

Erasing the Leverage Deficit: How to Keep Tehran from the Bomb



JINSA's Gemunder Center Iran Policy Project - October 2021
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I. Executive Summary

If it is not already, Iran is on course to soon become a nuclear threshold state, with a potentially undetectable capacity to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon in a matter of weeks. It has reached this dangerous tipping point at the exact same time as the future of Biden administration efforts to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) are most uncertain. After months of stalling, Iran claims it might return to negotiations at some undeclared time, perhaps in November. Meanwhile, administration officials have suggested their patience is running out and that, should diplomacy fail, a “Plan B” might be required – without specifying either the timing or nature of their backup strategy.¹

This muddle – in which the only thing advancing is Iran’s nuclear program – is a result of Washington’s glaring deficit of leverage vis-à-vis Tehran. Iran has made clear it does not believe it will pay any meaningful price for abandoning diplomacy, attacking U.S. troops and partners, or tiptoeing up to, and perhaps even crossing, the nuclear weapons threshold. And, thus far, it has been proven largely right. With the notable exception of the 2020 killing of Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani, three successive U.S. administrations have confronted Iranian nuclear and regional aggression solely with economic pressure. To achieve its own stated goal of preventing a nuclear Iran, the Biden administration will need more, and other types of leverage, regardless of whether its diplomacy results in a mutual reentry to the agreement, simply drags on, or collapses. Now is the time for the United States, in close conjunction with Israel and other allies in the Middle East, to develop clear and forceful additions to open-ended, conciliatory diplomacy with Tehran.

Decades of U.S. interaction with Tehran demonstrate that Iran’s leadership can only reliably be compelled to abandon nuclear and regional aggression when it perceives a real threat of military action by the United States or Israel. Supreme Leader Khomeini ended Tehran’s interminable total war with Iraq in 1988, once he became convinced Washington was about to intervene decisively; Tehran actually suspended enrichment in 2003 when it thought it could be next after the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, and in 2012 it conspicuously avoided crossing U.S. and Israeli redlines, each of which was underlined by clear military preparations.

Conversely, when feeling purely economic pressure, the most Tehran has acceded to is the JCPOA, a timebound nuclear agreement with very limited restrictions and a pathway to a legitimized nuclear weapons capability. Even then, Tehran received a \$75-150 billion windfall and an effective green light to expand its regional footprint. The inadequacy of results from the Trump administration further bears this out. Facing primarily economic sanctions, even stringent ones under President Trump, Iran progressively ratcheted up its nuclear program and military strikes around the Middle East. Intending to keep Tehran at the negotiating table, the Biden administration now has offered carrots in the forms of goodwill gestures, underenforcement of key energy sanctions and even major sanctions relief. Yet this only encourages Iran to keep its foot on the nuclear accelerator as it and its proxies sustain a robust tempo of attacks against U.S. and allied targets around the region.

Thus, a more assertive and concerted approach that fully enforces existing sanctions, and more importantly enhances military readiness, offers by far the best prospects for realizing the Biden administration’s goal of “putting Iran in a box” to reduce America’s exposure in the Middle East and constrain Tehran’s destabilizing behaviors.² Indeed, no matter the fruition or failure of stalled talks in Vienna to rejoin the nuclear deal, more leverage certainly will be imperative for reining in Iranian aggression and buying time – and peace and quiet – in the Middle East that enables the Biden administration to focus on its domestic and foreign policy priorities, notably including strengthening the U.S. deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific region.

Moving forward, and starting immediately, the United States and its allies must fully enforce existing sanctions, particularly those targeting Iran's energy sector. More crucially, the Biden administration must work with its Middle East partners to bolster the credibility and effectiveness of military options for preventing a nuclear Iran and addressing associated regional tensions. Fortunately, these measures all are based directly on actions the United States has taken previously. Moreover, Washington is far from alone, since Israel and other regional actors can play vital roles, too. A credible U.S. military option is the most direct and effective route but, failing that, Israel's freedom of action remains the best alternative.

For starters, stronger and unequivocal messaging is necessary. The Biden administration should reiterate President Obama's 2009 pledge "to use all elements of American power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon," while also reversing the Obama administration's public handwringing over the efficacy of military elements of that power.³ More explicitly, American policymakers should state publicly that military force indeed can prevent a nuclear Iran and that, together with Israel, it is prepared to carry out such options. Indeed, given the innate credibility deriving from Israel's ongoing kinetic (and sometimes covert) action against Iranian aggression, the administration can immediately bolster shared deterrence by publicly doubling down on its support for the "ironclad" partnership with Jerusalem and the latter's right to defend itself.

These declarations must be rolled out in close combination with tangible actions to bolster, signal, and ensure the readiness of, military options against Iran. The United States needs to undertake a range of actions, including:

- Updating contingency planning to neutralize Iran's nuclear facilities, counter potential retaliation by Tehran and its proxies against U.S. and/or Israeli military action, and defend U.S. and allied assets against growing Iran-led missile and drone threats;
- Enhancing regional force posture, including deploying strategic bombers and massive ordnance penetrators (MOP) to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, boosting U.S. naval presence in Middle Eastern waters, and ensuring adequate force protection measures for U.S. and allied forces to defend and retaliate against Iranian aggression on land and at sea;
- Exercising jointly with Israel and possibly Gulf partners for long-range strike, aerial refueling, air defense, distributed maritime operations, and other relevant U.S. missions; and
- Amplifying strategic communications to link these actions explicitly to U.S. statements emphasizing readiness to use all elements of national power to prevent a nuclear Iran.

These steps will require time and explicit efforts to restore U.S. credibility, especially after the precipitous and chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal that led to the return of the Taliban regime. Meanwhile, Israel already has taken steps to streamline its purchases of U.S. weaponry and bolster the believability of its own military options. In tandem, therefore, Washington should strengthen Israel's freedom of action by:

- Providing to Israel adequate stockpiles of precision guided munitions (PGM), including Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tail kits and GBU-39/B small diameter bombs (SDB);
- Expediting transfer of KC-46A aerial refueling tankers, for which Israel already has arranged purchase, by loaning these platforms and/or initially offering Israel two U.S. production slots (as long as doing so would be consistent with U.S. Air Force readiness);
- Promptly transferring F-35 multi-mission aircraft, CH-53K heavy lift and SH-60/MH-60

multi-mission helicopters for which Israel is arranging procurement, and fast-tracking efforts to sell or transfer F-15 fighter aircraft as excess defense articles (EDA);

- Ensuring sufficiently robust Israeli air defense batteries and interceptor stockpiles, all of which are co-produced with the United States; and
- Expanding and deepening bilateral intelligence cooperation on Iranian nuclear and regional threats.

Finally, the historic Abraham Accords and Israel's ensuing reassignment to the area of responsibility (AOR) for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) are breaking down barriers to regional defense cooperation. Moving forward, the United States should promote deeper ties by:

- Building on America's reassignment of Israel to CENTCOM's AOR by reconfiguring the U.S. stockpile of prepositioned weaponry in Israel, known as WRSA-I, as a regionalized depot for U.S., Israeli and Arab partner operations in the region, as well as upgrading this stockpile with sufficient PGM reserves;
- Expanding regionwide maritime security and air defense cooperation, to include joint operations and exercises to promote interoperability among U.S. and partner forces;
- Rapidly concluding the U.S. agreement to sell F-35 multirole combat aircraft to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), subject to appropriate end-use monitoring; and
- Supporting Gulf partners' efforts to counter threats from Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen, including ensuring adequate air defense capabilities for Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain.

II. The Key to Successful Iran Policy

Since at least the George W. Bush administration, lessons from nearly two decades of U.S. interaction with Iran on its nuclear program all point to the importance of credible alternatives to open-ended diplomacy and the steady single-minded accumulation of sanctions. When facing purely economic pressure, the most Tehran has acceded to is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a timebound nuclear agreement with only limited and reversible restrictions on its pathway to a legitimized nuclear weapons capability, and even then it received a \$75-150 billion windfall for its troubles and an effective green light to expand its Middle East footprint at the direct expense of the United States and regional partners.⁴ The only times Iranian aggression in the nuclear or regional realms has been deterred, or compelled to change course significantly, is when its leadership perceived a real threat of military action by the United States or Israel.

Currently the United States finds itself at a severe credibility deficit with Iran, precisely when it urgently needs options to halt – by deterring or, if necessary, denying – Tehran’s ongoing approach to the brink of nuclear capability and its heightened aggression across the Middle East. This stems directly from the fact that the Biden administration’s objectives of reducing America’s risk exposure in the region, averting a nuclear crisis and stabilizing relations with Iran are mismatched with its chosen means, chiefly conciliatory diplomacy. Perhaps paradoxically, a more forceful approach that enhances military readiness – and reduces U.S. and allied vulnerabilities to Iranian aggression – will better support the administration’s goals by offering far more realistic prospects for mitigating Iran’s malign nuclear and regional behaviors, thus undercutting the main drivers of instability and conflict in the Middle East. A more assertive U.S. posture toward Tehran also could serve the administration’s larger foreign policy goals by strengthening deterrence more broadly when it comes to strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

The lack of results from the Biden team’s approach underscores these lessons. Attempting to entice Iran toward talks and then keep it at the table, from the outset the administration abandoned even the pretense of continuing its predecessor’s “maximum pressure” campaign of robust sanctions, and instead underenforced key penalties on Tehran’s energy sector.⁵ This translated to substantially increased oil exports as negotiations got underway in Vienna; instead of spurring Iranian comity, however, the ensuing economic relief merely gave the regime space and time to drag its feet, advance its nuclear program and steadily raise its demands. Accordingly, in six rounds of talks from April to June, Iran did not budge from its maximalist position that Washington must move first in any return to the JCPOA and deliver significantly more sanctions relief than even the generous terms offered by the Biden administration. As happened with the 2013-15 negotiations that produced the original agreement, the White House’s attempts to break down this “wall of mistrust,” as the preceding Rouhani administration characterized its relations with Washington, through a series of unilateral goodwill gestures only reinforced for Tehran the wisdom of its own uncompromising approach. So did an October statement by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan indicating that, rather than using pressure to reinforce diplomacy, the United States would be “prepared to turn to other options” only “if diplomacy fails.”⁶ Unsurprisingly, by that same point Tehran was boldly demanding the Biden administration unfreeze \$10 billion in assets just to get its negotiators to return to the table.⁷ This fits a larger trend, stretching back to the Iranian revolution, in which Tehran predictably views good-faith outreach and confidence-building measures by U.S. presidential administrations (of both parties) as a weakness to exploit rather than an opportunity to reciprocate.

When it comes to future U.S. diplomacy with Iran, these perils of business as usual are compounded by two events. First, the Raisi administration already is signaling an even more hostile negotiating tack than its predecessor, including suggestions it could come to a seventh round of talks with even more stringent demands.⁸ Second, the precipitous way in which the White House carried out its other main Middle East policy initiative – departing Afghanistan – only reinforces Tehran’s incentive to dig in its heels. Its leaders now have ample evidence to convince them the Biden administration is willing to pay nearly any strategic price in order to move on from the region, including potentially agreeing to a reckless and lopsided JCPOA reentry. In July, Supreme Leader Khamenei crowed about the “humiliation of the White House internationally” and how “U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan proved that this country is no longer the superpower of the world and cannot impose its will on nations.”⁹ The commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps struck the same tone last month, proclaiming “what we can see is no longer a dangerous America, but a defeated, fleeing, and depressed America.”¹⁰

In the current standoff, as throughout U.S.-Iran relations in recent decades, Tehran’s approach is opportunistic, applying pressure to secure whatever concessions and strike whatever blows it can when it feels no real threat by the United States to push back strongly against Iranian intransigence or aggression. When confronted with believable American pledges of forceful retaliation and clear signs of determination, however, Iran has proven itself susceptible to basic calculations of deterrence and compellence in its nuclear and regional behaviors.

Supreme Leader Khomeini only ended the eight-year war with Iraq once he had determined the United States would intervene decisively against Iran, especially after a sharp defeat at the hands of the U.S. Navy and the accidental shootdown of an Iranian civilian airliner by the *USS Vincennes* in 1988; faced with what seemed to be a choice between that and a ceasefire “more deadly than taking poison,” Khomeini nevertheless chose the latter and agreed to end the war. In 2011-12, Iran responded to so-called “crippling” U.S. and EU energy sanctions by publicly threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz, conducting military exercises in the area and warning the United States not to send an aircraft carrier through the strait.¹¹ The Obama administration called any such closure a “red line,” pledged to “take action and reopen the strait” and assembled three carrier strike groups in the region, before conspicuously sending one of them through Hormuz without incident – after which Iran’s foreign minister claimed “we want peace and stability in the region” and that it never tried to close the strait in the first place.¹²

On the nuclear front, in the wake of the 2003 Iraq invasion Tehran inferred the consequences for terrorism-supporting regimes pursuing weapons of mass destruction, and took the momentous step of voluntarily suspending its enrichment program in October of that year – the only time it has done so. By fall 2012, with Iran’s stockpiles once again growing, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu literally drew an enrichment redline in front of the UN General Assembly, prompting Tehran to conspicuously keep itself short of this line by diverting some of its stockpiles to a form unsuitable for fissile material.¹³ Notably, Netanyahu delivered this deterrent message at a time when Israel was semi-openly preparing military options to address Iran’s steadily advancing nuclear capability.¹⁴

III. Three Possible Paths, One Viable Option

Not for the first time, a lack of credible threats to impose serious costs on Iranian implacable aggression now puts the United States in a tight spot. Tehran's nuclear program has progressed further than ever before, and its Middle East footprint and proxy projectile attacks on U.S. and partner assets around the region are rising, all while the Biden administration continues extending an open hand and conspicuously avoiding anything that smacks of pressure or coercion. Consequently, a serious leverage deficit now confronts American diplomats as they sit at a crossroads regarding the future of the JCPOA. Regardless of whether the Vienna talks result in a mutual reentry to the agreement, simply drag on or come undone, more leverage clearly is imperative.

A. If a Return Happens

A return to the JCPOA in any form is so fraught with risk as to be unacceptable for the United States, and any such outcome would necessitate concerted and immediate development of alternatives to sanctions and conciliatory diplomacy. The extensive economic relief Iran already has quoted as its price for reentry – one that could rise under the new Raisi administration – would eliminate the White House's intended source of bargaining power for pursuing a “longer and stronger” successor agreement on missiles and regional challenges. Tehran's insistence that any JCPOA return include concrete guarantees against the reimposition of sanctions would only further straitjacket future U.S. efforts to build leverage for a follow-on accord.

At the same time, reentry would enable Iran to ramp up its regional aggression almost immediately while also laying the foundations for a persistent, if also steadily growing, nuclear challenge. Rejoining the deal also effectively would sweep under the rug Tehran's continued stonewalling of international inspectors about the possible military dimensions of its program – an issue which was put under a spotlight by Israel's covert seizure and subsequent revelation of nuclear archives in 2018. At root, and similar to 2015-16 when the JCPOA was implemented, acceding to something that met none of the Obama administration's original criteria for an acceptable agreement would reinforce for Iran how the White House simply is eager to rid itself of involvement in the Middle East, almost regardless of cost – an impression only sharpened by the reckless nature of the Afghanistan withdrawal.

Combined with tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief, and again as with the aftermath of the original deal, Iran would then have deep pockets and an open door to increase its destabilizing activities around the Middle East. This would include heightened defense spending and arms production at home, and proliferation of these weapons and financial support to proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, and possibly elsewhere. Moreover, with the U.N. embargo on Iran's conventional arms trade expiring last year, and with the White House backtracking on U.N. “snapback” sanctions triggered during the Trump administration, Tehran could plow sanctions relief into major purchases of advanced Chinese or Russian weapons (something it could not readily do after the JCPOA originally was agreed).

Combined, these developments would raise the risks, both of attacks on U.S. assets in the Middle East, and of major Iran-driven war against Israel and Gulf partners, any of which would jeopardize the Biden administration's goal of reducing America's regional risk exposure and putting a lid on troubles in the region. The prospects for the Biden administration's desired “longer and stronger” deal would recede even further as Iran's Middle East footprint and aggression grow.

Rejoining the JCPOA also would require the United States to bolster deterrence on the nuclear front. Rather than expiring all at once a decade from now, the agreement's nuclear restrictions soon will fall away progressively year-by-year, beginning with the expiration of the U.N. ballistic missile embargo in 2023.¹⁷ This predicament confronting the United States will be worsened by concerns, as articulated by the Biden team, that returning to the original deal still will leave Iran uncomfortably close to nuclear weapons capability, since it would retain know-how to operate next-generation centrifuges and new facilities to mass-produce these machines and expand its enrichment capacity.¹⁸ The urgent need for more forceful deterrence against Iran would be compounded by any "more for less" interim return to the JCPOA, in which the United States tries to get back into the 2015 deal by giving up too many sanctions in exchange for too few nuclear concessions from Tehran.¹⁹

B. If Talks Plod Along

Tehran's nuclear progress since Biden's inauguration, and especially since Vienna talks started in April, highlight the dangers of simply keeping America's hand outstretched while Iran deliberates, delays, and dithers. In fact, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the lack of any credible alternatives to endless diplomacy only encourages Iran to see if, by playing the waiting game, it can sweat out additional U.S. concessions and build its own leverage while its centrifuges spin, stockpiles grow, and breakout time shrinks. Indeed, the already-high urgency of developing more robust methods for addressing Iran's nuclear progress will only rise the longer the United States allows itself, and Iran, to remain on this current untenable trajectory.

C. If Things Fall Apart

Iran also might use its delaying tactics as a veneer for effectively walking away from the negotiating table altogether. President Raisi and his negotiating team certainly appear set to take a harder line toward talks than did their predecessors, which could then complicate the Biden administration's ability or willingness to continue offering essentially unconditional diplomatic outreach and the extensive sanctions relief Iran demands. Moreover, and regardless of the administration in Tehran, from the start other key Iranian officials from the Supreme Leader on down have seemed unready to reconcile themselves to reentering the deal, even with conciliatory American interlocutors. This intransigence appears finally to have tested the Biden administration's ample patience, with Secretary Blinken saying in September that further delays could render a JCPOA return moot and thus "the ability to rejoin the [deal], return to mutual compliance, is not indefinite."²⁰

Any Iranian rejection of a U.S. deadline, whether explicit or not, therefore should be interpreted by the administration as the effective end of any pretenses, either that Tehran is willing to roll back its nuclear program (no matter how temporarily) or that sanctions pressure alone suffices to induce such rollback. The net result would be to confront Washington with the stark reality of a very small Iranian breakout timeframe and a warning of its intent to keep closing that window. Furthermore, any potential decision by the Biden administration to break off negotiations would need to be paired with immediate preparations to deter Iran from retaliating on the ground and in the nuclear arena.

IV. Recommendations

Moving forward, and starting immediately, the United States must fully enforce sanctions while working with its Middle East partners on a range of military preparations that can bolster the credibility of more effective means to prevent a nuclear Iran and address rising regional tensions.

Fortunately, all the recommended measures are based directly on actions the United States has taken previously that convey its readiness to keep all options on the table. Aside from the steps spelled out below, this includes vigorous and comprehensive implementation of the existing sanctions regime on Iran, particularly penalties targeting its energy exports to China. In direct contrast to recent offers of major sanctions relief, but in keeping with the administration's emphasis on getting tough with Beijing, this more assertive approach will underline the seriousness of U.S. intentions and limit Tehran's freedom of maneuver to drag its feet, issue its own harsh demands and further advance its nuclear program.

Equally fortunately, the United States is far from alone. Israel already bears the main burden of pushing back Iran on all fronts, including repeated covert action that, in recent months at least, bought the Biden team precious time to stave off an otherwise growing nuclear crisis. Other U.S. partners like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) increasingly show their own willingness to help pick up the slack for regional security, including closer and more overt cooperation with Israel.

A. Clear Statements of Stronger U.S. Policy

For years, a recurrent feature of the U.S. approach toward Iran, particularly on the nuclear front, has been American policymakers' tendency to talk out of both sides of their mouths, and thereby undercut the credibility of otherwise strong statements about the potential use of force if diplomacy fails. The Obama administration touted its willingness to consider military options while downplaying the efficacy of those same options.²¹ Though President Trump warned "Iran will pay a very heavy price, indeed," and made similar verbal threats at other times to deter Iranian aggression, he also tried unsuccessfully to entice Tehran by offering "don't wait until after U.S. Election to make the Big Deal. I'm going to win. You'll make a better deal now!"²² Biden administration officials continue to offer an open hand for talks, even as the President vows Iran will "never get a nuclear weapon on my watch."²³

Stronger, unequivocal messaging is needed. Building on Biden's statement, his administration should start by reiterating President Obama's 2009 pledge "to use all elements of American power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon."²⁴ At the same time, it should avoid the Obama administration's mistake of publicly doubting the efficacy of military options, either American or Israeli, in rolling back Tehran's nuclear progress – especially given the measurable setbacks dealt by recent covert action against Iranian facilities.²⁵ More explicitly, American policymakers should state publicly that military force can indeed prevent a nuclear Iran and that it, together with Israel, is prepared to carry out such options. Indeed, American officials should play up U.S. kinetic alternatives to open-ended diplomacy, while also building on the President's own frequent invocation of America's "ironclad" partnership with Israel by publicly supporting Jerusalem's freedom of action and its current efforts to improve the viability and readiness of its own military options against Iran's nuclear program, and by declaring U.S. support for Israel in the event of Iranian retaliation for any Israeli military action.²⁶

Indeed, this latter step offers more immediate benefits for shared deterrence against Tehran – given the effectiveness, intensity and persistence of Israel's ongoing campaign against Iran on both the nuclear and regional fronts. Doing so will require an opposite approach from the

administration's response to the covert April 2021 attack on the Natanz enrichment site, from which it distanced itself by saying "the U.S. was not involved in any manner."²⁷ Instead, the White House should expand its statements in favor of the recent Abraham Accords by publicly supporting closer defense cooperation among its signatories and broadening the agreements to include new members.²⁸

Finally, American diplomats should connect this overall messaging campaign directly to the Vienna talks by saying explicitly that the United States will not wait indefinitely, either to consider military alternatives or to support those of its allies.

Congress can burnish the credibility of these statements, and hold the administration to account on ensuring it will prevent a nuclear Iran, by convening regular public hearings on the Biden team's Iran strategy as well as the necessity, and steps being undertaken, to prepare military alternatives to unconditional diplomacy on Tehran's nuclear program.

B. Concrete U.S. Military Readiness Activities

The Biden administration's messaging will only be credible in close combination with tangible actions to bolster, signal, and ensure the readiness of military options against Iran. By enhancing the ability of U.S. forces to conduct (and respond to) kinetic action, these steps also will enhance the veracity of pledges to prevent a nuclear Iran. Moreover, because credibility and deterrence can be fungible, such actions can help mitigate challenges posed by Tehran's regional aggression, and vice-versa. The need for these steps is made more acute by Iran's concerted efforts to build counterpressure against the United States through its continued nuclear progress and attacks on U.S. and allies' interests around the Middle East.

Specific U.S. military readiness activities should include:

- Updated contingency planning to:
 - Neutralize Iran's nuclear facilities and associated military capabilities;
 - Counter potential retaliation by Iran and/or its proxies against U.S. and/or Israeli military action, including through operations against Iran directly; and
 - Defend U.S. and allied assets from, and respond to, growing projectile threats (ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones) posed by Iran and its proxies regionwide.
- Regional force posture enhancements:
 - Deploying strategic bombers and massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) munitions, which are particularly well-suited for neutralizing Iran's deeply-buried nuclear facilities, to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean;
 - Boosting the presence of vital U.S. naval capabilities in waters around the Strait of Hormuz and Red and Arabian seas; and
 - Ensuring adequate force protection measures, including air defense capabilities for U.S. strategic assets around the Middle East – first and foremost U.S. bases in Iraq – as well as for other major U.S. and allied military and critical infrastructure sites;
- Joint military exercises for long-range strike, aerial refueling, air defense, distributed maritime operations and other relevant missions, to demonstrate and improve readiness of these updated contingency plans and force deployments;
- Strategic communications to publicize these activities and connect them explicitly to U.S. statements about preparing all elements of national power to prevent a nuclear Iran; and
- Using existing U.S. rules of engagement, which permit much more forceful action than U.S. responses to date against demonstrated hostile intent by Iranian and proxy forces,

to retaliate against Iran's aggressive actions against U.S. forces in and civilian targets, including Iraq, Syria and at sea.

C. Bolstering Israel's Freedom of Action

These U.S. actions will require time and effort to restore credibility, particularly in the wake of the Afghanistan withdrawal. In tandem, therefore, Washington should take immediate steps to strengthen Israel's freedom of action which, in light of America's receding regional commitments, increasingly helps defend U.S. national security interests as well.

Regarding several of the capabilities listed below, Congress can help mitigate the burdens on Israel's already overstretched defense budget, without creating any new costs to the United States, by authorizing Israel to use funds set forth in the bilateral 2016 memorandum on U.S. defense assistance, rather than paying in shekels, to cover the interest on a February 2021 loan package agreed by Jerusalem to expedite the purchase and transfer of some of these platforms.²⁹

Separately, the United States should conduct bilateral military exercises to promote interoperability between U.S. and Israeli systems for missions related to deterring and denying Iranian aggression, including long-range strike, air-to-air, aerial refueling, and air defense. Washington also should make efforts to bolster bilateral intelligence cooperation on Iranian nuclear and regional threats.

i. Precision Guided Munitions

Similar to its pledge to replenish Israeli air defense interceptors after the May 2021 Gaza conflict, the Biden administration must ensure adequate Israeli stockpiles of U.S.-made precision guided munitions (PGM) such as the highly accurate Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and GBU-39/B small diameter bomb (SDB). Israel has purchased tens of thousands of U.S.-made PGMs since 2015, including \$753 million worth of JDAMs and SDBs in May 2021, but in recent years U.S. inventories of these munitions for foreign sales have been constrained by a combination of high demand from the U.S. military and limited U.S. production capacity.³⁰ With orders from the Pentagon currently declining – and likely to continue declining in the next few years – the Biden administration can prioritize fulfilling new Israeli contracts, especially in light of Jerusalem's efforts to hasten its ability to purchase and take delivery of these and other U.S. weapons systems (see below).³¹ One option is to use the Pentagon's Special Defense Acquisition Fund (SDAF), through which the United States would purchase such weapons in advance of their sale and transfer to Israel, thereby giving U.S. defense companies a head-start on production and shortening delivery times without imposing additional costs on the United States. In recent years the fund's authorization from Congress has been tied to procuring and stockpiling PGMs.³²

ii. Aerial Refueling Tankers

Equally importantly, the Biden administration should expedite delivery of U.S. weapons systems already pledged to Israel, and for which Israel has taken measures to move forward the purchase date – most urgently KC-46A aerial refueling tankers. In March 2020, the State Department initially approved the sale of eight aircraft and parts to Israel for \$2.4 billion, to replace the latter's dangerously outdated Boeing 707 tanker fleet.³³ The Pentagon noted at that time how the sale would enable "Israel to provide a redundant capability to U.S. assets within the region, potentially freeing U.S. assets for use elsewhere during times of war."³⁴ In February 2021, the Israeli government agreed to a loan package from U.S. banks to accelerate

payment and acquisition of these platforms, though currently delivery is not expected until 2024.³⁵

The Biden administration and Congress must devise options to ensure the earliest possible transfer to Israel, including possibly loaning completed KC-46As to Israel while the latter's orders are being fulfilled, given both the strategic benefit of creating redundant capabilities to the United States and Jerusalem's efforts to move forward its ability to pay for these aircraft. Alternatively, the United States could provide Israel two of the U.S. Air Force's eight KC-46A production slots – until completion of the first two units for delivery to Israel – as long as doing so would be consistent with U.S. Air Force readiness.

iii. Fixed-Wing Combat Aircraft and Helicopters

The Biden administration also must expedite delivery of other vital platforms for which Jerusalem has taken steps to expedite purchase and transfer, including F-35 multirole aircraft as well as CH-53K heavy lift and SH-60/MH-60 multi-mission helicopters. Israel is awaiting delivery, due to be completed by 2024, of the remaining approximately 20 aircraft for its two currently operational F-35 squadrons, and recently it inaugurated a third squadron that, when fully operational, would bring Israel's total F-35 procurement to 75. Though these squadrons are intended to replace the aging F-15 and F-16 backbones of the Israeli Air Force's long-range strike capabilities, Washington also should fast-track efforts to sell – and/or transfer via the Pentagon's excess defense articles (EDA) program for surplus platforms – additional F-15 aircraft to Jerusalem, both to bolster its overall strike capabilities and to serve as a bridge until Israel onboard its full F-35 complement.

iv. Air and Missile Defenses

The United States also must take steps to ensure Israel possesses sufficiently robust multi-layered air defenses to mitigate – and if possible deter – massive retaliation by Iran and its proxies, chiefly Hezbollah, for any Israeli preemptive action against Tehran's nuclear infrastructure. This includes additional batteries of, and interceptors for, Israel's Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow systems, all of which are co-produced with the United States, and all of which can strengthen resilience against the highly capable arsenals of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones that increasingly encircle Israel – and U.S. regional assets – from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, and Iran itself.

D. Strengthening Regional Defense Cooperation

As indicated by the Abraham Accords, growing threats from Iran and its proxies not only are increasingly shared by America's partners across the Middle East, but they also are breaking down historic barriers to security cooperation between these countries. The United States certainly has played positive supporting roles – chiefly its strong public endorsements of the accords and its subsequent January 2021 decision to transfer Israel to the area of responsibility (AOR) for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) from European Command (EUCOM) – but more must be done to tighten and strengthen this budding counter-Iran coalition.

Steps the United States should take include:

- Ensuring Israel's smooth and prompt transition to CENTCOM, which only officially began on September 1, 2021; Congressional oversight, including hearings, will be important to ensure an effective transition.³⁶

- As part of this process, the United States should reconfigure its stockpile of prepositioned weaponry in Israel (WRSA-I), which is officially intended for Israel's use in an emergency such as wartime, into a regionalized stockpile for U.S., Israeli, and Arab partner operations around the Middle East; the United States also urgently must ensure these depots, which currently contain mostly obsolete unguided "dumb" bombs, have adequate PGM stockpiles – including potentially by relocating existing stocks from other regional storehouses to WRSA-I, which provides a more secure basing opportunity;
- Expanding the recently-created U.S. Navy Task Force 59, which will deploy unmanned aerial surveillance, surface, and undersea systems, to include joint operations and exercises with Israel and other regional partners aimed at countering Iranian maritime aggression;
- Promoting, under U.S. auspices, effective regionwide multi-layered air defense;
- Combined U.S.-led aerial, air defense, and maritime security exercises to promote greater interoperability and readiness among partner forces within CENTCOM's AOR;
- Rapidly concluding the U.S. agreement to sell F-35 multirole combat aircraft to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), subject to appropriate end-use monitoring; and
- Supporting Gulf partners' efforts to counter threats from Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen, including ensuring adequate air defense capabilities for Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain.

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