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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Israeli Position on the Iranian Nuclear Deal

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | July 2015

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Introduction

Israel has considered the Iranian nuclear program to be an issue of the utmost gravity since the revelation of some of its more secretive aspects in 2002. In an attempt to rally global opposition, Israel promoted the idea that Tehran's nuclear program posed an existential threat to the so-called Jewish state, and threatened to deploy air strikes against the country's nuclear installations. The goal was to pressure the international community into acting militarily and decisively against Iran, or at the very least to intensify the sanctions regime. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu became perhaps the most outspoken Israeli commentator on the Iranian nuclear program. He also set a precedent for Israeli premiers in his public disagreement with the United States over its aim of reaching a negotiated solution with Iran, sparking an unusual level of tension between Washington and Tel Aviv. Netanyahu had envisaged an end to Iran's nuclear infrastructure through military strikes primarily conducted by the US, or, as an alternative, a tightening of international sanctions. Netanyahu's government, therefore, consistently opposed all of the milestones achieved between Iran and international negotiators: the Joint Plan of Action, signed in Geneva in November 2013; the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, signed in Lausanne in April 2015; and the final agreement sealed in Vienna on July 15.

Israeli motivating factors

The factors motivating Israeli policy towards Tehran's nuclear program differ significantly from other states in the region. Israel's status as a de-facto but undeclared nuclear power was granted the tacit approval of the United States in a 1969 agreement between then-President Richard Nixon and his Israeli counterpart, Gold Meir. The terms of that agreement oblige Israel not to carry out any nuclear tests or to openly

acknowledge its possession of nuclear weapons, in exchange for the United States not pressuring Tel Aviv into joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty¹.

The consensus view is that Israel is in possession of a large arsenal of nuclear weapons, including thermonuclear, or hydrogen, bombs, as well as neutron or 'dirty' bombs, and has the capability of deploying these from aircraft or through long-range missiles. In other words, Israel enjoys a unique nuclear deterrent and the ability to launch nuclear strikes on targets thousands of kilometers away. Meanwhile, the Israeli military has 'second strike' capabilities, thanks to the location of its command-and-control centers in nuclear bomb-proof fortified bunkers, as well as its German-supplied submarines. In summary, Israel is uniquely prepared for a war in which it could completely destroy Iranian cities.

In such a setting, it is completely improbable that Iran's nuclear program could ever pose a serious threat to the safety of Israel, even providing for future Iranian possession of nuclear weapons. The efforts expended by Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders to stall the deal over Iran's nuclear program are not, as they claim, aimed at protecting Israel's existence, but rather at ensuring a continued Israeli monopoly of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. This monopoly is a pillar of Israel's security doctrine, and one of the major reasons behind its ability to project and maintain its grip on regional power.

Netanyahu reacts

The hyperbolic reactions to the agreement by Netanyahu and his cabinet ministers were out of all proportion to its actual terms, as if they were discussing a completely different deal. The Israeli premier's campaign against the deal started immediately after it was signed, with Netanyahu describing it as a "historical mistake" and suggesting that it

¹ Mahmoud Muhareb, *Israel's Nuclear Policy*, Arab Center for Research and Policy, Beirut, 2013

endangered the world's collective security. Netanyahu also stressed that as Israel was not a party to the agreement, it was subsequently not bound to its terms and that it would continue to defend itself².

Netanyahu never accepted President Obama's assurances about the deal preventing Iran from ever having nuclear weapons³. In a session held immediately after the announcement of the final agreement, the Israeli security cabinet formally declared its non-committal to the deal. Cabinet members quickly began a spirited campaign disparaging the deal and highlighting the threats to Israel, the wider Middle East, and the globe, resulting from Iran becoming a nuclear power, or even a nuclear threshold country. The cabinet also emphasized how the agreement would empower Iran in the economic, political and military spheres, enhancing Tehran's abilities to develop advanced conventional weapons. Netanyahu affirmed that he would spare no effort in persuading two-thirds of the US Senate to veto the Obama-backed deal⁴.

Israeli opposition politicians react

Israeli opposition politicians denounced the agreement in similar terms to their prime minister, but also took the opportunity to criticize Netanyahu for his failure to foil Iran's nuclear program, as well as for creating tensions in the US-Israeli relationship. Isaac Herzog, leader of the opposition Zionist Camp party, claimed that the July agreement was a bad one, and posed risks for the security of Israel. He affirmed, however, that regardless of disagreements over the nuclear issue and its impact on the relationship

² Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Iran nuclear deal makes world much more dangerous", *Haaretz*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.665821>;

³ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu tells Obama Iran deal threatens Israel's security", *Haaretz*, July 14, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.666028>;

⁴ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu says feels obligated to fight Iran nuclear deal in Congress", *Haaretz*, July 19, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.666761>;

with the United States, the Zionist parties were united on matters pertaining to Israel's security. The opposition leader called for the government and the opposition to work together and prepare for the results of the agreement in the near- and long-term⁵.

In contrast, Yair Lapid, of the *Yesh Atid* ("There is a Future") party, demanded that Netanyahu step down and that a formal investigation committee be formed to examine the reasons behind Israel's failure to prevent the nuclear agreement. According to Lapid, while Netanyahu had long insisted that he was the only leader capable of thwarting an agreement over Iran's nuclear program, the prime minister had failed to utilize any of the means at his disposal—including air strikes against Iranian nuclear installations—to prevent the deal from going through over the course of six years. To add insult to injury, Netanyahu had also, said Lapid, caused considerable damage to Israel's relationship with the United States and with the world at large. The result of Netanyahu's actions was that Israel was now more isolated on the world stage⁶.

The Israeli security establishment

While the leaders of virtually all of the mainstream, Zionist political parties held the view that the agreement arrived at in July was a bad deal for Israel, a number of prominent experts who previously held sensitive positions within the Israeli security establishment have voiced the opinion that the deal was the best possible option available. According to this view, Iran will be effectively prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons in the coming years. The fact that these views are held by members (albeit sometimes retired) of the Israeli defense and security establishment discredits the rants by those politicians who are evidently motivated by factors other than concern for Israeli security.

⁵ Jonathan Lis, "Herzog: We're against Iran deal, but won't join Netanyahu coalition", *Haaretz*, July 15, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.666123>;

⁶ "Lapid seeks probe into PM's handling of Iran nuclear talks", *Times of Israel*, July 16, 2015: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/lapid-seeks-probe-into-pms-handling-of-iran-nuclear-talks/>

General Yitzhak Ben Yisrael (Retired), the Director of the Israeli Space Agency, is one such voice. A recipient of the Israel Prize for his services to national security, Ben Yisrael claims—after a detailed reading of the terms of the agreement—that the deal has guaranteed several years of calm for Israel. According to Ben Yisrael, Obama was correct in asserting that the new agreement does not endanger Israel by allowing for a nuclear capable Iran, but rather that Iran’s capabilities in other forms of non-conventional warfare might increase in the coming years, thus posing a different type of risk for Israel⁷.

Similarly, Ami Ayalon, a former chief of Israel’s internal security service (Shin Bet) as well as of the Israeli Navy, affirmed that the deal secured was the best one possible for Israel. Ayalon also suggested that a number of other former and serving security agency chiefs shared this view⁸. This was echoed by Uzi Aylam, a former chief of the Israeli Nuclear Energy Commission from 1976 to 1985, in an interview with Israel Radio. Meanwhile, nuclear weapons specialist Avner Cohen was explicit in his criticism of the Israeli government’s attitude towards the agreement, which he described as silly.

Cohen’s argument is that the agreement with Iran is a realistic, compromise solution. Even though the deal will give Iran a very special status amongst those non-nuclear powers who are signatories to the NPT, Iran will also, says Cohen, be prevented from becoming a true nuclear threshold country for another two decades⁹.

⁷ Orlando Radice, “Members of Israeli security establishment contradict Netanyahu’s view of Iran deal”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 24, 2015: <http://www.thejc.com/news/israel-news/140630/members-israeli-security-establishment-contradict-netanyahu%E2%80%99s-view-iran-deal>

⁸ Judah Ari Gross and Avi Lewish, “Breaking ranks, former Shin Bet head praises Iran nuke deal”, *The Times of Israel*, July 21, 2015: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/breaking-ranks-former-shin-bet-head-praises-iran-nuke-deal/>

⁹ Avner Cohen, “Israel can live with the Iranian nuclear deal, can Netanyahu?”, *Haaretz*, July 17, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.666481>

Repercussions of the agreement for Israel

Regardless of their position towards the Iranian nuclear agreement, there is a consensus amongst Israeli policy makers that the Iran nuclear deal paves the way for a new Middle East with a new set of challenges that Israel will have to face. By ending the sanctions and Iran's previous international isolation, Tehran's military, economic and political power will be increased, enhancing its military production capabilities, particularly those reliant on advanced technologies. All of this will serve to increase the country's prestige on a regional and global level, and impact on its ability to project strength through non-state actors such as the region's various Iranian-backed militia, as well as state allies. Additionally, the deal makes it possible for Iran to become a "nuclear threshold" state, even if after two decades, while in the present climate, any Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear installations would be contrary to the prevailing approach of the international community. Ultimately, the new agreement could be the catalyst for a regional arms race, with countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey seeking to emulate Iran's gains by becoming nuclear powers.

Conclusion

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to prevent a final agreement with respect to Iran's nuclear program from being reached. It is unlikely that he will be able to rely on sufficient support within the US Congress to force the hand of President Obama and overcome a potential veto on legislation that would prevent the ratification of the agreement. Netanyahu will simply have to accommodate himself to the new reality, while trying to extract the maximum possible gains from the US as compensation for the agreement, following the presumptive ratification of the deal by the Senate in September 2015.

Israel will likely seek to use the opportunity to enhance its Air Force hardware, including planes such as the V22 and the F-35 stealth fighter, as well as advanced radar equipment and bunker-destroying munitions and other sophisticated weapons which the US has previously withheld from the Israeli military¹⁰.

Finally, Israel is likely to seek a strategic partnership with Washington which would allow it to maintain its qualitative edge in comparison to its regional neighbors, and to have American assurances that its nuclear facilities will not be subjected to inspections by the IAEA. Alongside expanded cooperation in intelligence gathering, at a time when other regional players will seek to develop nuclear capabilities, the Israelis will be able to closely follow any possible infraction by Iran of the nuclear agreement, and, crucially, how the Americans respond to it.

¹⁰ Alex Fishman, "Qualitative Edge", *Yediot Ahranot* (Saturday supplement of the print edition), July 17, 2015;