

Iran Talks: Israel Presses U.S. for More Sanctions, Military Threat

Israel is stepping up its pressure on senior American officials ahead of the resumption of nuclear negotiations between Iran and six world powers in Vienna this week.

Israel's goal is to persuade the United States to neither return to the original nuclear deal nor conclude a partial interim agreement, but instead to intensify sanctions on Iran and also present an explicit, credible military threat.

Diplomatic sources estimated that Iran's hard line during the talks in Vienna has prepared the ground to influence Washington's approach at the talks.

On Monday, Mossad director David Barnea will begin a round of meetings in Washington, including with CIA Director William Burns and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. On Thursday, Defense Minister Benny Gantz will arrive in Washington to meet senior American officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

Gantz's visit was arranged several weeks ago, long before obstacles in the nuclear talks arose. Last week, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett spoke with Blinken and expressed his concern over a possible return to the deal.

The Israeli officials will urge Washington to withdraw from the upcoming nuclear pact and to draw an alternative plan to address the Iranian nuclear program.

Israel also expects that the U.S. will immediately step up both economic and military pressure on Iran so that Tehran will arrive at the next rounds of talks from a significantly weaker position.

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Another demand Israel will make is to guarantee that any future deal with Iran will be conditioned upon the withdrawal of its forces from Syria and other countries in the region, to ensure Israel's aerial superiority.

Iran's chief negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, presented last week a document with sweeping demands for the removal of American sanctions as a condition for any progress in the talks. It also requested a clear commitment from the U.S. and the other signatory countries not to reimpose sanctions in the future.

Israeli officials expect the U.S. administration to refuse to make such commitments and hope Iran's uncompromising stance will help them persuade their American counterparts.

Israel views Sullivan as a powerful player who can influence U.S. decision makers and holds relatively hard line positions on the nuclear deal.

As opposed to him, Israel considers the head of the American negotiating team in Vienna, U.S. special representative to Iran Rob Malley, as an enthusiastic supporter of America's return to the nuclear agreement. Due to Malley's support for the deal, Bennett decided not to meet with him when he visited Israel prior to the resumption of the talks.

Israel's assessment is that despite the hardened stance Iran has presented at the talks, it wouldn't be quick to blow up the negotiations because its stifling economy desperately needs at least some sanctions removed.

Following the first week of talks, Israel is having trouble predicting whether the sides will ultimately reach an agreement. Contrary to the U.S. administration's initial expectation, the talks didn't end last weekend, and the parties are pursuing the negotiations this week.

Israel worries that if the talks will not terminate this week, they may drag on for months unless a deadline is set. It also fears that during that time, and with no international pressure, Iran will further advance its nuclear program.

Meanwhile, Mossad's Barnea is expected to try to convince American officials that Iran has no intention of putting an end to the development of its nuclear program. On Thursday, Barnea made an unusual public statement describing Israeli intelligence's outlook.

“It’s clear that uranium enriched to 60 percent isn’t needed for civilian purposes, and there’s no need for three facilities with thousands of centrifuges spinning unless they intend to develop nuclear weapons,” he said in a speech at the President’s Residence.

Addressing a ministerial cabinet meeting, Bennett said Sunday that the window between rounds of nuclear talks should be exploited to push the U.S. to “use a different toolbox” with Iran, adding that “Iran must start paying the price for violations.”

President Isaac Herzog also addressed the talks today at the presentation of U.S. Ambassador to Israel Thomas Nides’ credentials, saying that “Israel will welcome a comprehensive diplomatic solution that can resolve the Iranian nuclear threat once and for all.” However, he further clarified that all options remain on the table, adding that if the international community does not take decisive action, Israel will.

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