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Why Israel Won't Abide Any Iran Nuclear Accord

By Maysam Behravesh and Anders Persson , December 12, 2013 .



Israel is unlikely to support any agreement that brings Iran into the international fold. (Image: ajagendorf25 / Flickr)

The [interim nuclear deal](#) that was finally clinched between Iran and the world powers in Geneva in last November has been hailed by many in the West as a historic breakthrough for international diplomacy.

In return for provisional and modest sanctions relief, the deal enforces measures that guarantee to curb, but not dismantle, Tehran's nuclear activities in a verifiable fashion. Describing the accord as a "first step" that "achieves a great deal," U.S. President Barack Obama [asserted](#) shortly after the conclusion of negotiations that "for the first time in nearly a decade, we have halted the progress of the Iranian nuclear program, and key parts of the program will be rolled back."

"Simply put," he added, the plan "cut[s] off Iran's most likely paths to a bomb."

Other Western governments, including the [British](#) and [French](#), have made more or less optimistic pronouncements about the prospects for the interim Geneva pact to curtail nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and consolidate the structures of global security—it's "good for the whole world," as the UK foreign secretary [summed up](#) the accord.

But in Israel, where leaders have brushed aside assurances from Obama administration officials that the deal actually "[makes Israel safer](#)," opposition to the hard-earned consensus borders on the obsessive.

Before details of the pact were even released, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had rushed to [dismiss](#) it as a "historic mistake," refusing to abide by any deal that falls short of dismantling Tehran's enrichment program once and for all—a longtime demand for the Israelis, but a nonstarter for the Iranians. "Today the world has become a much more dangerous place because the most dangerous regime in the world has taken a significant step toward attaining the most dangerous weapon in the world," Netanyahu stressed in his address to the weekly cabinet meeting held shortly after the talks. Echoing Bibi's stringent stance, Israel's minister of intelligence and strategic affairs, Yuval Steinitz, exhorted that "the current deal, like the 2007 failed deal with North Korea, is more likely to bring Iran closer to having a bomb."

But Israeli politicians across the political spectrum are well aware that, given the magnitude of the political capital the international community has invested in resolving the dispute, it is simply too risky for Tehran to use the negotiations as a stratagem to outwit the world and work surreptitiously towards the acquisition of the bomb. Even if the Iranian leadership actually does harbor more sinister nuclear ambitions, it is rational enough not to take such a path under the existing circumstances, with the Islamic Republic just now managing after long years of costly mutual mistrust to restore a measure of confidence with the West. For Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's ultimate decision-maker in significant state affairs, any sort of double-crossing at this stage would be nothing less than suicidal, as it would offer a ready excuse for external intervention and a recipe for regime change. However intransigent and unreliable the Islamic Republic may otherwise prove to be, it will undoubtedly not fall into this trap.

And this is precisely what is unsettling Tel Aviv: any diplomatic resolution of Iran's nuclear controversy will deprive Israeli hawks of what they see as the sole feasible justification to overthrow the Iranian regime by military force. The fact is, with or without a nuclear bomb, Israel deems Iran's clerical regime an "existential threat" and is intent on deposing it. It's not simply because of Iran's nuclear program or bombastic anti-Israel rhetoric, but mainly because post-revolutionary Iran and its clients in the Levant stand as the chief impediments to Israeli hegemony in the Middle East.

In a rare [interview](#) with BBC Persian last October, Netanyahu warned that if Iran gets nuclear weapons, "this brutal regime will be immortal, like North Korea." But more realistic observers have long accepted that, for better or worse, the Islamic Republic is here to stay anyway—at least absent an Iranian uprising (a prospect the Israelis gave up on some time ago) or a foreign invasion (which the Israelis hoped the nuclear imbroglio would trigger). By helping avert war, the landmark Geneva accord is now wearing away this golden nuclear option for regime change in Iran, hence Israel's continuous insistence on keeping all [options](#) on the table and on asserting Israel's [right](#) to self-defense (as if it had been repealed).

This also tells us a good deal about the Netanyahu government's maximalist approach towards the international sanctions regime against Tehran: for Tel Aviv, sanctions are not merely an instrument of pressure to bring the Iranian leadership to its knees over the nuclear struggle, but primarily a "continuation of policy by other means"—an overarching strategy to wither out Iran as a whole, both as a state and as a nation.

Over the coming months, as the international community strives towards a "comprehensive" pact to resolve Iran's nuclear dossier once and for all, Israel is sure to intensify its spoiler role to impede a final deal. As it is feeling betrayed by the United States, not least due to the [secret](#) U.S.-Iranian [back channel](#) talks prior to Geneva, the disruptive strategy will take the form of operations to "expose" Iranians' putative breach of trust.

The greater challenge, however, is whether the Obama administration will manage to prevent the pro-Israeli elements in the U.S. Congress from ratcheting up sanctions against Iran while at the same time the administration is moving to soften them—a course of action that would undoubtedly kill any chances of reaching a final settlement. In the [words](#) of John Kerry, with the first step already taken, “now the really hard part begins.”