strife, crumbling state frameworks, Sunni jihadist forces threatening the West, and despotic regimes, the United States—which is increasingly energy independent and facing other pressing global challenges—would happily pivot to other theaters. Yet regional actors cannot accept that they may be left alone to deal with their bitter enemy, Iran, or that given a nuclear deal and converging interests on ISIS, Iran could become less of an enemy and be integrated into a stable regional order based on Obama’s notion of “equilibrium.” Such an outcome, if achievable at all, can only be reached by the U.S. standing behind its regional allies and displaying revamped deterrence, rather than relying mostly on cooperative measures. This U.S. attitude certainly cannot be reconciled with Israel’s perception of Iran as a mortal danger, a danger likely to persist—if not be entrenched—as a result of a nuclear deal.

In his March 2015 speech to the U.S. Congress Israel’s prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, demanded that the United States condition the lifting of sanctions and of constraints on Iran’s nuclear program on the cessation of Iran’s aggressive regional demeanor, terrorism sponsorship, and threats to annihilate Israel; on the last count, he called for international pressure on Iran to recognize Israel’s right to exist. While the United States rightly argues that it would be impossible to finalize a deal with these terms, regional actors feel their concerns over Iran’s hegemonic ambitions have been insufficiently addressed through strong U.S. policies *outside* the deal. Precedent for such a two-track U.S. strategy can be found during the Cold War, when Washington countered nefarious Soviet activities while simultaneously negotiating and securing arms-control deals with the Kremlin.

Only following the JCPOA did the United States launch a balancing effort to assure traditional regional allies that it does not intend to give Iran a “free pass” in the region. Providing support to the Saudi military campaign in Yemen, showing a naval presence in the Strait of Hormuz, forcing an Iranian naval vessel to undergo UN inspection before reaching Yemen, inviting Gulf leaders to Camp David and offering them assurances, releasing withheld weapons to Egypt, signaling openness to accommodate Israeli concerns, and foiling attempts to force Israel into an arbitrary UN framework toward a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East—all were measures aimed at counterbalancing. It remains to be seen whether these measures signify a solid trajectory, yet they may be too little, too late. Some regional actors have already drawn their conclusions and, doubtful of U.S. leadership and backing, taken matters into their own hands. Some are now pursuing policies independent of the United States, such as by signing arms deals with other states, conducting military strikes in neighboring countries, arming rebel forces in Syria, and announcing a joint Arab defense force designed first and foremost to confront Iran. However, these actors well realize that no real international or regional substitute exists for the United States if they wish to successfully cope with challenges posed by both ISIS and Iran.

For their part, Israelis, who likewise have no substitute for the United States, ask themselves: if while negotiating the nuclear deal the United States hasn’t faced down Iran for its regional policies, why should one expect U.S. assertiveness following the deal, when Iran is emboldened politically and financially and Washington is constrained by its own investment in the deal and by cautiousness to not push Iran to cross the nuclear threshold? And in the postdeal era, how would the United States act if confronted with a conflict of interests between its nascent relations with Iran and its longstanding relations with its traditional allies? Only time will tell.

Conclusion

From an Israeli perspective, the United States has essentially shifted the focus of its policy from prevention of a nuclear-armed Iran to containment of a nuclear-threshold Iran. Moreover, Israel feels that the

United States has not sufficiently addressed the consequences of a nuclear-*threshold* Iran—a highly troubling proposition from its standpoint. While the deal probably mitigates the risks of an Iranian breakout in the coming years—around a decade—it achieves this by mortgaging the longer-term future. In the meantime, it may inadvertently stoke the regional conflagration, spurring further instability and even sparking possible nuclear proliferation in the region.¹²

Indeed, the current trust deficit¹³ is so great that it is hard to find anyone in the Israeli decisionmaking or policy circles who believes that the current U.S. administration would actually stop Iran militarily if faced with an imminent Iranian bomb. Israel’s basic instinct of self-reliance on critical national security matters has only been reinforced throughout the diplomatic process. Nevertheless, an international deal with Iran ties Israel’s hands when it comes to taking preventive action, unless Iran is caught red-handed or Israel is faced with the same critical immediate choice between living with an Iranian bomb or stopping it militarily.

All the differences just discussed boil down to a debate over alternatives to the emerging deal. Israelis contend that portraying the inevitable alternative as war represents a false choice, since stronger U.S. deterrence—which necessitates a readiness to use force—would actually reduce the risk of war and that this portrayal can be used to justify *any* deal. They wonder what might constitute *true* dealbreakers for the United States. While Netanyahu speaks of an alternative “better deal,” the United States suspects this is no more than a smoke screen for rejecting any deal. In Washington’s view, no such “better deal” is to be had, and pressing for it would ultimately bring about the disintegration of the international coalition facing Iran. More public debate on this matter is warranted, but privately Israeli officials note that, among the P5+1, France—not the United States—was considered the toughest voice. The United States initiated many of the P5+1’s concessions to Iran, rather than being forced into them. Overall, the United States exhibited more eagerness for a deal than did Iran, and failed to maximize its full leverage, ultimately weakening its hand. One could indeed argue that the United States could have nudged in its favor the marker between an

acceptable deal and no deal at all, although in hindsight identifying this point with any certainty is difficult. At the present phase much of this debate is water under the bridge, yet some of it is still relevant in the push toward securing the comprehensive deal.

In Israel, while a wide consensus exists regarding the potential risks entailed in the deal, a policy debate is under way on how to best address Israel's concerns. Should Israel fight the deal publicly and through Congress, as the current Israeli leadership has done? Or should it accept the deal as a *fait accompli* and seek to obtain maximal improvements and strategic assurances through a dialogue with the United States and other major international actors? The latter course has been taken by the Gulf countries, who equally dislike the deal and have found ways to express their displeasure. Notwithstanding converging interests between Israel and major Arab actors—such as shared concerns about Islamists and jihadists, Iran, and the weak U.S. regional role—some in Israel fear that staying on the current course could mean being left behind or, worse, weakening both its unique strategic relationship with the United States and its qualitative military edge.

Regrettably, no open bilateral U.S.-Israel strategic dialogue is now being conducted at the highest levels. Launching such a dialogue poses a challenge to both parties, whose relations are also overshadowed by a strong division on the Palestinian issue—a division likely to grow following the establishment of Israel's new government and the return to the fore, once the Iran deal is finalized, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From the Israeli perspective, concerns exist that such a dialogue might not be fruitful and will be perceived as tacit Israeli acquiescence to the deal's terms (especially if framed as “compensating” Israel for the deal).¹⁴ Washington, meanwhile, is reluctant to conduct a dialogue while Israel openly and vehemently attacks the deal. Generally, each party believes the other holds the responsibility for initiating a dialogue. And even if a dialogue were to be held, the current trust deficit probably would not allow for a

truly open one in which Israel shares its bottom lines for a realistic deal that perhaps it doesn't like but “can live with” and the United States, in turn, shares its absolute dealbreakers.

However uneasy the present state of bilateral ties, these two allies certainly share the interests of working toward defusing tensions and misunderstandings, learning to better manage their disagreements, and exploring potential areas of understanding. Therefore, a quiet, substantive dialogue at a very senior level should begin between the two governments as soon as possible—before the deal is finalized. It should be clarified from the outset that such a dialogue is not meant or able to bridge major conceptual gaps or adopt a shared vision on the Iran deal. Rather, it should focus on practical understandings regarding the deal, a postdeal environment, and other issues of strategic concern.

Such a dialogue could be useful in addressing the weak or open links in the emerging agreement discussed above—especially with regard to limiting R&D, securing the irreversibility of prohibited stockpiles of enriched materials, insisting on intrusive inspection and verification, designing more balanced phasing-out of sanctions, and tying the closing of PMD files to the process of sanctions relief. Outside the contours of the deal, it could be used to provide an avenue for enhanced intelligence cooperation, define a set of U.S. responses to Iranian violations of various types and severities, discuss ways to shape the time bought by the agreement, focus on guarantees for the second decade, clarify options in the event no deal is reached, facilitate possible understandings regarding the broader regional dimension, and provide assurances to Israel to enhance its own margins of security, including on Israel's qualitative military edge given existing and potential risks. Time is too short, the stakes are too high, and U.S.-Israel relations are far too important to address the Iranian challenge through mutual public spats—from which Iran benefits to the detriment of both Israel and the United States.

Notes

1. In fact, this fatwa was never published and there is no known record of it in the West.
2. Israel does not count Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, as a moderate, transformative figure, considering his track record in the Iranian nuclear program and the lack of any progress under his presidency on human rights and liberalism at home and stability in the region. Some note that similar expectations of change surrounded previous Iranian presidents, such as Rafsanjani and Khatami, yet never materialized.
3. Notwithstanding open questions regarding the potential reversibility of the low-enriched uranium stockpile beyond the 300 kilograms permitted under the agreement and of near 20 percent enriched uranium converted to oxide and other forms.
4. Such erosion is more likely on the so-called uranium track since, to its credit, the deal has tighter provisions limiting the plutonium track.
5. Israelis often cite North Korea as a negative precedent for similar U.S. assurances failing the reality test.
6. As regards inspections in military sites, Supreme Leader Khamenei has publicly presented such inspections as "red lines." Iran's deputy foreign minister and nuclear negotiator Abbas Araqchi reportedly briefed a recent closed session of the Iranian parliament about Iran's willingness to allow IAEA inspectors limited "managed access" to military sites—a position that was later corrected. As regards notice time for the inspections, French foreign minister Laurent Fabius recently disclosed that Iran demands a 24-day warning period. Khamenei also publicly rejected interviews for Iranian nuclear scientists.
7. See, for example, Vice President's Joe Biden's statement at The Washington Institute's thirtieth-anniversary gala on April 30, 2015: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/30th-anniversary-gala-dinner>.
8. Furthermore, Israelis point out the lack of U.S. and international response to the Assad regime's violation of its commitment to fully dismantle its chemical arsenal, enshrined in a UN Security Council resolution under Chapter VII. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), in charge of inspecting the dismantlement of Syria's chemical arsenal, has reported the Syrian regime's use of chlorine gas and recently found traces of Sarin and VX chemical agents at a military research site in Syria.
9. Obama's letter to Khamenei upon launching the military campaign against ISIS in late 2014, to the effect that it would not target the Syrian regime, was interpreted by many in the region as essentially recognizing Syria as an Iranian sphere of influence.
10. In March 2014, Israeli naval commandos in the Red Sea intercepted the *Klos C*, a ship loaded with Iranian rockets heading to Gaza. The United States considered intercepting the ship itself since the shipment contravened a UN Security Council resolution, but decided against doing so. This author was told that one consideration guiding this U.S. decision was the desire to avoid undermining the nuclear talks.
11. In the last few weeks alone, Iran's Basij militia commander, Brig. Gen. Muhammad Naghdi, declared that "erasing Israel off the map" is "nonnegotiable" and a Khamenei representative in the Revolutionary Guards, Mojtaba Zolnour, stated that the Iranian government has "divine permission to destroy Israel."
12. Some Saudis are already saying that they will seek for themselves whatever Iran is allowed in the nuclear field. Saudi Arabia refuses to commit to a nonproliferation "gold standard" (i.e., pledge not to enrich uranium on its soil). Israelis strongly believe the Saudis could gain access to nuclear military capabilities through their close relations with Pakistan. It is far from a given that Saudi Arabia would prefer a US umbrella as suggested by president Obama.
13. Israeli officials privately claim that mutual trust on the issue was significantly eroded by the United States concealing from Israel the launching of bilateral talks with Iran in Oman in 2012. They also cite huge differences between what the United States has been presenting to Israel as U.S. goals, positions, and redlines in the negotiation and what ultimately emerged. U.S. officials blame Israel for using inside information from the negotiations, provided by the United States, in order to fight the deal, including through media leaks.
14. For some time, Israel has been conducting discussions with the U.S. administration regarding the extension and enhancement of the bilateral MoU on the provision of U.S. ten-year assistance to Israel, which is about to expire in 2017. However, Netanyahu was careful to characterize these discussions—conducted in professional levels—as separate from the nuclear deal and not meant as "compensation" for it.

