

SHADOW GOVERNMENT

The Countdown to an Israeli War With Iran Has Begun

If Biden returns to the Iran nuclear deal, don't be surprised if Israel takes matters into its own hands.

By [John Hannah](#), a senior fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America and a former national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney.

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A small army of top Israeli national security officials descended on Washington last week for their first in-person consultations with the Biden administration over its intention to return to the Iran nuclear deal. Israel is adamantly opposed to the agreement, arguing that in exchange for a pause in Tehran's nuclear program, it virtually guarantees that Iran can become a nuclear-weapons threshold state by the time the deal expires in 2030, while immediately funneling billions of dollars to a revolutionary regime single-mindedly focused not just on sowing aggression and terrorism across the Middle East but on the destruction of the Jewish state itself.

That's not a risk that the Israelis are prepared to take lying down, as they've repeatedly made clear. If Washington's strategy leaves Israel convinced that it faces a choice between fighting a much weakened Iran now or a much stronger Iran on a glide path to nuclear weapons a few years from now, no one should be surprised if Israel chooses the former. Though last week's talks got almost no attention in the U.S. press, my impression from people familiar with the discussions is that they may well mark the moment that the countdown to a new war in the Middle East began.

The Israeli delegation included Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's national security advisor, Meir Ben-Shabbat; the head of the Mossad, Yossi Cohen; the chief intelligence officer of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Gen. Tamir Hayman; and the air force general in charge of Israel's Iran strategy, Tal Kelman. Together and separately, they held meetings with U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, CIA Director Bill Burns, and other senior U.S. officials. President Joe Biden himself dropped by Cohen's White House meeting for an hourlong discussion.

The Israelis' overriding mission was clear: to look their U.S. counterparts in the eye and gauge if their worst fears about Washington's plans were in fact true. Was Biden really

committed to a straight-up return to the nuclear deal negotiated by then-President Barack Obama in 2015? Was the administration really determined to grant the Iranian regime billions of dollars in sanctions relief without first securing fundamental changes to the nuclear deal's major flaws—including a series of sunset clauses that start lifting constraints on Iran's ballistic missile program in 2023 and its advanced centrifuge program in 2024, as well as its lack of an ironclad verification regime? Were the Biden officials in fact impervious to Israel's warning that a return to the agreement would disastrously heighten the threat posed to Israel's security?

The answers the Israelis got? Yes, yes, and yes. Based on their own intelligence about the indirect talks being held in Vienna to bring the United States and Iran back into compliance with the nuclear deal, the Israelis arrived in Washington with low expectations. These expectations were met. Israel's bleak assessment about the administration's determination to resurrect the Iran deal without significant modifications was confirmed in full.

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Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, had messaged as much even before the delegation arrived. Asked if anything the Israelis might say would alter the administration's position on returning to the Iran deal, Psaki was unambiguous: "No." While Biden's

team was more diplomatic in their meetings, their bottom line was no less blunt, according to people knowledgeable about the talks.

The Israelis are deeply skeptical of the administration's assurances that restoring the 2015 deal is only a first step that will be quickly followed by subsequent negotiations to improve the agreement—by extending and strengthening its restrictions on Iran's nuclear program while also imposing constraints on Iran's most dangerous nonnuclear activities, including its ballistic missile arsenal and support for regional militias. The Israelis are contemptuous of the Biden administration's claims that once the United States lifts its most powerful sanctions on Iran's financial transactions and oil exports, the mere threat of reimposing them will somehow be sufficient leverage to compel Tehran to make additional concessions in the future.

Nor do the Israelis deem credible the suggestion that Biden would be prepared to snap back sanctions on Iran should it refuse to negotiate a follow-on deal. Once the nuclear deal is restored, the Israelis fully expect the Iranians to comply with its terms, patiently waiting for one sunset clause after another to expire and the deal's most important remaining restrictions to disappear in 2030 in order to stockpile as much weapons-grade uranium as they desire. Under circumstances where Iran is scrupulously observing the agreement's restrictions, just how likely is it, the Israelis ask, that Biden would be prepared to lower the boom by invoking snap back? After all, they point out, didn't every senior administration official from Biden on down excoriate then-President Donald Trump in 2018 for reimposing sanctions at a time when Iran was judged by international inspectors to be fully complying with the deal? Are the Israelis really now supposed to take seriously the idea that Biden would be ready to follow in Trump's footsteps and trigger an international crisis in the face of regular reports that Iran is abiding by its commitments?

Judging from my conversations with people familiar with the talks, the Israelis also have serious doubts that the Biden administration believes its own talking points about negotiating a longer and stronger agreement. They remember that all their U.S. interlocutors were prominent officials in the Obama administration when the Iran deal was negotiated. At the time, these officials derided critics who suggested that a better deal than the one signed in 2015 was possible, regularly dismissing such notions as “fantasy” and “the myth of the better deal.” Have their views of their own handiwork changed so much in the last six years that they will now insist on achieving what they once ridiculed as impossible? Or is the current pledge to pursue a longer and stronger deal in the future just rhetoric designed to neutralize opponents of the 2015 deal and smooth the way for its restoration? At that point, the Israelis fear, Biden will put Iran

on the back burner and switch focus to his administration's real priorities, including its expansive domestic agenda, climate change, and competition with China.

Questions about the administration's sincerity aside, the Israelis believe that the results of Biden's policy will be the same: returning to a deal that enriches and strengthens a rogue regime that is committed to Israel's destruction, while paving its path to obtaining nuclear weapons in less than a decade.

The Israelis have been relentlessly signaling that they will not tolerate such a situation. Last month, Netanyahu noted that the "worthless" nuclear deal "is once again on the table" and issued a veiled warning to Biden: "I say to our closest friends, too: 'A deal with Iran that threatens us with annihilation will not obligate us.' Only one thing will obligate us: to prevent those who wish to destroy us from carrying out their plans." Israeli Minister for Intelligence Eli Cohen was blunter still last week, claiming that "a bad deal will send the region spiraling into war" and that Israel's bombers "can reach everywhere in the Middle East—and certainly Iran."

It's not just Israeli politicians making clear that a return to the 2015 nuclear deal could back Israel into a corner and force it to take drastic actions. Days after Biden took office in January, IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi gave an extraordinary speech, warning that reviving the nuclear deal would pose an unacceptable threat to Israel's security and that he had ordered the IDF to have plans ready for attacking Iran during the coming year. Two months later, Kelman, the general in charge of the IDF's Iran strategy, was asked in an interview if Israel has the ability to attack and completely destroy Iran's nuclear program. He responded without hesitation: "The answer is yes. When we build these capabilities, we build them to be operational. It's not that there aren't many strategic dilemmas, since the day after Iran can go back to the plan, but the ability exists. Definitely."

Are the Israelis bluffing in order to deter Biden from reentering the deal? There's no way to know for sure. But for what it's worth, I don't think so. Israel's extraordinary covert operations over the past few years to expose and set back Iran's nuclear program are only a foreshadowing both of what's yet to come if Israel becomes convinced that its concerns about the nuclear deal won't be seriously addressed and of how determined it is to do whatever is necessary to keep the Iranian nuclear threat at bay. Reaching the conclusion that their best ally, the United States, has chosen a course the Israelis fervently believe will end up increasing that threat rather than containing it will only confirm their view that Israel is on its own when it comes to stopping Iran's march to the bomb—and that its operational planning to act militarily to defeat it must be

accelerated. That's precisely the conclusion that the Israeli delegation appears to have taken home from Washington and why last week's meetings may, in retrospect, have been an important inflection point. Despite all the Biden administration's best intentions, the risk of war in the Middle East is almost certainly now rising. Biden and his advisors would be wise to take heed.

John Hannah is a senior fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America and a former national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney.

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