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Israel, U.S. Lawmakers Press Case Against Iran Nuclear Deal

Israeli officials and congressional Republicans set high bars with exacting conditions for a nuclear accord with Iran, signaling fresh domestic and international pressure on negotiations leading up to a summer deadline.



Leading Arab governments, including Saudi Arabia, cautiously accepted the landmark diplomacy with Iran. But Saudi officials said they needed more assurances that Iran's pathway to a nuclear weapons program has been blocked.

The global responses and congressional reactions, pitted against a determined campaign by the Obama administration, form the outlines of a furious political battle as Israeli officials and their supporters gear up for a lobbying effort in Congress. "There is an alternative: to stand firm, get a much better deal, a deal that can be trusted," Israel's intelligence chief, Yuval Steinitz, said. "The deal has to be made on the assumption that Iran might violate it."

President Barack Obama and his aides dismissed much of the criticism—especially Israeli demands that Iran alter its regional and foreign policy and accept Israel's right to exist before world powers accept a deal.

"We want Iran not to have nuclear weapons precisely because we can't bank on the nature of the regime changing," Mr. Obama said in an NPR interview. "If, suddenly, Iran transformed itself to Germany or Sweden or France, then there would be a different set of conversations about their nuclear infrastructure."

While critics previously assailed the general aim of the diplomatic effort, the latest objections drill more deeply into specific details of the plan, such as Iran's research program, its past military initiatives, international inspections and sanctions.

Mr. Obama has chided Israel, saying it opposes any diplo-



matic deal. In response, Mr. Steinitz presented a list of changes that would make the framework agreement reached in Switzerland more palatable to his country.

However, in doing so, he offered what would amount to a dramatic rewrite of the proposed accord. The framework as announced leaves almost no room for negotiators on either side to overhaul the terms in the way Mr. Steinitz called for.

But the demands are likely to form the basis of renewed lobbying that Israel has vowed to wage against the deal, specifically among congressional lawmakers who are considering new sanctions against Iran. Among Mr. Steinitz's appeals: that Iran cease all nuclear research and development activity; remove its enriched uranium stockpile from the country; and reduce the number of operational centrifuges to below what was agreed upon last week.

Mr. Steinitz also said Iran must close its underground facility in Fordow, an enrichment site the country began constructing clandestinely in the early 2000s. He also said Israeli officials saw the U.S. Congress as the most likely arena to fend off a deal that endangered Israel's security, calling it "extremely relevant" to the effort. "We think the U.S. is strong enough to put new sanctions on its own," he said. Mr. Steinitz's remarks were the first time Israeli officials outlined their own alternatives to the nuclear deal after months of criticism from the White House that the country had no diplomatic solutions of its own.

The push has begun already on American airwaves. On April 5th, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared on three Sunday talk shows in the U.S. to speak out against the deal. "I'm not trying to kill any deal. I'm trying to kill a bad deal," Mr. Netanyahu said on NBC's "Meet the Press." [Photo, above] During the NBC inter-

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view Mr. Netanyahu said he believes lifting some of the sanctions on Iran and leaving them with some nuclear capability could result in a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. "It would spark an arms race among the Sunni states, a nuclear arms race in the Middle East," the Israeli leader warned. "And the Middle East crisscrossed with nuclear tripwires is a nightmare for the world. I think this deal is a dream deal for Iran and it's a nightmare deal for the world."

But Netanyahu stressed that when it comes to Iran's nuclear capabilities, he prefers a "good" diplomatic solution to a military one.

He outlined such a solution as "one that rolls back Iran's nuclear infrastructure and one that ties the final lifting of restrictions on Iran's nuclear program with a change of Iran's behavior" and insists that Iran stops "calling for and working for the annihilation of Israel." He also called for further sanctions on Iran as a way to get the country to take a deal that contains no concessions.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.), who recently led a congressional delegation to Israel, mirrored the harshly critical—and specific—assessment offered by the Israeli government.

Mr. McConnell has the option of calling up legislative measures proposing a role for Congress in approving the framework deal or for imposing new sanctions on Iran. He said the interim deal's specifics add up to "an international recognition of Iran's threshold nuclear capability."

Besides Mr. Obama, top administration officials including energy secretary Ernest Moniz have spoken in favor of the framework agreement.

White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that the administration campaign represents "a deliberate attempt" to prove the deal is good for Israeli and regional security.

Arab officials set a cautiously receptive position to the framework agreement between Iran and six global powers, including the United States. Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington, Adel al-Jubeir, stressed no formal deal has yet been reached and that his government was seeking to learn more how the diplomacy would cut off Tehran's path to a nuclear bomb. Riyadh and Tehran are fierce regional rivals and have been competing for influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. "The document is a framework agreement," Mr. al-Jubeir said. "We'll have to see what happens with the details."

Some Saudi officials and royal family members have said their government would seek to match any nuclear capabilities Iran maintains as part of a final agreement. U.S. officials have voiced concerns that Riyadh could seek assistance from Pakistan, a nuclear weapons state, in coun-

tering Iran.

The Saudi envoy declined in a press briefing to directly discuss Riyadh's future nuclear plans or any potential aid from Islamabad. "We are dedicated to secure our country," he said. "Two things we don't compromise on are our faith and our security."

Mr. Obama has pledged to host a conference at Camp David in the coming months with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the other leading Arab states in the Persian Gulf region to discuss their security and the Iran diplomacy.

Arab officials said they would seek greater assurances from Washington that the U.S. is committed to their defense against Iran. "The Camp David meeting will be an opportunity to hear from the president how this framework agreement fits into a broader strategy of containing Iranian influence and interference in the region," said a senior Arab official.

Among the steps that could be taken are a U.S. pledge to place the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council—which include Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Oman, Qatar and Bahrain and Kuwait—under an American nuclear umbrella.

In Israel, Mr. Steinitz said that since the framework was announced, he and Mr. Netanyahu had met with Israel's military and intelligence chiefs, who had identified what he called 10 "unanswered questions" in the agreement. They include doubts whether Iran ever would provide details on what its past nuclear activity had been and how quickly sanctions could be reinstated if Tehran were to violate the nuclear accord. He said the intelligence chiefs were concerned that centrifuges more advanced than those now used by Iran eventually could reduce its breakout time to three or four months even if it complied with the deal. The U.S. has said Iran's breakout time should be at least a year under the terms.

"All of our experts are united in their opposition to this bad deal," Mr. Steinitz said.

Raphael Ofek, an Israeli nuclear physicist who has worked in military intelligence studying Iran's program, said the framework left Iran with too many ways to violate the agreement. In an interview, Mr. Ofek said that the infrastructure at Iran's underground Fordow site was specifically made to enrich weapons-grade uranium and that if the site were still operational, it was unlikely to be used for any other purpose.

Mr. Ofek also said he believed Iran would seek to use remaining nuclear infrastructure to conduct experiments under the guise of medical or space program research and repurpose its findings for weapons under the terms of the agreement. "It sounds like a bad joke," he said.

[WSJ.com and NBCnews.com]