

Israel and the Negotiations on Iran's Nuclear Program

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Israel's approach to the negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran on the Iranian nuclear program has been marked by tension between the intense fear of an agreement that will leave Iran a nuclear threshold state that can break out to nuclear weapons in a relatively short period of time, and the hope that a reasonable agreement will spare Israel the need to consider unattractive options, such as a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. In most cases, the fear is the dominant element, and wields the primary influence over Israel's behavior.

The turning point that led to a resumption of negotiations with Iran was the victory of Hassan Rouhani, a pragmatist, in Iran's presidential elections. Rouhani's first objective was to have international sanctions against Iran lifted by resuming negotiations and reaching an agreement. Israel's response to Rouhani's election was cool, at best. On the one hand, there were clear positive aspects of the election results, including proof of the effectiveness of the sanctions, and the Iranian people's opposition to the Islamic regime and their desire for change. However, the conclusion was that Rouhani's election was a trick by the regime to overcome public opposition and bring about an end to the sanctions by demonstrating to the West the regime's softer side. Rouhani himself was described by Prime Minister Netanyahu as a "wolf in sheep's clothing,"¹ flesh and blood of the regime, and a man whose election was approved by Supreme Leader Khamenei and whose main objective is to help the regime survive. This objective would be achieved through negotiations with a minimum of Iranian concessions.

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From the start of the negotiations, Israel expressed concerns about Western weakness in dealing with the sophisticated Iranian negotiators, whose objective is clear: to preserve nuclear breakout capability and most of the assets of the nuclear program, and have the sanctions lifted. The West is perceived as fearing the consequences of a military strike against the Iranian nuclear program, and therefore, as striving to reach an agreement at almost any price. At the same time, in the wider debate in Israel, some have argued that the West started the negotiations from a position of strength because of the effectiveness of the sanctions, and that it is actually Iran that feels pressured to reach an agreement quickly. Some are concerned that the West does not understand this, and that therefore it will not leverage the potential of this advantage.

Israel's fears are tied to the perception that President Obama is weak and does not cope well with ideological rivals that display a coherent anti-Western world view, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Vladimir Putin's Russia. Obama's decision not to attack Syria as punishment for its use of chemical weapons against civilians during the civil war, and his preference for an agreement with Syria on dismantling its chemical weapons, was perceived as further proof of his weakness, since he recoils from the possibility of using military force – despite the fact that in retrospect, Israel has benefited from and expressed satisfaction with the agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons, most of which has already been implemented (all declared materials have already been removed from Syria to be destroyed on the high seas).²

The signing of the interim deal on November 24, 2013, which is perceived by many as a bad agreement³ for several reasons, raised the level of fear in Israel. First, the agreement leaves Iran's enrichment capability intact, and leaves the large quantity of uranium enriched to a low level inside Iran. This means that Iran's nuclear breakout capability has not been significantly damaged. The reduction in the amount of uranium enriched to 20 percent is seen as insignificant and as a way to create a false impression of a true limitation of Iran's breakout capability. At the same time, and for the same reason, the agreement is perceived as granting international legitimacy to Iranian enrichment capability, even though the P5+1 have refrained from inserting an explicit statement to this effect in the agreement, as the Iranians demanded. On the other hand, it was argued that the partial lifting of the sanctions and the new spirit created by the agreement would lead to the rapid erosion of the sanctions, and perhaps to their total collapse, even without

a final agreement. Another fear was that the parties would not succeed in reaching an agreement and would prefer not to declare failure, but to extend the period of negotiations with no limit, while in the meantime the centrifuges would continue to spin, increasing the inventories of uranium enriched to a low level, and in fact, strengthening Iran's ability to break out to nuclear weapons within a short time. These fears even led to apocalyptic statements in Israel such as, "We will know how to defend ourselves," which indicated Israel's intention to return to active discussion of the military option.⁴ In practice, it appears that these harsh comments also stemmed from the Prime Minister's frustration resulting from his awareness that an agreement between Iran and the world powers would make an independent Israeli military strike against the Iranian nuclear program even more difficult.

Netanyahu's harsh response to the interim deal has been criticized in the public debate in Israel and called disproportionate. Thus, for example, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin argued that "the Geneva agreement is not a 'historic agreement' and is not a 'historic failure.'"⁵ The main argument was that this agreement is limited, that its entire purpose is to allow time for conducting negotiations on a comprehensive final agreement, and that as such, is not inherently a bad agreement.

It appears that Israel subsequently moderated its approach to the interim deal,⁶ yet it is difficult to know whether this change stems from domestic criticism in Israel or whether is a result of a growing realization that the fears about the agreement were not well founded. It has become clear that the sanctions regime has not collapsed, partly because of measures taken by the United States. Indeed, the opposite claim can also be made – that Iran is very disappointed by the measures taken to ease the sanctions because they have not led to the desired economic results. Businesspeople are not keen on resuming business with Iran because of the great uncertainty this involves and because the financial sanctions, which are still in place, make it difficult to use the monies released under the agreement. A further reason for Israel's moderated response could be an understanding by the government that continued harsh responses, which are perceived as disproportionate, would harm Israel's ability to hold an effective dialogue that would influence primarily the position of the United States, and to a lesser extent, the other participants in the negotiations with Iran. In addition, Israel prefers continuing negotiations over a rapid move to a bad agreement, and it is now focused more on these dialogues and less on public statements.

In July 2014 the parties to the negotiations took advantage of the option included in the interim deal to extend the talks. The talks were extended for four months; following this, three scenarios are possible. The first scenario is an agreement that is acceptable from Israel's point of view, that is, an agreement that is good enough even if it does not include all the provisions that Israel wants. This is a scenario that does not require Israel to take any step beyond monitoring implementation of the agreement. The second scenario is an agreement that allows Iran nuclear breakout capability, and which is therefore bad for Israel. In such a situation, Israel would be forced to consider independent military measures against the Iranian nuclear program in a very problematic political situation. A military initiative against the will of the international community, after the world powers have signed an agreement with Iran, would be a costly measure. In the third scenario, the negotiations would fail and there would be no agreement. It is still possible that the negotiators would aspire to avoid a declaration of failure and attempt to extend the negotiations. In any case, Israel would have to consider its moves, although the scenario in which the negotiations are stopped would make it easier for it to do so in consultation and cooperation with the West.

Notes

- 1 Tom Eatkins, "Netanyahu: Iran's President is 'Wolf in Sheep's Clothing,'" *CNN*, October 2, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/01/world/meast/israel-netanyahu-iran/>.
- 2 This is clear from Netanyahu's comments in his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in May 2014. See "Netanyahu: Israel Does Not Spy on the United States. Nothing. Zero," *Ynet*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4522942,00.html>.
- 3 David Simpson, "Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu: Iran Nuclear Deal 'Historic Mistake,'" *CNN*, November 25, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/24/world/meast/iran-israel/>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Amos Yadlin, "The Geneva Agreement: Neither a 'Historic Agreement' nor a 'Historic Failure,'" *INSS Insight* No. 489, November 27, 2013.
- 6 Amir Tibon, "Israel to West: 'We Won't Go Wild' if Negotiations with Iran Extended," *Walla News*, May 27, 2014, <http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/2687/2750269>.