

THE BELFER CENTER'S IRAN PROJECT

Tipping the Balance?

Implications of the Iran Nuclear Deal on Israeli Security



HARVARD Kennedy School

BELFER CENTER

FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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The Iran Project

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The statements and views presented in this report are solely those of the individual authors and do not imply endorsements of other views and assessments of this report.

How the Iran Deal Affects Israeli Politics and Security Thinking

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When thinking about the impact of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) on Israeli politics and security, the implications in the short to medium term are likely to be most pronounced in the context of US-Israel relations. The focus in this timeframe will be primarily on questions of how the Iran deal is implemented, and this will lead Israeli decision makers to direct their attention to dialogue with the United States. Because the deal suffers from some major holes and vulnerabilities—the result of ambiguity incorporated into the text regarding key verification provisions—questions will arise as to how the P5+1 nations intend to ensure Iranian compliance.

One important issue is intelligence gathering to uncover possible Iranian violations, and US-Israel cooperation in this realm will be crucial. Moreover, there is a chain of decisions that will have to be taken, from the time that a violation is identified and until action is taken in response, and these steps must be clarified. Nothing can be taken for granted at this point. Critical questions will be raised about whether the political will exists to confront Iran with determination, especially if the perception is that a harsh stance will risk Iran viewing this as a pretext for exiting the deal. Israel and the US should thus forge bilateral

understandings that will clarify and codify some of these issues. Developments over recent months in relation to inspection procedures at Parchin, as well as Iran's testing of a new precision-guided ballistic missile that can carry a nuclear payload, have exposed that Iran is 'testing the waters.' Iran does so in the hope of establishing rules of the game whereby IAEA inspectors will be barred entry into any suspicious military facility and that ballistic missiles will be accepted as a "non-nuclear" matter. P5+1 reactions so far have not been encouraging, and the US administration has been more prone to explain why these Iranian interpretations are not a problem than to confront Iran's actions with determination.

Bilateral discussions between Israel and the United States will also likely include an even more pronounced element of defense cooperation, in light of Iran's ability—financially and otherwise—to assume a strengthened regional presence and role in the post-deal years, continuing to carry out dangerous arms transfers to its proxies throughout the region. Developments in Syria are of major concern, with a much enhanced presence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards on the ground, working in coordination and cooperation with Russia's air strikes with the aim of ensuring Assad's continued rule.

An additional theater where Israel is likely to be focusing more diplomatic effort is the regional one. While the prospect of new regional threats due to an empowered Iran are clearly apparent, there are corresponding opportunities to work on regional relationships with like-minded states in the region. Israel has a common interest with states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and perhaps others, to enhance their collective ability to coordinate policy and action with the aim of minimizing the dangerous implications of the deal in the regional setting.

In the longer time frame, assuming that Israel continues to face the current regime in Iran, Israel's thinking will turn increasingly to the strategic level, including an assessment of its own nuclear policy and strategic deterrence posture. After 10-15 years, when the meaningful restrictions on Iran are lifted, Iran will be able to cross the nuclear threshold at a time of its choosing, after having spent the interim years continuing to build up its vast nuclear infrastructure, including development of more and more advanced generations of centrifuges and ballistic missile capabilities. The extremely dangerous implications of this scenario will move to the forefront.

A final cautionary note: when addressing Israel's concerns and likely reactions, it is important to underscore that Iran's nuclear ambitions are not an Israeli issue per se. Deep skepticism regarding successful implementation of the deal is widespread, and the adverse consequences of Iran actually acquiring a military nuclear capability would point in many directions, both geographically and conceptually. The implications would be dire for the Middle East (short term), and for Europe and the US in the longer term, as well as for nonproliferation efforts, the NPT, and global security more broadly. Therefore, zeroing in on Israel's interests and concerns in the wake of the deal, while no doubt an important component of the overall picture, must be viewed in context. Otherwise—and this is often evident in the public debate—it is easy to slip into thinking that this is somehow only “Israel's problem.” Viewing the issue this way can take a particularly negative turn when it is used to support the conclusion that whatever the US does to confront Iran's ambitions and activities—especially if that were at some point to involve military force—is “because of Israel.” But that is not the case, and it bears reminding.



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