



Israel Considers Its Iran Options

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For more than a year, reversing the "maximum pressure" policy of its predecessor and hammering out some sort of nuclear compromise with Iran has been the centerpiece of the Biden administration's Mideast policy. The resulting negotiations have been watched intently by regional governments, and their scrutiny has intensified in recent weeks as Washington and Tehran have neared a breakthrough. But no country is observing the ongoing talks more closely than Israel – and no nation is contemplating a more drastic potential overhaul of its security posture as a result of them.

During a recent visit, my conversations with a range of Israeli experts, scholars and defense analysts shared an overriding theme: a persistent sense of incredulity – even betrayal – at the Biden administration's dogged attempts to conclude a new nuclear deal with Iran. Quite simply, Israeli observers do not understand why Washington has been so persistent in seeking to revive the 2015 agreement known as the JCPOA, and dismayed at the extent of concessions the White House has proffered to Tehran in order to make that happen. These concerns have only grown amid persistent rumors that the Biden administration is now contemplating removing Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), from the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization list in exchange for promises of good regional behavior from Tehran.

This policy, and its logical outcome of a re-empowered Iran, has galvanized a fresh strategic debate in Israel, where officials and experts are now considering the merits of both a "Plan B" and a "Plan C" in response.

Israel's "Plan B" is comparatively well known, and involves the creation of a sustainable independent military capacity for a strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. The government of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is now allocating significant resources to underwrite such an option. Last year, it increased the country's defense budget to nearly ILS60 billion (\$19.2 billion) – a surge of some 2.5 billion shekels (\$778 million) over 2019 levels – with much of the funds dedicated to the creation of a military contingency vis-à-vis Iran. This increase represents the most significant recapitalization of the Israeli Defence Forces in recent years.

Some domestic critics suggest that the current scramble is the fault of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who put too much stock in the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" approach in recent years, and as a result did not invest sufficiently in a viable independent military option for the country. As a result, some now support the current U.S.-Iranian negotiations – although, notably, not a new deal itself. Quite simply, a number of Israeli experts have made the case that the longer the current talks go on, the more time Israel has to prepare itself militarily for the inevitable.

Significantly, however, the current dynamics of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement have caused a portion of the Israeli defense establishment to begin to contemplate another option as well. This "Plan C" involves a reconfiguration of the country's nuclear posture into a more overt stance. Such a move would represent a dramatic change; for decades, Israel has embraced a policy of nuclear ambiguity, under which it formally denied its status as a nuclear possessor despite being widely understood to be one. This stance has allowed Jerusalem to avoid entanglement in international arrangements like the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which would expose the country and its atomic program to intense global scrutiny.

Now, voices in the Israeli defense community and policy establishment have begun to argue that a change to this policy is needed. Effectively, they contend, Israel should "come out of the nuclear closet" and affirm that it possesses nuclear weapons. By doing so, the thinking goes, Israel might be able to establish some semblance of a "balance of terror" with an Islamic Republic that is fast approaching the nuclear threshold, and whose nuclear program is simply too mature, too distributed and too resilient to be eliminated outright.

What that might mean – both for Israel's international standing and for the region at large – remains to be seen. But it is undeniably one of the most important strategic shifts now taking place in the neighborhood, as Mideast states brace themselves for what is shaping up to be a new, and deeply dangerous, Iran deal.