

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





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Policy Project Members and Staff

Co-Chairs

Ambassador Eric Edelman
Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

GEN Charles Wald, USAF (ret.)
Former Deputy Commander of United States European Command

Members

Elliott Abrams
Former U.S. Special Representative for Iran

Lt Gen Henry Obering, USAF (ret.)
Former Director of the Missile Defense Agency

VADM John Bird, USN (ret.)
Former Commander, U.S. Seventh Fleet

Steve Rademaker
Former Assistant Secretary of State for ArmsControl and Nonproliferation

Gen James Conway, USMC (ret.)
Former Commandant of the Marine Corps

Maj Gen Lawrence Stutzriem, USAF (ret.)
Former Director, Plans, Policy and Strategy at North American Aerospace Defense Command

Lt Gen David Deptula, USAF (ret.)
Former Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, U.S Air Force Headquarters

Ray Takeyh
Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations

Larry Goldstein
Founder and Director of Energy Policy Research Foundation, Inc.

Roger Zakheim
Former General Counsel and Deputy Staff Director of U.S. House Armed Services Committee

Staff

Michael Makovsky, PhD
President & CEO

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

John Hannah
Randi & Charles Wax Senior Fellow

Zac Schildcrout
Policy Analyst

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Yoni Tobin
Policy Analyst

Jonathan Ruhe
Director of Foreign Policy

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I. Executive Summary

Weakness is provocative. Despite warning of an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States did little ahead of time to prepare its partner in Kyiv to withstand this aggression. Even if it expected only a brief conflict and a decisive Russian victory, the U.S. failure beforehand to equip Ukraine's self-defense, or communicate to Moscow that American support for Ukraine would be lethal and unwavering, helped invite and prolong the war. Washington must learn from this costly lesson and immediately start preparing to blunt Iranian retaliation in the likelihood that, absent possible American intervention, Israel acts militarily to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold, which like the Ukraine war would pose critical strategic and economic challenges for the United States.

If Israel is forced to take matters into its own hands against Iran, it would in many ways mark the failure of three decades of U.S. policy. Since at least George W. Bush, successive presidents from both parties have explicitly pointed to a nuclear Iran as a direct national security threat to the United States, and solemnly committed to act in order to prevent this outcome. Instead, American leaders have concluded deeply flawed nuclear agreements, consistently signaled their desire to leave the region, enforced sanctions erratically at best, and failed to demonstrate the military capabilities and political will to uphold U.S. redlines against Iranian aggression. When combined with Israel's acuter threat perception and smaller window for action that stem from its far greater proximity and vulnerability to the Iranian nuclear threat, its keen sensitivity to historical threats to destroy it and the Jewish people, its profoundly limited strategic depth, and the Iranian regime's history of threatening its extermination, Washington's inaction will have left Israel with no choice but to strike Iran's nuclear program on its own.

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. Indeed, the current belief among American leadership appears to be that U.S. – and Israeli – action should be avoided, or at least delayed if at all possible. According to Lt. Gen. Alexis Grynkewich, America's top Air Force officer in the Middle East, the United States “would pause . . . before jumping into any kind of military action” and try to avoid being seen as “complicit” in an Israeli strike – even if Iran retaliated against U.S. targets in addition to Israeli ones.¹

In the immediate aftermath of an Israeli strike, the interests of the United States and Israel will be aligned, and both will be best served by close cooperation to ensure a less bloody, narrower, and shorter conflict.

Should Israel act, however, such concerns should be laid aside. The reality is that in the immediate aftermath of an Israeli strike, the interests of the United States and Israel will be aligned, and both will be best served by close cooperation to ensure a less bloody, narrower, and shorter conflict. This does not mean, however, that American policymakers can merely await such an outcome; instead, they should cooperate now to maximize Israeli deterrence, and its military effectiveness if deterrence fails, while also positioning the United States, Israel, and other Middle East partners to counter ensuing Iran-led escalation and defend abiding U.S. interests in maintaining regional stability.

Iran and its proxies surrounding Israel – including in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen – possess sizable arsenals of increasingly lethal and long-range attack drones, rockets, and cruise and ballistic missiles capable of overwhelming or evading regional air and missile defenses. Lebanese Hezbollah alone possesses more than 100,000 unguided rockets and at least 100 precision guided munitions which can exploit Israel’s lack of strategic depth and inflict potentially catastrophic damage on its military bases, critical infrastructure, and major conurbations.² Even as it cools current tensions with Gulf neighbors, Tehran continues threatening vital maritime chokepoints, international shipping, naval vessels, and offshore energy infrastructure across the region, and it retains the ability to ramp up the scale and tempo of these operations significantly with its array of swarming fast-attack torpedo and missile boats, surface ships, anti-ship drones and missiles, mines, and special forces.

Continuity of Official U.S. Policy to Prevent a Nuclear Iran		
President	Year	Statement
George W. Bush	2005	The United States and Israel “are united in our objective to make sure that Iran does not have a [nuclear] weapon.... All options are on the table.” ³
Obama	2013	“I’ve made the position of the United States of the America clear: Iran must not get a nuclear weapon. This is not a danger that can be contained, and as President, I’ve said all options are on the table for achieving our objectives. America will do what we must to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran.” ⁴
Trump	2017	“We will deny the [Iranian] regime all paths to a nuclear weapon.” ⁵
Biden	2022	The United States will “never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, and it is prepared to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome.” ⁶

If past is prologue, the extent to which Tehran unleashes these capabilities in retaliation against Israel will correlate directly to the amount of daylight it perceives between Washington and Jerusalem. The more Iran's leaders are convinced that their retaliatory actions risk a punishing U.S. intervention against Iran itself, which Tehran certainly wishes to avoid, the likelier they are to limit their response and seek to prevent a wider war. Tehran's momentous decision to agree to a ceasefire of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, and its freezing of key elements of its nuclear program in 2003, are signal examples of such Iranian restraint in response to perceived direct military threats from the United States.

The extent to which Tehran retaliates against Israel will correlate directly to the amount of daylight it perceives between Washington and Jerusalem.

Therefore, in preparing for the growing possibility of an Israeli strike, U.S. policymakers should be guided by the basic principle that the closer America stands by Israel, the more likely that, in the best case, Iran will be deterred from taking the last remaining steps toward the bomb, and, in the worst case, that an Israeli strike will be as effective as possible and the ensuing conflict will be contained – all vital U.S. interests. 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 blunting an inevitable Iran-led response that otherwise could impose significant casualties and extensive damage to Israeli infrastructure and society. Simply put, the United States should follow the president's own words about countering Iran's nuclear weapons program, as related 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."⁷

Staunch support for its close Israeli ally would also help restore badly damaged U.S. credibility across the globe. Many of America's friends and adversaries around the world and in the Middle East, including Egypt and Jordan – and especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain – will gauge the value of our 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 many of our formal treaty allies. Should Washington be perceived as reluctant or half-hearted in support of Israel on an issue of such longstanding and vital importance to the interests of both countries – stopping the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon – 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 some members of this group, U.S. failure to fully support an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear program "would be one of the greatest catastrophes ever."

Conversely, the more the United States seeks to distance itself from Israel, the more challenging an Israeli campaign will be and the greater the likelihood of a more bloody, wider, and longer conflict that could expand across the region – which will in all likelihood eventually require U.S. intervention anyway on far costlier terms. Indeed, 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.

Failing to back such a close partner as Israel in its moment of major vulnerability and conflict, especially after Israel effectively carried out longstanding U.S. policy, would shred America's global credibility and destroy, in a matter of days, decades worth of hard-won goodwill that could take many decades more of lengthy and arduous work to rebuild. The impact would be devastating and long-lasting, both in the region and worldwide. Watching us abandon Israel, our Arab partners would hedge toward our adversaries in Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow – each of whom would be emboldened to ramp up their threats to U.S. interests in the Middle East and around the world. From America's perspective, the impact on Iran's ongoing regionwide aggression, and on China's calculus toward Taiwan, would be devastating.

Failing to back such a close partner as Israel in its moment of major vulnerability and conflict, especially after Israel effectively carried out longstanding U.S. policy, would shred America's global credibility.

A. Recommendations

The United States must treat any Israeli military campaign to prevent a nuclear Iran as consistent with its own longstanding (but unfulfilled) Iran policy and as justified by Israel's sovereign right to defend itself against a clearly articulated existential threat. As National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in May, "we have made clear to Iran that it can never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon. As President Biden has repeatedly reaffirmed, he will take the actions that are necessary to stand by this statement, including by recognizing Israel's freedom of action."⁸

Building on and amplifying this, Washington should make plain – to friends and foes alike – that it stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel in deterring and mitigating Iranian-led escalation to a major regional conflict. Rather than being purely reactive, American policymakers urgently 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

Consistent statements by the Biden administration and Congress 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 to maximize its effectiveness against the Iranian nuclear threat, will reduce daylight between the two countries, rebuild waning U.S. credibility,

and bolster shared deterrence. Working with European partners to reimpose United Nations sanctions on Iran via the “snapback” mechanism while fast-tracking delivery to Israel of key platforms and munitions – KC-46A refueling tankers, 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 and concretize U.S. support for Israel’s freedom of action. As illustrated by the Ukraine conflict, supplying such systems and capabilities is far simpler prior to conflict than during it. Support for Ukraine also underscores the more fundamental challenge, both generally and in terms of backing Israel, 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.

Consistent statements by the Biden administration and Congress supporting Israel’s freedom of action against Iran will reduce daylight between the two countries, rebuild waning U.S. credibility, and bolster shared deterrence.

In addition to making its own statements and preparation in support of Israel, the United States should actively coordinate with its partner ahead of any potential strike on Iran. Washington should make clear to Jerusalem that it will support it following a strike, and will work to coordinate the objectives and response of each partner in such an eventuality. The United States and Israel will have broadly aligned interests – avoiding a broader war – but they should ensure they are on the same page on strategic questions that a strike will prompt, including how best to ensure Iran’s nuclear program remains shut down and how to deal with the continuing threat that Hezbollah’s arsenals pose to Israel.

In coordination with key Middle East partners, the United States also must proactively prepare to defend its own 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. As in the run-up to any potential conflict, 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.

Any U.S. threats to Iran on the “day of” or the “day after” would immediately gain credibility if the United States begins the “day before” to respond more consistently and forcefully to any further Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces or other assets in the Middle East. Iran should have no doubt of American resolve.

Day Of

The American government’s paramount priority for the day of an Israeli strike must be to make abundantly and immediately clear in public statements, and at the United Nations, that it 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. Explicitly reversing recent comments from American officers in the Middle East, the United States must communicate unambiguously (if also privately) to Iran and its Hezbollah proxy that it will not tolerate retaliation that would inflict severe damage against Israeli civilian population centers or critical infrastructure, or would in any way threaten the sea lanes upon which Israel’s economic viability depends, and that any such escalation would be met with an immediate and forceful U.S. response. Through private channels, American diplomats also should make clear to Hezbollah that the United States will not restrain Israel’s response in the event that Hezbollah chooses to unleash its massive arsenals on Israel. Such a warning could help convince Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah to prioritize his, and his organization’s, survival over any Iranian dictates.

In tandem, Tehran should be put on notice 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. Tehran must be left with no illusions that it can, whether directly and/or through proxies, unleash a destructive retaliation against Israel, and/or the United States or its other partners in the region, without prompting a heavy American military blow that could weaken the regime’s ability to survive.

Looking ahead, and leveraging Tehran’s continuing desire to avoid direct engagement with U.S. forces, American officials also should convey to the Iranian regime that any subsequent efforts to reconstitute or escalate its nuclear program would trigger U.S. military action, whether unilaterally or in coordination with Israel and/or others.

Day After

In the immediate aftermath of an Israeli strike, and even if it already pre-supplied Israel’s defense needs in certain regards, the United States must 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 signal 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 in a timely manner, in order to assist in Israel’s air defense and send to Iran an unmistakable message of U.S. commitment.

As feasible, the United States also should rotate additional guided-missile destroyers and frigates to Middle Eastern waters to help counter one of Iran’s most likely, and most formidable, means of escalation and retaliation: aggression against commercial maritime traffic – particularly energy transport – through the Strait 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 and/or Hezbollah actions against Israel’s offshore energy infrastructure and other defensive activities. The United States also should promptly deploy additional assets to the region, including bomber and fighter aircraft, to underscore American warnings that Tehran must avoid retaliating intensively or widening the conflict. Iran should be under no illusions about Washington’s resolve to fulfill its threats.

Finally, the United States should have a 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. In the days after a strike, even if U.S. actions can contain Iranian retaliation, it will be important to offer Tehran a diplomatic off-ramp that will bring any fighting to a conclusion. Ideally, this plan should consider how to transition to a better solution to Iran’s nuclear program rather than allowing Tehran to return to the nuclear threshold once again.

II. Iran Advances as U.S. Retreats

This task force issued a report in May 2022 calling on the Biden administration to boost Israeli capabilities as the best remaining roadblock between Tehran and the bomb.⁹ In the year since, Iran’s nuclear program has advanced further still, becoming more difficult to detect and neutralize as time goes on, while the United States has continued clinging to failed diplomatic endeavors. The result, as the top U.S. military officer in the Middle East, Gen. Michael Kurilla, acknowledged to the Senate: “I know right now, when I look at [Iran], I believe they are undeterred.”¹⁰ These conditions all increase the likelihood and urgency of Israeli action against Iran’s nuclear program.

A. Plan A Is Dead, Long Live Plan A

Already a year ago, Tehran called the Biden administration’s bluff by blowing past multiple negotiating ultimatums that it must rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), without triggering any change in U.S. posture.¹¹ Despite President Biden admitting in late 2022 that the JCPOA was dead, six months later his administration was reportedly actively seeking to revive talks with Tehran.¹² This refusal to take “no” for an answer has only confirmed, for Israel and Iran alike, that the administration has no Plan B.

More generally, the Biden administration has communicated its reticence to pivot to pressure, and its willingness to abandon partners, by accelerating its predecessors' retrenchment from the Middle East. This was clearly evident in the precipitous nature of its Afghanistan withdrawal, followed shortly thereafter by its conspicuous inaction while Iranian proxies attacked American forces in Syria. Revealingly, since it took office, the Biden administration has responded with force only four times to over 80 such attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East.¹³ Further weakening the U.S. position, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley seemingly walked back America's long-standing redline when he said the United States would not permit Iran a "fielded nuclear weapon" – an alarming caveat indicating the regime could assemble, or at least possess, every component of a nuclear weapon without triggering any U.S. response.¹⁴

Iran has been emboldened further by the political daylight between Israel and the United States, as evident by the tense relations between President Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu since the latter returned to office over six months ago.¹⁵

B. Iran's Buildup to a Breakout

Iran's nuclear expansion has snowballed exponentially in tandem with America's evaporating credibility; it will expand even more significantly in the foreseeable future.

Tehran assiduously built up its nuclear program following the November 2020 U.S. election and the covert killing of leading Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, before ramping up even more sharply in the past year. Having doubled its 20 percent and 60 percent enriched uranium stockpiles, its production rate for 60 percent enriched uranium, and the enrichment capacity of its active fleet of advanced centrifuges, by May 2023 Iran's breakout time was effectively zero, giving it the capacity to produce five weapons' worth of fissile material in one month.¹⁶ As a close adviser to Supreme Leader Khamenei boasted, "we can easily produce 90 percent enriched uranium [and] Iran has the technical means to produce a nuclear bomb."¹⁷

As Iran relies increasingly on better centrifuges that need less space and time to produce a bomb's worth of uranium, over time it can more easily disperse and hide the necessary equipment for a breakout. Indeed, it is already finishing and hardening new subterranean enrichment and centrifuge-manufacturing sites even more immune from military attack.¹⁸

The more Iran advances and hides its nuclear program, the more prompt detection becomes key. And yet Tehran has concertedly rolled back its compliance with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, shutting off cameras and other monitoring devices at its nuclear sites, thereby shrinking the outside world's margin of error for assessing where and when to prevent a nuclear Iran.¹⁹ Israel thus faces a closing window for detecting and neutralizing Iran's nuclear program; with each subsequent Iranian nuclear advance an Israeli strike becomes progressively more difficult.

III. “On the Horizon” Now: Israel Warns of Action

A growing confluence of factors increasingly is pushing Israel forward in preparing its most credible threats of military action against a nuclear Iran in more than a decade. First, Israeli leadership was jolted by two significant recent Iranian nuclear developments. In February, Tehran’s foray into 84 percent enrichment, aggravated by America’s shrug in response, prompted Israel to ramp up military preparations and convey to its American and European partners that any further Iranian enrichment above 60 percent now constituted Israel’s redline.²⁰ Netanyahu then added a sense of urgency, saying that stopping Iran requires “credible military action. The longer you wait, the harder that becomes. We’ve waited very long.” That same day Defense Minister Gallant warned that Tehran “has almost reached the red line.”²¹

This timeframe for Israeli action condensed further with Gen. Milley’s Congressional testimony in March, in which he estimated Iran would need only “several months” to produce a nuclear weapon.²² Gone is the sanguine scenario of a two-year cushion for Israeli intelligence to discern a specific “go” order from the Supreme Leader to build a bomb. Now Israeli officials speak of dispersed, lower-level progress in parallel with, not sequential to, Iran’s enrichment advances, that is more advanced than previously thought and harder to detect. This increased uncertainty offers Israel far less time to respond to indications of key Iranian advances.²³

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Second, the Israeli security cabinet reflects its prime minister in being more unified, hawkish, and exigent on Iran than any of its predecessors, including the unprecedented situation for Prime Minister Netanyahu where he is no longer the most hawkish member in his own security cabinet.²⁴ Right after the November elections, the incoming national security adviser laid down a marker by stating that Netanyahu “will act, in my assessment, to destroy the nuclear facilities in Iran” if U.S. diplomacy fails.²⁵ Nor is it merely the current Israeli government that is persuaded of the need to act against Iran’s nuclear program. In April, opposition leader Yair Lapid reinforced this shared sense of purpose when he said publicly, “on this, there is no coalition or opposition in Israel. Everybody’s on the same note.”²⁶

Third, several recent events combined to raise concerns that Israel’s military option might be a wasting asset. In April, Iranian proxies in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, and Lebanon launched a multifront assault that sought to gauge and erode Israel’s deterrence amid its persistent internal turmoil and strains with the United States.²⁷ In the

wake of these attacks, Israeli military intelligence warned for the first time in years of eroding deterrence and rising risks of major escalation with Hezbollah.²⁸ Simultaneously, Tehran seeks to acquire billions of dollars' worth of advanced Russian combat aircraft, air defenses, military radars, attack helicopters, missiles, and other systems to defend its nuclear infrastructure and bolster its retaliatory capabilities against Israel.²⁹ Jerusalem took the threat seriously enough to send high-level officials to Moscow in May to try to dissuade Russia from such consequential sales, especially in light of the imminent expiration in October of the UN embargo on key weapons transfers to and from Iran.³⁰

Recent statements and actions from top Israeli officials underscore this rising sense of alarm and urgency. Perhaps most noteworthy, in late May the Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Gen. Halevi – the country's highest-ranking military officer, and one noted for his generally understated demeanor – warned that “there are possible negative developments on the horizon that could prompt action.”³¹ Shortly thereafter the IDF kicked off a massive two-week nationwide exercise simulating its expected scenario in a looming confrontation with Iran, including strategic long-range Israeli airstrikes and prolonged, intense multifront conflict with Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies.³² During this drill Prime Minister Netanyahu noted how, in light of revived U.S. talks with Iran, “we are confident we can handle any threat on our own” and reiterated Israel is “committed to acting against the Iranian nuclear program.”³³

IV. U.S. Actions Will Determine Iranian Response

The Biden administration's wholehearted pursuit of diplomacy, to the exclusion of any corresponding U.S. pressures that would boost the prospects for successful talks, now leaves Israeli military action as the sole viable option to uphold America's enduring bipartisan interests to prevent a nuclear Iran and maintain Middle East stability. But just as American policymakers appear to prefer endless talks and the growing possibility of a nuclear-capable Iran over the prospect of an American – let alone Israeli – strike, so too will their inclination likely be to avoid any involvement in the Israel-Iran conflict that will follow. Such American passivity, however, would be a major strategic blunder.

In addition to its ever-expanding nuclear program, Iran has also amassed the capability to wreak tremendous devastation on Israel and the region. Whether, when, where, and how Tehran unleashes its rockets, drones, missiles, and proxies in the aftermath of an Israeli strike on its nuclear facilities will be determined by what the United States does on the day of, and the days after, such a strike.



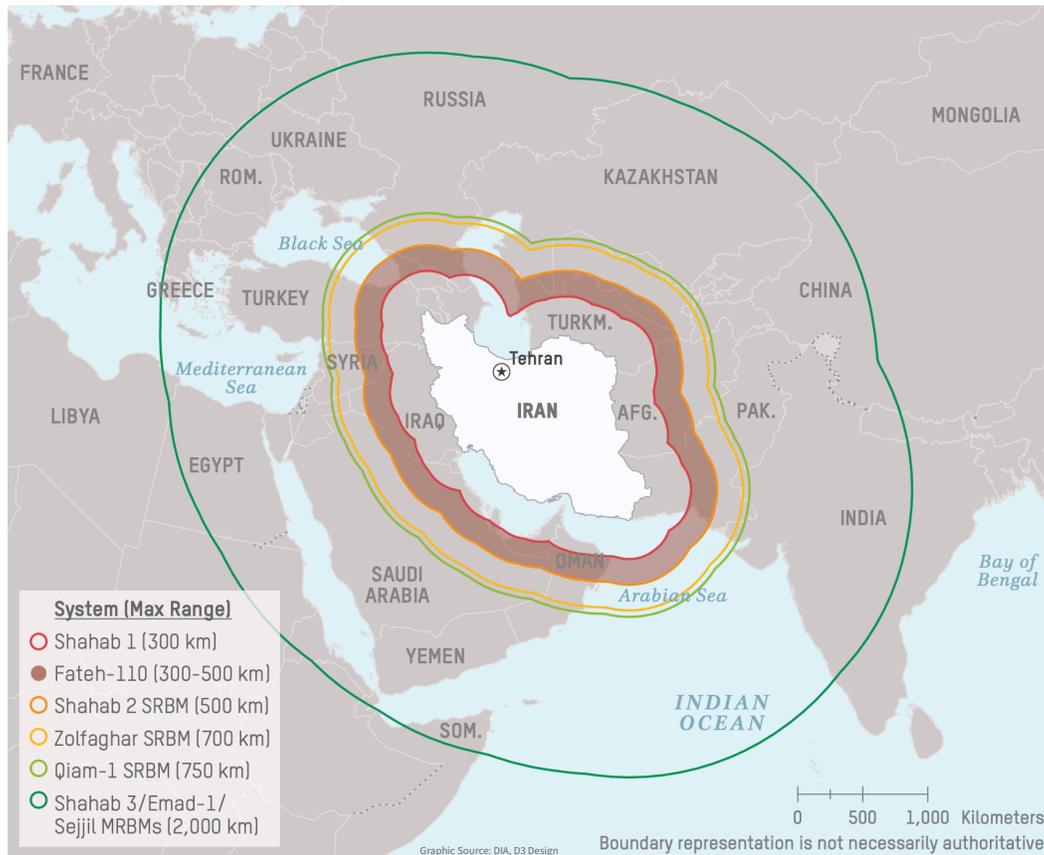
The current belief among American leadership appears to be that U.S. action or intervention should be avoided, or at least delayed. According to Lt. Gen. Alex Grynkeiwich, America’s top Air Force officer in the Middle East, the United States “would pause ... before jumping into any kind of military action” and try to avoid being seen as “complicit” in an Israeli strike – even if Iran retaliated against U.S. targets in addition to Israeli ones.³⁴ But rather than American involvement triggering escalation, it is American silence that would embolden Iran’s response while staunch American support for Israel would blunt it. Continued U.S. self-deterrence on this front could raise the risks of Iranian escalation against American targets. This trend already is evident in recent Iran-backed attacks on U.S. targets in Syria, intended to convince the Biden administration to pressure Israel to wind down operations against Iran’s expanding regional military footprint.³⁵

Iran's escalatory options and multifront capabilities are extensive and threaten to impose serious costs not just on Israel, but also on the United States and other targets regionwide. These include sizable arsenals of increasingly lethal and long-range attack drones and cruise and ballistic missiles capable of overwhelming or evading regional air and missile defenses – in the hands both of Iran and its proxies surrounding Israel and the rest of the region in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen. Lebanese Hezbollah also possesses more than 100,000 unguided rockets and at least 100 precision guided munitions which, in combination with the above projectiles, can exploit Israel's lack of strategic depth and inflict potentially catastrophic damage on its military bases, critical infrastructure, and major conurbations.³⁶ Iran and certain proxies also pose acute threats to vital maritime chokepoints, international shipping, naval vessels, and energy infrastructure across the region through combinations of swarming fast-attack torpedo and missile boats, surface ships, anti-ship drones and missiles, mines, and special forces. Iran-backed militias also can threaten to launch ground incursions into Israel, and to attack U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria.

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 Iran's leaders are convinced that their retaliatory actions risk large-scale U.S. intervention against Iran itself, the likelier they are to limit their response and seek to prevent a wider war.

In an ideal scenario for Iran and its proxies, they would mass their firepower entirely against Israel without any fear of U.S. involvement, whether that be restocking and fortifying Israeli armories, warning Iran against certain thresholds of escalation, and/or readying and deploying U.S. forces in the region. Western efforts in 2021 and early 2022 to dissuade the Russian invasion and tamp down tensions, by holding back military support for Ukraine while seeking to deter Russia by disclosing intelligence about Moscow's intentions, offer a cautionary tale since these actions arguably incentivized escalation by isolating Kyiv, causing military aid to be delivered belatedly, piecemeal, and incompletely, and helping confirm for Putin his mistaken belief that he would face only minimal costs for such aggression.

Just as Western inaction may have led Russia to believe it could invade Ukraine at low cost, an initial American failure to clearly back Israel would be perceived in Tehran as greenlighting a harsher Iran-led response. Hesitation by Washington in order to see, as Lt. Gen. Grynkewich put it, how things play out would only persuade Iran it will not face any serious consequences for laying waste to Israel, beyond what Israel itself can muster. Left to fend for itself against an Iranian onslaught, Israel would be forced to act not only against Iranian nuclear facilities but also against the munitions and launchers of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's other regional proxies, many of which are illegally hidden among civilians, that imperil its populations and infrastructure. This would unleash an inherently destabilizing escalatory spiral that could engulf the broader region and draw in U.S. forces regardless – and under much less favorable circumstances than if the United States proactively boosted shared deterrence with Israel.



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Because America’s friends and adversaries gauge the value of our commitments worldwide in no small part on how we treat Israel, a longstanding partner in many ways closer to the United States than many of our formal treaty allies, abandoning Israel in such circumstances also would undermine U.S. credibility more globally in the eyes not of only Iran, but also China, Russia, and others. As a leader of one of America’s closest Arab partners recently told members of this group, U.S. failure to fully support an Israeli strike to destroy Iran’s nuclear program “would be one of the greatest catastrophes ever.”

This in turn would encourage key partners in Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East – including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to engage in hedging activities with America’s enemies and create vacuums to be filled by Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran. At the same time, the worse the conflict in the Middle East resulting from Iranian escalation, the more U.S. resources and attention would be pulled from competing strategic demands in Indo-Pacific, Europe, and elsewhere.

The aftermath of an Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear program need not be so dire, however. The more firmly the United States stands behind Israel, and the more quickly and resolutely Washington signals it will not tolerate Iranian retaliation, the less bloody Tehran’s response will be. American credibility certainly has sagged, yet as throughout its history, Tehran has been reliably deterrable by credible threats of overwhelming force that the United States uniquely can bring to bear. By threatening to impose serious costs on any Iranian attempt to escalate or regionalize its retaliation, clear American

rhetorical and material support for Israel can exploit Tehran's ingrained fear that only the United States is capable of overpowering its military forces and ultimately toppling the regime. This fear compelled abrupt and momentous changes in Iranian aggression in 1988, when it agreed to end the Iran-Iraq War once it thought Washington would intervene decisively on Iraq's side, and in 2003 when it froze key parts of its nuclear program in the wake of lightning U.S. campaigns to overthrow the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. Similarly, and despite routinely full-throated warnings against Israel, the same basic logic of deterrence could dissuade Hezbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah from automatically heeding Tehran's demand to retaliate massively for Israeli action against Iran's nuclear program. Nasrallah remains keen to avoid a replay of the surprisingly forceful Israeli response to Hezbollah's abduction of two IDF soldiers in 2006, especially now that the terrorist group increasingly has political equities – and vulnerabilities – inside Lebanon that would be jeopardized by any decision to plunge the already unstable country into a major conflict on behalf of Iran.³⁸

Clear and immediate U.S. support for Israel's efforts to prevent a nuclear Iran would also help rebuild American credibility, not only with Tehran and other adversaries, but also vital partners and allies in the Middle East and elsewhere who fear being left alone to deal with China, Russia, or Iran. With such reassurances, America's longstanding Arab partners could even boost their own tacit or informal support for Israel against any Iranian retaliation, or at least leave Tehran isolated in the aftermath of Israeli military action. And by mitigating Iranian escalation, a strong U.S. posture backing Israel also will limit the risks of yet another major Middle East conflict that would further confound America's efforts over the last decade to reduce its risk exposure and resources in the region.

V. Recommendations: Last Best Chance to Prevent a Nuclear Iran

Partially in the hopes of dissuading Israeli action, the Biden administration is allowing considerable daylight between itself and Israel on Iran's nuclear program. But if push comes to shove the United States must treat any Israeli strike as consistent with its own longstanding (but unfulfilled) Iran policy, and thus make clear – to friends and foes alike – that it stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel in deterring and mitigating Iranian-led escalation to a major regional conflict. The more closely the United States supports Israel in the aftermath of military action, the more likely the intensity and duration of any ensuing hostilities will be minimized.

Given this strategic context, the United States should approach the prospect of Israeli military action through the prism of statements and actions it must take “the day before” to help prepare Israel to be maximally effective, as well as “the day of” and “the day after” to deescalate any ensuing conflict and undergird U.S. credibility and interests in the Middle East and globally.

A. *The Day Before*

1. Robust U.S. Diplomatic Preparations

For starters, the United States must avoid telegraphing what it *will not do* to support its partner, publicly downplaying the viability of military options, or seeking to assuage Tehran by creating distance between Washington and Jerusalem. Official U.S. comments that recent exercises with Israel were “not about planning any kind of joint U.S.-Israel strike against Iran’s nuclear program” – true or not – certainly were counterproductive in this light.³⁹

Instead, the Biden administration must amplify National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan’s public, but largely standalone, statement in May that Iran “can never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon” and that President Biden “will take the actions necessary to stand by that statement, including by recognizing Israel’s freedom of action.”⁴⁰ Consistent statements like these, as well as declarations that the United States is ensuring Israel has the tools it needs to maximize its effectiveness against the Iranian nuclear threat, will reduce daylight between the two countries, rebuild waning U.S. credibility, and bolster shared deterrence.

At the same time, American diplomats should work with their British, French, and German counterparts to reimpose six previous UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCR) and accompanying sanctions on Iran, by utilizing the “snapback” provision spelled out in UNSCR 2231 (2015) that instantiated the JCPOA. Continuing to promise Tehran that its egregious violations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) will face no such penalty merely incentivizes further nuclear advances while also complicating future detection of these moves. This problem also will worsen over time, as UNSCR 2231 stipulates an end to UN sanctions on Iran’s ballistic missile program in October 2023 – and with it, any prohibition on supplying such weapons to Russia and other U.S. adversaries – as well as the termination of all UN, U.S., and EU sanctions on Iran’s nuclear program by 2025. In tandem with pursuing “snapback” to isolate Iran diplomatically and penalize it for severely degrading the global nonproliferation regime, American diplomats also must make clear now to Iran’s UN backers, China and Russia, that it will veto any action in the Security Council to delegitimize Israel’s self-defense in the event of an Israeli strike. Preparation for blowback by Iran and its supporters in the UN General Assembly or other international forums should also be made by coordinating a diplomatic campaign, in partnership with like-minded countries, to mount a robust defense of Israel.

2. Tangible U.S. Support for Israel

To concretize U.S. support for Israel's freedom of action and maximize the effectiveness of potential Israeli military action, the United States should fast-track delivery of key platforms and munitions to Israel, many of which already are under contract. As illustrated by the Ukraine conflict, supplying such systems and capabilities is far simpler prior to conflict than during it. Support for Ukraine also underscores the more fundamental challenge, both generally and in terms of backing Israel, 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. Specific priorities include:

KC-46A aerial refueling tankers: The United States must expedite delivery, currently scheduled for 2025, of two of the four KC-46As purchased by Israel in 2021, and fast-track training for Israeli pilots. By upgrading its aging tanker fleet, these platforms would bolster Israel's ability to operate more effectively at long range and with larger payloads, while also being interoperable with U.S. aircraft stationed in the Middle East. Notably, both houses of Congress already have expressed support for training Israeli pilots on the KC-46A prior to delivery, and for forward-deploying U.S. KC-46s to Israel as a stopgap until delivery of the tankers Israel already has purchased.⁴¹

Multirole aircraft: The United States should work with Israel to expedite transfer of U.S.-made F-35I, F-15 EX, CH-53K, C-130, and/or SH-60/MH-60 aircraft. As with KC-46As, these capabilities are vital to upgrade Israel's aging fleets for both long-range missions to neutralize Iranian capabilities and for defending against Iran-led retaliation – all the more so as Tehran appears set to acquire advanced Russian air defenses and combat aircraft in the future. Indeed, Israeli planners expect fully 20 percent losses of air platforms in any campaign to neutralize Iran's nuclear capabilities. In addition to swiftly transferring aircraft for which Israel already has arranged procurement, the United States should explore options to provide F-15 aircraft to Israel via the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program.

Precision guided munitions (PGM): The United States must fast-track PGM production and subsequent deliveries to Israel, given the physical scale and complexity of the Iranian nuclear and conventional challenges, the need to minimize collateral damage, and the IDF's planning constraints that stem from the sheer draw on its U.S.-procured stockpiles due to years of ongoing operations to roll back Iran's regional military footprint. Foremost, this means updating and replenishing America's prepositioned weapons stockpile in Israel, known as WRSA-I, with Joint Direct Attack Munition kits (JDAM), GBU-39/B small diameter bombs (SDB), and potentially bunker buster munitions and air-to-air missiles, to fulfill the depot's official purpose of supporting Israel in an emergency such as wartime. Simultaneously, the Pentagon can shorten delivery times for Israeli PGM procurement via the Special Defense Acquisition Fund (SDAF), which enables the United States to pre-purchase these weapons in advance of their sale to Israel.

Air and Missile Defenses. In light of the massive rocket, drone, and missile firepower at the disposal of Iran and its proxies ringing Israel, the United States also should see to it that Israel has adequate batteries and interceptors for its Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow air and missile defense systems – all of which are co-produced with the United States.

3. Coordinate Objectives with Israel

In addition to making its own statements and preparation in support of Israel, the United States should actively coordinate with its partner ahead of any potential strike on Iran. Washington should make clear to Jerusalem that it will support it following a strike, and work to coordinate the objectives and response of each partner in such an eventuality. Both the United States and Israel will have broadly aligned interests – avoiding a broader war – but they should ensure that they are on the same page on strategic questions that a strike will raise, including how best to ensure Iran's nuclear program remains shut down and how to deal with the continuing military threats that Hezbollah poses to Israel.

4. Ensure Ready and Resilient Regional Defenses

In coordination with key Middle East partners, the United States also must proactively provide for the defenses of its own forces and assets in the region. Even in the absence of any potential Israeli military action, these steps are urgently needed now to counter Iranian aggression and advance regionwide security cooperation by signaling continued U.S. commitment to Middle East stability. Building on recent first steps, the United States must accelerate progress toward more genuinely integrated regional air and missile defense (IAMD) against drone and missile threats from Iran and its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen – most urgently by establishing a common operating picture (COP) that includes Israel and as many Arab partners as possible – and protection of key maritime chokepoints. Building on increasingly frequent and operationally focused U.S.-Israeli exercises that culminated in Juniper Oak early this year, the United States should capitalize on Israel's reassignment to U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility by conducting additional large-scale combined exercises that can enhance U.S.-Israel readiness to counter Iranian nuclear and regional threats.

These efforts should be combined with sustained messaging from Washington's highest levels (including the president, secretary of state, and secretary of defense) on the importance the United States attaches to IAMD as part of its enduring commitment to the security of its traditional partners.⁴² American officials must also expand on initial successes toward integrated maritime defenses against Iran's threats to shipping and naval forces in the Strait of Hormuz and other vital waterways.⁴³ Through accompanying contingency planning, additional combined exercises, and strategic communications under CENTCOM's auspices to enhance U.S.-led readiness and deterrence, the United States also can demonstrate its continued commitment to uphold Middle East stability and rebuild effective defense cooperation with longstanding regional partners to counter Iran.

B. The Day Of

The Biden administration's paramount priority for the day of an Israeli strike must be to make abundantly clear that it views Israel's decision as consistent with longstanding U.S. policy to prevent a nuclear Iran and that, consequently, the United States stands with Israel, fully supports Israel's security and self-defense needs, and will take whatever steps necessary to deescalate the situation and dissuade Iran from triggering a major regional conflict.

As with any national security emergency, the administration should immediately inform Congress of ongoing U.S. engagement and anticipated authorities or funding required for a U.S. response. In addition to working with the administration to advance next steps for U.S. action, Congress should also pass a resolution signaling America's enduring commitment to support Israel's self-defense.

American officials also must communicate to Tehran that the United States is prepared to defend and respond forcefully, by itself and/or with Israel and others, to Iran-led retaliation that imposes serious costs on Israel and/or seeks to expand the conflict by targeting U.S. and/or other assets around the region. As part of this policy, the United States should make clear it will view any Iranian missile launch in response to Israeli action as a potential attack on U.S. targets, and will take all available measures to intercept or otherwise defend against such launches. Such declarations and redlines will be inherently more credible in close linkage with the above U.S. steps and signals to maximize the effectiveness of potential Israeli action.

Given the acute threats to Israel posed by Lebanese Hezbollah in particular, and to leverage the complex political and strategic calculations inside Lebanon that could limit Hezbollah's appetite for risking a devastating conflict at the behest of Tehran, American diplomats also should work through back channels to dissuade the group from joining Iran-led retaliation against Israel. Tehran must be left with no illusions that it can, whether directly or through proxies, unleash a destructive retaliation against Israel and/or United States or its other partners in the region without drawing in a punishing American military blow that could weaken the regime's capability to survive.

C. The Day After

As crucial as vocal U.S. support for Israel will be on the day of any strike, it will be imperative for the United States to sustain concrete support for Israel the day after, both to disincentivize Tehran from escalation and to deny or mitigate its retaliation in whatever forms it ultimately takes. As it has done successfully with the sustained resupply effort for Ukraine, Congress should ensure the White House sustains support for Israel in the wake of military action, and the Biden administration should coordinate closely with Congress on any military operation in order to ensure expedient delivery of funding. Congress should also leverage its good offices to engage directly with allies and partners to provide required assistance to Israel and reinforce U.S. messaging to adversaries, particularly with respect to escalating behavior.

Equally important, American leadership must continue communicating this support publicly to signal enduring U.S. commitments to its key partners and to regional stability and deescalation. Most crucially, the United States must conduct an immediate and comprehensive resupply effort for Israel's self-defense, prioritizing air and missile defense interceptors, PGMs, and spare parts and ammunition. These efforts must consciously avoid a repeat of the aftermath of the 2021 Gaza conflict, in which President Biden's full rhetorical support for Israel was not remotely matched by any expeditious resupply for Israel's dwindling air defense interceptor stocks.⁴⁴

It will be imperative for the United States to sustain concrete support for Israel the day after, both to disincentivize Tehran from escalation and to deny or mitigate its retaliation.

As an operational backstop and another unmistakable sign of support, and consistent with existing operational planning through EUCOM, the United States should be prepared to deploy Patriot systems to Israel under American control to assist Israel's air defense and send an unmistakable message of U.S. deterrence and commitment to its partner. As feasible, the United States also should rotate additional guided-missile destroyers and frigates to Middle Eastern waters to help counter one of Iran's most likely, and most formidable, means of escalation and retaliation. 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 and/or Hezbollah actions against Israeli offshore energy infrastructure and other defensive activities. The United States also should promptly deploy additional assets to the region, including bomber and fighter aircraft, to underscore American warnings that Tehran must avoid retaliating intensively or widening the conflict. Iran should be under no illusions about Washington's resolve to fulfill its threats.

Finally, the United States should have a 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. In the days after a strike, even if U.S. actions can contain Iranian retaliation, it will be important to offer Tehran a diplomatic off-ramp that will bring any fighting to a conclusion. Ideally, this plan should consider how to transition to a better solution to Iran's nuclear program rather than allowing Tehran to return to the nuclear threshold once again.

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