

**Iran nuclear deal**

## Israel faces up to limited options on Iran

Naftali Bennett takes less combative approach to nuclear talks as Jewish state assesses Tehran's advances



Naftali Bennett has made his disquiet be known through back channels © AFP via Getty Images

**Mehul Srivastava** in Jerusalem 9 HOURS AGO

In 2015, Israel's then prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu lambasted western powers' nuclear accord with Iran, in a fiery address to the US Congress that nearly ended his relationship with the Obama White House.

Now, as western and Iranian negotiators try to find a way back to the deal that former US president Donald Trump abandoned in 2018, Netanyahu's successor, the mild-mannered Naftali Bennett, has adopted a more measured approach, letting his disquiet be known through back channels or in sober statements.

"We hope that the [talks in Vienna] conclude without an agreement — the removal of sanctions and the flood of billions of dollars for this regime means more rockets, more UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles], more terrorist cells, more cyber attacks and malign activities," Bennett said this week.

Talks are set to resume in Vienna on Tuesday. The less combative stance reflects a pragmatic assessment of the Jewish state's limited options, said senior Israeli officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Depending on the exact contours of the deal, Israel may be able to accept it.

"There is a small change in tone, and I think that this government is a little bit less confrontational with the American administration," said Yossi Kuperwasser, a former head of research in the Israeli army's military intelligence division.

The US government's desire to get an agreement, and Iran's urgent need for sanctions relief means that Israel has to assume that a deal is likely, said Ephraim Asculai, who has worked both with the Israel Atomic Energy Commission and the IAEA in Vienna.

"I don't think Israel has any real options besides advising the US government what should or should not be in the final agreement," he said. But Iran's delays make much of this advisory process less effective, he added. "Iran is playing for time, and with the exception of [pain of] sanctions, it has the upper hand here, in missiles, in regional hegemonic ambitions."

It is as yet unclear if a deal will be struck. While Iran says it is committed to serious negotiations in Vienna with the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China — as well as indirect talks with the US, mediated by the Europeans — it has set tough conditions for Washington. Iran says it will roll back its nuclear advances, made since former president Trump abandoned the deal and reimposed sanctions, only if the US lifts all sanctions and guarantees no future government will pull out of the agreement.

In any case, Israel has reminded Israelis that whatever is decided in Vienna, the Jewish state isn't bound by the agreement. It is thus, theoretically, free to keep sabotaging Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Israel is suspected in recent years of carrying out explosions at Iranian facilities as well as cyber attacks on nuclear and other infrastructure. It is also believed to be behind the assassination of a leading nuclear scientist in late 2020.

In interviews, several Israeli officials said a full-fledged military option to take out Iran's nuclear projects was technically unfeasible. This is because of the long distances Israeli planes would have to travel and the large number of sites they would have to hit, some repeatedly. There are more than a dozen well hidden and fortified targets, many deep underground.

Analysts have said that Israel may be hiding its capabilities to maintain the element of surprise. The Israeli military has set aside hundreds of millions of dollars to overcome the challenges of hitting Iranian nuclear targets effectively, and local media reported that at least one set of options was displayed to US officials in recent weeks.

The ability to influence the US and world powers in the midst of talks is equally slender, the officials said. By keeping their disagreement with the US behind closed doors, Bennett and his foreign minister Yair Lapid hope to be able to influence the

goodwill by creating public disputes”, said a foreign ministry official.

The original nuclear deal, called the JCPOA, focused on the 15 years from 2015 and one official, who has spoken to Bennett recently, said it might be better to focus on what comes next — the so-called “JCPOA II” — a follow-up agreement on Iran’s ambitions post-2030 that the US has promised Israel would be “longer and stronger”.

That tacit approval of the current talks, if not any final deal, is also based on a shared acknowledgment by the Israeli intelligence community that the original deal, paired with continued assaults by the Mossad, had indeed delayed Iran’s nuclear ambitions, said two people who spoke on condition of anonymity. These gains have been eroded by Iran’s further enrichment of nuclear material since the deal collapsed.

In a January cabinet meeting, Major General Aharon Haliva, the head of Israel’s military intelligence, told the government that a deal was better than the current situation, where Iran was free to do as it chooses, according to a person familiar with the discussions.

As the talks resume in Vienna, Israel has made a very public display of its own diplomatic advances. President Isaac Herzog made a historic state visit to the United Arab Emirates, Iran’s regional rival, the first since the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and three Gulf countries.

The peace deals, which were agreed under a shared distrust of Iran, have allowed Israel and its newfound allies to keep pressure on Iran, said Najat Al Saied, a professor at the American University in Dubai, even if the detail isn’t necessarily made public. “You won’t be getting any details, what kind of weapons or technical tools, that’s not going to be shown to the public,” she said.

With talks set to resume in Vienna in the coming days, Israel is aware of how limited its choices are, diplomatic or, as one retired official said, militarily. “There’s always a [military] option — but it may not be a great [military] option,” said the official.

