



Israel's deepening Iran dilemma

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The Islamic Republic of Iran has long represented the most significant strategic challenge facing Israel. Today, despite years of persistent focus, as well as a range of covert initiatives to erode Iranian military and technological capabilities, that threat has grown significantly more acute. As a result, the Jewish state is fast approaching a critical juncture in its Iran policy.

As I heard on a recent fact-finding trip to the country, two things are drawing this fateful moment closer.

The first is Iran's own accelerating nuclear advances. The country was recently discovered to have enriched uranium to 84% purity, just shy of the "red line" of 90% that has been drawn by successive Israeli leaders. That development demonstrates serious, sustained nuclear progress on the part of the Islamic Republic — progress that has taken place notwithstanding the massive economic and political pressure leveled against Iran by the West in recent years.

The second is the bankruptcy of the current U.S. approach to the threat from Iran. The Biden administration took office promising to scupper the "maximum pressure" policy of its predecessor and reengage diplomatically with Iran as a way of curtaining its regional menace. More than a year on, the White House remains committed to resuscitating the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the West — even though, Israeli experts say, it is abundantly clear that for the Iranian side, this is now a "dead issue."

As a result, they assert, the United States doesn't have much of a Plan B for preventing Iranian nuclearization. This sobering realization has led even those Israelis who previously backed the 2015 deal to become convinced that Israel will need to act unilaterally to dismantle (or at least delay) the Iranian nuclear effort.

Whether it can actually do so, however, is the subject of considerable debate in the country. An often-heard refrain is that Iran's nuclear program is too mature, too distributed and too resilient to be eliminated outright by any conceivable Israeli military action — and that therefore the result of any Israeli strike would be temporary at best, buying the country (and the international community) just a short reprieve in terms of Iranian nuclear development.

Some Israeli officials, though, push back on this presumption. They point to the fact that prior rounds of Israeli preemptive action (against Iraq's Osiris nuclear reactor in the early 1980s, and more recently Syria's nuclear plant at al Kibar in 2007) had lasting effects, with neither Baghdad nor Damascus resuming its respective nuclear quest since. This, they argue, suggests that Israeli military action might have more of a long-term impact on Iran's nuclear program than many currently believe.

But the resources necessary to carry out any such strike remain in distinctly short supply. Here, returning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the subject of widespread criticism. Both liberal and conservative commentators assert that, for all his persistent rhetoric about the dangers of a nuclear Iran, Mr. Netanyahu did not do nearly enough to fortify Israeli capabilities the last time he was in office. Simply put, they say, he trusted former President Donald Trump too much and therefore did not devote sufficient resources to erecting an independent military option against Iran.

To its credit, the unity government of Naftali Bennett thereafter sought to rectify this state of affairs, allocating significant sums of money to "rearmament" broadly, and to recapitalizing Israeli military capabilities vis-a-vis the Iran threat in particular. And now, the country's new right-wing coalition government (once again helmed by Mr. Netanyahu) is expected to continue along this course.

This situation eloquently underscores the deepening Israeli dilemma vis-a-vis Iran, especially in the context of its long-standing "special relationship" with the United States. As Israeli observers put it, America has the capability to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat, but it doesn't have the political will to do so. Israel, by contrast, is in the opposite position; it has sufficient will, but lacks the capability to deal with the Iranian threat in a lasting fashion.

The optimal scenario, at least as seen from Jerusalem, is for the United States to give Israel the advanced military capabilities it needs to set back Iran's nuclear enterprise for as long as possible. But such a scenario remains remote, because of Washington's fixation with the idea that some sort of deal with Tehran is still possible. And as a result, the Israeli view holds, the White House isn't prepared to do what is necessary to prevent Iran's ayatollahs from acquiring the bomb.