

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

December 2015



## **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.*

# The Nuclear Agreement with Iran: Significance for Israel

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The nuclear agreement reached with Iran is having a significant effect on Israel. The struggle to prevent the agreement from being signed has failed, and it is becoming an accomplished fact. Israel will lose a major part of its ability to affect the Iranian nuclear program: the sanctions against Iran will be removed, and the possibility of a military strike against the Iranian nuclear sites will be eliminated, at least as long as Iran fulfills the agreement. On the other hand, the United States and Israel are embarking on a dialogue aimed at strengthening Israel's security against Iran and its allies, and it is reasonable to assume that this dialogue will reduce the tension created in their relations during the period in which the agreement was negotiated.

Despite the criticism in Israel and the United States of the obvious faults in the agreement, it also has advantages because it imposes significant restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program, mainly for 10-15 years. As a result of these restrictions, the time needed for Iran to break out to a nuclear weapon will increase from a few weeks to a year. Despite the restrictions, however, most of the Iranian nuclear capability infrastructure will not be affected. The restrictions are reversible, and leave Iran the option to breakout to the bomb whenever it decides to do so. Iran can make such a breakout in the next few years, mainly by building secret nuclear facilities. The more likely possibility, however, is

that Iran will wait until the restrictions are removed in 10-15 years, when it will be allowed to build a huge and unrestricted uranium enrichment program, and the time it needs to breakout to a nuclear weapon will become much shorter—zero, as President Obama suggested.

The common assumption in Israel, and to a great extent also in the United States, is that despite the agreement, Iran will not forgo its intention of obtaining a nuclear weapon but will be content for the meantime with the status of a recognized nuclear threshold state. Thus, it will postpone the fulfillment of its plan until it discerns an appropriate time for its breakthrough. This assumption means that at least as long as the Iranian regime remains in power, and given its declared wish to destroy Israel, Israel will have to take into account the possibility that the Iranian regime will acquire a nuclear weapon, which Israel regards as an existential threat.

Beyond the risks involved in the scenario of a nuclear Iran, Israel will have to deal with additional risks related to Iran, some of which are a result of the nuclear agreement. First of all, the agreement does not include the Iranian missile program, which is the largest of its kind in the Middle East. This means that Israel will continue to be subject to an increasing threat of missiles and rockets from both Iran and its allies, above all Hezbollah. Furthermore, the removal of the sanctions against Iran will enable it to devote resources to a substantial buildup of its conventional capabilities, which have been neglected over the past two decades, on the basis of its improving relations with Russia. Secondly, the agreement reinforces Iran's regional status. Many countries now regard Iran as an important factor in shaping the situation in Syria and Iraq, and in the struggle

against the Islamic State, and its weight is becoming even greater as a result of its closer relations with Russia and the weakness shown in the region by the United States. Thirdly, Iran is trying to exploit the presence of members of the Revolutionary Guard in Syria and Lebanon to extend its front line against Israel from Southern Lebanon to the Golan Heights. Fourthly, Iranian leaders declare explicitly that they intend to penetrate into the Palestinian theater, and send weapons to the West Bank as well.

Currently, Iran's regional policy must also cope with difficult challenges: the risk that Assad's regime will fall, the rise of the Islamic State, the opposition by some groups in Iraq to Iranian influence there, and Saudi Arabian activity against Iranian influence in Bahrain and Yemen. Iran, however, also poses clear challenges to countries in the region, including Israel: its growing influence within a group of countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and Yemen); anxiety among the Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia, about Iran, combined with their disappointment at the weakness of American policy; and the possibility that the obtaining of nuclear weapons by Iran will set off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that will aggravate the instability in the region.

Against these risks, given Israel's basic perspective of the nuclear agreement as a bad agreement that does not bar Iran's path to obtaining a nuclear weapon, the dialogue and cooperation with the American administration must be the main channel for Israel in dealing with the Iranian nuclear and regional threat. Such cooperation can include:

- Joint consideration by the United States and Israel of how to prevent Iran from violating the nuclear agreement,

including reaching a mutual understanding on the question of what will be considered a violation of the agreement, and what measures will be taken if the agreement is violated. From Israel's perspective, such consideration should also address the preservation of the military option against Iran in the event that the agreement is violated.

- Upgrading Israel's military capabilities, both against the Iranian threat, and against Hezbollah, including Hezbollah's huge stockpile of rockets.
- Strengthening Israeli deterrence against Iran, particularly against the possibility of a nuclear Iran. Over the years, Israel has developed good deterrent capability against conventional military capabilities, and to a great extent, also against terrorist threats. Deterrence against an enemy's nuclear capability will require additional means. Among these, taking into account the possibility of the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran, Israel is liable to ask the American administration to state explicitly and clearly that an Iranian nuclear attack against Israel or other United States allies will be regarded by the administration as a nuclear attack against the United States.

To sum up, where Israel is concerned, if Iran complies with the agreement, the immediacy of the Iranian nuclear threat will be delayed for several years, but the threat will not disappear. It will remain a key factor in the perception of the threat against Israel, at least as long as the current regime remains in Iran, and will require Israel to continue taking measures for dealing with it.



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