

Back to Iran Nuclear Talks

Perspectives, scenarios, and policy recommendations – by Amos Yadlin*

* **Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin** is the former Head of the Israeli Defense Intelligence, former Director of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), and a leading security and foreign policy expert. Maj. Gen. (res.) Yadlin is senior advisor to ELNET and chair of ELNET's Forum of Strategic Dialogue.

Iran's nuclear advancement, one of the world's most pressing national security challenges, has returned to the headlines, as parties to the nuclear deal prepare for renewed negotiations at the end of November. Ahead of the talks, we share key policy recommendations, as well as possible scenarios and perspectives.

Policy Recommendations

In preparing for restarting negotiations alongside the US, Europe should focus on three dimensions of addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge:

1. **Coordination between Europe, the United States, and regional partners directly threatened by Iran, including Israel, is essential.** It is imperative to agree on how the parties will work together to achieve the shared goal of stopping Iran from possessing a nuclear weapon. The parties should clearly define the red line that Iran should not be allowed to cross, and agree on the course of action in light of Iran's continued advancement of the nuclear program, with or without the deal.
2. An upgraded agreement, if enforced, is probably the best option for stopping Iran's nuclear program in the long run. However, this **requires a clear understanding of the conditions for a "longer and stronger" deal.** Ideally, Iran should be denied an indigenous enrichment capability, including mastering the fuel cycle. Unfortunately, this option may not be realistic at this point. The practical approach should therefore focus on **extending the sunset clauses** for decades and establishing an **intrusive "anytime, anywhere" inspection regime.**
3. **For diplomacy to succeed in effectively blocking Iranian pathways to a nuclear weapon, it must be backed by robust disincentives, including a viable and credible military option.** Clearly, the United States and Israel should prepare for military action if Iran crosses the red line. Europe should be ready to join the maximum pressure campaign in case the regime in Teheran does not return to the nuclear deal.
4. **Iran's regional aggression should be addressed as a critical, yet separate issue, not to overload the nuclear file.** Parties should discuss coordinated action against Iran's encroachment in the Middle East, regardless of the status of nuclear negotiations.

Perspectives from Iran, US, and Israel

View from Teheran:

The Iranian regime has announced a return to the talks, realizing that its demands in the previous six rounds of negotiations will not be accepted even by the Biden administration. Tehran understands that the United States is preparing a "Plan B" option, and fears that a wider set of sanctions will be imposed on Iran should it be blamed for not returning to the deal. The Iranians also fear a decision by the IAEA Board of Governors regarding the denial of access to the suspected sites. It is important to understand that even the conservatives in Iran, who oppose the agreement, know that such an agreement in its final years, which are fast approaching, is an excellent deal for Teheran. Returning to negotiations is a win-win for them – it defers any international actions against the regime and gives time for Iran to advance to the nuclear threshold.

Leveraging rising oil prices and bypassing sanctions, particularly through oil exports to China, the Iranian regime has been able to improve the country's economy. The regime's self-confidence and perceived lower risk of American intervention are reflected in the Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia, the Iranian attack on the American al-Tanf base in Syria, its naval provocations in the Gulf of Oman, and possibly even the assassination attempt against Iraq's prime minister. Against this backdrop, Iran's return to negotiations this week does not necessarily mean a return to the agreement. As long as the talks are ongoing, Iran is guaranteed some immunity from further international pressure. Its readiness to return to the agreement and its terms are far from clear.

View from Washington:

The Biden administration is preoccupied with many internal and external issues that it considers far more important than Iran, including the economy, COVID, political and social polarization, climate change, strategic competition with China, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, growing tensions with Russia and North Korea, and the midterm elections. The US administration is seeking to "put the Iranian nuclear genie back in the bottle." But Iran's refusal and stubbornness in resuming negotiations has led to a growing understanding that an alternative Plan B must be formulated. In Washington's view, a Plan B option could be predominantly economic and diplomatic, still a long way from a US military threat ("all options are on the table".)

The prevailing view in Washington is that should Iran continue its obstruction, it will be blamed for the failure to return to the agreement. The US would then join with the Europeans partners to the agreement, and possibly also with Russia and China, to impose sanctions involving all powers, while increasing pressure through the IAEA, leading to a new discussion in the UN Security Council. The US has apparently begun to consider a credible military option as necessary for the success of the diplomatic effort, whether to influence Iran's decision-making or as a signal to China that failure of negotiations could jeopardize Gulf energy supplies, which are essential to Beijing.

View from Jerusalem:

Jerusalem's assessment of the situation is grim. Iran already possesses 25 kg of uranium enriched to 60%, and 120 kg of uranium enriched to 20%, an amount sufficient for a first nuclear bomb if enriched to a military level (over 90%). Israeli experts assess that Iran can build a nuclear device in less than two months. Israel continues to view a return to the previous agreement as a strategic mistake, since even with a return to full compliance Iran is now closer to the nuclear threshold than in 2015. Moreover, as the agreement approaches its "sunset clauses", Iran will gain international legitimacy for an unlimited nuclear program.

Israel's government doubts it will be possible to achieve a "longer and stronger" agreement, to which the Biden administration has previously committed. While President Biden reassured Israel's Prime Minister Bennet "that Iran will never have nuclear weapons," the statement fell short of reiterating the need to amend and strengthen the deal. Israel is therefore in a situation where all the scenarios are problematic, and its political and security levers require validation, updating, and strengthening.

Possible scenarios

There are three plausible scenarios in the context of the return to the negotiations:

1. **Return to the deal** - although the agreement will yield fewer benefits today than in 2015, the parties have reasons to seek a deal to avoid confrontation. On the one hand, the agreement would not roll back the nuclear project far enough; on the other hand, Iran has developed a "resistance economy" and alternatives in Asia to overcome sanctions. Yet, a return to the same agreement now, on the eve of the "sunset clause" era, and given that Iran has reduced the breakout time to a few months instead of a year foreseen in the original agreement, is much more dangerous than in 2015. Striving for a "**longer and stronger deal**" is a preferred yet unlikely scenario, since there is little leverage and determination among Europeans and the US to achieve it. While the US and its partners hope to build the levers later, it is difficult to see how Iran would agree to amend the agreement without significant pressure and without making counter demands on its part.
2. **Stalling scenario** – the parties will likely be unable to overcome their differences and may seek to continue the negotiations even if barren to avoid escalation. Should the Iranians continue to advance their nuclear program at the same time, Israel will find itself in a problematic situation where it must consider action while the other involved powers are still negotiating with Iran. Alternatively, the US and Europe may demand that Iran freeze the nuclear program in exchange for a partial lifting of sanctions. While a "**less for less**" agreement could be highly problematic since it would keep Iran very close to the nuclear threshold, it may buy time to increase readiness for other scenarios.
3. **Crisis scenario - Failure to return to an agreement** - this is the most challenging scenario in the short term that would pose urgent dilemmas for decision-makers in Israel, Europe, and Washington.

*For more information on Iran's JCPOA violations and critiques of the original deal, read [**ELNET's Policy Paper on Iran Nuclear Deal**](#).*