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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Israel and Iran's Framework Nuclear Agreement

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | April 2015

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## Introduction

Late in the evening on Thursday, April 2 in Lausanne, Switzerland, Iran and its interlocutors in the "P5+1" group of nations (which includes the five permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as Germany) announced their assent to a framework agreement (the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program"). The parties also agreed to set June 30, 2015 as the deadline to arrive at a more detailed and final agreement which, once implemented and activated, would impose restrictions preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. According to the few details of the deal made public, published by the US State Department, Iran will have the right to operate no more than 5,000 of the 19,000 centrifuges at its Natanz reactor site, where enrichment of uranium must not exceed 3.67%. Iran will be allowed the use of a further 1,000 centrifuges at the Fordo nuclear facility, which is to be converted into a nuclear physics research site. Finally, the agreement calls for a redesign of the Arak heavy water reactor, to be supervised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a previous sticking point in negotiations due to its ability to produce plutonium.

Provided that Iran abides by the above rules, the country's ability to produce a single nuclear warhead will be pushed to one year, compared to the 2-3 month period which, according to Israeli and American assessments, it would need to produce a warhead today. Additionally, the text of the framework agreement stipulates unannounced visits by IAEA inspectors to all Iranian sites suspected of being the locations of banned nuclear activities. In other words, it will be difficult for Iran to conduct a clandestine nuclear program. Non-compliance by Iran on these issues could lead to the renewal of sanctions on the country.

## Israel's Multi-Faceted Response to the Framework

### Agreement

There is widespread agreement amongst Israel's political factions that the country must continue to monopolize nuclear weapons in the Middle East, and therefore, that Iran must be prevented from obtaining such weapons. Without a clear course of action to ensure this status quo is maintained, however, friction and infighting amongst Israeli political groups led to a confrontation between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama on the topic of Iranian nuclear weapons. There is a strong

Israeli voice that believes the best means of maintaining the nuclear upper hand in the region is through maintaining the best possible relations with the White House. Israeli reactions to the framework agreement, then, have varied between outright opposition, and a limited, conditional acceptance of its inevitability. While Netanyahu led the camp which took the former view, numerous retired high-ranking security and military personnel adopted the latter position.

### **Netanyahu and the Rejectionist Camp**

Netanyahu's opposition to a peaceful deal which did not completely destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure is completely in character with the positions he has adopted over the last two decades. In the weeks and months before the crunch talks in Lausanne, Netanyahu intensified his diplomatic activity to try and persuade the US to abandon the idea of an agreement with Iran. He repeatedly called for additional US sanctions in the hope that, once materialized, these would prevent a deal between Tehran and the P5+1 powers from taking hold. Netanyahu even pressured the US to carry out airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. It was no surprise, then, that Netanyahu, together with a group of other Israeli officials, wasted no time in attacking the framework agreement.

Even without having seen the details of the agreement, Netanyahu's team viewed it as an historic failure, the result of Iran dictating terms to the major world powers<sup>1</sup>. A phone call with President Obama, described by the Israeli media as "difficult" and coming only hours after the Lausanne agreement was signed, did nothing to budge Netanyahu's position on these matters, leading the Israeli prime minister to wage a campaign via the media, including in the US.

Speaking to the press immediately after a session of Israel's Security Cabinet, Netanyahu spoke of the "unanimous" rejection by all of its members of what he termed "a bad deal". The Israeli premier also later tried to dismiss Obama's defense of the agreement the president was making in the media. Netanyahu claimed that the deal was a threat to Israel's continued existence, that it legitimized Tehran's nuclear ambitions and that, by keeping Iran's nuclear infrastructure in place, it would gradually allow for the country to obtain a nuclear weapon. Netanyahu also claimed that the

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<sup>1</sup> Barak Ravid, "Israeli officials: Iran deal will make world much more dangerous", *Haaretz*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.650349>;

Lausanne framework agreement would lead to a new arms race in the Middle East, raising the prospect of a war of unprecedented intensity.

The Israeli prime minister claimed, however, that war was not the inevitable alternative to the agreement; a "third way", he suggested, included increasing the sanctions burden until Tehran was forced to accept a "good deal", something which many observers believe would only accelerate Iran's efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon and thus provoke American air strikes and all-out war. Finally, Netanyahu added a further condition by demanding that Iran recognize Israel's right to exist as part of any nuclear agreement<sup>2</sup>.

### **Conditional Acceptance**

A number of retired Israeli military and intelligence leaders, whose views are generally believed to be close to those of the state security apparatus, have given the Iran nuclear deal their cautious, conditional approval. Speaking to Israel Radio, former Mossad Chief Ephraim Halevi described the deal as positive. Another cautious proponent of the deal is Brig. Gen. Prof Uzi Aylam, former head of Israel's Atomic Energy Commission, who expressed the view that if the agreement was implemented meticulously, then Iran would be "very far away" from building a bomb<sup>3</sup>. Amos Yidlin, meanwhile, the former chief of Israeli military intelligence and present head of the Institute for National Security Studies, described the agreement as reflecting a compromise between Iran and the P5+1 group, one which had secured great advances but also required serious amendments<sup>4</sup>. The argument of those Israelis who expressed reservations on the Lausanne agreement can be summarized as follows:

1. The agreement will lend international legitimacy to Iran's nuclear program, and in turn make it more difficult for Israel to carry out a military strike against Iranian nuclear installations.

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<sup>2</sup> "Netanyahu: 'Any deal must recognize Israel's right to exist'", *Maariv*, April 3, 2015 (link in Hebrew) <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/687/412.html?hp=1&cat=404&loc=12>;

<sup>3</sup> Itamar Eichner, "PM: Iran must recognize Israel's Right to Exist", *YNet News*, April 3, 2015 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4644036,00.html>

<sup>4</sup> Amos Yadlin, "The Lausanne Statement on the Iranian Nuclear Program: Insights and Recommendations", The Israel Institute for National Security Studies, April 6, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9177>

2. The framework agreement tacitly recognizes Iran as a “nuclear threshold” country. What this precisely means is ambiguous, but it expresses very clearly the idea that Iran has the technology and capabilities needed to produce a nuclear weapon in a relatively short period of time. Yet Israeli observers who constantly refer to Iran’s “nuclear threshold” ignore the strenuous restrictions and monitoring regime stipulated by the Lausanne agreement that is practically unique for any nuclear threshold country. Other Israeli researchers and analysts believe that Iran’s deterrent capabilities will grow for as long as the country remains on the nuclear threshold, either because of the natural accumulation of expertise amongst Iranians, or because of the ability of Iran to keep certain aspects of its nuclear program a secret. This ambiguity may eventually drive Israel and other countries to treat Iran as an effective nuclear power<sup>5</sup>.
3. According to this position, the nuclear agreement will bring about a new Middle East arms race, with other countries in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, striving to achieve Iran’s nuclear status.
4. The agreement will bolster Iran’s regional status and influence, ending its international isolation and ushering in a new chapter in Tehran’s international relations. This will also strengthen Iran’s regional allies, including both state and non-state actors.
5. The US may possibly provide Saudi Arabia and other regional allies with advanced weapons to compensate for the agreement, thus obliterating Israel’s de-facto “qualitative military edge” which it enjoys over Arab countries.
6. Israeli observers are skeptical of the willingness and ability of the world powers to re-impose sanctions on Iran or to strike against the country’s military installations in the event that the country violates the agreement.

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<sup>5</sup> Yoel Guzansky and Udi Dekel, “Recognizing Iran as a Nuclear Threshold State: Implications for Israel and the Middle East”, Israel Institute for National Security Studies, March 25, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9004>

## Conclusion

In practical terms, Israel has no real military option now that the agreement has been accepted by the deliberating parties. While Netanyahu and his government are expected to continue using their influence in Congress and other pro-Israeli institutions in Washington to foil the deal, the probability of their success in doing so remains remote. Nor are the Israelis likely to compel the Obama Administration to substantially change the terms of the Lausanne deal. What all Israeli political parties are likely to clamor for, however, is for "compensation" from the US in the form of more advanced weapons; assurances surrounding Israel's continued qualitative military advantage; guarantees that Israeli nuclear facilities will not be searched by international inspectors; the strengthening of existing guarantees into something resembling a formal military alliance; and the expansion of intelligence cooperation between the two countries to include not only the Iranian program, but to cover other countries in the region which might seek to obtain nuclear weapons, as well.