



# A return to the Iran nuclear deal would increase the chances of war

**FOR THE** third time in 2021, the US recently flew B-52 bombers along the Iranian coast, in what *The Wall Street Journal* called “a show of the deterrence (to) reassure allies in the region.”

Unfortunately, both the supreme leader of Iran and America’s regional allies know this is more show than a serious threat. They know US military options under Biden are far off the table, as his administration has repeatedly telegraphed its intention to allow Iran to rejoin the nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, by merely returning to compliance with the flawed 2015 deal, without demanding any significant changes, despite Iran’s egregious behavior over the last five years.

The administration refuses to acknowledge that Iran desperately wants to rejoin a deal that was skewed in its favor. It will relieve the Iranians’ financial predicament, solidify the regime’s repressive grip on its people, while allowing the pathway to nuclear weapons capabilities the JCPOA granted over time. The administration’s analysis is that unless America enables Iran to return to the original deal, hardliners may be victorious in this year’s Iranian election, marching more quickly to a nuclear weapon. This completely misreads the situation. As Alexander Grinberg of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security wrote, there is no difference between so-called “moderates” and hardliners; both want to return to the deal. The only difference is their tactics to do it.

If you want to understand how Israel views the threat of an Iranian return to the JCPOA, just listen to the recent words of the IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen Aviv Kochavi. In unprecedented public remarks, he said that if the US returns to the JCPOA, it will be considered an “intolerable threat... we cannot allow it.” He went on to state that he is ordering new operational plans to confront Iran this year. This is not bravado. After years of speaking to experts, military officials, politicians, and intelligence experts, I have concluded that a return to the original

JCPOA means a likely regional war.

The only question is tactics. Mossad director Yossi Cohen, a hard-liner on the nuclear agreement and who has had an amicable relationship with Biden, recommends quiet behind-the-scenes lobbying in contrast to the more public approach of Kochavi. Yet both are close to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is no wallflower in letting the world know that the current JCPOA is a deal breaker.

No nation, especially the US, should be surprised if Israel decides to act if the “new” version of the JCPOA does not indefinitely end Iran’s ability to develop a nuclear weapon. JCPOA opponents’ greatest fear is that Iran will return to the deal, knowing that it will become immune to a future attack from its enemies once it becomes a nuclear power.

If the Biden team does not want the region to spiral out of control, they would be wise to listen to the words of one of Israel’s most astute military and intelligence experts, retired Maj.-Gen. Yaakov Amidror, Israel’s former national security adviser, “In a situation where the United States returns to the old nuclear agreement with Iran, Israel will have no choice but to act militarily against Iran to prevent it from manufacturing a nuclear weapon,” he says.

It is that simple, and Amidror also has Netanyahu’s ear. Israel takes Iran’s supreme leader at his word. His goal is the “elimination” of the Zionist entity that must “be uprooted and destroyed.” To Western sensibilities, this seems just incendiary rhetoric. US President Joe Biden must think again about how his decision about how to reenter the JCPOA can make all the difference in the world. No one wants a regional war, least of all Israel. But when faced with the potential for another Holocaust, Israel will not shy away from preemptively acting. To avoid conflict, Biden should not dismiss Israel’s red lines like US president Barack Obama did, paying lip service to their legitimate security concerns.

In 1981, Israel struck the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak. In 2007 Israel struck the

North Korean-built Syrian reactor that was undetected by America. Today, Iran can enrich uranium to 90%, deliver a nuclear warhead on its advanced missile system, and is working on compartmentalizing the core of a nuclear warhead. Today America has little idea how far along Iran’s weaponization program is, as the JCPOA didn’t allow intrusive inspections in its military facilities. In fact, the JCPOA didn’t require a single centrifuge or nuclear facility to be destroyed, something JCPOA advocates fail to acknowledge but which Israel is well aware of.

If Biden signs onto a JCPOA agreement that does not significantly change the agreement’s sunset provisions, it will tie Israel’s hands. It will then be forced to make a fateful decision to either live with a nuclear weapons-capable Iran, hoping mutually assured destruction will be a deterrent, or preemptively attack Iran and bear all the risks of retaliatory attacks. The international diplomatic fallout resulting from a preemptive attack will be led by the West, sanctioning Israel for its aggression.

The refrain of the Obama-Biden administration officials is the choice is binary: return to the JCPOA or you are asking for war. They have it backward; returning to this deal without significant improvement means war. They just don’t get it. As Michael Oren and Yossi Klein Halevi wrote in *The Atlantic*, “Reviving the JCPOA will ensure either the emergence of a nuclear Iran or a desperate war to stop it.”

During the years after the agreement went into effect in 2015, the same team that is now in place in the Biden administration did not enact a single new sanction for their miserable human rights record, growing missile development, support of terrorism, or support of Islamists, despite promises to the contrary. Sanctions relief today will support clandestine nuclear work in uninspected military sites and support Hezbollah and Iranian controlled militias throughout the Middle East. Billions of dollars will return to the coffers of the supreme leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Is there a plan to deal with this



US AIR FORCE/REUTERS

A B-52 Stratofortress, flown by Capt. Will Byers and Maj. Tom Aranda, prepares for refueling over Afghanistan during a close-air-support mission in this undated handout photo

beyond the hope for diplomatic engagement where the US would have lost its leverage?

Let's take the Biden administration at its word – that it will rejoin the JCPOA. What does that mean?

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said that there will be “no significant amendments added before rejoining the agreement.” Translation: the old deal is back with the hope that someday the Iranians may grace the Biden administration with another negotiation to address the failings of the JCPOA and their bad behavior. If you have seen the North Korean-American nuclear negotiations, don't watch this sequel, it will be the same sad story, undermining American interests and increasing the chance that Israel will preemptively attack Iranian nuclear facilities.

Israel has contemplated preemptive attacks against Iranian nuclear facilities many times over many years. Some thought it would act in 2007 when a politically manipulated American National Intelligence Estimate claimed Iran had stopped its nuclear weapons program, something disproved when Israel stole the Iranian secret atomic archive in 2018. As Oren and Halevi wrote, “The archive confirmed that Iran's nuclear-weapons program did not stop in 2003 but was merely split into overt and covert channels.” Netanyahu and his former defense minister Ehud Barak were reportedly in favor of an attack in 2012 but were thwarted by their security cabinet.

There should be little doubt that no matter who is prime minister after Israel's fourth

election in two years, the decision on a pre-emption strike will rise to the top of the agenda if the US returns to the deal it struck in 2015. That deal was not popular with Israelis, the American people, or Congress at the time, as evidenced by the fact that Obama never submitted it to the Senate as a treaty, knowing he was 24 senate votes short of approval. So it remains an unsigned document, not a treaty, to this day.

Fast forward to 2021's hyper-polarization. You may find some Democrats in the Senate who were against the JCPOA in 2015 but may now be more likely to find some rationale to favor the JCPOA, even though its flaws remain while Iran has become an even more dangerous and authoritarian state. Will Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who voted against the original deal, claim in 2021 that some minor reform by the Biden team that does not substantially change the agreement's essence allow him to vote in favor of a “new” JCPOA agreement? In 2015, he chose not to lobby a single senator against voting in favor of the deal despite speaking an excellent game to anti-JCPOA constituent groups. Will he choose politics over principle this time?

Iran is a revolutionary Islamist country whose core beliefs demand the extermination of the Jewish state. To western ears, this is unfathomable, but it is nevertheless true. Failing to understand the foundational core of Iran's regime's founding and beliefs dramatically increases the chance that Israel will need to strike Iran with all of the profound and dan-

gerous consequences it will produce for the region and the world.

So will Israel strike? When will it strike? How will it strike?

Israel knows it will face a multi-front war and need to figure out how to survive a conventional missile onslaught from Hezbollah, Hamas, Iranian controlled Syria and Iraqi militias, and from Iran itself. We saw how devastating the Iranian cruise missile attack on Saudi oil facilities was last year, and Israel fears these capabilities even with its multi-tiered anti-missile defenses.

How would the Biden administration respond to a preemptive Israeli attack? Would they act like Henry Kissinger in 1973, telling associates to let Israel get a bloody nose before resupplying to gain leverage for the future?

Israel's preemption would not necessarily be immediate as it would need to monitor the Iranian nuclear timeline, but once Iran gets close to that line in the sand, it will act. Cyber and clandestine attacks will continue. But conventional wisdom says Israel will need a kinetic attack in Iran to delay its program and repeat when it again comes close to crossing the nuclear weapons threshold again. The new variable is the Abraham Accords and the open relationship between Israel and Sunni states. Israel would likely coordinate defense and intelligence sharing, as the Gulf states share the same mortal threat, but Israel will fear its plans could be leaked and will keep its timing close to the vest.

Administration officials claim that the maximum pressure campaign has failed because Tehran has not rolled back its nefarious activity. The problem with this logic is that for the two and a half years Obama remained in office after the JCPOA went into effect, none of the moderation Obama anticipated happened. Iran became an emboldened hegemon. Today Iran deserves maximum sanctions for its clandestine nuclear work, to keep maximum leverage to negotiate a better deal, and impose a cost on their worsening human rights abuses and their support of terrorism.

Biden has the power to set the region on its course. What will he choose? ■

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