



What Israel Is Telling Biden About Iran

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Earlier this month, Israel's intelligence community took the unprecedented step of publicly airing its most recent assessment of Iran's nuclear progress. Iranian investments in atomic development are today at a "low point" as a result of U.S. and Israeli pressure, Major General Tamir Heiman, the head of Israeli military intelligence, told reporters at a press briefing. As a result, Iran is "at least two years" away from developing a nuclear weapon.

The disclosure was nothing short of unprecedented. Israel's intelligence organs are among the most secretive in the world, and notoriously tight-lipped about their operations and strategic estimates. Public comments of this kind would undoubtedly have needed authorization from the highest echelons of the Israeli government to be aired. That they were speaks volumes about Israel's mounting fears that the new U.S. administration's is rushing to reengage with Iran, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

That's hardly an idle concern. Even before the Biden administration took office, its incoming principals were making abundantly clear that reengagement with Iran would sit at the very center of their Mideast agenda. And now that they are in power, the effort is gaining serious momentum.

Thus, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told the *Washington Post* in late January that he envisions a rapid timeline for new nuclear talks with Tehran, terming it a "critical early priority." Secretary of State Antony Blinken was even more explicit. In his first television interview as America's chief diplomat, Blinken told *NBC News* in the beginning of February that Iran was just "weeks away" from having the requisite fissile material to produce a nuclear weapon — and that this timeline necessitated a full court diplomatic press to get Iran back to the negotiating table by any means necessary. Some two weeks later, the Biden administration made it official by formally offering to restart negotiations with the Islamic Republic.

Doing so could mean the United States proffering preemptive concessions to the Iranians as a good faith gesture — something which some in the Biden administration's orbit have already suggested. At a minimum, it is likely to entail a rollback of the massive economic leverage vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic that the United States has accumulated over nearly two years of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy.

That appears to be precisely what Israel is worried about. "In its current situation, Iran considers a nuclear deal the only way out of the crisis, and hence it is trying to go back to the deal it signed in 2015," Gen. Heiman explained. If this interpretation of Iranian conduct is accurate, it means that Iran's leaders don't view the 2015 nuclear deal — or even the new one that the Biden administration hopes to conclude at some point in the future — as a meaningful constraint on their strategic trajectory. Rather, it suggests that the Iranian leadership sees any such arrangement, and the inevitable economic dividends that would accompany it, as a renewed means to achieve regime stability, as well as a continued (albeit slower) path to nuclear status.

Half-a-decade ago, the Obama administration's outreach to Iran fundamentally upended the *status quo* in the Middle East, and set the Islamic Republic on a path of sustained strategic expansion. Today, the message out of Jerusalem is that Israel is fearful that history could soon repeat itself.

The Biden White House would do well to take these worries to heart. It would do even better to reassure officials in Jerusalem (and in other regional capitals) by explaining how, precisely, it plans to balance its new push for reengagement with Iran's regime and its support for America's traditional Mideast partners.