

Will Iran Have a Nuclear Bomb by Winter?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Not everyone is convinced that the recent meeting of Naftali Bennett with Joe Biden, despite their supposedly becoming, [Israel Hayom](#), September 3, 2021:

From an appearance and visibility perspective, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's visit to Washington was a success. It seems he indeed managed to forge a personal connection with President Joe Biden and open a new page in US-Israel relations under the Democratic administration.

However, in terms of the essence of the visit, numerous and quite possibly critical questions remain. Beyond the administration's diplomatic intentions, particularly in relation to reopening a Palestinian consulate in east Jerusalem, the monumental issue at hand remains what the US position will be if or when Israel is forced to take action against Iran...

While Bennett conveyed his government's opposition to the U.S. reopening its consulate "to the Palestinians" in Jerusalem, this was not the life-and-death issue that Iran has become for Israel. Iran was the chief subject of his discussion with Biden. From the Stuxnet computer worm, to the assassination of five of Iran's most important nuclear scientists, to the sabotage, in 2020 and 2021, of two different centrifuge plants – the second of them located 50 meters underground – at Natanz, the Mossad has managed repeatedly to slow down Iran's march to the bomb. Nonetheless, the Iranians continue to progress in their enriching of uranium, which now stands at

60%, and the Israelis now believe that within just a few months Iran will have uranium enriched to a weapons-grade level, and will be able to produce a bomb.

The Iranians have been offered concession after concession in the Vienna talks, but have nonetheless shown no desire to conclude an agreement with the Americans to return to the 2015 nuclear deal. They ended the latest round of talks in June, and have not renewed them since. Iran is stalling for time, letting the Americans continue to think there is a chance Tehran will return to the J.C.P.O.A., while continuing to work furiously toward producing a nuclear weapon. The Biden Administration continues to pin its hopes on luring Iran back to the negotiating table, although it's hard to see what further concessions it could make; it has shown that it has no desire to use force on Iran itself, and what is even worse, it has not offered its support for an Israeli operation on Iran's nuclear facilities, which may depend for its success on the U.S. supplying bunker-busting bombs (massive ordnance penetrators, or MOPs) of a size that Israel does not now possess.

The Iranian regime, Oren notes, needs an actual weapon, and not merely the ability to produce one at short notice, for the purpose of deterrence. Tehran knows that if Gaddafi had not given up his nuclear program, he might have produced a weapon, and a threat to use it could have prevented NATO's bombing campaign in Libya that helped in his overthrow; when Israel ended Saddam Hussein's own nuclear project, by destroying Iraq's Osirak reactor in Operation Opera in 1981, this ended any possibility of his producing a nuclear weapon; had he been able to do so, this could have kept the Americans from attacking Iraqi forces in Kuwait, or later, from invading Iraq in 2003 and overturning Saddam's regime. Iran is keenly aware of what happened to both Gaddafi and to Saddam Hussein, and wants to avoid their fate. Only an actual bomb, and not the ability to manufacture it even in a short time, will

prevent an attack by America or Israel, thus ensuring the survival of the Islamic Republic. Would Kim Jong Un still be in power if he did not have nuclear weapons as North Korea's invisible protective shield?

Oren also makes the point that the rulers of Iran think possession of a nuclear weapon will enhance the country's prestige; it will have joined that exclusive nuclear club as its tenth member. It is galling to the ayatollahs that other non-Western countries – India, Pakistan – now are nuclear powers, but not Iran, and especially infuriating is the fact that the Zionist state has long been a nuclear power possessing hundreds of nuclear weapons.

It's safe to assume that Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the security advisers surrounding him have seen the images from Afghanistan and concluded that an American military response is nothing to be feared. The lack of an American reprisal following the missile fire on US bases in Iraq, carried out by pro-Iranian militias, only bolsters this conclusion.

The disorganized, confused, and at times frantic withdrawal of American soldiers and civilians, as well as of Afghan interpreters and other helpers, from Afghanistan made a deep impression on the Iranians. After 20 years and two trillion dollars spent, America, having failed to defeat the terror group, hurriedly abandoned Afghanistan. In the rush, the Americans left the Taliban more powerful than ever, for it quickly took possession of the \$90 billion worth of weaponry the American military left behind. Iran, like much of the astonished world, including our European allies, was not impressed by the American performance. It has concluded that it has little to fear from the Bidenites, who are intent on relying on "diplomacy" rather than military force to persuade Iran to give up its nuclear program.

In Tehran, although officials also undoubtedly took note of the warning issued after the meeting between the Israeli prime minister and US president, whereby “other options” regarding Iran were still on the table – they certainly must have noticed that the warning didn’t include the customary “all options” on the table. We can surmise that the Iranians believe the American administration will do everything in its power to prevent Israel from launching a war that could envelop the US....

When Biden said that Iran would not get a nuclear weapon “on his watch,” the Iranians simply did not believe him. His vague allusion to having “other options” rather than, as he should have said, “all options, including the military one, are being considered,” was telling. Nor has he said anything about the need to guarantee that Israel retains its Qualitative Military Edge, or QME. He should have said “we are paying special attention to preserving Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge, especially in light of Iran’s rushing headlong to enrich uranium to weapons-grade level, and, at the same time, working furiously on its ballistic missile program.” Such remarks would have given Iran pause; the failure to make them has instead alarmed the Israelis.

The current Israeli government is a fractious coalition, from the far-right of the Yamina Party to the far-left of Meretz, and even includes a member of the Arab Ra’am Party. A decision to make a pre-emptive strike on Iran to prevent it from being able to produce a nuclear weapon would not be supported by the entire cabinet, but would likely lead to a deadlock. Could Bennett nonetheless go ahead without the support of a majority of his ministers? Even now, many of the ministers on the right have denounced Bennett for allowing the Gantz-Abbas meeting to take place, and for not being more forceful about the need to stop Iran when he met with Biden; meanwhile, ministers on the left think Bennett himself should be meeting with Abbas. Imagine the effect of a divided cabinet on decision-making in

a time of possible war.

According to one possible scenario, the Iranians will continue enriching uranium and manufacturing the additional components required for a nuclear bomb and will reach the point of no return over the winter months. This would be the ideal time due to possible severe weather conditions that could impede and perhaps even neutralize the Israeli Air Force. Another consideration is the possibility of deterring Israel with a massive missile barrage by Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, without caring too much about an Israeli response against Lebanon.

Michael Oren notes that during the winter, the “severe weather conditions” could make any operation by the Israeli Air Force in Iran very difficult, and it is precisely by this winter that Iran should have enough uranium enriched to a weapons-grade level to make a bomb. Can Israel afford to wait until winter, or must it wage a preventive war before then, if the IAF is to succeed? And what would be the diplomatic fallout if Israel did not wait, but attacked Iran months before it could build that nuclear weapon? Would the Bidenites back Israel, or bemoan its decision and deliberately distance themselves from the Jewish state? There are many holdovers from the Obama Administration in Biden’s government, as well as a growing number of Democrats in Congress, who are distinctly unfriendly to the Jewish state; both groups may exploit what they would call an “unprovoked” attack on Iran as a reason for slashing American military aid to, and security cooperation with, Israel.

Another problem is Hezbollah. Iran might order its Lebanese ally to let loose with a series of ferocious rocket barrages at Israel from its storehouse of 150,000 rockets, some of which are now precision-guided. If thousands of rockets were to be launched by Hezbollah at Israel every day for a month, they could not all be intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome

missile defense system; there would simply be too many of those rockets, and there are not enough Iron Dome batteries to intercept them all. Many of those rockets are therefore likely to land in Israel, wreaking havoc, especially in northern Israel, in the Galilee. The IAF would have its hands full, not just in trying to defend against the incoming rockets, but also in responding to such massive rocket attacks with airstrikes in Lebanon, diverting IAF resources and attention from the campaign to keep Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

Contrary to the widespread view among Israeli pundits that the humanitarian disaster in Lebanon limits Hezbollah's ability to attack Israel, the current crisis is actually deterring Israel from harming or attacking Lebanon in response to Hezbollah fire. The world will not sit idly by as Israel exacerbates, through a military campaign, the suffering of the Lebanese people whose situation is already dire.

Oren argues that Israel will not be able to attack Hezbollah with massive force because the damage such an attack would cause Lebanon, already enduring the worst economic crisis of any nation in the last 150 years, would provoke international condemnation. But is that true? Won't many Lebanese be delighted to see Israel deal a mortal blow to Hezbollah, which has been responsible for much of Lebanon's financial immiseration? And won't the Gulf Arab states also be glad to see Iran's closest ally badly mauled? When Oren predicts that "the world will not sit idly by" if Israel "exacerbates...the suffering of the Lebanese people" is he right? What exactly would "the world" do instead of sitting "idly by"? Hasn't the world sat idly by when Hezbollah over the past two decades has done so much to bring about that suffering in the first place? Of course there will be the usual UN resolutions denouncing Israel, but so what? Israel will brush them off. And Security Council resolutions about Israeli attacks in Lebanon, that unlike General Assembly resolutions are enforceable, when

unfavorable to Israel will be vetoed by the U.S.

In light of this scenario, it was very important to hear a public commitment of support from the US president for Israel's right to defend itself against any regional threat. Behind closed doors, it was crucial to hear how the US can enhance our ability to defend ourselves. This can be done by giving Israel military capabilities the US has thus far withheld from us, to other understandings. For example, will the US be willing to grant us military, logistical, diplomatic and even legal aid during a war with Iran?...

Wouldn't it make more sense for the Americans publicly, rather than "behind closed doors," to pledge military assistance to Israel so that it can defend itself, and to explain that part of Israel's self-defense against a mortal threat includes the right to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, as Iran has repeatedly made clear, over the past forty years, that its aim is to destroy the Jewish state? Biden might have said to Bennett (and can still say) "We of course will continue to assure Israel's qualitative military edge, so that it can defend itself against every kind of Iranian threat, including – above all – the nuclear one. And of course no one should expect Israel to wait until Iran acquires a nuclear weapon before acting; that would be too late; the ayatollahs have made their intention to destroy Israel abundantly clear, and they will have to be stopped before then." Such a statement would give Tehran pause, as the Iranians try to figure out just what it means. Would that American commitment include providing Israel with bunker-busting bombs capable of destroying Iran's nuclear facilities built deep inside a mountain at Fordow? What else might the Americans be willing to do to help our closest ally end the Iranian nuclear threat that is directed not only at Israel, but also at the Gulf Arab states, and at the United States itself? Keeping Iran guessing as to what kinds of weapons and security assistance America will provide the Jewish state could make the Iranians decide

to slow down their nuclear effort, so as not, at this point,
to provoke an attack.

First published in