Iran Nuclear Talks – Deal or No Deal?

May 7, 2025
Featuring Barak Ravid
Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: All right. Welcome to "The Iran Breakdown." I'm your host, Mark Dubowitz. Today I'm joined by Barak Ravid, one of the most connected and respected journalists covering Israeli diplomacy in U.S.-Middle East relations. Barak is a senior correspondent for *Axios,* contributor to CNN, and writes for Israel's *Walla News* and *Yedioth Ahronoth*. His reporting has earned him top honors, including the White House Correspondents' Association's Aldo Beckman Award for overall excellence in White House coverage in 2024; it recognized his deeply sourced reporting during critical moments in U.S. foreign policy. He also received an honorable mention from the National Press Club for his piece "Biden's Peace," detailing U.S. efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Barak is the author of "Trump's Peace: The Abraham Accords and The Reshaping of the Middle East," a behind-the-scenes account of the Trump administration's diplomatic breakthroughs with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The book features exclusive interviews with President Trump and other key players. It offers unprecedented insights, one of the most consequential foreign policy shifts in recent history. In this episode, we're going to unpack the latest developments in the Iran nuclear talks, what's happening behind closed doors, the strategies of the Trump administration, Khamenei's maneuvers, and the roles of Israel Congress in the Gulf States. So, let's break it down.

Barak, wonderful to have you.

RAVID: It's great to be here in a podcast hosted by the most hated man for both MAGA Republicans and Obama Democrats.

(LAUGHTER)

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's fine. Actually, a lot of friends – a lot of MAGA Republican friends, a lot of Obama Democratic friends. But certainly, there does seem to be an isolationist wing of the right and a anti-Israel wing of the left that does despise me.

RAVID: No, I have to say – it's because while covering the negotiations that led to JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], I remember how you were enemy number one for the administration. And it's sort of like, we're 10 years later and you basically haven't changed any of your opinions, but you found yourself now in the same situation with a new administration, but just from the other side of the political map, which I think tells, at least to me, a lot about what happened to the Iran discussion in America. And I'm saying it as– I see myself as sort of, I think, outside observer because I'm not American, I'm Israeli who came here to the US and is sort of watching it almost as if I'm watching National Geographic. So, it's really interesting to see this development, and it's one of those cases that you tell me, but you didn't even know that you were so sophisticated as leading a campaign against the Iran nuclear talks.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting, Barak. I would say the one fundamental difference between 2015 and 2025, is in 2015 I opposed President Obama's Iran deal. I was in opposition to the administration. This summer around I'm actually in full support of President Trump's policy and his national security team's policy, as well as Senate Republicans and leading members of Trump's base, including key evangelical leaders. So, you had a story just a couple days ago in *Axios* about exactly this, that President Trump had come out very clearly on "Meet The Press," and he said, "My policy is dismantlement." And that of course has been echoed by Marco Rubio, Mike Waltz, Pete Hegseth, Steve Witkoff, and leading Senate and House Republicans. So, I feel like, unlike in 2015 where I was in full opposition to the Obama administration and the president, this time in full support of the president and his position. It just seems like there's a certain wing of his base, this isolationist wing, they're actually in opposition to the president's policy, not me.

RAVID: What was interesting in that NBC interview that you mentioned, is that you could see how there were both sides of the argument, where, you know, taking using the fact, using the fact that Trump sometimes says contradictory things within two minutes. And each of them said, "You see." One part said, "You see! Total dismantlement." And the other side says, "Yes, but afterwards he said that he's open to Iran having a civilian nuclear program therefore he's not really in support of total dismantlement." And it just seems to me that at the moment, and I think I told you this in another forum, that both sides of the argument are much more advanced in their thinking than the talks themselves. Which is also kind of funny how everyone- there are always several clocks and the political discourse / media discourse is always, this clock is always faster than the real clock which is where the talks are, which is much slower and much more like... The political and the media discourse is like Formula One and the talks are like watching paint dry.

DUBOWITZ: That's a good analogy. Before we dive into the talks, because I want to get your insight. I mean, you've got great sources and you're obviously reporting on this very closely. I do think he's comment on “Meet The Press,” on NBC News was very interesting, and I actually fully support both pieces of it. I fully support the dismantlement of Iran's nuclear program. On the other hand, I do support that Iran can have a civilian nuclear program like 23 other countries in the world who buy their fuel rods from abroad, who don't have domestic enrichment, who don't have domestic reprocessing of plutonium. And in fact, Iran today has a nuclear reactor called Bushehr. And by the way, they buy their fuel rods for Bushehr from the Russians. And they've never used any of the enriched uranium that they've produced in massive quantities to actually fuel this nuclear reactor, which puts a lie to Iran's claim that they need enriched uranium on their soil for civilian nuclear energy.

They certainly don't. They haven't used it; they've been using Russian fuel rods. And I think when Secretary Rubio came out just before President Trump's statement, he made it very clear there is a pathway to a civilian energy program: There's just no domestic enrichment, no reprocessing, no need for centrifuges, no need for deeply buried underground facilities in Natanz and Fordow that enrich uranium. No need for all of this fissile material and infrastructure that could be used to build nuclear weapons, Iran, you can be like 23 other countries and have these fuel rods. By the way, I fully support that. So, again, I support both aspects of what the president said, and we'll see as the negotiations continue, and the debate continues, whether these isolationist voices in the Trump coalition are prepared to continue supporting the president or are they going to continue doing what I fear they are doing right now, is undermining the president's leverage and Steve Witkoff's leverage at the negotiating table. But let's jump into what's going on.

So, it's like watching paint dry.

RAVID: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: What is going on in the negotiations, if anything?

RAVID: Not much.

DUBOWITZ: Not much?

RAVID: Not much, that's the thing. At the beginning, in President Trump's letter to Iranian leader Khamenei, he set a two-month deadline. Then people said at those two months, “When do you start counting? Do you start counting from March 7th when the letter was delivered? Do you start counting from when the first round of talks took place? What's the date?” And until now, I'm not sure. I think it's from the first round of talks, which means that four out of eight weeks are behind us. It's still unclear when the next round of talks is going to take place. There’s the president's visit to the Middle East, that obviously will take a lot of time, both the preparations and the visit itself. I spoke on Monday night with White House Envoy Steve Witkoff, he said that they're trying to hold a fourth round of talks over the weekend.

Iranian press reported it might take place on Sunday in Muscat in Oman, which makes sense. If Trump is arriving on Tuesday to Saudi Arabia, it makes sense for Witkoff to already be in the region. But even if there will be a fourth round of talks, we are in a very, very early stage. Meaning the parties didn't really start discussing the actual details of a possible deal. We're still in the place where the Iranians made some proposals and the US has been studying them, analyzing them, preparing some sort of– I don't know if you want to call it request for clarifications, answers, counterproposal, I don't know how to call it, but it's preparing something to give back to the Iranians. This, I think, will happen if there will be a fourth round of talks, but it is still very much like macro issues. It's still not a detailed, technical negotiations like we saw in 2015 over the JCPOA and even in 2013 over the JPOA [Joint Plan of Action], the interim agreement.

So, what it tells me, is that the two-month deadline is not really relevant anymore. I think it has become an aspirational deadline that if it means that it's 12 weeks instead of eight weeks, nobody's going to make a big deal out of it. And if there will be progress, as at least President Trump has said, if this progress continues, then I think this could continue for a long time. We have to remember, to get the JCPOA it was three years of negotiations. It's not something you can get- even if the Iranians said, "Tomorrow, okay, dismantlement, we agree." Just to build a protocol of how to do it, you're talking about months of negotiations. So, I think this issue, again, if it continues to make progress, if there's crisis that's another thing, but if there continues to be on both sides the feeling that there's progress, it could take at least, at least a year.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I certainly hope that if they agree on–

RAVID: Which– why does it matter? It matters because in October, the snapback clause of the 2015 nuclear deal expires. So, if the talks will continue, the US and its European partners will have to figure out what to do with the snapback because they cannot allow the snapback to expire. So, this leads, me at least, to think that there will have to be- again, if talks continue to make progress as both sides are saying right now, if that's the case, there will have to be some sort of an interim agreement. At least with this issue of the snapback.

DUBOWITZ: Well, first of all, I agree with you. We're early in the negotiations and there's a lot to discuss. I actually agree with President Trump. It's fairly a simple deal. I mean, Iran must agree to dismantlement – and there is a 60-page report that FDD has put out that details what dismantlement is and how dismantlement occurs. And so, there's not that much to negotiate. With JCPOA, it was an incredibly complicated deal, precisely because the Obama administration conceded a massive nuclear infrastructure to Iran and then was looking at ways of restricting that over time with sunset provisions under which those restrictions would expire. So, it was painstaking negotiation by technical experts to try to figure out how can you stop Iran from breaking out to a nuclear weapon when you're giving them the very nuclear infrastructure that allows them to do so. I agree with President Trump; it's a simple deal on dismantlement.

But my question to you is, dismantlement, no enrichment. The day after President Trump's interview, Monday this week, Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian foreign minister and lead Iran nuclear negotiator, came out with a withering post on X – attacking by the way FDD, but also attacking Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and really implicitly attacking President Trump's position on dismantlement. Making it very clear that that is unacceptable, that is an absolute red line, and enrichment on Iranian soil is the number one condition for the Ayatollah and for the regime.

So, Barak, I want to ask you on this, because there's been a lot of media and political discussion, and you say that that's getting well ahead of the negotiations. But on three occasions, Steve Witkoff had publicly said that he's willing to give 3.67% enrichment to Iran, which would then be essentially conceding the number one demand that the Iranians have and would also be effectively adopting the framework of JCPOA. Then Secretary Rubio came out and explained that, in fact, what Steve Witkoff meant was not to give them domestic enrichment, but to give them this civilian nuclear option where they buy enriched fuel rods from abroad for their reactors. And actually, Steve Witkoff clarified this in a post saying, "No, exactly. Dismantlement, no enrichment." Very confusing messages. It seems to have been clarified by the president, but

what do you make of that? Do you think that the U.S. negotiating team has conceded enrichment on Iranian soil to the Iranians as part of these initial discussions? Or do you think that Secretary Rubio is right, that's what Witkoff really meant when he talked about enrichment?

RAVID: Look, I don't know exactly what the administration's position is on enrichment in Iran, because as you said, there were several statements made. And I even think that, because somebody gave me an explanation why dismantlement does not necessarily contradict some enrichment in Iran, which was, I don't know, how that physically can go together...

(LAUGHTER)

…but whatever. So, I think, to be honest, at the moment, it feels to me that the U.S. position hasn't been set yet on this very crucial part of the negotiations, because it's one or zero. It's either you allow Iran to have some enrichment, or you don't. There's no way around it. And I don't think a final position has been made.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, you could, for example, and I'm just speculating here. I don't know if this would work or ever be acceptable to any party, but you could, for example, have a U.S.-Iranian enrichment facility in Kazakhstan under international safeguards.

RAVID: Yeah. You know–

DUBOWITZ: It produces fuel rods. And those fuel rods then are sent to Iran for their Bushehr reactor or whatever other civilian nuclear reactors they want to set up. And it's under U.S. supervision, IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards. The Iranians could then claim they are still enriching, not on their soil, but enriching. But of course, the enrichment is for fuel rods. And you could design it so that it's proliferation-proof.

RAVID: Somebody told me, "Yes, and you can also have a..." He said, "Yes, the Iranians are proposing a joint venture, a joint U.S.-Iranian venture for nuclear energy and uranium enrichment." And he said, "Yeah, why not build like, what the Biden administration discussed with Saudi Arabia for a U.S. controlled facility, enrichment facility in Iran that the Iranians only get the product?" And I said, "That's all great, but it'll happen when unicorns will fly to Iran with Donald Trump on their back." I mean, it's like, if it's not simple, it means it's not going to happen. So, I think it's at the end of the day, a very simple question: Do you agree to uranium enrichment in Iran and then negotiate the scope? Or you say, no, it's zero and it–

DUBOWITZ: And it must be dismantled.

RAVID: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: And I think that's what Donald Trump has said, dismantlement means no enrichment capability, no centrifuges; it means shutting down the deeply buried underground Natanz enrichment facility, the even more deeply buried underground Fordow facility. By the way, this new facility, I know that Israelis call *Salahin*, which is at Natanz, which is going to go a hundred meters underground, even deeper than Natanz and Fordow, and it's going to be heavily fortified with concrete, making it, maybe, impossible for US and Israel to destroy it from the air. And so, if you adopt that framework and you're in JCPOA, you're effectively conceding Iran those capabilities. If you adopt Donald Trump's dismantlement conception, then all of that has to be ripped out. And Donald Trump, remember in the Oval Office a couple months ago, said something to the effect of that under U.S. supervision, Iran must blow up own facilities up–

RAVID: Will blow them up.

DUBOWITZ: –or effectively we're going to blow out up for them.

RAVID: Yeah.

DUBOWITZS: Right? So, this is not the first time that he's talked about dismantlement two or three days ago. He made that clear right from the beginning.

RAVID: I agree. But then I always ask myself the question, if that's the case, and if, I think you'll agree with me, that the Iranians will not dismantle the nuclear program.

DUBOWITZ: I don't agree.

RAVID: You think they will?

DUBOWITZ: I think that the biggest mistake we can make is to think that 2025 is 2015. And what I mean by that, because we started talking about the differences, is that to be fair to Barack Obama in 2015, when they were negotiating that agreement, the United States had leverage, it had economic leverage, right? The Iranian economy was suffering, but the entire Iranian infrastructure, its capabilities was in place. It had Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iraqi Shiite militias, the Houthis, air defenses, ballistic missile production capability, and a president who clearly wasn't prepared to use military force, was clearly prepared to block Israel from using military force. And so, all Obama had was economic leverage, and that was leverage that proved to be insufficient to get a zero-enrichment deal.

But Barak, you've been covering this in detail. 2025 is very different. Everything that I just described has either been destroyed by the Israelis or severely degraded. We– the United States and Israel – have way more leverage today than we did in 2015, and we should stop negotiating with ourselves and saying, "You know what? The Iranians will never accept this." Because you know what the Iranians never say? They never say, "The Americans will never accept this."

RAVID: That's true.

DUBOWITZ: We better adjust our position to compromise.

RAVID: That's true. That's true. I'm just giving my own assessment that I, really, I do not see the Iranians coming in with C-4 explosives and blowing up their own nuclear facilities. The only way, again, in my opinion, that those nuclear facilities will be blown up is, through a military action by either Israel, or the US, or Israel and the US. I just don't see any other way that you can dismantle...

DUBOWITZ: Let me give you a scenario, and I'd love you to respond to this because if, and I don't want to give any clues and tips to the Iranian nuclear negotiators, but if I'm thinking that Donald Trump is gone in three and a half years, if I'm thinking that the next president of the United States, either a Republican or a Democrat, is not going to be willing to use American power against Iran, then I'm going to do a deal, a three and a half year deal, and I'm going to wait Trump out, in which case, it doesn't even matter what I concede. I could concede dismantlement. It's like, okay, IAEA come in, we'll do a Libya model, right? Take out the infrastructure, take out the centrifuges, close the facilities, take out our enrichment and reprocessing capability, shut down in some way our strategic missile capability, including our ICBM [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile] capability.

Sure. I'll concede all that. Then in return, I want hundreds of billions of dollars in sanctions relief, and I want a treaty that says no U.S president will withdraw from this. Then I wait three and a half years, Trump's out, and I start rebuilding all that infrastructure. And what am I worried about? I'm not worried about the US using American power, and I'm probably counting on the fact that the US will block Israel from using military force. So, in my mind, there is a deal that the self-proclaimed “flexible supreme leader,” who talks about this as in wrestling metaphors, but also cites Islamic history to talk

about why compromise is sometimes required, could concede on enrichment, knowing that Donald Trump's gone in three and a half years.

RAVID: I'm not saying it's impossible, okay, I'm just saying that this is, a lot of times, and now I'm bringing my Israeli point of view to discussions. A lot of times Bibi would do something, and everybody say, "Oh, this is the sophisticated way, and he's a magician and he's doing this, and if he succeeds, he's a genius. If he fails, no, no, you don't understand how genius he is because he failed here, because his plan is completely different." I think, we sometimes, sort of like, give too much credit to the Iranians, especially to Khamenei. Khamenei has made massive, massive, massive mistakes over the last two years, like crazy mistakes that led him to where he is now. And I'm not saying he can't make those mistakes again, I'm just saying that if we say that he's not stupid and that he's not irrational and that he's super smart and rational player and thinks strategically, then what it means is that he'll say, "I cannot miscalculate it again."

And to say that no other president in the future will take military action against Iran or will not allow Israel to... We were close, we were close, we can argue how close, to Joe Biden supporting a military strike against Iran during the transition. Okay? It was definitely closer than any other Democratic president in history. And it could have happened.

DUBOWITZ: If there were signs that Iran was going to 90%.

RAVID: No, then it would definitely happen. I'm saying even without that, there were discussions in the White House, and serious people supported a military action against Iran. Not only if they go to 90%, but just because everything you mentioned, that there's an opportunity. Iran is weak. Don't kick the can down the road, make it your legacy. There were serious people supporting it within the administration.

DUBOWITZ: It's interesting. Why did Prime Minister Netanyahu with that opportunity in the transition, knowing that Trump was coming, uncertainty of what President Trump would do. Why not take that opportunity in the transition and hit the nuclear facilities?

RAVID: I think he made a mistake.

DUBOWITZ: And why do you think–

RAVID: I think he made a mistake. Not by the way, not for the first time. He made the mistake.

DUBOWITZ: And was his calculation that, “Not to worry, President Trump will be coming in and we'll have even more backing, more support from the United States. President Trump will for sure back military force against Iran's nuclear facilities and may even do it himself.”

RAVID: I think that's the message that Netanyahu's confident Ron Dermer got from Trump himself when he met him in Mar-a-Lago a few days after the election. It's not a crazy thought. It's not like, oh, how did Netanyahu think that that's what's going to happen? It's not crazy. I'm just saying that, there was, I really think from everything I know, and it's not an opinion, I'm just giving the facts of what happened in November 2024. There was an window of opportunity for an Israeli strike in Iran supported by the Biden administration, because there are certain technical elements of such an operation that Israel cannot do on its own. It needs not a lot of U.S. support, but some critical U.S. support that cannot go forward without it.

And I think the plans were there, the operational plan was there. But I think also one of the reasons it didn't happen, is because, at that point, there was zero trust between Netanyahu and Biden. And it's a whole different discussion, but I think Netanyahu brought his relationship with Biden to a point where it was just very hard for both sides to agree on such

an issue even though, on the merits of it, there was not a big disagreement. But I think just the politics and the bad blood was one of the key things that got in the way.

DUBOWITZ: So fast forward to today, May 2025, Joe Biden's out of office. Donald Trump is in office. Nuclear talks are ongoing as we've discussed, even though paint is drying. What is Netanyahu's position today? I mean, with respect to his options, with respect to Israeli military options, with respect to–he seems to be getting full support from President Trump on Gaza and Hamas, obviously strong military support. All of the munitions and systems that had been delayed or semi-embargoed under Biden have all flowed now – to now to the IDF [Israeli Defense Force]. He's given Israel really strong backing on a number of different fronts. So, it is a reasonable inference, those who made it around Netanyahu, the prime minister himself, that Trump was going to be very good for Israel and had Israel's backing or provide Israel backing that President Trump didn't. However, we are where we are today, and nuclear talks are ongoing. Where do you see the Israeli opportunities, calculation, and limitations?

RAVID: So first I have to say that Netanyahu, no doubt that Netanyahu was caught off guard in his last meeting with Trump by the public statement that they're going to start nuclear talks. And he knew that they were discussing it. He knew that it's going to happen, but he didn't know that while he was sitting next to President Trump, there will be such an announcement in front of the cameras. And I think when you add to that what Trump said in that meeting about Syria and about Turkey, something that Netanyahu is highly concerned about Turkish involvement in Syria, and basically Trump said, "Yeah, Turkish involvement in Syria is great. I support that." And the fact that Trump did not commit to a military strike if talks fail, and the fact that Trump didn't say anything about lifting the tariff that back at the time he still planned to impose on Israel. Not only that, he told Netanyahu, "You're getting four billion a year. Congratulations." Meaning like, "It would be good if you'd say thank you and shut up."

So that was a very bad meeting, a very bad meeting. The number of people on both sides of the Atlantic that told me that they saw it as a humiliation of Netanyahu, I think I heard it from 20 different people. And regardless of political affiliation, just people who watched it and said, "Wow, this is humiliating." So, I think that Netanyahu is aware that he has very limited influence over White House decision making and over the president's policies.

It is true, at the same time, that on Gaza at least, Trump seems to basically say, "Whatever you do, I'm okay." But I think that's mainly because he doesn't– it's not a priority for him. Unlike Russia-Ukraine, or Iran, or tariffs, which are all a very high priority for Trump. And it means that once Gaza, for example, is a priority again, then maybe there's not going to be this backing.

So, I think Netanyahu knows he needs to navigate very carefully right now because he has no ability to know what's coming. And I think especially after – Mike Waltz is not National Security Advisor anymore. The channel between Ron Dermer, Netanyahu's confidant, and Waltz was a key channel for a lot of things. Iran was one issue, but Gaza also. And with Waltz gone, I think Netanyahu has even less ability to give his input into the decision-making in the White House.

DUBOWITZ: Right. I mean, that may be true, but of course with Secretary Rubio, both the Secretary of State and acting National Security Advisor, Secretary Hegseth, and other members of the administration, who have very close relationships with their Israeli counterparts, one can assume there'll still be an opportunity for close discussions and not the kind of surprises that Netanyahu and the Israelis experienced in 2013 and 2015 during JPOA and JCPOA negotiations. And it may just also be that, to your point earlier, things are so preliminary in the talks that it's not yet the opportunity to start to influence.

But what I want to ask you, Barak, was–

RAVID: Yeah. By the way, I'll give you an example. The US and Iran announced that they'll start technical talks. The Israelis said- in the last call between Netanyahu and Trump, Netanyahu said, "Oh, you're starting technical talks. I want to send my experts to sit with your expert." Trump said, "Great, send them."

So, a team of Israeli nuclear experts came to Washington, DC, and to meet the U.S. technical team. And then they met one person, Michael Anton, who is heading the technical team, the head of policy planning in the State Department and a key player in many of the U.S. diplomatic initiatives, both on Russia-Ukraine and Iran. But at the time when they came to Washington, he was the only one. There was still not a U.S. team that can sit face-to-face and discuss this.

This is just one example of how this thing is really, really, really just starting.

DUBOWITZ: Really early days. But let's go back a bit into Israeli history because, I mean, Prime Minister Netanyahu has made the Iran issue his issue for decades. I think it's fair to say his legacy depends on what he does about Iran. I mean, if Iran goes nuclear, there's no Israeli response, and it's fair to say that that would be really damaging to the prime minister's legacy.

But it hearkens back to two Israeli prime ministers, who faced with similar situation, not identical, defied two U.S. presidents, two Republican presidents. Menachem Begin defied the wishes of the Reagan administration when he bombed the Osirak reactor in 1981. And the U.S. response was pretty harsh. I mean, I'm old enough to remember Vice President Bush blasting Israel for violating Iraq's territorial integrity. I recall they imposed sanctions, including a partial military embargo on Israel at the time.

But Begin had the courage. And years later, I think the Americans were grateful to Menachem Begin, particularly during the first Gulf War, when they had to confront Saddam [Hussein] and Saddam didn't have nuclear weapons.

Fast-forward to Prime Minister [Ehud] Olmert. I mean, you remember this.

RAVID: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: They provided evidence to the George W. Bush administration that Syria was building a nuclear reactor for nuclear weapons purposes. They provided all the evidence. And the response from the Bush administration was, "We'll take care of it. We'll condemn them at the UN Security Council, and we'll lead a public diplomatic effort to do this." And Olmert said, "Thank you very much, Mr. President." Turned around, went back to Israel, and ordered the bombings of the al-Kibar reactor in Syria.

So, two Israeli prime ministers defied two American presidents, both Republican, and went ahead and used the military option to destroy two nuclear weapons programs that were being built by two Israeli enemies. Why isn't Prime Minister Netanyahu going to be the third?

RAVID: First, he might. Although people don't change at the age of 75, and if someone was Prime Minister for 15 years and didn't do it, then it raises a lot of questions whether he will ever do it. But to his credit, it's also that Iraq and Syria, in both cases it was like one facility. You go in, you take it out and that's it. Iran is more complicated and many facilities underground. But we also have to remember that now it's 2025. When Menachem Begin did it in the 1980's, Israel's military capabilities were also far less advanced than they are today. Same goes for 2007 with Syria.

It's a complicated question on whether it's the same thing, or it's much more complicated. In any case, Netanyahu could have done it in 2011, in 2012, 2013. He chose not to do it. Once he blamed Yuval Steinitz, who was his most loyal ally, his crony, and you couldn't find a more loyal puppy than Yuval Steinitz to Netanyahu, and Netanyahu blamed him, that because he was against a strike in Iran, at some point it didn't happen in 2012 or 2013, which is ludicrous. And by the

way, Netanyahu could have done it in the first Trump presidency. He also didn't do it. He waited for Trump to do it or for maximum pressure to work. He could have done it in November or December 2024. Chose not to do it. So, I'm not saying he wouldn't, I'm just saying that there's a record that raises a lot of questions.

I would also say that we already know what Netanyahu's legacy on Iran is because we had October 7. Hamas was funded, trained, armed by Iran, not by anybody else. Netanyahu was the prime minister during all those years. I mean, that's his Iran legacy. October 7th is Netanyahu's Iran legacy, nothing else. For now, through October 7th, through Hamas, Iran created– it wasn't an existential threat on Israel obviously, but it was a huge threat. Not threat, it was something- a threat that materialized.

So that's Netanyahu's legacy. And when the history books will be written, I don't know, 50 years from now, 100 years from now, five years from now, that's going to be his legacy. And nothing he will do, even an attack on Iran, on the Iran nuclear program, will not change that legacy. So, if he is looking to do it to wipe out the stain of October 7th, I don't think it's going to work.

And by the way, that's not the reason for doing it, I hope, because that's a very cynical and political reason to do it. If you do it, you do it because of the merits. And the merits are that Iran is very weak, its nuclear program is very advanced, and you've been talking for 20 years or 30 years about removing this threat, and you have an opportunity. So, I think this is the issue here. If Netanyahu is thinking about his legacy, then I have a problem with that, because this is not the reason to do such a thing.

DUBOWITZ: But let's agree you're right, that it's not about legacy, but it's about the security of the State of Israel.

RAVID: Yeah. Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: It's also about American national security. It's about ensuring that the leading state sponsor of terrorism that has killed and maimed thousands of Americans, thousands of Israelis, and hundreds of thousands of Middle Easterners, doesn't end up with nuclear-tipped missiles.

RAVID: Yeah. But he knew that in 2011, in 2012, in 2013.

DUBOWITZ: But to be fair, Barak, I've heard this argument before, and I've been working this issue for over 20 years, and others have been working this for much longer, it would've been a fair assumption to have said 20 years ago, 10 years ago, five years ago, that Iran would already have a nuclear weapon.

And there's a reason Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon. Some would say they don't have a nuclear weapon because Khomeini has not yet made the decision to have a nuclear weapon. Some would say, well, in fact, they had an active nuclear weapons program, certainly before 2003. That program changed in its nature after 2003 because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the concern in Iran that they were next, but they never stopped their nuclear weapons program. They just put part of it in a covert manner and part of it in an overt manner. But they continued their nuclear weapons program.

And yet, because of a combination of Israeli sabotage efforts, economic pressure, U.S. diplomacy, Iran today in 2025 still doesn't have a nuclear weapon. So, I think you could say that this has been successful. It's been a successful strategy for the past 20 years, but we are at the moment–

RAVID: But that's not Bibi's strategy. That's the whole point. The strategy you are describing is not Netanyahu's strategy. It's a strategy that started with Ariel Sharon giving the order to Meir Dagan to start covert operations against the Iranian nuclear program. It continued with Ehud Olmert doing the same thing, telling the Mossad to do sabotage operations, cyber attacks – Olympic Games, the cyber attack against the Iranian centrifuges, it's something that it happened when

Netanyahu was already prime minister after he won the election in 2009, but it started when Olmert was the prime minister.

So, the whole effort to contain, or to slow down, or to delay, or whatever you want to call it, the Iranian nuclear program, is something that started with Ariel Sharon, continued with Ehud Olmert, and continued Benjamin Netanyahu. The difference is–

DUBOWITZ: And with [Naftali] Bennett and with [Yair] Lapid.

RAVID: And with Bennett and Lapid. The difference is that Netanyahu, Netanyahu is the only one from those leaders who said again, and again, and again, that he will destroy Iran's nuclear program. And so that's why him claiming that, "We did sanctions. We did sabotage. We did this ..." That's all great, but that wasn't your strategy.

DUBOWITZ: Well, to be fair, I mean, again, I want to be fair here because I think it's always important to try to be non-partisan in these discussions. I certainly try on the U.S. side as much as possible. The strategy of all of these prime ministers is to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

RAVID: Yes, of course.

DUBOWITZ: And all these prime ministers, there's more continuity than difference, all of them used a variety of tools of Israeli power to do so. All of them had relationships with U.S. presidents, some very close, some very contentious. But at the end of the day, I think there's continuity in Israeli strategy. Not to, quote, “destroy Iran's nuclear program,” but to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

And most importantly, I think all these Israeli prime ministers understood, back to the beginning of our conversation, that if you're going to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, you cannot give Iran the nuclear infrastructure. You cannot give them the fissile material, and you can't give them the domestic enrichment and reprocessing capability to develop that nuclear weapon. I think there's been a lot of consistency on Iran's strategy over decades, at least from my perspective as a non-Israeli outsider. I think there's been more continuity and more agreement amongst Israeli leaders than amongst American leaders. I think our Iran policy, there's been radical differences between presidents in the United States. I think you would agree with that.

RAVID: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: I mean, Obama to Trump is a sharp break in U.S. strategy, and it's also an issue that I think has become unfortunately very partisan and very polarizing in the United States, I think maybe more so than in Israel. You prepared to comment on that in terms of the Israeli public or the Israeli view of this?

RAVID: Yeah, look. Obviously it's very political also in Israel, but I'm just saying that when Naftali Bennett became the prime minister after 13 years of Netanyahu, something like that, and with the government with Lapid and with [Benny] Gantz, one of the things that Bennett, Lapid, and Gantz all agreed on is that during the first Trump term when Israel had its consecutive ongoing election campaigns, Netanyahu completely neglected, for political reasons, because one of the issues was you need to pass a budget, and he refused to pass a budget, which is sort of crazy. And because of that, there was a huge gap in preparedness of the IDF for the scenario of military strike in Iran.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Certain programs were either shut down or suspended and were not getting fully funded.

RAVID: Yes, it's a fact.

DUBOWITZ: Though, to be fair, and I just want to be fair in these discussions, I mean part of the reason, apart from the multiple elections and not passing a budget, was also that at the time Gadi Eizenkot, as then-IDF Chief of Staff, recommended to Netanyahu after JCPOA was reached that the IDF's priorities in terms of resource allocation should shift from Iran nuclear to countering Hezbollah. And in fact, many of the programs and capabilities that we've seen now exercised over the past year and a half against Hezbollah, perhaps at the time programs were started and budgeted as a result of Eizenkot's recommendation to Netanyahu, which was a perfectly reasonable recommendation: "We have JCPOA. This thing is going to be deferred for a number of years because of the agreement. The restrictions are going to sunset, but not immediately. The IDF needs to start spending money, time, and resources on countering Hezbollah and developing capabilities against Hezbollah." Would you agree with that as part of the reason?

RAVID: It's part of the reason. The only thing is that that was when Obama was still the president, but then Trump came in and Netanyahu pushed Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA, which he did. And by the way, Eizenkot at the time was against the US withdrawing from the JCPOA, and Netanyahu was in favor. So, if you are in favor and before your policy was, "Okay, there's JCPOA, let's focus on other things," once there's no JCPOA and you have Donald Trump in the White House, you would think that this means that, "Okay, so we need to review again the policy and at least know that we have a capability which is ready."

Because at the time, there was the American drone that was shot down by Iran and it was a point that people thought maybe something's going to happen. Then Trump decided not to do anything. Then there was the Iranian attack on the oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. This was also a point that people thought, maybe it'll change something, and we need to be ready. Then there was the Soleimani assassination that also– so you had several points that were sort of like alarms that go off and say, "We need to have this ready because you don't know where this thing is going."

DUBOWITZ: Or Barak, to be fair again, just to be fair, the opposite, and this may be getting back to today, which I think is where we need to end on, is if your assumption is, "I now have President Trump back in the White House, President Trump has withdrawn from the deal and he's committed to maximum pressure, the United States has made stopping an Iranian nuclear weapon their priority, the United States is going to take care of this problem instead of subcontracting to Israel, a tiny country of 10 million people with a highly effective, but very small air force and intelligence community. Now the United States is on this issue, and we don't need to be preparing for an Israeli military attack on our own. The United States will take care of it. That was first Trump administration."

Second Trump administration is, "I don't need to go on to Joe Biden during the transition because Donald Trump's coming to the White House, the same Donald Trump who led the same maximum pressure campaign back in his first term, who has made stopping Iran's nuclear weapon a key part of his agenda and his legacy. And so, the United States is there, and the United States is back, so we don't have to prepare." It seems to me that in both cases, Netanyahu has been counting on President Trump to stop this.

RAVID: So, would you say that he made the right decision or that he made a mistake?

DUBOWITZ: We don't know yet.

RAVID: No, we have a track record. I'm not the one–

DUBOWITZ: Can I just say did he make the right decision back in first term Trump because we don't know second term Trump?

RAVID: No, no. I'm talking first term Trump, transition, and now. So, there's a track record, and all I'm saying is– I'm not making an opinion about whether Israel should attack Iran or not. I'm just saying this: There's a guy who was prime

minister for 15 years, said again and again and again, and gave orders. He didn't just say it in public and then in private. He gave orders to prepare for a military strike in Iran, then did not give the order, and then all of a sudden decided that, "That's it. We don't need to prepare anymore." And there was a three-year period where he did nothing on this issue and for totally domestic political reasons of political survival–

DUBOWITZ: But the IDF was preparing against Hezbollah. You have to acknowledge that.

RAVID: Yes. But since when is this either-or? It was never either-or.

DUBOWITZ: No, that's fair. It's not either-or. Though I mean unfortunately life is either-or in terms of priorities and budgets and resource allocation.

RAVID: But a lot of the resources that Israel used at the end, the weapons themselves that Israel used to kill [Hassan] Nasrallah are the same kind of weapons that it would've used to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. So, there's an overlap.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah.

RAVID: Okay, so again, I'm not the one who said for years, "Israel will defend itself by itself, will not be dependent on anybody else, will not allow another Holocaust." I'm not the one who said all those things. And I just think that if a politician says those things for decades, I mean, there needs to be a minimum accountability and not just say, "Oh, but you see how much I managed to impose sanctions, to get the US to impose sanctions on Iran." That's great. Thank you. Thank you for your work, but that's not what you promised.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it is fair to say, and I really want to just get this as sort of a closing insight, it is fair to say whether it was by design, by accident, whether it was by strategy or tragedy, Israel today is in a much stronger position vis-a-vis Iran and its axis of misery, or “axis of resistance,” as the Iranians call it, than really it'd ever been. Iran is weaker than it's been since the Iran-Iraq war. Its core capabilities have been severely degraded, in some cases destroyed. And we haven't even talked about the other element of strategy that I think is really important, which is to provide maximum support to the Iranian people who've been on the street since 2009, yelling, "Death to the dictator," and asking every U.S. president, "Are you with us or are you with the dictator?" And have gotten no support from any U.S. administration and arguably until recently, they haven't gotten any support from any Israeli government.

I am pleased to see that in the past year or so, that Israel has now made maximum support for the Iranian people a key pillar of its Iran strategy. I think it would've been great if this had been started 10, 15 years ago, not just after October 7th, but this is going to be a key element going forward regardless of what happens on the nuclear torques. And it's been a consistent theme of this podcast, which is you've got to prepare for weakening and undermining the regime and supporting the Iranian people to hopefully one day replace this regime with a regime that is much more responsible and is not threatening Israel or United States or its neighbors. Looking forward, are you hopeful that we've turned the corner on some of the mistakes of the past, or are you worried that we're about to hit the wall on Iran policy in a way that will be devastating for US and Israeli security?

RAVID: Look, I think two things. First, I think that, let's say there's going to be a deal, okay? Let's go with this scenario for a moment. I think there's immense, huge potential to get a deal that is, how [Anthony] Blinken used to call it-

DUBOWITZ: “Longer, stronger, broader.”

RAVID: “Longer, stronger, broader.” All the elements are there–

DUBOWITZ: But longer, stronger, broader is still JCPOA. Just understand that–

RAVID: No, again–

DUBOWITZ: Still has enrichment.

RAVID: Again, my personal opinion is that, again, and I said it, the only way to dismantle Iran's nuclear program, to blow it up, is through military force. I do not see how you do that in a deal. If you want to get a deal, which Trump says he does, he has the opportunity to make it, “broader, stronger, longer.” A lot of potential to do it. All the elements are there and the question is how tough he's ready to be in order to tell the Iranians, "You will get a deal and you'll get something in return, but you will have to give a lot to the point of almost everything." Because again, I don't think that in a deal they will agree to give everything, meaning dismantle their nuclear program, but I think he can get with them to a deal that they agree to give up almost everything, which again, each of our listeners would agree if he thinks it's good or bad. I'm not giving my personal opinion. So that's one thing.

There's huge potential to do it. At the same time, there's still also a big opportunity. And again, I'm not expressing an opinion, I'm describing reality. There's still a huge window of opportunity for a military strike against Iran, because Iran is still a weak- it still doesn't have its proxies back. It still doesn't have its full missile arsenal back. It still doesn't have its air defenses back, and the US has, I think, the biggest military buildup in the region, I think at least since the first two months after October 7th, maybe even more, because they didn't have B-2 bombers in the region at the time. So huge buildup.

So, I think if you are someone who supports military action, if you're somebody who supports a deal, for both of those points of view, the stars are aligned. And now the question is: What kind of decisions the leaders are going to make? It's now in the realm of the decision makers. That's where we are right now. The conditions are perfect for both options and Trump will have to decide. It's literally, I think, one person who decides. It's not even two, meaning it's not even Trump and the supreme leader. I really think it's all on Donald Trump. He can get, I think, a deal that is, again, for those who support the deal, that achieves almost a hundred percent, I don't know, 95%, and for those who support a military strike, can definitely go on a military strike in conditions that are– you can never know. You know how you start a military strike, you don't know how you end it. But at least the conditions, right now, operationally and regionally are the best, I think, you'll ever get. That's if I look at the reality on the ground.

DUBOWITZ: Barak, thank you. We're going to continue to really depend on your reporting as one of the best source reporters in Washington and in Israel, and look forward to not only reading your articles, seeing you on television, but hopefully having you back on the podcast as the story unfolds. I think 2025 is going to be the Iran year.

RAVID: Definitely.

DUBOWITZ: And you're one of the Iran guys, so we're going to be pleased to have you back.

RAVID: Definitely. Thank you, Mark. It was great being here and I'll come back, I'll be back.

DUBOWITZ: I'll be back. Thank you.