

# **Last Best Chance:**

## **U.S. Policy for an Israeli Strike on Iran**





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# I. Executive Summary

Time has long been running out to prevent a nuclear Iran, and now that time is up. From day one of his new term, President Donald Trump inherited this dangerous and urgent problem—but also opportunity. Seizing this opportunity requires ensuring that there is no daylight between the United States and Israel, particularly when it comes to military action against Iran’s nuclear program, and just as critically, in managing the day after a strike to prevent Iranian retaliation and reconstitution of that program.

Iran’s nuclear program now has advanced so far that it could produce ten bombs’ worth of highly enriched uranium in one month. As the president recently admitted, this crisis is “down to the final moments.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the Tehran regime is perhaps the most vulnerable it has been in decades. Israel has destroyed Iran’s advanced S-300 air defenses and severely weakened its second-strike threats against Israel, foremost Hezbollah. The Assad regime in Syria, Tehran’s closest Arab state ally, is no more and, thanks to Israel, Syria’s military capabilities have been laid waste. Iran is experiencing significant economic and energy problems at home, which will worsen as President Trump resumes tough oil sanctions, intensifying the regime’s unpopularity among the Iranian people.

Iran’s unprecedented vulnerability, even if it has not yet decided to take the final step of building a nuclear weapon, suggests the time is fast approaching to address this nuclear threat. The United States, and certainly Israel, cannot risk waiting until the last possible minute to try to catch Iran’s final turn of the screw on a nuclear weapon. Hamas’s October 7, 2023, invasion has taught at least Israel that it can no longer wait for an existential threat to emerge before addressing it.

President Trump prefers a diplomatic agreement to dismantle Iran’s nuclear program. As he said on February 10, 2025, “I’d much rather see a deal with Iran where we can do a deal — supervise, check it, inspect it and then blow it up or just make sure that there [are] no more nuclear facilities.”<sup>2</sup>

Trump’s objective is correct, but the odds that it can be achieved through diplomacy are extremely low. The Tehran regime saw what happened to Moammar Qaddafi when he dismantled Libya’s nuclear program, and it has no intention of repeating that outcome. As indicated by its recent effort to ensnare the Trump administration in drawn-out indirect talks, Iran wants to slow-roll diplomacy and make its nuclear weapons infrastructure even more advanced, opaque, and invulnerable to threats.<sup>3</sup> Maximum pressure from U.S. economic sanctions will not alter this calculation.


That leaves the military option, which Israel appears intent to execute. The United States has every interest to maximize the effectiveness of such an attack, deter Iran’s efforts to reconstitute its nuclear program, limit the risks of a wider war, and uphold the credibility of more than two decades of U.S. commitments to prevent an Iranian bomb. The United States ideally would be a full partner with Israel, or at a minimum provide it with essential support, in both the strike itself and in managing the aftermath. There should be no daylight between the two countries.

In addition to transferring critical capabilities to Israel, the Trump administration should offer aerial refueling, combat search and rescue (CSAR), intelligence, air defense, and preemptive action against potential Iranian ballistic missile retaliation. Preferably, the countries also would collaborate on complex operations which are more challenging for Israel alone, such as targeting Iran’s deeply-buried Fordow enrichment facility.

The United States and Israel also share an interest that any military campaign against Iran’s nuclear facilities remain a contained military operation and not the start of a regional war. This means ensuring there are no severe reprisals against Israel, U.S. bases in the region, and U.S. Gulf partners. This will require Washington to warn Iran that any such retaliation will put at direct risk the regime itself, including its political, military, and economic centers of gravity. Tehran should understand that the existence of the 46-year-old Islamic Republic itself could be in jeopardy.

Washington and Jerusalem also must make clear they have prepared economic, diplomatic, military, and covert means to prevent Iran from trying to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program after any strike. This entails keeping a policy of maximum pressure in force as long as this Iranian regime persists. Also, any military operation against Iran’s ramified nuclear weapons infrastructure must be seen as a long-term campaign, and not a one-off strike.<sup>4</sup>

There are certainly risks to military action, which should not be minimized. But the risk of inaction is greater. The United States cannot permit Iran to become a nuclear weapons power, which would threaten the existence of Israel and other U.S. partners, trigger a regional proliferation cascade, push the United States out of the Middle East, and eventually threaten America’s eastern seaboard. Moreover, permitting Iran to cross the nuclear threshold, a core redline for decades for Republican and Democratic presidents alike, would severely damage U.S. credibility across the globe, undermining American allies and emboldening American foes, especially China.

<b>Recommendations: U.S. Military Action to Prevent a Nuclear Iran</b>		 JINSA
<b>No Daylight</b>	American and Israeli officials must ensure there is no bilateral daylight when it comes to rolling back Iran’s nuclear progress; deterring, mitigating or defeating retaliation; and preventing any reconstitution of its nuclear program. To this end, U.S. officials must convey to Iran, before and immediately upon any strikes:	
	1.	Israeli military action is consistent with longstanding U.S. prevention policy.
	2.	The United States is providing Israel the tools it needs to defend itself.
	3.	Any escalation and/or nuclear reconstitution will result in further strikes as well as coordinated attacks on regime leadership targets and core military and economic assets.
	In tandem, Congress should:	
	1.	Leverage its good offices to engage directly with U.S. allies and partners to reinforce these warnings to Iran, particularly regarding potential escalation.
	2.	Approve conditional Authorizations for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) against Iran’s nuclear program and designated Iran-backed foreign terrorist organizations, assuming that bipartisan majorities could be mobilized for such legislation in both the House and Senate.
	The Trump administration also must conduct a concerted diplomatic and communications campaign to prepare key allies and partners abroad, and the American public, by laying out:	
	1.	The expected requirements, both in resources and time, of a potential campaign against Iran’s nuclear program and related regime assets.
	2.	The necessity of such a campaign in light of Iran’s refusals to comply with its NPT obligations and negotiate an acceptable agreement in good faith, and in light of core

		U.S. national security interests and longstanding bipartisan commitments to prevent a nuclear Iran.	
	3.	Throughout, American officials must remember to do no harm. They must avoid public statements which, while well-intentioned, counterproductively play directly into Tehran’s hands by advertising an overweening desire to avoid any conflict whatsoever, telegraphing the ends to which the United States will not go, and openly doubting the efficacy of military options.	
<b>Close U.S.-Israel Pre-Strike Coordination</b>		To be maximally effective, “No Daylight” must align with concrete preparations to support Israel’s military option and, by ensuring the United States is not caught off-guard by potential Israeli action, reinforce for Tehran that it cannot profitably retaliate against either country or against America’s Arab partners, nor reconstitute its nuclear program. Accordingly, the United States should:	
	1.	Ensure that unfrozen arms transfers to Israel are carried out completely and expeditiously, in order to provide Israel with vital weapons and materiel.	
	2.	Immediately initiate any additional transfers of critical offensive capabilities to Israel, such as bunker busters, other precision air-to-ground munitions, equipment for IDF special operations forces, relevant spare parts and ammunition, and air and missile defense interceptors.	
	3.	Ensure the Pentagon has adequate interceptor stocks for U.S. air defense systems deployed in Israel.	
	4.	Coordinate on potential combined U.S.-Israel strike options against Iran’s nuclear program, including advance planning for how best to provide aerial refueling support for Israel—as has already been rehearsed repeatedly in combined U.S.-Israeli exercises—as well as intelligence-sharing and CSAR, among other forms of assistance.	
<b>Getting Ready Now for the Day After a Strike</b>		The United States and Israel will have broadly aligned interests in avoiding a broader war following any Israeli and potentially U.S. military action. Therefore, the United States, Israel, and other relevant partners must prepare today for tomorrow’s potential fallout along several mutually supporting lines of effort:	
	1.	Readying and signaling follow-on, potentially combined and/or covert, operations to further degrade Iran’s nuclear infrastructure; to detect, deter, and deny any ensuing reconstitution efforts; and to target core regime leadership and related military and economic assets.	
	2.	Dedicating and coordinating sufficient intelligence resources for battle damage assessments of the efficacy of military action against Iran’s nuclear and related infrastructure, to detect potential post-strike reconstitution efforts, and to prepare covert follow-on actions as needed.	
	3.	Developing plans to try to end the tensions and escalatory potential that an Israeli strike will create and, even if serious retaliation is avoided, offering Tehran a diplomatic off-ramp that will bring any hostilities to a conclusion.	
	4.	Considering options to transition to a better, more sustainable solution to Iran’s nuclear program that forestalls any long-term opportunity for the regime to reconstitute these efforts. <table border="1" data-bbox="454 1738 1476 1881"> <tr> <td>a.</td> <td>Planning should include U.S.-led diplomacy, including international sanctions, to compel Iran to provide the IAEA with a comprehensive declaration of its nuclear weapons program, the completeness and accuracy of which inspectors are then permitted to verify.</td> </tr> </table>	a.
a.	Planning should include U.S.-led diplomacy, including international sanctions, to compel Iran to provide the IAEA with a comprehensive declaration of its nuclear weapons program, the completeness and accuracy of which inspectors are then permitted to verify.		

	<p>b. These plans should be informed by, and seek to thwart, foreseeable Iranian responses such as leaving the NPT treaty, attempting a “sneakout” at undeclared facilities, and/or seeking assistance from other U.S. adversaries to make its program more immune to military action.</p>
<p>The United States must pair these plans with tangible actions to execute follow-on operations, harden regional defenses, and isolate Iran in the wake of any military action. The more clearly the regime sees, and foresees, a robust united front foreclosing its freedom of maneuver, the more likely it can be deterred from nuclear and regional escalation. Specific steps should include:</p>	
1.	<p>U.S. preparations for immediate and comprehensive resupply for Israel’s most pressing self-defense needs in the wake of military action—prioritizing air and missile defense interceptors, possibly supplemented by air-to-air missiles to help intercept incoming projectiles.</p>
2.	<p>Consistent with existing operational planning, continuing U.S. deployment of air and missile defense systems in Israel under U.S. control, to backstop Israel’s defense and underscore American deterrence and commitment.</p>
3.	<p>Ensuring effective defenses for U.S. forces, bases, other assets, and partners in the Middle East, including through continued progress on regional integrated air and missile defense (IAMD).</p>
4.	<p>Building on increasingly frequent and operationally focused U.S.-Israeli exercises such as Juniper Oak and Red Flag by carrying out combined exercises, contingency planning, and strategic communications to enhance and convey U.S.-Israeli readiness and deterrence.</p>
5.	<p>Rotating U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyers and frigates to Middle Eastern waters, and ensuring adequate deployments of mine countermeasures (MCM) ships to the U.S. Fifth Fleet’s area of responsibility, to underscore U.S. warnings that Iran must avoid retaliating intensively or widening the conflict.</p>
<p>The United States also must plan for its efforts to succeed in deterring or significantly limiting Iran’s retaliation, to the point where the regime prioritizes diplomacy over the kinetic route. While still maintaining potent offensive and defensive capabilities to prevent Iranian escalation, American officials must prepare to undertake crucial diplomatic initiatives, including:</p>	
1.	<p>Making clear to Iran’s United Nations (UN) backers, China and Russia, that the United States will veto any UN Security Council action to delegitimize Israel’s self-defense in the event of an Israeli strike.</p>
2.	<p>Working proactively with E3 partners Britain, France, and Germany, in advance of potential military action, to start turning the gears that can eventually “snap back” UN Security Council sanctions well before this option expires in October 2025.</p>

## II. Strategic Context

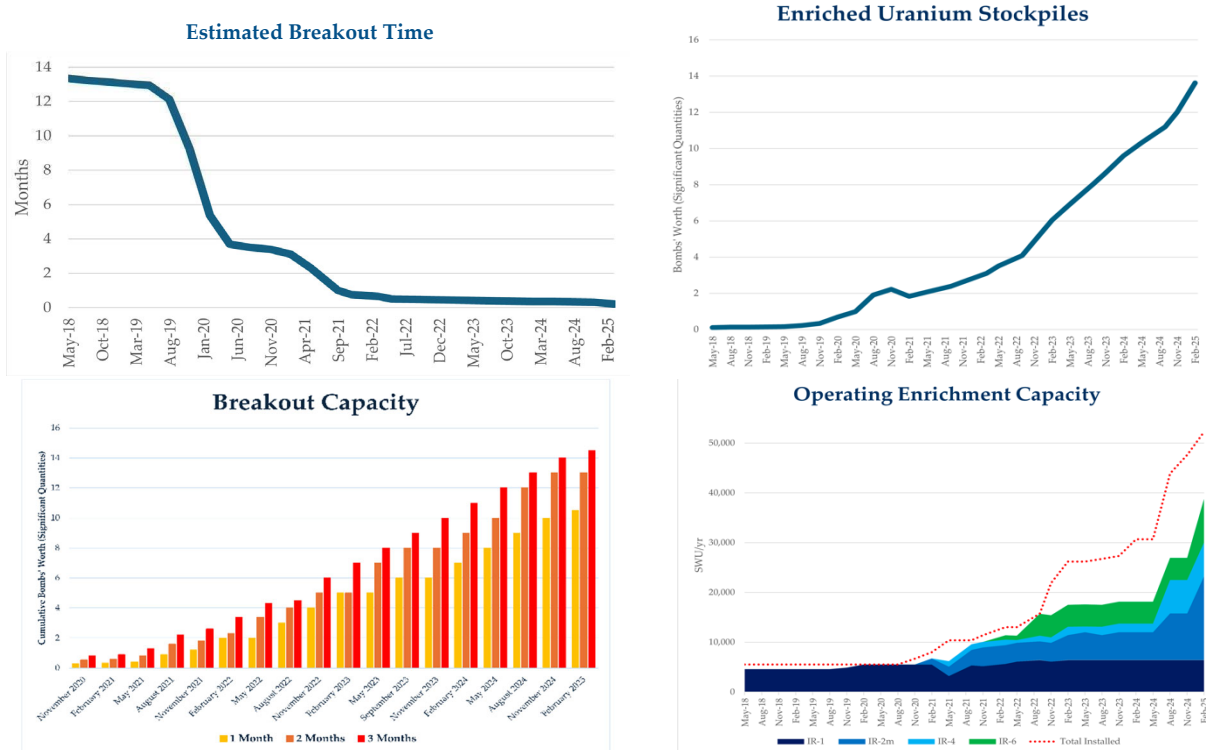
Among its myriad upheavals, October 7, 2023, diverted Israel from serious and long-running preparations to strike Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. With the dust settling on Israel’s largely successful operations against Iran’s “ring of fire” since that awful day, but with Iran’s nuclear progress accelerating, U.S. intelligence recently assessed Israeli military action was likely in the first half of 2025. As a senior Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer recently told JINSA, “if there is only a one percent chance Iran gets a bomb, and only a one percent chance it does what it has said it’ll do with that bomb, then Israel cannot take that chance.”<sup>5</sup>

### A. Turning the Final Screws?

Iran’s decades-long nuclear weapons project is reaching its culminating point. It is now perilously close to the point where it could achieve all the necessary elements of a bomb. As it advances to the edge of this nuclear threshold, Iran also complicates the world’s ability to detect, deter, and deny these last steps by making its nuclear infrastructure and activities more resilient and opaque.

#### i. Abundant Fissile Material, Overnight

Iran’s shrinking “breakout time” to produce its first bomb’s worth (“significant quantity,” or SQ) of 90 percent highly enriched uranium (HEU), widely accepted as the requisite purity for an explosive device that fits in a missile warhead, is well-documented. While problematic, its ability to continue closing this window is asymptotic, and on its current trajectory will remain roughly 1-2 weeks, where it has been since mid-2022, as then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted last July.<sup>6</sup>





More alarming, particularly as time goes on, is Iran’s growing breakout capacity to enrich multiple SQs month after month. Since it announced its largest-ever enrichment capacity expansion in late 2024, years of steady, but still troubling, linear growth have now given way to geometric expansion.<sup>7</sup> Combined with its growing stockpiles of enriched uranium, Iran’s current quadrupling of its 60 percent HEU output—a level equal to 95 percent of the work to attain weapons-grade uranium—positions it well to break out both rapidly and at scale.<sup>8</sup>

*ii. Closing in on a Bomb*

Iran’s headway on a workable nuclear explosive device is less predictable or measurable than its enrichment progress. Nevertheless, it is widely understood to be both advanced and progressing, creating concomitant and cumulative reductions in the remaining time needed to weaponize.

For years, U.S. and Israeli intelligence believed Iran’s regime would need approximately 1-2 years to finish a nuclear weapon after deciding to do so, and that this decision would occur sequentially, after enriching to 90 percent HEU. In 2023, however, American and Israeli defense chiefs cut those estimates to only several months.<sup>9</sup> Last year, both countries’ intelligence communities further tightened this projected weaponization timeframe by assessing that Iran was advancing this track prior, not subsequent, to 90 percent enrichment.<sup>10</sup> In July 2024, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) declared publicly for the first time that Iran has “undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so.”<sup>11</sup> The DNI also concluded, in November 2024, that Tehran continues to work on “improving the accuracy, lethality, and reliability” of its ballistic missile arsenals that could one day deliver a functional nuclear device.<sup>12</sup>

Other considerations hone this acute sense that the window to detect and halt Iran’s weaponization is closing rapidly. Starting late last year, U.S. intelligence indicated the regime is secretly positioning itself to cross the nuclear weapons threshold even more rapidly by examining how to produce a rudimentary nuclear explosive device that could be readied more quickly for a test detonation.<sup>13</sup> In addition to being less technically complex than a miniaturized device fitting inside a warhead, this option could utilize Iran’s ample 60 percent HEU stocks, thus foregoing the final jump to 90 percent HEU that crosses Israeli, U.S., and European redlines. Like the gun-type device used on Hiroshima, this route would not require testing to provide sufficient confidence in its functionality.<sup>14</sup>

But even Iran’s achievement of a sophisticated implosion-type weapon could be just around the corner. It has known since 2009 how to produce such a device with 90 percent HEU, and it watched Pakistan successfully test similar capabilities multiple times in 1998.<sup>15</sup> Especially at this late stage in its development, and considering that the Manhattan Project needed less than a year to design and manufacture the first such bomb from scratch, it is highly unlikely Iran would not be able to cross the finish line more speedily than those who first unleashed the atom eighty years ago.<sup>16</sup>

*iii. Going to Ground*

Iran is magnifying the challenges of tracking and halting this enrichment and weaponization progress, precisely as the windows for doing so close tighter. Since late 2022, it has relocated its most advanced enrichment activities from the main Natanz plant, covered by dozens of feet of concrete and earth, to the smaller and better-protected Fordow facility, tunneled directly into rock an estimated 200 feet or more below the surface. Iran is also boring a new “Natanz Tunnel Facility” into another mountainside which,

when completed as early as this year, will be bigger and more deeply-buried than Fordow—potentially beyond the reach of even the most powerful U.S.-made bunker busters.<sup>17</sup>

Iran’s refusal to declare this new underground site to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reinforces concerns that its program is moving beyond the reach of inspectors, too. It has reduced transparency at key enrichment-related sites since 2021, prevented a full accounting of its enriched uranium stockpiles, and staunchly refused since 2019 to comply with investigations into suspected weaponization efforts.<sup>18</sup> Combined with its growing breakout capacity and its pivot to more deeply-buried sites, this opacity complicates timely and accurate IAEA detection of a potential covert, *fait accompli* “sneakout” to enrich initial SQs.

Last summer’s U.S. and Israeli assessments that Iran was proceeding toward weaponization, before first achieving 90 percent HEU, also points to the historical challenges of gaining actionable intelligence on the decisions that ultimately propel countries over the nuclear threshold. As seen in U.S. surprise at the first nuclear tests by the Soviet Union, China, France, and others, these decisions flow from a mix of political, parochial, and technical decisions that do not always follow clear decrees, proceed predictably, or generate loud and clear signals for the outside world.<sup>19</sup>

Driven by consistent warnings from the IAEA director that Iran’s safeguards violations had erased his ability to track its nuclear advances, last November the United States and its “E3” partners (France, Germany, United Kingdom) put forward a censure resolution calling for a comprehensive IAEA report on Tehran’s bomb-making program. After conspicuously avoiding such action for years due to fears of retaliation, this latest U.S.-E3 initiative reflects their growing senses of urgency and alarm that Iran could cross the nuclear precipice undetected.<sup>20</sup>

## B. Israel’s “Sole Existential Threat”

The existential threat of a nuclear Iran has been reliably one of the few unifying precepts in Israel’s otherwise fractious and protean domestic politics. Even as Israelis disagree ardently over the details, the consensus and risk-acceptance when it comes to preventing a nuclear Iran continue to solidify, in step with both the country’s changing security calculus in response both to October 7, 2023, and Tehran’s increasingly breakneck drive to the edge of nuclear weapons capability.

### *i. Clear-Eyed, Yet No Clear Decisions*

The brutal arithmetic of a nuclear Iran is clear to Israelis, since the country’s small size leaves it disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of even a relatively low-yield atomic detonation. Iranian officials lean into this threat, with regime leadership regularly chanting “death to Israel” at state functions and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) emblazoning this message on their nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. Back in 2001, with its nuclear program still fledgling, Iran’s then President Rafsanjani stated publicly “the use of even one nuclear bomb on Israel will destroy everything.... It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality.”<sup>21</sup>

Already in 2006, then-IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz declared that a nuclear Iran is “the sole existential threat facing the state of Israel”—a statement echoed in then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s warning that “under no circumstances, and at no point, can Israel allow anyone with these kinds of malicious designs against us, to have control of weapons of destruction that can threaten our existence.”<sup>22</sup> Tellingly, these comments, reiterated consistently by Israeli officials of all stripes ever since, came when

Iran's operational enrichment program was less than one-half of one percent its current output, and was conducted solely at one aboveground site.

Israel has taken various concrete steps to fulfill these pledges as Iran's nuclear ambitions grew. It targeted Iran's enrichment and weaponization programs with serial covert strikes, from a combined U.S.-Israeli cyberattack on Iran's operational centrifuges and targeted killings of its nuclear weapons scientists during the Obama years, to kinetic attacks in 2020-21 against centrifuge manufacturing, underground enrichment, weaponization-related sites, and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, often called the "Oppenheimer" of Iran's atomic ambitions. Seeking to broaden international awareness of this threat, in 2018 Israel divulged extensive proof of Iran's weapons program after secreting extensive archives out of Tehran.<sup>23</sup>

At several points, Israel readied conventional operations to degrade Iran's nuclear infrastructure more swiftly and systematically. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then-Defense Minister Ehud Barak tried repeatedly in 2010-12 to convince Israel's security cabinet to approve military action, but were overridden by concerns about IDF readiness and potential U.S. opposition.<sup>24</sup> Israel resumed earnest preparations in the years right before October 7, 2023, as Iran kicked enrichment into overdrive and new concerns arose over its weaponization.<sup>25</sup> Once again, officials displayed unique unanimity on this issue, with Netanyahu's political rivals speaking just as forcefully as his cabinet and coalition members on the urgency to act. In April 2023, opposition leader Yair Lapid said "on this, there is no coalition or opposition in Israel. Everybody's on the same note."<sup>26</sup> Concerted Israeli preparations continued through summer into fall 2023, until the thunderclap bolted out from Gaza.

## *ii. A New Calculus*

The shock and fallout of October 7, 2023, are sharpening Israel's imperative and exigency to address Iran's nuclear threat. Most saliently, the country places far less faith in early warning and deterrence after assuming, mistakenly and catastrophically, that aggression from Hamas and other Iranian proxies could be detected, and then affected, by basic carrot-and-stick logic. This "ring of fire's" ability to open seven total fronts, attrite IDF weapons stocks, and strain its readiness through cost-imposing and open-ended conflicts now reinforces a painful sense that Israel's defense posture has been far too reactive for far too long, too averse to assuming short-term risks, and too permissive in allowing its adversaries to amass formidable arsenals and erode Israeli deterrence.

Iran's massive projectile offensives last April and October, its first direct attacks on Israel, underlined this negative dynamic. And while most projectiles in both instances were intercepted or failed in flight, causing relatively minor damage on the ground, every Israeli immediately drew conclusions about what could happen if even one of the handful of missiles that made it through was nuclear-tipped. Facing such a dire scenario, the risks of striking Iran's atomic infrastructure innately became much more tolerable, even if the expected breathing period bought by such action continued shrinking as that infrastructure became more ramified and opaque.<sup>27</sup>

Last August, Prime Minister Netanyahu framed Israel's longstanding position more viscerally and evocatively than perhaps any leader before. After the usual avowals that "we'll do whatever we're able to do to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons," he stated bluntly: "we're faced with a noose of death that Iran is trying to place around our neck, and I think the message we're sending, 360 degrees, is that we're not going to be lambs led to the slaughter."<sup>28</sup> With this overarching Iran threat front of mind, in January 2025 a high-profile government commission called for reorienting Israel's defense concept and

procurement priorities from containment and deterrence to proactive “prevention and readiness” premised on risk-acceptant, disproportionate, and long-range offensive operations to nip threats in the bud long before they became untenable.<sup>29</sup>

Israel signaled its evolving shift by combining high-quality intelligence with adroit tactics and operations to carry out daring but effective operations with undeniable strategic impact. From July to December 2024, the Israeli Air Force’s (IAF) three rounds of strikes against Yemen’s Houthis entailed mid-air refueling over distances greater than that between Tel Aviv and Tehran—the longest-range IAF combat operations since 1985 in Tunisia. The message to Iran was driven home by then-Defense Minister Yoav Gallant’s unobvious warning that “we will do this any place where it may be required ... in Lebanon, in Gaza, in Yemen, and *in other places* [italics added].”<sup>30</sup>

In September 2024, IAF airstrikes and special forces successfully neutralized a subterranean factory at Masyaf, Syria, that supplied Iranian missiles to Hezbollah. Though much closer to Israel than Iran’s nuclear sites, the facility was reportedly deeper than Fordow, some 230-430 feet underground, and thickly enshrouded with advanced air defenses.<sup>31</sup> Later that month, Israel used dozens of bunker busters and other precision munitions to kill Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in his headquarters deep below ground in the heart of Beirut.<sup>32</sup> Often perceived as prohibitively complicated and escalatory, it both reflected Israel’s evolving cost-benefit calculus and prefigured potential strikes against Iran’s underground nuclear installations.

In response to Iran’s April and October 2024 attacks, Israel utilized sophisticated standoff weaponry to conduct pinpoint attacks against nuclear-related sites at Isfahan and Parchin. The latter IDF strike was part of an operation resembling the preparations, complexity, and tempo of a broader campaign against Iran’s nuclear program. More than 100 aircraft conducted sorties in two waves stretching more than 1,000 miles from Israel, first clearing Iran’s active defenses before hitting some 20 strategic sites dispersed countrywide.<sup>33</sup>

The stunning battlefield turnaround of 2024 both fed and reflected Israel’s stunning psychological transformation. Tehran’s willingness to take its first-ever direct kill shots, and Israel’s ability to hit back hard against Iran and Hezbollah without prompting serious further escalation, combined to sharpen Israel’s calculus. Striking Iran’s nuclear facilities and related regime assets is now feasible, and opportune. Even if the setbacks to Tehran’s nuclear progress end up being minimal, acting urgently is clearly preferable to the proven risks of deferring the problem, waiting until the absolute last possible minute, and relying on early warning to discern when Iran begins to turn the last screw. As Tehran accelerated its nuclear progress in late 2024, U.S. military intelligence reportedly alerted the outgoing Biden and incoming Trump administrations that, unless Iran agreed to completely abandon its nuclear program, Israel likely would strike Natanz and Fordow in the first half of 2025.<sup>34</sup>

### C. Racing Against the Clocks

Israel’s sense of urgency due to Iran’s nuclear advances is now compounded by the Iranian regime’s profound, but fleeting, vulnerabilities in almost every other respect. The recent destruction visited on the conventional capabilities of almost the entire “axis of resistance,” and its effect on their appetites for further escalation, creates once-unthinkable openings for military action against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. By redoubling Tehran’s incentives to plow ahead toward the bomb and reconstitute the

ring of fire, however, this moment of opportunity for Israel—and the United States and other partners—is a wasting asset as well.

*i. Iran's Best-Laid Plans, Gone Awry*

In a reversal perhaps as stunning as October 7, 2023, the horrific events of that day set in motion a chain of events that set back significantly the larger designs of Iran and its proxies to encircle Israel, paralyze its freedom of action, and eventually eliminate the Jewish state. Paradoxically, Hamas's brutal assault ultimately undid years of assiduous efforts, coordinated largely by Tehran, to unify the various proxy fronts besetting Israel on all sides, arm them to the teeth, use them as frontline fodder to eat away at Israel's deterrence and defenses, and inhibit the IDF from engaging its impressive capabilities directly against an Iranian regime acutely sensitive of its own weaknesses.

This collapse of Iran's proxy network was gradual, until it was sudden. The first loose thread was evident almost from the start. Hamas's all-out attack failed to generate a cascade of additionally devastating thrusts from other fronts. Instead, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and their IRGC advisers did too little to overwhelm Israel's defenses, but just enough to court painful IDF reprisals that gutted Hezbollah and IRGC Quds Force operational leadership in Lebanon and Syria by early 2024.<sup>35</sup> Then, in just several short weeks last September, IDF action utterly transformed Hezbollah from the world's best-armed non-state actor, possessing a daunting second-strike capability, into a leaderless and aimless smoldering ruin of a military force. Hezbollah's abrupt demise triggered the equally precipitous collapse of Iran's decade-long project to convert Syria into another Lebanon, as the Assad regime disintegrated, its arsenals were destroyed by the IAF, and the IRGC fled unceremoniously eastward. In a vicious cycle from Tehran's perspective, the loss of Assad further inhibits its ability to rebuild Hezbollah's finances and armories via Syria.<sup>36</sup> These brief but intense turns of events are no less surprising, nor any less immediately consequential on the battlefield, than Israel's lightning victories of June 1967.

Threatened with the calamitous loss of its proxy empire, Iran doubled down on these failures by twice attacking Israel directly and, ironically, inviting the destruction of many of its best capabilities. The most far-reaching military operation inside Iran since the 1940s, and the largest since the early 1980s, Israel's October response eliminated the most advanced air defenses guarding nuclear sites and other core regime assets. It also severely degraded Iran's offensive arsenals. According to Israeli estimates, the regime lost fully 90 percent of its production capacity for medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) that, with Hezbollah sidelined, would serve to deter or retaliate against further Israeli military action.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps as worrying for Tehran, Israel's attack prompted no discernable "rally around the flag" diversion of popular discontent away from the regime's abysmal and repressive rule at home.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Iran rung in 2025 with nationwide power outages, currency devaluations, and collapsing oil exports that drove home the regime's mismanagement of the country's bountiful natural resources—in turn a timely reflection of its underlying incompetence, corruption, and callous unresponsiveness to its people's basic needs.<sup>39</sup>

*ii. No Time Like the Present*

Just as Israel's adversaries worked to undo the devastating verdict of 1967, Iran already is doing its best to slam shut the window opened wide by recent events. It is digging its deepest nuclear facility yet, near Natanz, while prohibiting inspectors from visiting.<sup>40</sup> It intends to revamp its damaged air defenses, including large-scale exercises to better integrate domestic and Russian early warning radars and interceptors. It also is procuring advanced Su-35 combat aircraft from Russia to help counteract losses

imposed by Israel in October. Though the latter remain far from operational, their sale embodies an increasingly tight bilateral strategic partnership that offers Tehran a range of sophisticated defenses and pertinent lessons-learned from Moscow's extensive use of Iranian projectiles in Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> Russian technical experts reportedly visited Iranian missile facilities just weeks before Tehran's all-out attack on Israel last October that used some 200 ballistic missiles.<sup>42</sup>

Iran also is trying to reverse the estimated year-plus setback to its ballistic missile production capacity at the hands of Israeli airstrikes. It is importing materials for propellant from China, developing "new special missiles" to be more precise and effective against Israeli defenses, and debuting new underground "missile cities."<sup>43</sup> Hamas and other Iranian proxies simultaneously try to bog down the IDF in the West Bank, while Iran continues attempting to rearm Hezbollah and otherwise support the group's defiance of an internationally-accepted Lebanon ceasefire.<sup>44</sup>

Iran also is escalating on the nuclear front to compensate for these weaknesses. Tellingly, it ramped up such efforts throughout 2024 and into 2025, even as it opted not to escalate conventionally in response to Israel's April and October strikes. While estimates of Iran's weaponization timeline have varied anywhere from several months to more than a year, from an analogous point in its own program, China needed only roughly one month to assemble a functional device after producing enough HEU—a process that now would take Iran a matter of mere days.<sup>45</sup>

In parallel with its rising breakout capacity and weaponization activities, Iran's officials increasingly speak openly of their ability and incentive to achieve a nuclear deterrent in short order.<sup>46</sup> Potential attempts to fashion a crude but testable, if undeliverable, nuclear device threaten to condense Iran's already-shortening weaponization timeline, while also obviating any need to enrich 90 percent HEU and thereby trigger more forceful and unified Israeli-U.S.-E3 action. This is all good politics for a regime that is increasingly unpopular with its own people. In a marked uptick from past surveys, a spring 2024 poll of Iranians conducted by a Canadian firm found more than two-thirds support for the statement that "Iran should possess nuclear weapons."<sup>47</sup> In February 2025, Iranian military leaders reportedly urged Supreme Leader Khamenei to approve constructing a bomb, admonishing the reputedly cautious leader that "we have never been this vulnerable, and it may be our last chance to obtain [a nuclear weapon] before it's too late."<sup>48</sup>

### *iii. America's Interest in Israel's Success*

The United States has every interest in preventing a nuclear Iran, even if Israel takes the first step. With Iran already perched on the atomic threshold, negotiations offer almost zero prospect of an agreement that completely, verifiably, and permanently dismantles Tehran's nuclear weapons program before the option to "snap back" stringent UN Security Council sanctions expires in October. In the absence of this longshot possibility, the potential risks and uncertainties of effective military action remain far preferable to the global consequences of a nuclear Iran.

The United States has irreversibly staked itself to preventing a nuclear Iran, with Republican and Democratic presidents alike spending two decades consistently vowing to use all elements of national power, and risking major conflict, to avert exactly this outcome. Indeed, there are few parallels in post-Cold War U.S. strategy where American leaders have so reliably pledged to do whatever it takes to defend such a crucial commitment. By this point, so much of America's reputation is wrapped up in preventing a

nuclear Iran that this promise is innately intertwined with every other U.S. commitment to the Middle East—and also our other commitments worldwide.

Despite stunning Israeli military action gutting Iran’s main deterrent in Hezbollah and clearing the path for major strikes on its own core assets, crossing the ultimate redline to gain the ultimate weapon would enable and embolden Tehran to restore these capabilities and threaten even more powerful versions of October 7, its own massive missile and drone strikes, and other proxy attacks on U.S. and partner targets. The regime would have good reason to believe these threats could compel the United States to abandon its avowedly “ironclad” support for Israel, and with it the larger vision of a new Middle East architecture built on U.S. leadership, Israel-Saudi normalization, and regional defense and economic integration. This in turn could be the entering wedge for realizing Iran’s ultimate aim to dominate the region by evicting the United States, jeopardizing Israel’s existence, and cowing Arab countries into submission.

As a presumably inviolable redline, the continued prevention of a nuclear Iran is also bound tightly with America’s overlapping and globe-spanning network of security guarantees. This is especially true as China, Russia, and North Korea cooperate increasingly closely with Iran and each other in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. As the Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessed in March 2025:

Cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea has been growing more rapidly in recent years, reinforcing threats from each of them individually while also posing new challenges to U.S. strength and power globally. These primarily bilateral relationships, largely in security and defense fields, have strengthened their individual and collective capabilities to threaten and harm the United States, as well as improved their resilience against U.S. and Western efforts to constrain or deter their activities. ... This alignment increases the chances of U.S. tensions or conflict with any one of these adversaries drawing in another. China is critical to this alignment and its global significance, given the PRC’s particularly ambitious goals, and powerful capabilities and influence in the world.<sup>49</sup>

Were Iran to go nuclear, these other adversaries would then see little risk in testing U.S. redlines and commitments elsewhere, dangerously stretching American resources and credibility toward a breaking point. Iran and its great power cohort would boost strategic and technical ties to weaken American leadership and partners writ large, likely on a much wider scale and with much more risk-taking than their existing support for Russia’s assault on Ukraine. China could then accelerate its plans for invading Taiwan, and challenging any other number of bedrock U.S. interests across the Indo-Pacific, in the wake of an equally critical U.S. redline being erased in the Middle East.

### **III. Scenarios for the Day After**

Iran has overlapping options and considerations that could shape its response to any military action against its nuclear weapons program. To no small extent, Tehran’s decision-making will be influenced by its perception of Israel’s isolation, particularly from the United States, in the execution and aftermath of such an operation.<sup>50</sup>

## A. Iran's Regional Retaliatory Options

### i. *Operation True Promise 3*

Iran could channel retaliation directly on Israel with missiles, drones, and other conventional weapons, similar to its two “True Promise” operations last April and October after costly IDF action against IRGC and proxy officials, respectively. Lacking anything like a modern air force or blue-water navy for long-range power projection, the regime instead spends appreciable time and energy developing MRBMs, land attack cruise missiles (LACM), and one-way attack drones ranging most everywhere in the Middle East. Since several of its MRBM and LACM variants are nuclear-capable, responding in this fashion would signal that Iran’s atomic ambitions remain undimmed, and could seek to deter further Israeli action by threatening to mix conventional and nuclear missiles in future attacks. Last year’s projectile strikes against Israel, the first ever from Iranian territory, reflect the regime’s growing willingness for direct large-scale confrontation, perhaps particularly among IRGC leadership elements. As was the case in April and October last year, Tehran may well calculate it cannot be seen *not* to retaliate against yet another round of Israeli military action. Such a response also would enable Iran to build on last year’s attacks by providing invaluable real-world performance data to further improve the lethality and survivability of these strike packages.

Retaliating directly against Israel, and avoiding attacks on U.S. and/or Arab targets, also reduces the risk of inviting an overwhelming response by bringing the United States into a larger and, from Iran’s perspective, much riskier and more uncertain conflict. A third all-out strike on Israel also offers the possibility of deterring U.S. and Arab involvement, by holding its other fires in reserve and threatening to unleash them on U.S. bases and the wider Gulf. That being said, the regime might well calculate that the entire region—Israel, U.S., and Arab targets alike—are all fair game in response to large-scale operations intending to roll back its core nuclear program.

Yet there are significant factors militating against such a response against Israel, at least as the sole or primary vector of Iranian retaliation. These arsenals pose real threats inasmuch as they are coordinated with even larger-scale attacks by Iran’s ring of fire, aiming to saturate Israel’s interception capacity and strain its radars with concentric and multi-directional salvos. As the crown jewel in this plan, Hezbollah received heavy aid from Tehran in accumulating up to 300,000 munitions, including tens of thousands of heavy rockets and hundreds or thousands of precision missiles and drones. The group was built up specifically as a second-strike capability to overwhelm Israeli air and missile defense systems and inflict potentially catastrophic damage on its military bases, critical infrastructure, and population centers. Iran likewise armed proxies in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen to pile on with their own projectiles as well.

For the foreseeable future, however, this ring of fire is no more. Even if it retains sizable offensive capabilities, Hezbollah’s new leadership still lives under the shadow of the IDF’s lethal shock and awe campaign last fall as it focuses on rebuilding the group’s shattered command and control apparatus. Syria is no longer a major factor, either as an Iran-directed launchpad against Israel or a replenishment source for Hezbollah. Nor do the Houthis, Iraqi militias, or Hamas remotely present serious offensive challenges to Israel, at least in the near term.

With its proxies now effectively out of the equation, another massive missile and drone offensive against Israel seems to offer Iran, at best, merely more of the same as its 2024 barrages. Notably, while both attacks represented maximum effort by Iran to inflict serious damage, they were launched alone without



proxy backup. This gave Israeli, U.S., and partner forces sufficient early warning and bandwidth to focus on defeating the vast majority of the incoming projectiles. And while Iran is estimated to retain perhaps several hundred MRBMs after firing more than 300 total during last year's attacks, it confronts two key chokepoints inhibiting further large-scale strikes: the crippling of its production capacity by IDF airstrikes last fall, and its reliance on a finite number of MRBM launchers. The latter also sacrifice surprise by requiring time-intensive, aboveground pre-launch preparations that generate large intelligence signatures.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it opted not to continue up the escalation ladder after Israel's own strikes on Iranian soil last April and October, even as the supreme leader and other top officials vowed to execute a "crushing response" to the latter.<sup>52</sup>

ii. *Indirect and Broader Retaliation*

Iran could unleash broader regional retaliation in lieu of, or in tandem with, targeting Israel, as an IRGC commander threatened in March 2025 when he noted "the United States has 10 bases and 50,000 soldiers in the region. ... If you live in a glass house you shouldn't throw stones."<sup>53</sup> The serious losses to its ring of fire and its capacity to threaten Israel conventionally aside, Iran retains significant capabilities to target U.S. bases, partners, and other core national security interests centered around the Gulf. Iran's solid-fueled short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) face far fewer teething problems than its MRBMs, and they feature ranges, mobility, payloads, and precision comparable to the vaunted U.S.-made ATACMS. They can be fired in large "bolt from the blue" salvos with less early warning than MRBMs, given their shorter flight times and the regime's concerted buildup of rapid firing positions for its SRBMs in underground facilities.<sup>54</sup> Iran has shown it can employ these and other shorter-range projectiles, specifically LACMs and attack drones, in "mass precision" strikes on vulnerable strategic targets, like Saudi energy facilities in 2019 and U.S. forces in Iraq in 2020.<sup>55</sup> Their utility is also evident in Iran's concerted efforts to supply them to Hezbollah, and in their extensive use by Russia against Ukraine.

Iran also can jeopardize freedom of navigation in the Gulf itself, and the U.S.-led forces tasked with upholding it, as an implicit counter to any efforts to target its own energy infrastructure. Its geography enables it to threaten naval and civilian vessels in the crowded and strategically critical waters stretching from Basra to the Arabian Sea, through which nearly one quarter of the world's crude oil consumption flows every day.<sup>56</sup> Along this 1,000-mile coastline, Iran is unveiling underground launch sites to unleash swarms of antiship cruise missiles (ASCM) and missile boats. These complement its drone and helicopter carriers, and its longstanding arsenals of coastal defense missiles, fast attack craft, and naval minelayers. Iran's regime has a long history of strikes on shipping in the region, from the Iran-Iraq War to more recent mine and drone attacks.

Several added factors could whet Tehran's appetite to retaliate via these fronts. Despite having only a fraction of its patron's firepower, the Houthi success in diverting non-Chinese and non-Russian shipping from the Red Sea, and threatening the U.S. Navy around Bab el Mandeb, could encourage Iran to apply similar pressure on the Strait of Hormuz and its environs, as it has done on several occasions previously. Beyond being highly dependent on the free flow of their energy exports, the Arab Gulf countries resemble Israel in offering Iran small handfuls of incredibly high-value targets like military installations and critical infrastructure.<sup>57</sup> By the same token, U.S. forces across the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Syria, and in the Gulf itself tend to be highly concentrated on small numbers of airbases, naval vessels, and desert outposts. And unlike Israel, many of these Arab and U.S. targets are inadequately protected by air and missile defenses.<sup>58</sup>

Broadening the conflict in any of these ways might seemingly defy a basic cost-benefit calculus from Tehran’s perspective, but there certainly is recent precedent for escalating horizontally. Especially as its own deterrents against Israel proved hollow over the past year, striking relatively undefended U.S. and/or other assets in the Gulf seemingly could provide opportunities to chalk up much-needed easy victories for the regime. Such attacks also could exploit U.S. fears of heightened conflict as an indirect lever to compel an end to IDF action. Iran has done so with regularity, and with some success, through proxy attacks on U.S. installations in Syria and Iraq, and on Middle East shipping—first in 2021, and then far more frequently in the aftermath of October 7, 2023.<sup>59</sup> It took a similar tack in 2019, in response to U.S. “maximum pressure” on its oil exports, by targeting Saudi Arabia’s largest export terminals at Abqaiq with an effective cruise missile and drone attack. In these lights, it is notable that the supreme leader threatened Israel and the United States alike after Israel’s punishing airstrikes last October, even though—or perhaps precisely because—the Biden administration worked so openly, and mostly productively, to curtail the intensity of IDF action.<sup>60</sup>

### *iii. Holding Fire*

Whatever the efficacy of any actual retaliation, these first two options also risk plunging Iran into costly escalation spirals that invite even more painful Israeli and/or U.S. military action against Tehran’s most prized assets, up to and potentially including the survivability of the regime itself. Difficult as it may seem, especially if IRGC hardliners and Khamenei’s aspiring successors seek to outdo one another in clamoring for vengeance, Iran could choose to define survival as resistance and victory, absorb the immediate ignominy of a strike, and instead focus on generating international pressure against follow-on U.S. and/or Israeli action.

This offers Iran the benefits of avoiding an unpredictable larger conflict, and manipulating its ostensible de-escalation to impose non-military costs on Israel, the United States, and others. At the same time, Iran could balance this approach with concrete but unattributable and unspoken retaliation, for instance by resuming its well-established practice of using proxies to attack Israeli, American, and/or Jewish “soft targets” around the world. Though Hezbollah’s primary force in Lebanon is devastated, its intercontinental networks and connections with other illicit groups remain intact and capable of targeting embassies, cultural centers, tourist sites, and the like.

By keeping its powder officially dry, Iran’s diplomats could resume their favorite pastimes of delegitimizing U.S. and Israeli standing in the world, and portraying their country as the victim of economic and military punishment that harms the prospects for peaceful negotiations and their country’s adherence to major international arms control agreements like the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In the same stroke, they could split the informal U.S.-Israel-E3 front that has begun coalescing against Iran’s NPT violations and preparing to snap back stringent UN Security Council sanctions on its core nuclear activities.<sup>61</sup> In this scenario, America’s Arab partners likely would feel compelled to distance themselves as much as possible from the United States and Israel.

Iran’s envoys might hope to find a receptive audience in Washington, given recent Trump administration statements emphasizing its overriding priorities to avoid Middle East conflict and to initiate negotiations. They certainly would be welcomed with open arms in the same international institutions, foremost the United Nations and International Criminal Court, that have aggressively isolated Israel and condemned what they view as Israeli war crimes in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Yemen, and Iran ever since October 7, 2023. Posing as mediators, Russia and/or China could seek to split apart the United States and

Israel, weaken U.S. pressure on Iran, and burnish their own credentials as go-betweens in Middle East diplomacy. With these winds at its back, Tehran also might hope to undermine global compliance with U.S. “maximum pressure” sanctions.

Even more than legitimacy, time could be the most precious commodity Iran gains from simply sitting on its hands. With Israel isolated, and with the pain of sanctions potentially receding, the regime would have renewed resources and de facto diplomatic cover to redouble its nuclear drive. To the extent sanctions are undercut, it could hope to co-opt or otherwise stave off some of the domestic discontent that has persisted for years as well.

Were Iran to go this route, it would in fact resemble the pattern following past Israeli strikes on nuclear weapons programs around the Middle East. Consumed by a life-and-death struggle with Iran, Saddam Hussein decided not to retaliate kinetically for Israel’s successful 1981 strike on his nuclear reactor at Osirak. Bashar al-Assad similarly chose to not respond when the IDF destroyed Syria’s Al Kibar reactor in 2007. And the Iranian regime has avoided any overt military retaliation for a series of covert Israeli strikes on its nuclear facilities and scientists over the past decade-plus.

## B. Response on the Nuclear Front

Iran’s leaders would face another momentous decision, just like Saddam Hussein in 1981 and Bashar al-Assad in 2007: resume working toward a nuclear weapon in some fashion, or throw in the towel? Ultimately Iraq tried the former route, while unforeseen events overtook Syria. Weighing these pros and cons will be linked to the regime’s shorter-term willingness to retaliate openly and aggressively, especially if it faces a high likelihood of further, costlier military action in response.

### *i. Going for Broke for the Bomb*

To a much greater degree than Saddam after 1981, Iran would be well-positioned to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program. By applying lessons it learned from the Iraq and Syria cases, it has built its nuclear program specifically to minimize the damage that could be inflicted by military strikes, and to recuperate as quickly as possible afterward. In the context of recent calamitous losses to its missile and proxy forces, persistent domestic unrest, and its abiding fear of being overthrown by U.S.-led action, the regime presumably would be strongly incentivized to redouble its drive to the bomb as its ultimate guarantor of survival.

Even as regime leadership transitions toward a new generation, its collective memory remains seared by the lessons it believes were learned from the crucible of the Iran-Iraq War, much as World War I was the prism of Nazi Germany’s worldview: resilience is the key to survival and any setback can be overcome through increased defiance. As added inducement, the regime could note that Saddam and Assad failed to rehabilitate their programs after Israeli airstrikes, ultimately leaving them vulnerable to dethronement. Last May, a top adviser to the Supreme Leader warned “in the case of an attack on our nuclear facilities by the Zionist regime, our deterrence will change.”<sup>62</sup>

Recent U.S. intelligence assessments see Israeli military action as setting back Iran’s approach to the nuclear threshold by mere weeks or months, and even Israel’s rosier estimates hover around one year.<sup>63</sup> This reflects Tehran’s assiduous efforts, over years, to make its key nuclear infrastructure redundant, resilient, and opaque—thus avoiding the fatal Iraqi and Syrian mistakes of concentrating their programs largely in singular above-ground sites reliant on foreign assistance for critical material or components. Iran

has mastered the entire fuel cycle to produce fissile material, and its scientists already have irreplaceable know-how from producing 60 percent HEU—already technically fissile material—in advanced centrifuges manufactured domestically, and from converting 20 percent HEU to uranium metal like what is needed for a warhead. In conjunction with its weaponization program, it has dispersed these activities across multiple sites—many of them shielded by concrete, earth, and rock—and hindered any accurate or full accounting of its progress by blocking inspectors and, like the Manhattan Project, shrouding and disaggregating this project throughout a web of purportedly civilian institutions.<sup>64</sup>

These steps are designed to help Iran rapidly reconstitute its nuclear venture by complicating Israeli and U.S. pre-strike planning, the potential effectiveness of any actual strike, and post-strike assessments of the damage inflicted. It could do so as a longer-term effort to build an even more resilient weapon development program with even greater industrial-scale enrichment capacity, and/or as a crash program to assemble and test a crude device quickly with a single SQ of 60 percent HEU. Doubling down on its current behaviors, Iran presumably would go even farther underground and completely beyond prying eyes—as it is doing already by digging the unprecedentedly deep Natanz Tunnel Facility, and refusing to declare it to the IAEA, in reaction to covert Israeli strikes in 2020-21 on several of its enrichment and centrifuge-manufacturing plants.

This reflects a larger historical trend in which strategic and military assets become increasingly hardened and in-depth the more they are pulverized by bombing. By 1917-18, many defenses on the Western Front had moved below ground, reinforced with concrete, and echeloned in multiple layers to guard against increasingly powerful, accurate, and sustained artillery barrages. In the next war, German industrial production actually increased well into 1943-44 as factories were dispersed and shifted underground in response to massive strategic bombing raids. Most relevantly, the 2010 U.S.-Israel cyberattack knocked out large swathes of Natanz’s enrichment capacity for months, but by comparison Iran barely skipped a beat after Israel’s covert kinetic attacks a decade later. By then, its infrastructure had expanded to the point where it could quickly ratchet up enrichment levels, wheel out better centrifuges, relocate these activities to more secure locations like Fordow, and get to work building new, even better-protected facilities.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, Iran’s reconstitution efforts could get a little help from its friends in China, Russia, and/or North Korea, all of whom already are boosting strategic and technological ties among themselves. Last year the Biden administration aired concerns that Tehran could call on Moscow for nuclear assistance in exchange for sending drones and missiles to Russia, right around the time Russia’s Deputy Security Council chair, and former president and prime minister, Dmitri Medvedev threatened bluntly that “it is worth considering which of the United States’ enemies we might potentially transfer our nuclear technologies to.”<sup>66</sup> In 2023, CIA Director Burns cited publicly that Russian technicians were assisting Iran’s work on “space launch vehicle[s] and other aspects of their missile programs,” and Pyongyang has a similar history of proliferating nuclear-capable missile technology to Tehran.<sup>67</sup> Russia and China also could supply Iran with more sophisticated active defenses, such as radars and surface-to-air missiles, to better protect its nuclear sites and other regime assets from follow-on attacks.

## *ii. Throwing in the Towel*

Yet Iran’s leaders might decide the expected costs of reconstituting its nuclear program outweigh the prospective benefits. If it faced rising pain from “maximum pressure” sanctions that ate further into its parlous finances, and thus reduced its ability to ameliorate widespread internal dissent, the regime might calculate it could ill-afford to scrape the bottom of its coffers to rebuild its nuclear program. The regime

might seek to make a virtue of necessity in this circumstance, framing its decision as one of responsible de-escalation that merits global diplomatic isolation of the United States and Israel. Iran’s calculation would swing further against reconstitution the more effective any military action turns out to be, and if Iran expects further strikes in the near-term—particularly if it fears any resumed breakout attempt could be detected and denied.

*iii. Splitting the Difference*

The regime could try to have its cake and eat it, too, by slow-rolling a covert reconstitution of its nuclear program, while simultaneously portraying itself as both aggrieved and willing to take the high road against Israeli and/or U.S. aggression. Fundamentally, this would resemble the regime’s Janus-faced nuclear policy dating back decades, to when it first built undeclared enrichment sites like Natanz and Fordow and worked on a bomb, all while loudly proclaiming its right to every benefit of the NPT as a strictly civilian nuclear power.

## **IV. Recommendations**

For all its aggressive tendencies, the Iranian regime has always been keenly perceptive of U.S. and Israeli resolve and unity, or lack thereof, and it reliably tailors its behaviors in accordance with the costs it believes will be imposed in response. This basic logic of deterrence and compellence has moved to center stage as Tehran plows toward nuclear weapons, and as it engages in increasingly high-stakes standoffs and overt conflict with the United States and Israel since October 7, 2023. It will become even more important in the context of military action, given Tehran’s likely remaining capacity and strong incentives to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program in one way or another.

Accordingly, the regime’s decision-making and risk-acceptance in the wake of any Israeli strike will hinge directly on the amount of apparent daylight between Washington and Jerusalem, and its attendant fears that retaliation will bring additional, prohibitively costly action by both countries. By threatening to deny and punish any Iranian attempt to escalate or regionalize its response, clear American rhetorical and material support for Israel can exploit Tehran’s ingrained and well-founded fear that only the United States is capable of overpowering its military forces and ultimately toppling the regime. To this end, credible U.S. threats to impose follow-on costs against regime leadership, and its core military and economic assets, can help deter or mitigate Iran’s regional and nuclear retaliation. Simply put, 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, and the less likely Iran’s regime will be to redouble its push for the bomb.

These decisions will have implications for U.S. interests and credibility in the region and globally. America’s friends and foes worldwide gauge our commitments 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 allies. Moreover, Israel would be upholding America’s own, clearly established redline against a nuclear Iran. As a leader of one of America’s closest Arab partners told JINSA, U.S. failure to fully support Israel in these circumstances “would be one of the greatest catastrophes ever.” This in turn would encourage key partners like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to hedge toward America’s enemies and create vacuums for Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran. And the worse the conflict resulting from Iranian escalation, the more U.S.

resources and focus would be pulled back into the Middle East, away from competing priorities elsewhere. Conversely, the reassurance conveyed through U.S. backing for Israel could encourage Arab partners to boost their own tacit or informal support, or at least leave Iran isolated in the wake of Israeli military action.

### A. No Daylight

American and Israeli officials must ensure there is no daylight when it comes to rolling back Iran's nuclear progress, deterring or defeating Iranian retaliation, and preventing any reconstitution post-strike. By confronting Iran's regime with a stark choice between forfeiting its illegal program peacefully, or having it destroyed militarily, close and conspicuous coordination offers the only hope for coercive time-limited talks to achieve a viable diplomatic agreement. In lieu of a diplomatic ultimatum, or if that fails, Iran will constrain its response to Israeli strikes to the extent the United States and Israel are in lockstep on this issue. For every ray of daylight peeking through, however, Iran will be tempted to retaliate more rigorously against an Israel it perceives as isolated, and against the United States as an indirect path to curb further Israeli action—as it did to some effect via the Biden administration. To this end:

- American officials must convey clearly to Tehran, both before and immediately upon any strikes, that Israeli military action is consistent with longstanding U.S. prevention policy, and that the United States is providing Israel the tools it needs to defend itself.
- To deter Iranian reconstitution and retaliation after a strike, American officials also must make clear that any such efforts will result in the regime losing much more than its nuclear program via concerted and coordinated attacks on the regime's leadership as well as its core military and economic assets.
- American officials can state clearly and sincerely that, while they do not want another Middle East war, Iran's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons constitutes the main threat to peace.
- Congress should leverage its good offices to engage directly with U.S. allies and partners to reinforce this warning, particularly regarding any potential Iran-led escalation.
- Congress also should communicate the shared determination of both parties, and the executive and legislative branches, on this issue by approving conditional Authorizations for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) against Iran's nuclear program and designated Iran-backed foreign terrorist organizations.<sup>68</sup> Such unequivocal deterrent messaging will be particularly timely, and imperative, if Israeli strikes do not significantly impair Iran's ability to reconstitute its program.
- In closest possible coordination with coalition partners that helped defeat prior Iran-led barrages, including Arab countries, Britain, and France, the United States also should warn Tehran and its proxies against threatening America's Arab partners or regional freedom of navigation. Deterrent messages like this are equally important for assuaging valid Saudi, Emirati, and Jordanian concerns that the Houthis will again jeopardize key shipping lanes and fire missiles and drones on their vulnerable homelands.

- » The Trump administration also should consult closely with its E3 partners regarding potential negotiations and pressure on Iran’s nuclear program; President Emmanuel Macron’s rare decision in early April 2025 to convene French cabinet ministers suggests inter-allied consultations have been less than ideal on this score.<sup>69</sup>
- American officials should remember to do no harm in their public statements. This includes avoiding any repeat of the Biden and Obama administrations’ counterproductive, unprompted tendencies to advertise their self-deterrence and overweening desire to avoid any conflict whatsoever. Such statements can be driven by valid concerns, but telegraphing the ends to which the United States will not go, and openly doubting the efficacy of military options, plays directly into Tehran’s hands by encouraging it to see Israel as alone and vulnerable, and to view the United States as easily susceptible to Iran’s escalatory threats.

## B. Close Pre-Strike Coordination

To be maximally effective, these efforts to remove daylight must align closely with concrete preparations to support Israel’s military option and, by ensuring the United States is not caught off-guard by potential IDF action, reinforce for Tehran that it cannot profitably retaliate against either country, or against America’s Arab partners, or reconstitute its nuclear program. Accordingly:

- American officials should make clear to their Israeli counterparts that they will support their partner following a strike, and that this requires full and close cooperation beforehand on the goals and responses of each partner in such an eventuality.
- Building on its salutary initial signals that it will unfreeze all preexisting U.S. arms transfers to Israel, the Trump administration now must do everything it can to ensure these vital resupply efforts are carried out completely and expeditiously.
  - » To the greatest extent possible, the two countries should begin implementing any additional transfers of critical offensive capabilities Israel might need, including potentially bunker busters, other precision air-to-ground munitions, materiel for IDF special operations forces, relevant spare parts and ammunition, and air and missile defense interceptors.
  - » The Pentagon also should ensure adequate stocks of interceptors for its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) air defense system, currently deployed in Israel, which helped blunt Iran’s October 2024 barrage.
- The Trump administration also should coordinate beforehand on operational support for the IAF in the event of military action against Iran’s nuclear program. Given the serial delays in transferring U.S.-made, Israeli-purchased KC-46A aerial refueling tankers, and given the real possibility of an extended IDF campaign, the United States should plan in advance for how best to provide aerial refueling support for IAF operations—as has already been rehearsed repeatedly in combined U.S.-Israeli exercises—as well as intelligence-sharing, combat search and rescue (CSAR), and other assistance.<sup>70</sup>

## C. Getting Ready Now for the Day After

### *i. Planning Is Everything*

The spread of Middle East conflict since October 7, and the intricate diplomacy to contain it, is a glaring reminder of how operations quickly take on lives of their own, particularly in the absence of coherent and concerted planning among partners intended to end operations on favorable terms.

Most crucially, the United States and Israel will have broadly aligned interests in avoiding a broader war following any Israeli and potentially U.S. military action, and they must get on the same page regarding strategic questions that a strike will raise, including ensuring Iran's nuclear program remains shut down. Such questions will gain salience in proportion to Tehran's ability to weather Israeli strikes, make its program more opaque and survivable, and quickly resume driving toward the nuclear threshold.

Therefore, the United States, Israel, and other relevant partners must prepare today for tomorrow's potential fallout along several mutually supporting lines of effort:

- Readying and signaling follow-on, potentially combined and/or covert, operations to further degrade Iran's nuclear infrastructure; to detect, deter, and deny any ensuing reconstitution efforts; and to target core regime leadership and related military and economic targets.
- Dedicating and coordinating sufficient intelligence resources for battle damage assessments of the efficacy of military action against Iran's nuclear and related infrastructure, to detect potential post-strike reconstitution efforts, and to prepare covert follow-on actions as needed.
- Developing and advancing plans to try to end the tensions and potential for escalation that an Israeli strike will create and, even if serious Iran-led retaliation is avoided, offering Tehran a diplomatic off-ramp that will bring any hostilities to a conclusion, and
- Considering options to transition to a better, more sustainable solution to Iran's nuclear program that forestalls any long-term opportunity for the regime to reconstitute these efforts.
  - » Planning should include U.S.-led diplomacy, including international sanctions, to compel Iran to provide the IAEA with a comprehensive declaration of its nuclear weapons program, the completeness and accuracy of which inspectors are then permitted to verify.
  - » These plans should be informed by, and seek to thwart, foreseeable Iranian responses such as leaving the NPT, attempting a "sneakout" at undeclared facilities, and/or seeking assistance from other U.S. adversaries to make its program more immune to military action.

Combined with the gravity of these considerations, ongoing tensions underscore the importance of removing potential U.S.-Israel daylight on these questions as far in advance as possible. Despite often being outgunned, Iran and its proxies are dangerously adept at taking back the initiative upon the first signs of Israeli or U.S. uncertainty, hesitation, and division. America's largely reactive approach to regional upheaval since October 7, 2023, has played into Tehran's hands here. So, too, has Israel's proclivity to "mow the grass" by focusing on tactical and operational decisiveness, while giving short shrift to overarching political and strategic outcomes. This tendency, hardly unique to the IDF, reflects a pervasive but often self-defeating temptation throughout military history to punch a hole in the enemy's line and



see what develops. As a cautionary tale, the tortuous and public U.S.-Israeli disagreements over the eventual Gaza ceasefire encouraged Hamas and the rest of Iran’s “axis of resistance” to drive deeper wedges between the two countries, prolong the war, drive up its costs, and divert attention from Iran’s accelerating nuclear progress.

*ii. Working the Plan*

Just as concrete U.S. pre-strike coordination and support for Israel can best support coercive diplomacy and maximize the effectiveness of Israeli action, the United States must pair these post-strike plans and warnings with tangible actions to execute follow-on operations, harden regional defenses, and isolate Iran diplomatically and strategically. The more Tehran clearly sees, and foresees, a robust and united front foreclosing its freedom of maneuver in the aftermath of Israeli action, the more likely it can be deterred from escalating the nuclear or regional fronts. The Trump administration should coordinate closely with Congress to ensure expedient delivery of funding for these readiness activities and any contingency operations resulting from Iranian retaliation.

- As a first step, American strategists should be prepared to conduct immediate and comprehensive resupply for Israel’s most pressing self-defense needs in the wake of action against Iran’s nuclear program.
  - » Priority should be given to air and missile defense interceptors, possibly supplemented by air-to-air missiles to help intercept incoming projectiles. These efforts must consciously avoid repeating the aftermath of the 2014 and 2021 Gaza conflicts, in which full U.S. rhetorical support for Israel was not remotely matched by expeditious resupply for Israel’s dwindling interceptor stocks.
  - » As it has with one of its THAAD systems since last fall, and consistent with existing operational planning, the United States should continue to deploy air and missile defense systems in Israel under U.S. control to backstop Israel’s defense and send an unmistakable message of joint deterrence.

The “bolt from the blue” threat posed by Iran’s shorter-range weapons systems, including SRBMs and anti-ship capabilities, is a strong case for ensuring the most effective possible defenses for U.S. forces, bases, other assets, and partners in the Middle East. Accordingly:

- The United States should accelerate efforts to build more genuinely integrated air and missile defenses (IAMD) and stronger maritime security cooperation with its regional partners. Impressive coalitional feats against Iran’s projectile attacks in April and October 2024, including the sharing of early warning data from the Gulf, provide proof of concept for U.S.-led development of a common operating picture (COP) that includes Israel and as many Arab countries as possible. At the same time, these accomplishments underline the continual need for active, and irreplaceable, U.S. involvement to sustain and improve these multilateral efforts.
- Building on increasingly frequent and operationally focused U.S.-Israeli exercises like Juniper Oak and Red Flag, 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 to enhance U.S.-Israel readiness for offensive and defensive operations, as well as CSAR operations to prevent Iran from taking any American or Israeli servicemembers hostage.

- » This should build on recent combined exercises, like those in early March 2025, that practiced operational coordination between Britain-based U.S. B-52H strategic bombers and IAF F-15I and F-35I combat aircraft.<sup>71</sup>
- Accompanying contingency planning, additional exercises, and strategic communications under CENTCOM’s auspices can further enhance U.S. readiness and deterrence.
- To help counter one of Iran’s most likely and potent escalatory options, the U.S. Navy should rotate guided-missile destroyers and frigates to Middle Eastern waters, and ensure adequate mine countermeasures (MCM) ships in the U.S. Fifth Fleet’s area of responsibility.

*iii. Expecting the Unexpected*

The United States also must plan for its efforts to succeed in deterring or significantly limiting Iran’s retaliation, to the point where the regime prioritizes the diplomatic over the kinetic route. The Trump administration must be fully prepared for Iran to absorb any strike and exploit this ostensibly peaceful “de-escalation” to delegitimize U.S.-backed Israeli action, deepen Israel’s existing international isolation in reaction to its self-defense, and gain cover to ultimately reconstitute its nuclear weapons program. On this score, threatening to leave the NPT might seem to offer leverage for Tehran to split apart the U.S.-E3 counterproliferation coalition and its members’ growing support for the laudably persistent IAEA campaign to publicize and bring an end to Iran’s treaty violations.

- While still maintaining potent offensive and defensive capabilities to prevent Iranian escalation, American diplomats must make clear to Iran’s UN backers, China and Russia, that it will veto any UNSC action 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.
- Regardless of how the next few months play out on the ground, the Trump administration must work with the E3 now to start turning the gears that can eventually “snap back” UNSC sanctions before this option expires in October 2025.
  - » In tandem, the United States, E3, and any other country concerned by the potential unraveling of the most successful arms control agreement in modern history should amplify public diplomacy highlighting Iran’s egregious NPT violations and its persistent refusals to negotiate in good faith over a nuclear deal—especially since Iran, backed by Russia and China, might well try to claim that snapback sanctions no longer apply if it leaves the NPT.

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