

# The late November extension of the Iran nuclear talks: Understanding Jerusalem's sigh of relief

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## Introduction

Despite high expectations that the November 24 deadline for reaching a comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran would be a firm deadline, the inability of the parties to reach an agreement, and the subsequent decision to extend the process for seven months did not really come as a surprise. The assumed wide gaps between the two sides on some of the most critical issues on the agenda would have been difficult to bridge in the final weeks and days. Because neither side wanted to declare the process a failure, an extension was almost inevitable, although the rather long duration of the extension – through the end of June 2015 – was unusual, especially in light of certain diplomats' claims that agreement had already been secured on many of the issues.

The November extension raises many questions about what exactly is going on in this negotiation, but analysts are making their assessments with a dearth of actual knowledge, because the negotiators are purposely keeping the proceedings under very tight wraps. So we actually have no way of knowing what percentage of the issues is nearing or has reached agreement, and where the parties remain very far apart. When we listen to the Iranians in the public domain – especially statements issued by Supreme Leader Khamenei – we hear mainly “no, no, no”, but Secretary of State Kerry tells us that “great progress” has been made. So what is the reality? A best guess would be somewhere in the middle, although probably much more is stuck than resolved, otherwise it is difficult to understand the need for an additional seven months. Moreover, there is absolutely no indication that Iran has made a strategic decision to back away from its military aspirations; indeed, it is doing everything possible to hold on to its breakout capability, and still secure sanctions relief.

***Israel's (surprising) sigh of relief***

For some the inability to achieve an agreement on November 24 was a keen disappointment, but for others the decision elicited at least a temporary sigh of relief. In the Middle East – certainly in Israel – the more dominant sentiment was no doubt relief. This might seem odd against the backdrop of long-standing fears in Israel that the negotiations are not progressing, and that Iran remains defiant. Israel believes that Iran is holding out for a deal that will keep it at breakout, while at the same time trying to ease the economic situation through lifting of sanctions. Because Iran is still moving forward on the nuclear front, Israel's fear is that continuing on this route will ultimately render a reversal of Iran's military nuclear aspirations increasingly difficult to achieve, to the point of impossible.

Israel also doesn't put much stock in the Interim Deal, especially because Iran made sure that the terms of the deal would not significantly undermine its current status with regard to breakout. Israel is very troubled by the fact that Iran is continuing with R&D into more and more advanced generations of centrifuges,<sup>1</sup> and that the weaponization aspects of Iran's program are not covered by the Interim Deal. Moreover, in the parallel negotiation between the IAEA and Iran, Iran remains intransigent, stonewalling on the IAEA's different requests, including entry to the military facility at Parchin. And Iran is paying no price for this ongoing intransigence, because clearing up the PMD is currently outside the direct purview of the P5+1.

Still, countries like Israel – that remain on the sidelines of the negotiations and have no direct impact on the proceedings – are relegated to trying to influence the positions of those that do have a seat at the table, and weighing the alternatives. Because the breakdown option was not a realistic option for either the US or Iran, the alternatives in late November boiled down to either concluding a nuclear deal, or deciding on an extension of the negotiations. In the final weeks of negotiations, and in view not only of Iran's ongoing intransigence but indications of P5+1 willingness to move toward Iran by conceding on different issues, it was clear that any deal reached would necessarily mean further P5+1 concessions, with the inevitable outcome of a bad nuclear deal. When compared to a bad deal, the extension option was clearly the better choice. An extension held the (albeit slim) hope of getting a better deal in the coming months, if more pressure is applied. A more cynical view would be that the sigh of relief from Jerusalem was primarily a reflection of what one feels when an inevitably bad

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<sup>1</sup> Enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, and development of new and faster centrifuges are functional equivalents as far as Iran's prospective breakout capability. Both play the part of enabling Iran to make a quick dash to fissile material. This is why Iran could afford to stop enriching to 20 percent as long as it was allowed to continue working on the advanced centrifuges.

outcome is delayed, providing some breathing space before tough decisions will have to be made.

It should be kept in mind that contrary to some assessments, Israel does have a clear interest in a negotiated deal. The alternatives to such a deal would be Israel taking military action or Iran becoming a nuclear state, neither very appealing to Israel, to say the least. Looking back over the course of the years since 2003, Israel's prime ministers are on record with unequivocal support for diplomacy as the best means to rein in Iran, although Israel has also attempted to add a measure of deterrence vis-à-vis Iran with its own threats of military force against Iran's nuclear facilities, if diplomacy fails. So although Israel has often been portrayed over the past year as not willing to accept *any* deal, this seems not supported by the evidence. In fact, it is hard to see where Israel would disagree with the US approach that the best way to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons is through a "verified, negotiated deal."<sup>2</sup> The catch is that it must be a good deal, and there are differences of opinion over the definition of a good (and bad) nuclear deal.

### ***What the decision makers have been saying***

Interestingly, in official statements issued since the extension decision was announced, Israel's specific security concerns seem to have receded somewhat from the forefront of the arguments presented. Earlier this year (first months of 2014) Prime Minister Netanyahu seemed more prone to hint at the possibility of Israel taking action to ensure its security. But in the months preceding the deadline, and once it passed, Israeli officials have chosen not to dwell on the threat that a bad deal would pose to Israel in particular. Instead, they have highlighted more general concerns tied to the scenario of a bad nuclear deal and to Iran's continued nuclear ambitions. They emphasize the danger of Iran remaining at the nuclear threshold; the concern that it is continuing to pursue R&D on more advanced generations of centrifuges; fears of additional proliferation in the Middle East; and Iran's work on developing ICBMs, that can only mean that the regime has military nuclear intentions.<sup>3</sup>

A comparison of Netanyahu's words at the AIPAC policy conference in March 2014, and his most recent address to the Saban forum in early

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<sup>2</sup> See Carol Morello, "Kerry predicts Iran nuclear talks will be settled long before June deadline" *Washington Post*, December 7, 2014.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-predicts-iran-nuclear-talks-will-be-settled-long-before-june-deadline/2014/12/07/72d18dc6-7e58-11e4-9f38-95a187e4c1f7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-predicts-iran-nuclear-talks-will-be-settled-long-before-june-deadline/2014/12/07/72d18dc6-7e58-11e4-9f38-95a187e4c1f7_story.html)

<sup>3</sup> See statements by Netanyahu and Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz in Stuart Winer, "Israel nods in approval as Iran nuke talks extended" *Times of Israel*, November 24, 2014.

December, reveals a notable change of emphasis, from Israel's specific concern to the global one. At the AIPAC policy conference Netanyahu said "letting the worst terrorist regime on the planet get atomic bombs would endanger everyone, and it certainly would endanger Israel since Iran openly calls for our destruction. 70 years ago our people, the Jewish people, were left for dead. We came back to life. We will never be brought to the brink of extinction again. As prime minister of Israel, I will do whatever I must do to defend the Jewish state of Israel."<sup>4</sup> At the Saban forum Netanyahu was focused on the avoidance of a bad deal, and Israel's ability to have a positive influence in this regard, from the sidelines: "The November 24 deadline has come and gone. That's fortunate. Because a deal was not signed that would have left Iran as a threshold nuclear power. Though Israel isn't part of the P5+1, our voice and our concerns played a critical role in preventing a bad deal."<sup>5</sup> Netanyahu also advocated increasing the pressure on Iran.

In between these two addresses, Netanyahu's statements during an interview on BBC on the day the extension was announced are quite interesting – they contain an element of self-reliance, but not in the sense that Israel reserves the right to take military action. Rather, Netanyahu seemed to be referring to verbal action: voicing Israel's concerns to the United States. This is in line with his later Saban forum statement about Israel's role in convincing the P5+1 to avoid a bad deal: "Israel will continue to defend itself using its own resources. We are following the nuclear talks with Iran closely ... and letting our views be known directly, via my contacts with the American administration and other heads of government."<sup>6</sup>

The fact that Israel is less prone to putting its own threat perception at the forefront should not, however, be read as a sign of complacency or trust that a good deal will be achieved by the negotiators. On the contrary, Israeli officials have strongly emphasized the dangers ahead: Iran's unwillingness to back away from its military ambitions, and the imperative to continue with the pressure of sanctions, which is the only reason that Iran came back to the table in October 2013.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Netanyahu's address to the AIPAC policy conference, March 4, 2014.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-transcript-of-netanyahus-aipac-address/>

<sup>5</sup> Carol Morello, "Kerry predicts Iran nuclear talks will be settled long before June deadline" *Washington Post*, December 7, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> "Netanyahu welcomes failure to reach Iran nuclear deal in Vienna", *Haaretz*, November 24, 2014. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.628281>.

<sup>7</sup> National Security Head Yossi Cohen said that the extension of the JPOA enables Iran to preserve and even increase its nuclear capabilities, while sanctions are in danger of collapse. Quoted in Herb Keinon, "Iran retains its nuclear capabilities as sanctions regime erodes, NSC chief says", *Jerusalem Post*, December 7, 2014.

### **What role does Israel really play in confronting Iran?**

Israel's role in the eleven year on-again, off-again negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program has long been the topic of considerable debate. Fundamentally, Israel has no direct role in this dynamic, nor does the responsibility for dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions rest on its shoulders.<sup>8</sup> However, because Israel has long been the target of quite horrific rejectionist rhetoric from Iranian leaders, it has been hard for it to resist reacting to the threat; and since Netanyahu became prime minister, Israel has been much more vocal on this topic. Still, official statements warning that if diplomacy fails Israel may have to take military action in self-defense, have often been misread as implying an eagerness to do so. But there is not much to back that up.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, these threats have been an attempt to deter Iran, adding to the other forms of pressure on this state – all with the goal of getting Iran to return to its NPT commitment and back away from its military aspirations. In 2012, it seems that Israel's deterrence shored up a success – not vis-à-vis Iran, but rather the EU. It seems that EU fears of an actual Israeli attack helped to push the members closer to their decision to place an oil embargo on Iran. This was a drastic step from the EU's point of view, but proved to be a crucial piece of the biting sanctions puzzle that the US and some of its allies put together in 2012.

If we understand Israel's concerns, and its acute frustration over the lack of success so far in negotiating with Iran – with Iran all the while pushing forward with its nuclear program – the question is what is helpful to the overall effort and what is not. If threats of military force did help to bolster P5+1 determination, that was a positive effect, but if they interfere with the US approach, they can become a liability – for the talks as well as for US-Israel relations. The changes in emphasis in Netanyahu's rhetoric over the course of 2014 may be indicative of an understanding that Israel's efforts are best directed to trying to convince P5+1 states of the worthiness of its positions. This would explain why Netanyahu played up the success of Israel's efforts to warn of a bad deal in November. Expressing self-reliance through verbal action seems a better course to follow, but if a bad deal is concluded, Israel will nevertheless face some tough decisions.

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<sup>8</sup> Emily B. Landau, "Iran: Not Israel's role or responsibility", *Times of Israel*, March 7, 2012. <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/iran-not-israels-role-or-responsibility/>

<sup>9</sup> Recently, US officials were quoted using unfortunately foul language to communicate their assessment that Netanyahu was never serious about employing military force. See Jeffrey Goldberg, "The crisis in US-Israel relations is officially here", *The Atlantic*, October 28, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-crisis-in-us-israel-relations-is-officially-here/382031/>

### **Israel in broader context**

Israel seems to be in step with other states in the region, both regarding its concern that Iran could become nuclear weapons state as well as its preference for an extension at this juncture. Where Israel and these states – especially in the Gulf region – differ is that the Gulf states tend to be relatively quiet regarding their concerns, whereas Israel makes its positions known. But the implications of a possible nuclear Iran are dire across the region.

Currently, the Middle East is experiencing multiple crises, and is near boiling point as far as the situation in Syria and Iraq. This has impacted the nuclear talks in that it elicited some calls in the US for getting a ‘quick nuclear deal’ so that the administration would be able to consider cooperation with Iran on any number of challenges in the Middle East. But so far the nuclear issue is still being treated in the main in its own right, as was proven by the latest decision to extend negotiations, rather than settle for a bad deal.

Finally, while the focus of this article has been Israel’s reactions and calculations, it is important to keep in mind that the Iranian nuclear threat is first and foremost an issue of international security, with the continued viability of the nuclear non-proliferation regime on the line. While the Middle East is likely to suffer the initial effects of an Iranian nuclear capability, the extremely dangerous implications of this scenario have a global reach.

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