

No Daylight: U.S. Strategy if Israel Attacks Iran

KEY FINDINGS

As Iran's nuclear program advances and U.S. Iran policy falters, the United States – executive and legislative branches alike – should immediately begin preparing to blunt Iranian retaliation in the likelihood that, absent possible American intervention, Israel acts militarily to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold.

If Israel is forced to take matters into its own hands, it will be fulfilling enduring bipartisan U.S. policy to prevent a nuclear Iran. American officials might disapprove, or even resent, such Israeli action, believing, erroneously, that containing a nuclear Iran is preferable to the risks of preventing it militarily. Should Israel act, however, such concerns should be laid aside.

In the immediate aftermath of an Israeli strike, the interests of the United States and Israel will be aligned. Both countries will be best served by close cooperation to ensure a less bloody, narrower, and shorter conflict. To achieve that goal, American policymakers must start preparing now.

Iran and its proxies surrounding Israel – including in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen – possess lethal and long-range attack drones, rockets, and cruise and ballistic missiles capable of overwhelming regional air defenses and inflicting potentially catastrophic damage. The extent to which Tehran unleashes these capabilities in retaliation against Israel would correlate directly to the amount of daylight it perceives between Washington and Jerusalem.

The more Iranian leaders are convinced that their retaliatory actions risk a punishing U.S. intervention against Iran itself, the likelier they are to limit their response and seek to prevent a wider war. Conversely, American failure to support Israel in a military campaign to defang its archenemy of its capability to eliminate the Jewish state's very existence would lead to much harsher Iranian retaliation and a wider regional conflagration, which will likely require U.S. intervention anyway on far more costly terms.

U.S. policymakers should be guided by the basic principle of demonstrating no daylight between America and Israel. Immediate and unwavering U.S. support for Israel on the day of a strike and strong pressure on Tehran and its proxies, especially Hezbollah, in the days after holds out the best prospect of mitigating inevitable Iran-led retaliation. The United States should follow the president's own words about countering Iran's nuclear weapons program, as emphasized by the U.S. ambassador to Israel earlier this year: "Israel can and should do whatever they need to deal with it and we've got their back."

Staunch support for Israel would also help restore badly damaged U.S. credibility across the globe. Many of America's friends and adversaries will gauge U.S. national commitments worldwide in no small part on how we treat Israel, a longstanding partner viewed as having a much closer bond to the United States than even some of our formal treaty allies.

Should Washington be perceived as reluctant or half-hearted in support of Israel, doubts that other U.S. partners have about the dependability of their U.S. security assurances will multiply exponentially. As a leader of one of America's closest Arab partners recently told members of this task force, if the United States failed to provide full support to an Israeli strike to destroy Iran's nuclear program, "it will be one of the greatest catastrophes ever."

Recommendations

Washington should make plain – to friends and foes alike – that it stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel in deterring and mitigating Iranian escalation to a major regional conflict. American policymakers must anticipate and act "the day before" to help prepare Israel to be as maximally effective as possible, as well as "the day of" and "the day after" to deescalate any ensuing conflict and undergird U.S. credibility and interests both in the Middle East and globally.

Day Before:

Consistency in messaging: Ensure the administration and Congress make consistent statements in favor of Israel's "freedom of action" against Iran, as well as declarations that the United States is ensuring Israel has the tools it needs. This will maximize its effectiveness against the Iranian nuclear threat, will reduce daylight between the two countries, rebuild waning U.S. credibility, and bolster shared deterrence;

Coordination with Israel: Washington should not only make clear to Jerusalem that it will support it following a strike but work to coordinate the objectives and response of each partner in such an eventuality, including how best to ensure Iran’s nuclear program remains shut down and deal with the continuing threat that Hezbollah’s arsenal poses to Israel;

Sanctions: Work with European partners to reimpose United Nations sanctions on Iran via the “snapback” mechanism;

Fast-tracking delivery to Israel of key platforms and munitions: Expediting KC-46A refueling tankers and delivering precision-guided munitions (PGMs) such as the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and GBU-39/B small diameter bomb (SDB) and bunker buster bombs, attack aircraft like the F-35I and F-15EX, and missile defense capabilities – would further clarify concretize U.S. support for Israel’s freedom of action. Supplying such systems and capabilities is far simpler prior to conflict than during;

U.S. Defense Industrial Base capacity: Support for Ukraine underscores the fundamental challenge, in ensuring the U.S. defense industrial base has proper capacity and wartime mobilization ability to provide sufficient supplies for military partners. This will require intensifying the Administration’s existing efforts to shore up the U.S. defense industrial base and incentivize industry to invest in additional manufacturing capacity to allow it to surge production of key munitions and military systems;

Regional defense: Proactively prepare for the defense of U.S. and partner forces and assets in the region. Backed up by U.S.-led show-of-force combined exercises featuring fighter, bomber, and tanker aircraft like those recently conducted between U.S. and Israeli units, this should include public joint statements from the United States and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries underlining the inviolability of their access to military bases in GCC countries, their shared commitment to defend forces deployed to and operating from those bases, and their readiness to bolster those forces as needed to counter potential Iran-led threats. U.S. leadership also is needed now to accelerate progress toward more genuinely integrated regional air and missile defense, and protection of key maritime chokepoints; and

Congressional messaging: Congress should pass a resolution signaling America’s deep support for Israel’s right to act in self-defense in fulfillment of the vital U.S.-Israeli common interest in preventing a nuclear Iran.

Day Of:

Strength in messaging: Make clear in public statements that the U.S. administration views Israel's decision to act as consistent with longstanding U.S. policy to prevent a nuclear Iran and that, consequently, the United States stands with Israel and fully supports its security and self-defense needs;

Put Iran on notice: Deliver a message to Iran that any effort to retaliate against U.S. troops, citizens, or interests in the region, or to strike the core political and economic interests of America's Gulf partners, will be met by a severe U.S. military response, including against vital interests of the Iranian regime itself; and

Ultimatum on nuclear program: Convey to the Iranian regime that any efforts to re-constitute or escalate its nuclear program would trigger U.S. military action, whether unilaterally or in coordination with Israel and/or others.

Day After:

Resupply of Israeli Forces: Conduct an immediate and comprehensive resupply effort for Israel's self-defense, prioritizing air and missile defense interceptors, PGMs, ammunition, and spare parts. As an operational backstop and another unmistakable sign of support, the United States should – consistent with existing operational planning with United States European Command (EUCOM) – be prepared to deploy Patriot systems to Israel under American control to assist in Israel's air defense and send to Iran an unmistakable message of U.S. commitment.

Maritime Defense: Rotate additional guided-missile destroyers and frigates to Middle Eastern waters to help counter Iran's aggression against commercial maritime traffic – particularly energy transport – through the Straits of Hormuz and nearby waters. The U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean should help ensure the security and freedom of movement of merchant ships that supply Israel with essential goods, thereby freeing up the Israeli navy to counter any Iranian/Hezbollah actions against Israeli natural gas infrastructure and other defensive activities.

Find off-ramp: The United States should have plan – developed and advanced in coordination with Israel, its other regional partners, and other allies – for how to end the tensions that an Israeli strike will create. Ideally, this plan should consider how to transition to a better solution to Iran's nuclear program rather than allowing Tehran to, once again, eventually return to the nuclear threshold.