

Israel's Evolving Iran Policy

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Concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions have consumed Israeli decision-makers for decades. Another grave concern is what Israelis perceive as Iran's growing political and military influence in the region, particularly in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Capitalising on regional conflicts and political vacuums, Iran is building what Israel views as a 'land bridge' of friendly, largely Shia forces from Tehran to the Mediterranean. Never mind that Iran faces serious limitations to its regional power-projection capabilities and is domestically vulnerable after years of sanctions, repressive rule and poor governance.¹ Or that Israel remains the most powerful and well-equipped military force in the region, supported by its strategic ally, the United States. From the Israeli perspective, Iran's expanding missile capacity and network of non-state militia partners pose a grave threat. Iran's past support for terrorist attacks within Israel itself and against Israelis abroad, combined with inflammatory rhetoric expressing the intention to 'wipe Israel off the map', further elevates the Iranian menace in the Israeli psyche. In short, there is little debate in Israel about Iran's desire or ability to do it harm.

Until recently, however, views on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear challenge diverged. From fissures within the security establishment about the utility of military options and the wisdom of the Iranian nuclear agreement to concerns among political leaders about publicly opposing an American

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president, Israel's positions on Iran policy were more divided over the past decade than is often understood.² While a consensus emerged about the need to counter Iran in Syria even before the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – that is, the nuclear deal – Israeli views on Iran's nuclear programme remained contested.

The most significant divisions arose between Israel's political and security establishments, with the latter taking a less alarmist view of Iran and the nuclear agreement than Israel's political leaders, most notably Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As a former senior intelligence official noted, 'Israel's security establishment has seen Iran as a serious threat that needs to be managed. For Netanyahu, fearing Iran is like a religion.'³ These cracks persisted into the first year of the Trump administration, when it was still unclear whether a US president openly hostile to the nuclear agreement would nonetheless remain in the deal. A number of prominent Israeli security officials and analysts, even those originally opposed to the JCPOA, were in favour of the US staying in the agreement and believed it was working to keep the Iranian nuclear challenge contained. Having delayed the nuclear threat, the JCPOA provided Israel with space to shift its attention to the more immediate and prevalent challenge the country faced from Iran, namely its growing influence in Syria.⁴

Once President Donald Trump decided to pull the US out of the JCPOA in 2018, though, domestic debates within Israel over Iran policies dissipated. A new consensus emerged in support of the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' approach, which many Israelis hope may lead to the collapse of the Islamic Republic. The increased Israeli focus on Iranian entrenchment in Syria and the belief that the JCPOA had empowered Iran regionally brought the political and security communities into closer alignment and overshadowed previous differences over how to handle the nuclear threat and relations with Washington.

Notwithstanding a minority of Israeli analysts who question the effectiveness of the American maximum-pressure approach in achieving its stated goals, there is widespread optimism that the strategy is weakening Iran and its regional networks, particularly following the United States' killing of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander

Qasem Soleimani in early January. Even the analysts who question the merits of maximum pressure do not propose an alternative strategy.

The perception of Iranian vulnerability has only grown in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, which has hit Iran particularly hard as its leaders blundered their response to the outbreak. Israelis are expressing confidence that the twin pressures of the pandemic and economic hardship are leading Iran to pull back its forces from Syria.⁵ After an attempted Iranian cyber attack on Israeli water infrastructure in spring 2020, some Israeli analysts viewed Israel's successful retaliatory cyber attack, which shut down an Iranian port, as further evidence of Iranian vulnerability.⁶ Such assessments reinforce Israeli support for continuing pressure on Iran despite calls for easing economic sanctions during the pandemic.⁷

It is also worth noting that during the years leading up to the JCPOA, the main opponents to a military strike on Iran were the heads of Israel's security services. This included former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chiefs of staff Gadi Eisenkot, Gabi Ashkenazi and Benny Gantz, as well as Israeli intelligence leaders like ex-Mossad heads Meir Dagan (who died in 2016) and Tamir Pardo, and former Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin. They mainly feared that a strike without American consent and coordination would not deliver the desired outcome. Today, like-minded individuals who fully back Netanyahu's views dominate the defence establishment. For instance, the Mossad director is Yossi Cohen, Netanyahu's confidant and former national security advisor. The current head of the National Security Council, Meir Ben-Shabbat, is also a close ally of the prime minister. Coming from the Shin Bet, he lacks relevant experience on Iran and in dealing with the international community.⁸ But while many Israeli defence professionals still believe that reaching a new agreement with Iran would be the best course of action, they are discouraged from proposing alternative viewpoints by a leadership now tightly aligned with Netanyahu.⁹ While newly appointed Defense Minister Gantz may change this discourse, no such change is now apparent.

The result is that Israel's Iran policies are now unusually cohesive, with hardly any divergence about the wisdom of Netanyahu's preferred policy.

Israeli perceptions of Iranian vulnerability have grown

With a US administration fully sympathetic with his strident hostility towards Iran and supportive of continued economic and military pressure on that country, Israel's political and security establishments have little to debate. Israelis largely agree that the best approach is for Israel to continue degrading Iran's capabilities in Syria while supporting the American maximum-pressure campaign against Iran through economic sanctions, military strikes in Iraq and Syria, and continued cyber warfare. Many in Israel believe Netanyahu's ultimate strategy is to encourage a US escalation with Iran that would prompt an American military strike against Iran's nuclear sites, which some Israelis believe would be far more effective than any strike the Israelis could carry out on their own.¹⁰ The military option, off the table since 2013, is again a topic of national conversation.

Israel's Iran policies during the Obama administration

For decades, Israel has promoted efforts to expose and prevent an Iranian nuclear-weapons capability. Israeli leaders quickly condemned the final nuclear agreement between Iran and world powers in July 2015.¹¹ Netanyahu called it a 'stunning historic mistake' and noted that Israel was not bound by the agreement 'because Iran continues to seek our destruction'.¹² Avigdor Lieberman, then the Israeli foreign minister, compared the deal to the Munich agreement with Nazi Germany.¹³ Moshe Ya'alon, the Israeli defense minister at the time, said the agreement was built on 'lies and deceit' and that it was a 'tragedy for all who aspire to regional stability and fear a nuclear Iran ... Instead of fighting terror with all its might, the free world has granted legitimacy to Iran's hateful, murderous ways.'¹⁴ Former national security advisor and newly appointed Mossad head Yossi Cohen argued in January 2016 that Iran was an even more formidable threat following the nuclear agreement, saying that as it 'continues to call for Israel's destruction, it upgrades its military capabilities and deepens its grip in our area ... via its tentacles of terror'.¹⁵

However, such official reactions to the JCPOA masked important debates within Israel about its approach to the nuclear negotiations and the deal itself. Critiques of Netanyahu's opposition to the deal focused largely on how he managed his relationship with the United States during the nuclear

negotiations and his public attempts to persuade Congress to derail the agreement. Analysts viewed Netanyahu's speech to both houses at the US Capitol in March 2015 as particularly damaging to Israel's relationship with Washington, jeopardising bipartisan support for Israel with his 'crude interference in American politics'.¹⁶

Even hardline Israeli leaders like Lieberman who were highly critical of the nuclear deal frowned on Netanyahu's public opposition to the US position that led Americans and others to 'simply laugh at us when we start to talk about Iran'.¹⁷ Former national security advisor Giora Eiland viewed the JCPOA as a 'bad agreement', but argued that a confrontational approach with Washington should be abandoned in favour of a dialogue with the US whereby 'Israel can request returns in the defense world'.¹⁸ Ephraim Sneh, a former minister in Labor governments and a long-time Iran hawk who adamantly opposed the JCPOA, was nonetheless critical of the rift Netanyahu created with the Obama administration by choosing 'to follow the interests of the Republican party rather than Israel's own security interests'.¹⁹

Disagreement also emerged within Israel about the merits of the deal itself, with Israel's security establishment maintaining a far less hostile view of the JCPOA than the political elite expressed. Some security analysts and officials even saw value in the agreement, and behind closed doors said that it represented the most viable means of ensuring Israel's security in the short to medium term.²⁰ In a speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in September 2015 following the failure to thwart the deal in the US Congress, Gantz – currently defense minister, then IDF chief of staff – argued that while 'a better deal could have been reached ... I also see the half-full part of the glass here ... And I see the achievement of keeping away the Iranians for ten, fifteen years into the future – and postponing their capabilities of having a nuclear capability – and with the right price.'²¹ Gantz went on to argue that it was a 'done deal' that in his assessment did not threaten Israel's security situation: 'We are the strongest country in the [Middle East]; we know how to take care of ourselves ... So I refuse to get hysterical on this.'²² A former Israeli defence official similarly noted that the Iran issue had decreased in importance for members of the IDF general staff,

some of whom believed that too much attention and resources had been invested on Iran.²³ Indeed, in a speech to the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv in January 2015, IDF Lieutenant-General Gadi Eisenkot, then chief of staff, referred to the nuclear agreement as a 'strategic turning point' that brought risks but also opportunities for Israel.²⁴

Others in Israel's military and security community also viewed the JCPOA as successful in at least postponing the Iranian programme, and assessed it was a better outcome than the alternatives.²⁵ For example, while calling the nuclear agreement 'highly problematic', in part because it 'legitimizes Iran's status as a nuclear threshold state', former military-intelligence head Amos Yadlin saw gains at least in the short term.²⁶ Former Mossad head Efraim Halevy also argued that the agreement blocked the 'road to Iranian nuclear military capabilities for at least a decade'.²⁷ Israeli analyst and former general Shlomo Brom called the agreement an 'historic achievement' that shuts off 'Iran's pathway to a nuclear weapon for ten years or more' and that 'is good for Israel and its national security'.²⁸ Isaac Ben-Israel, chairman of the Israeli Space Agency, argued that 'the agreement is not bad at all, it's even good for Israel ... The United States president said that the deal distances Iran from a nuclear bomb for a decade or two, and he is correct.'²⁹ Even the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, the important Israeli panel that advises the Israeli government on nuclear issues, reportedly endorsed the JCPOA, finding the agreement's inspection measures and constraints on Iranian plutonium and uranium enrichment sufficient to prevent Iran's ability to produce a nuclear bomb.³⁰

Some Israeli analysts believe the reported fissures between the security and political establishment over the nuclear deal have been overblown. As one former Israeli security official put it, 'out of 600 ex-generals and officials, 500 were with Bibi [Netanyahu] on Iran, even if those same 500 would be against Bibi on Israeli-Palestinian issues'.³¹ The fact remains that prominent voices in Israel's security establishment publicly countered Netanyahu's assessments of the agreement and the way he handled Israel's relationship with Washington.

Despite Israel's official opposition to the JCPOA, it is remarkable how, once the agreement became a reality, the nuclear issue quickly moved off

the radar in Israel's political and public discourse. In October 2015, then-defense minister Ya'alon, who had forcefully argued against the agreement, acknowledged the new strategic context in a joint press conference with Ash Carter, the US secretary of defense: 'The Iran deal is a given. Our disputes are over. And now we have to look to the future.'³² The Israeli intelligence community did not assess that Iran was cheating after the deal, and largely accepted it as a *fait accompli*.³³ The regional challenges from Iran became a much greater concern than the nuclear agreement, which many in Israel's security establishment had come to accept as largely functioning to contain Iran's nuclear programme.³⁴ Iran's expanding regional presence through Syria undoubtedly became Israel's greatest security concern.

When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Israel refrained from intervening. Israeli analysts noted that the war at first actually served the country's interest by substantially weakening the Syrian army and bringing about the US-led effort to dismantle Syria's chemical-weapons arsenal in 2013. Like many other countries, Israel acknowledged the Syrian people's tragedy. It also offered humanitarian assistance to villages in the Syrian-administered portion of the Golan Heights in the hope that these areas would not be used as launch pads for attacks against Israel.³⁵ During the first years of the war, Israel kept its intervention to a minimum, enforcing two red lines by responding militarily to attacks on its territory and thwarting shipments of sophisticated arms from Iran and Syria to Hizbullah.

While the Israeli campaign in Syria to target Iranian intervention started well before the 2015 nuclear deal, it accelerated as the focus shifted from the nuclear negotiations and as Israel perceived a need to respond to Iran's growing regional posture and its increased ability to threaten Israel in conventional spheres. In 2015, under Eisenkot, the IDF published for the first time an unclassified version of its doctrine. The document introduced a military term now commonly used both in Israel and in the US: the 'campaign between the wars' or, in its Israeli acronymic form, *mabam*.³⁶ The *mabam*, conceptually an agile campaign, has evolved over time, but its underlying

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objective is to enable the IDF to enforce its red lines while avoiding escalation to full war. It was at this point that the Israeli concept of Iran building a land bridge to extend its influence from Tehran to Beirut through Iraq and Syria became a key talking point in Washington and within the US think-tank community.³⁷

By 2016, Israel assessed that Iran sought to create a permanent presence in Syria, building camps, ports and civilian infrastructure to create a Syrian version of Hizbullah.³⁸ The *mabam* campaign started as a limited effort, but expanded rapidly in scale and depth. The campaign involved more than 1,000 targets throughout Syria, including Iranian weapons and rocket depots, Iran's command and control headquarters, intelligence and logistics sites, and key IRGC and Hizbullah personnel.³⁹ Israel had learned its lesson from Hizbullah in Lebanon and vowed not to let Iran establish another front in the Syrian Golan. The shifting balance in Syria led Israel to draw another red line at Iran's build-up of capabilities in Syria that could be used against Israel in a future war. In practice, enforcing Israeli red lines has meant numerous airstrikes in Syria, with no signature strikes in Lebanon but later an expansion to Iraq, as well as a diplomatic campaign to distance Iran, Shia militias and Hizbullah from Israel's border.⁴⁰

Israel's actions in Syria have been constrained by Russia's presence in and air dominance over the country since its 2015 intervention. But Moscow's interests vis-à-vis Iran in Syria are also nuanced, and through an improvement of ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Netanyahu's government was able to deconflict its operations with Moscow and continue its campaign. Even an accidental downing of a Russian plane by Syrian air-defence systems following an Israeli strike in 2018 did not disrupt Israel's campaign beyond limiting its freedom of action for a brief period.⁴¹

In parallel with its military campaign, Israel has consistently appealed to the international community, and primarily to Russia, to keep the Iranians and Shia militias at least 40 miles (65 kilometres) from its Golan border. Despite international agreements, and notwithstanding reports that Russia agreed to heed Israel's requests,⁴² these demands have not been met,⁴³ and Shia militias, including Hizbullah, continue to operate on the Syrian side of the Golan, deployed independently, or often embedded within the Syrian army.⁴⁴

Israel's policy shift during the Trump administration

There is little doubt that Trump's hostile views of Iran and the nuclear deal were welcome news to Netanyahu. Based on discussions with Israeli officials and analysts, as well as reports from that period, it appears that while Netanyahu did actively lobby for the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, he was merely pushing on an open door. Netanyahu and Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to the United States, viewed Trump's election as an unexpected opportunity to derail the deal and adjust the United States' Iran policies. According to a former Israeli intelligence official, Trump's ascension to the White House precipitated a 'dramatic change', as Israel's political system, though not its professional echelon, began to actively work against the deal.⁴⁵

They were preaching to the converted. As one former Israeli defence official put it, 'either Bibi conveyed to Trump that he's right or they were just thinking alike'.⁴⁶ Another former official observed that while Netanyahu was cautious, he saw Arab leaders in the Gulf pushing for a more aggressive stance against Iran when Trump took office. He no longer saw any reason to be constrained, finding Trump and his advisers to be in 'total sync' with his own views on Iran.⁴⁷ Other former intelligence officials similarly observed that while Netanyahu wanted Trump to get out of the deal, Trump himself vowed to withdraw from it during his election campaign and entered office with that intention. Thus, the two leaders were already 'on the same page'.⁴⁸

Israel's exposure of a nuclear archive it captured from Iran, and Netanyahu's dramatic presentation of the material in spring 2018 just days ahead of Trump's decision to leave the deal, appeared to be coordinated with the US administration.⁴⁹ At that stage, the expectation in Israel was that the United States would withdraw from the agreement. Nevertheless, Israeli officials viewed the archive discovery and public presentation as important for shaping perceptions in Europe and globally. It failed to do so.⁵⁰ While the archive provided additional support for allegations that Iran had lied about its nuclear programme in the past, it did not provide new evidence that Iran was violating the JCPOA. The International Atomic Energy Agency also issued multiple reports confirming Iranian compliance even as the US threatened to withdraw from the agreement.

For this reason, and despite the anti-JCPOA positions of Netanyahu and his close advisers, some important voices in Israel were still arguing in favour of the United States staying in the deal and pushing back against Netanyahu's drive to scuttle the agreement. One former defence-intelligence official suggested that Israel's professional security experts saw the JCPOA as the best solution to a complex problem, particularly since a military attack on Iran was too risky.⁵¹ Unlike Netanyahu, many in Israel's professional security establishment viewed Iran as a rational actor susceptible to containment, and saw the JCPOA as a useful mechanism for accomplishing that goal.⁵² Even leaders such as former prime minister and IDF chief of staff Ehud Barak, who had once advocated military options, did not see the value of the US pulling back from the deal unilaterally. As he put it, 'even if America decides to pull out of it, no one will join – not the Chinese, not the Russians, not even the Europeans. It will serve the Iranians.'⁵³ In a similar vein, former Shin Bet director Carmi Gillon argued that 'doing away with the agreement is no real option. It simply removes from existence something that had been established, that presented certain assets and certain things that are tangible – and replacing that [with] nothing.'⁵⁴

Once Trump formally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018, however, debate within Israel ended. Even professional career officials who believed the JCPOA was better than the alternatives began reconsidering its problematic aspects. Those who still believe that reaching a new agreement is the best way forward are discouraged from voicing their opinions.⁵⁵

Maximum pressure

Israel's ongoing concerns about Iran's regional provocations aligned well with the Trump administration's central complaint that the nuclear deal failed to address them. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's 12-point list of grievances against Iran underscored that for the Trump administration, the nuclear and regional issues could no longer be uncoupled – a position long held by Netanyahu.⁵⁶ Connections between Israel's campaign between the wars in Syria and the Trump administration's maximum-pressure approach against Iran became more apparent in the two years following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA.⁵⁷

Indeed, until mid-2018, Israel was not attacking Iranian targets directly in Syria, and instead had largely focused attacks against Iran's delivery of weapons to Hizbullah. But with what Israel saw as a shift in Iran's operational mode in Syria and under the cover of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and maximum pressure, Israel's campaign expanded to direct targeting of Iranian officials and assets in Syria. Israel's traditional stance of non-attribution for attacks in Syria also gave way to more open acknowledgment of military action directed against Iran there.⁵⁸ With unusual candour, Eisenkot told the *New York Times* that in 2018 alone, the IDF dropped 2,000 bombs in Syria.⁵⁹

In 2018, Naftali Bennett, then the Israeli education minister, warned that such a shift was coming. He vowed that Israel would not let Syria turn into another front for Iran to launch proxy attacks on Israel and contended that Israel's approach of dealing solely with the proxies had proven insufficient. Referring to Iran as an octopus with tentacles, Bennett coined the term the 'octopus doctrine' and stated that from then on Israel should strike the beast's head in response to proxy attacks. He also linked the regional elements to the nuclear issue.⁶⁰

By 2019, Israel had expanded its target list beyond Syria to Iranian targets in Iraq. Israel was worried about Iranian expansion in Iraq as Tehran faced greater constraints in the Syrian theatre due to Russian pressure, Israeli strikes, and Assad's and Hizbullah's desire to avoid escalation with Israel.⁶¹ As Iran moved to Iraq, 'so did Israel'.⁶² According to a former Israeli official, the US did not initially welcome the expansion of Israeli strikes to Iraq, but views changed in the White House as the Trump administration saw value in Israel working in parallel to confront Iran.⁶³ According to former senior US defence officials, while the Pentagon saw Israel's actions in Syria as shouldering the burden of rolling back Iran's influence, US Central Command initially opposed Israel's actions in Iraq, fearing that they would risk American lives.⁶⁴

These policies blurred the distinctions between the nuclear agreement and the regional conflict, particularly as Iran itself began lashing out at regional targets in the Persian Gulf to raise the costs of the American pressure campaign and the reinstatement of sanctions. While it is not clear to

what extent Israel and the United States are coordinating their respective attacks in Syria and Iraq against Iranian targets, there is certainly greater mutual awareness of the linkages between Israeli and American military actions against Iran. Though one of the stated American policy objectives of this pressure is a new agreement with Iran – a prospect that Netanyahu deeply opposes – many Israelis perceive the ultimate American goal as regime change in Tehran, on which they see close synergy among Trump’s top advisers (particularly Pompeo) and Netanyahu’s inner circle.⁶⁵ Former officials think Netanyahu too is hoping for regime change, and that every time there are protests on the streets he believes the regime will collapse, as do many in Washington.⁶⁶

Despite confusion about policy aims and the rising costs of maximum pressure and US–Iran escalation, Israelis across the political spectrum support the Trump administration’s approach to Iran. Many Israelis were surprised by the US decision to kill Soleimani, likening it to an unexpected gift.⁶⁷ In Israeli eyes, the strike offset grave Israeli disappointment when the US did not respond to the attacks on state-owned Saudi Aramco oil-processing facilities in September 2019 that were attributed to Iran. Israeli officials and analysts feared that American forbearance reflected an inclination to withdraw from the region, and regarded the Soleimani strike as restoring US deterrence. Despite some concern that his death may worsen the situation for pragmatists in Iran and increase pressure on Iraq to expel the United States, most Israeli analysts believe the killing – and the wider pressure campaign – is working, at least to the extent of degrading Iran’s capabilities over the shorter term.

As one former Israeli defence official put it, Israel’s post-Soleimani view of US Iran policy is ‘so far so good’ and ‘what’s not to like?’⁶⁸ In the Israeli calculus, Soleimani’s death disrupted Iranian overconfidence and will force the Iranians to be more cautious, since they can no longer predict American responses.⁶⁹ The Israeli strategy is to ‘ignite things’ and force Iran to take steps, such as resuming its nuclear programme, that might lead to more robust American action against the country.⁷⁰ After fearing American passivity, some Israelis even believe that the next logical US step would be a strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities.⁷¹

The military option and current Israeli policy

Debates about an Israeli military option against Iran were prevalent through late 2012. According to a former Israeli national-security analyst, until then the Israeli military was ready to act, as Netanyahu and then-defense minister Ehud Barak supported a military attack against Iran even if the security establishment largely opposed it.⁷² Whether or not the Israeli military was preparing military plans for actual use or merely for political influence, the military option faded when it became clear that the diplomatic track with Iran was serious.⁷³

When the JCPOA was finalised in 2015, the prevailing view among Israeli analysts was that the military option was off the table as long as Iran was adhering to the deal. As one defence reporter put it, 'now, with the entire international community behind the agreement, it's unlikely that there is even one person in the top ranks of the defence establishment – including the chief of the Mossad, the director of the Shin Bet security service and the commander of the air force – who supports an attack on Iran'.⁷⁴

With the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, in the context of Israel's optimism about American pressure and its assessment that Iran's vulnerabilities are only increasing, military options to address Iran's nuclear programme have again become salient.⁷⁵ In summer 2019, former Israeli National Security Council head Yaakov Amidror stated at a public conference that Israel still needed to plan for a strike on Iran, and that Israel could not rely on or trust the international community to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.⁷⁶ In December 2019, Yisrael Katz, then the minister of foreign affairs, said that an Israeli strike on Iran was a possibility, contending that while US pressure was effective, the sophisticated attack on Saudi Aramco indicated that Iran remains strong and was deterrable only by military threats.⁷⁷ The same week, the IDF reported a test launch of a 'rocket engine propulsion system', which reportedly was part of a surface-to-surface *Jericho* ballistic missile, having a range of 4,000 km and capable of carrying nuclear warheads. The test occurred days after reports emerged that Iran had deployed missiles in Iraq and Yemen in violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime, and thus was interpreted as a direct warning to Tehran.⁷⁸

The same month, IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi assessed that escalation between Israel and Iran was almost inevitable and could even result in war.⁷⁹ In early 2020, the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate published an assessment recommending that, to capitalise on Soleimani's death, the IDF should increase strikes against Iranian forces in Syria to drive them out of the country. Some believe that Netanyahu's strategy supports escalation in order to trigger a US–Iran military confrontation, because he ultimately wants the United States to 'deal with Iran', including striking its nuclear targets.⁸⁰ Several Israeli analysts believe Israel could handle an escalation with Iran and would be willing to accept retaliation if the US decisively targeted Iran's nuclear sites.⁸¹

Reports of a replay of pitched debates between the political and defence establishments about the merits of military options against Iran's nuclear assets appear to be exaggerated.⁸² There is far less defence and intelligence pushback than there was before 2012 on account of Washington's overall supportiveness of an aggressive Israeli policy, heightened concerns about Iran's regional activities and its resumption of the nuclear programme, and an Israeli security leadership more closely aligned with Netanyahu.

Public debates in Israel over its Iran policies have largely disappeared. Once the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the JCPOA and apply maximum pressure, Israelis across the political and security establishments embraced American policies. Israel's own military campaigns in Syria and beyond reinforce American pressure against Iran, and the views among the political leadership in both countries are more closely aligned than ever. While Israelis would not welcome a decision by Trump to negotiate a new deal with Iran, they do not believe such a scenario is likely, and many still view the ultimate outcome of maximum pressure as regime change in Tehran. But from Israel's perspective, the result of maximum pressure is less important than continuing the process of applying it.

Indeed, Israel's current Iran policy favours short-term gains and accords little attention to the long term. Many Israeli strategists see advantages in short-term planning, and the benefits of disruptive actions that alter the status quo. In addition, Netanyahu may want to capitalise on Trump's time

in office to 'shake things up' in the hope that something better will emerge, because he is convinced that now is the time to deal with Iran and that it is his historic mission to do so.⁸³ At least officially, Israelis also appear confident that the current pressure is weakening Iran and curtailing its influence. The COVID-19 crisis is only increasing Israeli confidence that the Iranian leadership is vulnerable.⁸⁴

The fact remains that undesirable Iranian actions have continued. Thus, Israeli confidence could be dangerous. Current official Israeli thinking, with no significant countervailing voices in Israel or the US to provide fallback options, may only encourage military escalation and support for more aggressive US military actions against Iran, with unknown or at least poorly thought-through results.

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The wild card, of course, is the impending election in the United States. A transition in Washington from a Republican White House hawkish on Iran to a Democratic one led and substantially staffed by those who served in the administration that initiated and concluded the JCPOA would undoubtedly constrain Israel's options and affect its calculations. This is why the Netanyahu government is working so hard to lock in gains now, prior to the US elections, supporting policies against Iran that may make a return to the JCPOA and engagement with Iran more difficult, if not impossible, regardless of who is in the White House.

In spring 2020, Israel formed a unity government with Netanyahu as the prime minister for the first 18 months. Former IDF chiefs of staff Gantz and Ashkenazi became defense minister and foreign minister, respectively. Both have opposed Israeli military actions in Iran without coordination with Washington. Under Netanyahu, the tenor of Israel's Iran policy in the near to medium term will depend on his own legal situation, as he faces a trial for corruption charges, and on how the US election shapes up. Netanyahu could inflate the threat if his legal troubles appear grim and he perceives that the next US administration is not prioritising Iran.

If Joe Biden becomes president and attempts to bring the US back into the JCPOA and possibly even directly engages Iran, something close to *déjà vu* all over again may ensue. Netanyahu will reflexively resist such a change in Washington, just as he vehemently opposed Obama's Iran policies at first. Most likely Netanyahu would, as he did before, reach out directly to Jewish groups in the United States and friendly members of Congress to slow sanctions relief or any other measures he viewed as concessions to Tehran. Depending on political tensions, Gantz and Ashkenazi might choose not to push back against such steps, at least not publicly. At the same time, Israel would continue its military campaign against Iran in Syria, which is uncontested by Washington, although the IDF might need to scale back its kinetic strikes in Iraq. If these steps were unavailing, the Netanyahu government might try to provoke Iran.⁸⁵ The key would be to maintain a threat level and target list that would not directly place American personnel in harm's way, but that could nonetheless prompt a US response to Iranian escalation. This might involve covert Israeli action in Iran itself, including explosions at sensitive facilities, which would likely elicit an Iranian response but not necessarily pose a direct risk to US assets.⁸⁶

Only a major shift in US policy, such as public rebukes to Israel for spoiling attempts to revive the nuclear agreement that portended long-term damage to the bilateral relationship, would be likely to rekindle debate in Israel about its approach to Iran. As matters stand now, a policy of escalation seems to be the favoured tactic on all sides, imposing few costs on Israel and preserving the legacy of the longest-serving prime minister in Israel's history. If Israel does conclude that the United States is determined to reach an agreement with Iran, it will likely shift its focus from attempting to derail such an agreement to trying to shape it. Israel might then work with Arab Gulf countries to pressure Washington into linking agreement on sanctions relief and nuclear issues to Iranian concessions on ballistic missiles and regional activities. Given the post-JCPOA evolution of US and Israeli policies on Iran, Biden might be more likely than Obama was to consider such a linkage, particularly if it attracted European support. By the same token, Iran's leadership might be less likely to consider it.

Notes

- 1 See Michael Wahid Hanna and Dalia Dassa Kaye, 'The Limits of Iranian Power', *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 5, October–November 2015, pp. 173–98; and Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, 'Iran: The Case Against War', *New York Review of Books*, vol. 66, no. 13, 15 August 2019.
- 2 See Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Israel's Iran Policies After the Nuclear Deal* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE207.html>.
- 3 Author phone interview with a former senior Israeli intelligence official, 10 April 2019.
- 4 Amir Rapaport, 'A Year After the Implementation of the Nuclear Agreement with Iran', *Israel Defense*, 5 January 2017, translated by the authors from the original Hebrew, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/28148>; and author interview with former senior Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, 29 January 2020.
- 5 See Ben Caspit, 'Iran Seems to Reconsider Military Entrenchment in Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/israel-syria-iran-russia-us-donald-trump-bashar-al-assad.html>.
- 6 Judah Ari Gross, 'Cyberattack on Port Suggests Israeli Tit-for-tat Strategy, Shows Iran Vulnerable', *Times of Israel*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cyberattack-on-port-suggests-israeli-tit-for-tat-strategy-shows-iran-vulnerable/>.
- 7 See Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein, 'Calls to Reduce Pressure on Iran's Regime Are Reckless and Misguided', *Times of Israel*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/calls-to-reduce-pressure-on-irans-regime-are-reckless-and-misguided/>.
- 8 Amir Rapaport, 'The Former Reporter from Dimona Who Will Soon Become Head of the NSC', *Israel Defense*, 18 August 2017, translated by the authors from the original Hebrew, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/30767>.
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- 63 Dalia Dassa Kaye, 'Trump Must Not Give Israel a Blank Check in the Middle East', *National Interest*, 15 September 2019; and author interview

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- ⁶⁵ Author interview with former National Security Council official, Tel Aviv, 27 January 2020.
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- ⁶⁸ Author interview with former defence official, Tel Aviv, 28 January 2019.
- ⁶⁹ Author interview with former defence official, Tel Aviv, 28 January 2019.
- ⁷⁰ Author interview with former intelligence official, Tel Aviv, 28 January 2020.
- ⁷¹ Author interview with former senior Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, 28 January 2020.
- ⁷² Author interview with former National Security Council official, Tel Aviv, 27 January 2020.
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- gence official, Tel Aviv, 27 January 2020.
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- ⁸⁴ It is important to note that despite the economic implications of the COVID-19 crisis, some leading Israeli analysts do not believe that it has weakened the Iranian regime. Rather, they see the refusal of Washington to approve a loan to Tehran as empowering the hardliners and increasing the anti-American stance in Iran. See 'Live Discussion: Iran in the Days of Coronavirus – Implications for Israel's National Security', Institute for National Security Studies, 20 April 2020, discussion conducted in Hebrew, <https://www.inss.org.il/he/event/iran-coronavirus/>.
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