

Netanyahu at Odds With Israeli Military and Intelligence Brass Over Whether to Push Trump to Scrap Iran Nuclear Deal

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman are at odds with the defense establishment over whether to urge the United States to scrap the nuclear agreement with Iran, according to senior government and defense officials who asked to remain anonymous.

Netanyahu and Lieberman believe a U.S. withdrawal from the accord would be in Israel's interest, but defense chiefs have reservations. U.S. President Donald Trump is due to recertify the nuclear deal on October 15 and inform Congress whether Iran is complying with the terms of the agreement.

Should the U.S. decide Iran is violating the accord, this in effect would decertify it, leading to possible American withdrawal from the deal and renewed sanctions on Iran. However, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany are also signatories to the nuclear agreement.

Israeli officials said Netanyahu and Israel's ambassador in Washington Ron Dermer are encouraging Trump and his close circle of advisers not to recertify the agreement and announce that Iran is breaching it.

Netanyahu and Lieberman's position is at odds with most Israeli experts in Military Intelligence and in the IDF's Planning Directorate, the Mossad, Foreign Ministry and the Atomic Energy Committee.

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Despite Netanyahu's wish that Trump announces that Iran isn't complying with the nuclear deal, all Israeli intelligence bodies dealing with the Iranian issue are united in the opinion that in the two years and two months that have passed since

the agreement was signed in Vienna, Iran hasn't been caught violating a single clause. Also, the Israeli intelligence community has no evidence that the Iranians have resumed their nuclear project and gone back on their commitments.

Netanyahu is expected to meet Trump on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York on Monday, and the future of the nuclear deal will be one of the main issues the prime minister is expected to bring up with the president.

"Netanyahu and Dermer are pushing the White House to decertify the nuclear agreement," an Israeli official said. "As far as Netanyahu is concerned, it's the most important thing Trump can do, and he hopes that as a result Congress will resume the sanctions against Iran."

On Tuesday, after Reuters cited senior U.S. officials as saying Israel wasn't interested in the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and objected to revoking it, Netanyahu quickly issued a denial. He said Israel's interest is that the Trump administration "fixes the agreement or revokes it."

A day later, Lieberman said at a Rosh Hashanah event held by Yisrael Beiteinu party that he supported Netanyahu's position. "The agreement isn't delaying Iran's nuclear program even by one day, they are clever enough not to break it off," he said in his speech.

"The agreement isn't holding them back or preventing them from continuing to research and develop centrifuges. It isn't preventing them from continuing with missiles and warheads and checking accuracy and distances. The Iranians have refused to let anyone check the military program sites," he said.

According to Israel's intelligence agencies, the Iranian effort to comply with the agreement is clear, creating an advantage for Iran in the international arena. A similar picture emerges from the information gathered by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and from the periodic reports published by the agency.

Furthermore, while Netanyahu and Lieberman are aspiring to see Trump take action that would lead to the United States' withdrawal from the agreement, the senior ranks of the Israeli security establishment, intelligence community and Foreign Ministry believe that even though the agreement is bad for Israel, an American withdrawal from it would be even worse. The professional ranks of Israeli statecraft think that if America withdraws from the agreement, the other

world powers will not follow through, and thus Iran will not become isolated nor face new international sanctions. Instead, the international community will be divided and the monitoring of Iran's nuclear program could suffer a setback.

An Israeli official said Netanyahu and Lieberman think the international community is divided anyway, especially in light of the strained relationship between the United States and Russia, and it doesn't seem the international community can take significant decisions on the issue. The prime minister and defense minister think that if the U.S. withdraws from the agreement and announced it is bringing back tough sanctions against Iran, such as a trade ban on those who do business with the Islamic Republic, such a policy will intimidate the large European corporations that are responsible for most of the trade with Iran today.

Israeli defense sources say the prime mission of the intelligence organizations regarding Iran is to make sure it isn't breaking the agreement nor using secret mechanisms to bypass it and keep building its nuclear program. The Israeli intelligence community believes Israel has a clear interest in improving the agreement through stronger validation and inspection measures, especially in light of the international community's failure to deal with North Korea's nuclear program.

Some senior sources also doubt it would be possible to improve the agreement, or to convince Russia, China and the European Union to pressure Iran to accept new terms for the deal. In addition, no detailed plan has yet been prepared - in Israel or in the U.S. - outlining what to do if an attempt to improve the agreement ended in failure and led to an international confrontation over the nuclear program.

Israeli officials noted that the internal discussion in Israel over the deal's fate resembles the internal debate within the American administration: While Trump has stated a number of times that he wants to withdraw from the agreement, some of his top advisers and cabinet members, such as Defense Secretary James Mattis, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have reservations, fearing a U.S. pullout from the agreement might play into Iran's hands. They prefer to focus on actions to block Iran's aggressiveness across the Middle East.

"Like in the United States, we have disagreements on this issue," said an Israeli

official. "If you ask Netanyahu and Lieberman, they see eye-to-eye with each other, but the security establishment doesn't necessary share their views."

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