

Israel Opposes Biden Administration Iran Deal

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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TEL AVIV—“The only thing worse than the Iran that exists now is an Iran with nuclear weapons,” President Joe Biden [explained](#) to Yonit Levi, anchor of Israel’s most watched nightly news broadcast, in an exclusive interview in Washington in the days before his July visit to Israel. “And if we can return to the deal and hold them tight,” Biden added, “I still think it makes sense, we’ve laid it out on the table, we’ve made the deal, we’ve offered it, and it’s up to Iran now.” When pressed by Levi, Biden said that he would use force “as a last resort” to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

As the Biden administration closes in on a second Iran deal, the Israeli government disagrees with Washington’s assessments of the tradeoffs and worries about the United States’ readiness to enforce it. The deal does not make sense, Jerusalem believes, because, having failed to hold Iran tight under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the U.S. possesses less leverage to do so under Iran deal 2. And because the Biden administration, like the Obama administration, has demonstrated desperation by making serial concessions to the Iranians, Washington appears to many Israelis to be readier to accommodate Iran’s hard lines and overlook its persistent deceptions than to back up American words with force.

On Aug. 24, with reports swirling that the latest round of talks in Vienna had brought the U.S. and Iran to the verge of a new accord, Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid [reiterated](#) Israel’s opposition at a

press briefing in Jerusalem for foreign correspondents. “Israel is not against any agreement,” he emphasized. “On the table right now,” however, “is a bad deal.” According to Lapid, “It would give Iran \$100 billion a year” that Tehran will put to work “to undermine stability in the Middle East and spread terror around the globe.” Echoing former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s stance toward the JCPOA, Lapid declared that “if a deal is signed, it does not obligate Israel.”

Lapid insisted that “The United States is and will remain Israel’s closest ally, and President Biden is one of the best friends Israel has ever known.” The prime minister nevertheless maintained that Israel rejected the contemplated agreement based on criteria that the Biden administration professed: “In our eyes, it does not meet the standards set by President Biden himself: preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear state.” Consistent with Israel’s longstanding policy to make the final decisions about its self-defense and take responsibility for executing them, Lapid stressed that Israel “will act to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state.”

The JCPOA provides Israel ample reason to doubt the Biden administration’s assurances that a second Iran deal will bring regional stability. Conceived and negotiated by former Obama administration figures – in particular, Biden National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Special Envoy for Iran Rob Malley, who are now driving the Iran deal 2 negotiations – the JCPOA left Iran’s military sites unmonitored by the International Atomic Energy Association. It gave the IAEA imperfect access to Iran’s declared sites. It went into effect while Iran hid many nuclear sites that only became known after the Mossad’s 2018 capture in Tehran of a [secret Iranian nuclear archive](#). It permitted Iran to develop ballistic missiles, sow terror throughout the Middle East, arm Hezbollah and Hamas, and continue to call publicly for Israel’s destruction. It came with sunset provisions that paved the way to Iran’s achievement within 10 to 15 years of internationally recognized status as a nuclear threshold state. And it provided immediate sanctions relief that infused tens of billions of dollars into Iran’s debilitated economy.

Last week, in the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz, former Israeli deputy national security adviser Chuck Freilich [argued](#) that President Donald Trump's 2018 decision to withdraw from the JCPOA "has proven no less than catastrophic" because it freed Iran to increase markedly their uranium enrichment. But Freilich [overlooks](#) the progress toward breakout capabilities that Iran achieved before the U.S. left the JCPOA, while underestimating the success of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's "maximum pressure" campaign, which severely weakened Iran's economy and thereby opened the possibility of a new round of talks in which the U.S. could negotiate from a position of strength. Freilich, moreover, ignores the [timeline](#) of Iran's nuclear advances. While it began to overtly violate the terms of the JCPOA by May 2019 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union remained parties to the agreement with Iran), Tehran significantly stepped up uranium enrichment after Biden's election in November 2020 apparently in anticipation – correctly – of the new administration's easing of sanctions and willingness to meet Iran's escalating demands.

The Biden administration's new Iran deal is likely to lock in place Iran's progress and enable further development beyond the reach of formal inspection requirements. As Lapid pointed out in his Aug. 24 news conference, the emerging agreement "creates huge political pressure on" the International Atomic Energy Agency "to close open cases without completing professional investigation." Lapid noted that when asked whether he had received adequate information from the Iranians on these open cases, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi responded, "Absolutely not. So far Iran has not given us the technically credible explanations that we need to explain the origins of many traces of uranium. Let us have an explanation. If there was nuclear material there, where is it now?"

Based on Iran's consistent record of concealment, stonewalling, and prevarication, Lapid's distrust is entirely warranted: "How is it possible to sign a deal with Iran when this is what the body responsible for supervising a deal says? How is it possible to sign a deal with the Iranians that gives them a \$100-billion-a-year prize for breaking all of their commitments?" The prime minister might

also have asked how it is possible for the U.S. to enter into a deal – or negotiate – with a regime that permits assassination [plots](#) to target Pompeo and former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton.

If the Biden administration signs off on arrangements that empower Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons – or if negotiations fall through and Iran pursues them unconstrained by a second pact with the U.S. – can Israel back up its brave words to block Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons? That crucial question turns on three others: Does Israel have the military capabilities to significantly set back Iran’s nuclear program? Can Israel absorb and effectively respond to the expected retaliation, including ballistic missiles from Tehran, a deluge of rockets and intermediate-range missiles from Hezbollah in Lebanon that can reach all parts of Israel, and a barrage of rockets from Hamas in the Gaza Strip? And, in the event of an Israeli strike, even if the U.S. does not intervene militarily, will Washington stand by Jerusalem in the diplomatic sphere and provide material and financial support?

Some here hold out the hope that Israel can avoid direct military confrontation through clandestine, asymmetric, and “gray zone” operations that take the fight to Iranian territory and exact a high price on the regime. Longtime security analyst Ehud Yaari [pointed out](#) on the Aug. 24 evening news that “There is no other country in the world that tried to obtain a nuclear weapon for 30 years and failed to do so. Not South Africa, not India, not Pakistan.” Yaari suggested that the reason is that Iran wants to develop the ability to assemble a nuclear weapon but does not want to assemble it because that might provoke Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to seek nuclear weapons. Perhaps. But there is little doubt that the mysterious explosions that from time to time destroy Iranian labs and the periodic unsolved killings of Iranian scientists have played a significant part in setting back Iran’s nuclear program. To delay, however, is not to prevent. Iran has come a long way and has been approaching nuclear threshold status – the point at which no conceivable attack by Israel could prevent it from making nuclear weapons.

Under these circumstances, it seems that Israel would only endorse a U.S.-Iran agreement that provides credible rollback of Iran's substantial nuclear progress, credible monitoring and inspection, and credible threat of force should Iran fail to comply with its obligations.

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https://www.realclearpolitics.com/authors/peter_berkowitz/

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