

ANALYSIS

# Lapid's Iran approach seems to be paying off with Western allies... for now

After Netanyahu chose confrontation to try to stop the 2015 JCPOA, France and UK are open to hearing from new Israeli government



By LAZAR BERMAN ✓  
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Foreign Minister Yair Lapid (L) and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson at a Conservative Friends of Israel event in London, Britain, November 29, 2021. (Stuart Mitchell)

The governments that sent their negotiators to Vienna this week are well aware that the foundations of their foreign policy are being put to a very public, high-stakes test.

Iran's hardliners under President Ebrahim Raisi are doubling down on their belief that they can stare the Biden administration down, gaining sanctions relief before they give much ground on the nuclear front.

US President Joe Biden, meanwhile, has made no secret of how badly he wants to put the Iran nuclear issue back in the box so he can focus on China, Russia, and a host of thorny domestic issues.

The European nations at the table want to show that former US president Donald Trump made a dangerous error when he pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018, and that a diplomatic settlement is the best way to stop Iran's nuclear program.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid face perhaps the starkest test of their international approach.

Their predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, chose confrontation when a Democratic administration in the US worked with France, Britain, and Germany to hammer out the 2015 deal with Iran to put brakes on its nuclear program.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shakes hands as he leaves the House chamber on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, March 3, 2015, after addressing a joint meeting of Congress in a speech opposing the imminent Iran nuclear deal. (AP/Andrew Harnik)

But Bennett and Lapid, who forced Israel's longest-serving premier from office half a year ago, are trying something markedly different. Though they too publicly assail the JCPOA and call for an agreement that addresses Iran's support for armed proxies and its ballistic missile program — a deal that Raisi and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will never accept — they are doing everything they can to coordinate with the US and E3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom). They want Israel's case heard, and they are determined to be an integral part of the conversation.

With some luck, personal charm, and what increasingly looks like a fair level of diplomatic acumen, their approach seems to be paying off so far. It was on full display this week during Lapid's trip this week to London and Paris, as key officials heard Israel's case.

Of course, no one knows where the latest round of talks will lead, and Bennett and Lapid risk being blamed for not sounding the alarm as loudly as Netanyahu did. But if they are able to keep Europe and the US interested in Israel's intelligence and its concerns, it will be a crucial affirmation of the way this government handles its international affairs.

### A sweet spot

Lapid arrived in London on Sunday at a propitious time.

After months of uncommonly positive coverage in UK newspapers around its pioneering COVID-19 policies, Israel is seen today in a far more positive light by many British officials than it was in the past.

Though British leaders from both parties have long been quite friendly to Israel, the professional British foreign policy establishment — sometimes referred to derisively as the “camel corps” because of its sympathy with Arab allies and narratives — is increasingly open to hearing Israel's positions, explained British commentator and journalist Jonathan Sacerdoti.

“This is due in no small part to Israel's COVID successes,” he told The Times of Israel.

Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks during a press conference in London, on November 27, 2021. (Jeff Gilbert/Pool via AP)

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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, meanwhile, has hit a rough patch. He gave a widely panned speech to business leaders last week in which he lost his place in his notes and went on at length about Peppa Pig. More significantly, he faced revolts from his own party over social funding, and defended a Conservative MP for two weeks before changing his position and admitting the lawmaker violated lobbying rules.

At the same time, Johnson, elected in 2019 on his “Get Brexit Done” slogan, has struggled to show that he can negotiate bilateral trade deals that benefit UK businesses and citizens.

In addition, the British public has recently been reminded of the nature of Iran’s regime by headlines about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, an Iranian-British dual citizen imprisoned in Iran on espionage charges. Johnson made misleading comments in 2017 about the nature of Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s trip to Iran, which complicated her case when a Tehran court seized upon them as proof she was not just on a family vacation. Her husband Richard held a 21-day hunger strike only weeks before Lapid’s visit.

“This all has created something of a sweet spot for Israel right now,” explained Sacerdoti.

Lapid’s visit also gave Johnson some positive economic news in the post-Brexit reality he helped bring into being. Johnson’s Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and Lapid signed an MOU for strategic cooperation, meant to lead to a free trade agreement between the countries, and closer security, economic, and technological ties.

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid (R) signs an MOU with UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss at the Foreign Office, in London, November 29, 2021 (Stuart Mitchell/ GPO)

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In a sign of how closely Britain wants to coordinate with Israel, Lapid and Truss also jointly published an article in the Daily Telegraph, pledging their “close co-operation” to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

With bilateral military ties that have been growing closer since the David Cameron premiership, the deepening diplomatic coordination and economic cooperation have the potential to form a key pillar of Britain’s post-EU posture, and to enhance Israel’s voice in Europe, in the Middle East, and in international institutions.

**No teddy bear**

France, where Lapid visited the day after his meetings with Johnson and Truss, has been regarded as less supportive of Israel than Britain, to say the least.

There are certainly important voices in the French halls of power that are hostile to Israel, especially in the French Foreign Ministry. But on Iran, France is far more hard-nosed than many realize.

“France was always on the frontlines,” said Arie Bensomhoun, executive director of ELNET France, a nonprofit organization that works to strengthen ties between Israel and Europe. “They know exactly what is at stake when it comes to the nuclear issue and when it comes to Iran.”

This combination of file pictures created on August 9, 2021, shows French President Emmanuel Macron and Iran's President-elect Ebrahim Raisi. (Stephane De Sakutin and Atta Kenare/Various Sources/AFP)

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France, which had supplied Iran with enriched uranium under the shah, halted its shipments after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Iran-backed Hezbollah terror group is blamed for the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing that killed 58 French paratroopers. In the 1980s, Tehran is believed to have ordered the kidnapping of French citizens in Lebanon, as well as a series of deadly bombings in Paris. The two countries even broke off relations for almost a year in 1987.

During the negotiations in the lead-up to the JCPOA, Iranian state TV accused France of serving as “Israel’s representatives,” while France’s foreign minister warned that Iran was involved in a “con game.”

France has been increasingly strident in its criticism of Iran in recent months as well. “I think we changed our point of view in France about Iran,” Philippe Latombe, vice president of the France-Israel Friendship Group in the National Assembly, told The Times of Israel in September.

The change in France’s perspective could be felt in the briefing provided to the group by Eric Danon, the French envoy in Israel, said Latombe.

President Isaac Herzog (L) and French Ambassador Eric Danon at a Bastille Day celebration, Jaffa, July 14, 2021 (Lazar Berman/Times of Israel)

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“The speech changed from the last time I came,” he said, underlining a particular focus on the Iranian threat this year.

During his Bastille Day address in Tel Aviv earlier that month, French Ambassador Danon declared, “The mullahs’ regime should never possess the nuclear bomb.”

“We might have sometimes disagreed on the method,” Danon continued in a surprisingly muscular speech, “but we stand together to fight simultaneously against the nuclear risk, the ballistic missile threat and the destabilizing actions of Iran in the region, and first of all in Lebanon, in Syria and in Iraq.”

Further contributing to the openness of the dialogue, Lapid and Macron have a warm personal relationship stretching back before either of them was in their current position. Lapid took the unusual step of endorsing Macron in the 2017 presidential election, and Macron seemed to return the favor by hosting him at the Elysee Palace in Paris only four days before the April 2019 elections in Israel.



French alignment with Israel on Iran might go even further than many realize.

According to Bensomhoun, Israeli officials in the room during Lapid’s meeting with Macron told him that “even if the president is supporting a diplomatic resolution, they understand the importance of having all solutions on the table, including a credible military option.”

“If something has to be done, the French will be part of the coalition,” said Bensomhoun.

In October, France deployed a Rafale fighter squadron in Israel for the first time as part of the international Blue Flag aerial exercise.

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“They are not teddy bears, they are not naïve,” declared Bensomhoun.

Experts said that it seems that the July crisis in bilateral relations — which involved the suspected use of Israeli spyware developed by NSO Group to allegedly hack the phones of Macron and other senior French officials — seems to no longer be causing tensions.

“It looks like Israel settled the issue with the French,” explained Emmanuel Navon of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security. “Macron was really aggravated by this issue, and I assume he brought it up.”

“Clearly we are in a different story after four months of conflict because of NSO,” said Bensomhoun. “It doesn’t mean that the NSO Pegasus file is closed, but it will not interfere anymore with the bilateral relations.”

## **Plan B**

After alarming progress by Iran in its nuclear program, and with key provisions of the 2015 JCPOA set to expire in 2025 and 2031, there is no guarantee that any deal will be reached in Vienna. If not, Western powers will have to settle on another way to stop Iran’s nuclear program.

That increasingly likely scenario seemed to be at the core of Lapid’s message this week.

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Foreign Minister Yair Lapid (R) and his British counterpart Liz Truss at the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office in London, November 29, 2021. (Stuart Mitchell)

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“Lapid wanted to discuss Plan B more than Plan A,” said Navon.

It seems that Europe and the US understand that talks may well fail, and are willing and eager to hear Israel’s perspective.

If Lapid and Bennett succeed in helping their allies maintain a robust sanctions regime on Tehran while presenting a credible military threat, their nonconfrontational approach will look like a prudent choice.

However, if Biden blinks, and offers Iran a more favorable deal to enable the US to focus efforts elsewhere, Israel’s leadership risks being painted as failing to protect the Jewish state against one of its most serious threats.