

With Iran Deal Closer Than Ever Israel Presses for War

As Iran indicates it is open to a new nuclear deal, Yair Lapid is pushing the U.S. towards an attack that would devastate the entire region.

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While Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz was [launching his assault on seven Palestinian NGOs](#) on Thursday, Prime Minister Yair Lapid was pressing the United States [closer to an attack on Iran](#) that could send the entire region into an unprecedented conflict.

Lapid sent a message to the White House that “In the current situation, the time has come to walk away from the table. Anything else sends a message of weakness to Iran.” He said this in a meeting with outgoing uber-hawk Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL) and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides.

“Now is the time to sit and talk about what to do going forward in order to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon,” Lapid further stated. Given that Iran currently endures not only the sanctions that it suffered under before the 2015 JCPOA, or Iran Nuclear Deal, was struck but also the “maximum pressure” sanctions that Donald Trump placed on the country that current President Joe Biden never saw fit to lift, it is unlikely that Lapid has even more sanctions in mind.

Lapid was reacting to the latest turn in the JCPOA drama, a turn that, not coincidentally, has also brought closer than ever the possibility of a return to the deal that the United States unilaterally, and without any justification, abrogated in 2018.

On August 8, the [European Union submitted](#) what it considered to be a final draft of an agreement to fully re-establish the JCPOA, stating it could not be negotiated further. The United States immediately agreed that the draft could be the basis of an agreement; this was unsurprising as it was very similar to the deal the U.S. was prepared to embrace back in March.

Iran responded this week with a few reservations, but with a clear message that a few

changes could make it a deal they could sign. Since the deal was presented to both Washington and Tehran as a “take it or leave it” offer, Israel is claiming that this is tantamount to an Iranian rejection. That’s a criminally flippant attitude about taking a course that is very likely to a regional war. But it’s important to understand that Iran has some legitimate concerns and this is not, [as is being portrayed by some](#), just a delaying tactic.

Iran’s concerns

There are three issues that Iran feels must be addressed in the “final text;” a text which, it must be noted, [few expect](#) will be truly final as long as neither Tehran not Washington reject it outright or put irreconcilable demands on its completion.

The issue of the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) once seemed insurmountable. [But Iran offered a compromise](#) that could help address the economic effects of the FTO designations. The IRGC is an ubiquitous force in Iran, for better or worse, and the inability of its financial arms to function due to this designation would hamper Iran’s economic recovery.

Tehran therefore backed off the demand that the IRGC be de-listed and adjusted it to a demand that some of its subsidiary organizations be de-listed instead, primarily Khatam-al Anbiya Construction Headquarters, a large engineering firm. The company has been [under U.S. sanctions](#) since 2007.

Second, Iran wants an [International Atomic Energy Agency \(IAEA\) case](#) against it closed. This case involves three unexplained incidents of nuclear material that the IAEA has detected. The draft text stipulates that the IAEA will close the case if Iran provides a credible explanation of the nuclear material detected.

Iran’s response to the “final draft” did not include anything, [according to reports](#), about the IAEA case. This is notable because Iran was deeply concerned, understandably, that this issue could be used to moot at least some sanctions relief even if the JCPOA was restored, particularly if the IAEA referred the case to the UN Security Council. Tehran’s silence may indicate that it finds the formula of providing a credible explanation in exchange for dropping the case acceptable.

Finally, [Tehran wants assurances](#) that the United States will keep its word this time. This is largely about Trump’s unjustifiable withdrawal from the deal, but it also refers to the fact that American rhetoric, [even during the Obama administration](#), was discouraging investment in Iran, limiting Iran’s economic recovery, and minimizing the benefits Iran was getting from the deal.

This is a trickier issue. On the first two, Iran says the U.S. has “[shown flexibility](#),” implying that this issue of guarantees is the most difficult. Whether or not he wants to, Biden legitimately can’t promise that a future president won’t do exactly what Trump did. And there’s nothing he can do if a member of Congress, from either party, decides to make threatening statements toward Iran that any investor will take as a warning not to invest there.

The current thinking seems to be that the renewed JCPOA [would include “indemnities”](#) that would guarantee Iran “certain economic returns” even if the U.S. backs out again. Tehran

seems to be indicating that this is acceptable, but they want it spelled out in the new deal, which, so far, it has not been.

All of these are sensible solutions to the remaining problems, and their very reasonableness explains Lapid's bellicose reaction. Election season is not the time a sitting Israeli prime minister wants the specter of a nuclear Iran to diminish. After all the negative things that both Lapid and his chief rival, opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu have said about the Iran Deal its restoration will be seen as a major setback.

Israel lobby struggles to counter

While Lapid will certainly not try to undermine Biden to the extent that Netanyahu did to Barack Obama in 2015 by working with the Republicans openly, his reaching out to Deutch—who, though he is retiring, remains one of the more influential Democrats in Congress and is eager to show his worth to [his next employers](#), the anti-Palestinian American Jewish Committee—indicates he is about to mobilize a full court press on Capitol Hill.

That makes this an “all hands on deck” moment. Recent polling indicates that a [strong majority](#) of U.S. citizens continues to support a return to the JCPOA. But opponents of the deal will seize on Lapid's opposition, and that can be more potent than Netanyahu's was back in 2015. Lapid and Biden have a much better relationship than Obama did with Netanyahu, and Biden is both considerably less committed to the JCPOA and much more cautious about, and sympathetic to, pro-Israel domestic forces than his former boss.

Yet the distaste for U.S. involvement in yet another Middle East conflict runs very deep. Moreover, while groups like AIPAC, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, and other pro-war, pro-regime-change institutions carry considerable weight on Capitol Hill, they have absolutely no argument against the clear reality that Iran was complying with the JCPOA before we pulled out of it and has since moved [significantly closer](#) to nuclear breakout capability, whether or not it actually intends to build a bomb, something that [is far less certain](#) than the U.S. and Israel present it as.

Even Lapid is not offering a viable alternative to diplomacy. He is mouthing [generic, warmongering platitudes](#). “The EU sent Iran a final offer, which does not comport with the principles to which the Americans committed, and established that the offer was ‘take it or leave it.’ Iran refuses the offer, and therefore the time has come to get up and go. Anything else sends a message of weakness.”

But he [doesn't know what to do](#) if the U.S. does leave the table. “Now is the time to sit and talk about what to do going forward in order to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”

Next week, Israel's national security adviser will arrive in Washington to meet his U.S. counterpart. Ahead of that meeting, it is time to raise a voice loud and clear. Only 8% of Americans back a military option with Iran. Next to that kind of pro-diplomacy majority, what the prime minister of a foreign country, especially one running an apartheid state, wants means less than nothing. We need to make that clear to everyone in Washington.

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