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Not Over: Ensuring Iran Does Not Rebuild

Introduction

Israel's 12-day military campaign against Iran and its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities will almost certainly be viewed as a major turning point in the history of the modern Middle East—on a par with such transformative events as the wars of 1967 and 1973, the Camp David Accords and Iranian revolution, 9/11 and 10/7. It capped off 21 months of dramatic regional events. On October 7, 2023, Iran-backed Hamas invaded Israel, perpetrating the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. The next day, Iran's most powerful proxy, Hezbollah, launched an unprovoked war of attrition against Israel. Israel's security posture and deterrence were shattered. The ambitions of Iran, and its stable of regional proxy armies, to destroy the Jewish state via a sustained multifront war appeared closer than ever to realization.

Within a year, however, Israel effectively decimated Hamas and Hezbollah to the point that neither pose a military threat to Israel. That facilitated last month's Israel-U.S. attack. We will learn more in the future, but that attack likely set back Iran's nuclear program more than years of sanctions, sabotage, and diplomatic agreements. Decades and billions of dollars that Iran invested in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and proxies have been wiped away. No cracks have—yet—appeared in the Tehran regime's edifice, but it stands humiliated, the pillars of its deterrence and national security doctrine in tatters, thoroughly penetrated by spies and saboteurs, and in its weakest position since at least the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

Now, however, is no time for complacency, triumphalism, or distraction by secondary concerns. Instead, the United States and Israel should remain laser-focused on finishing the job at hand. Iran's military and nuclear programs and ambitions are down, but not out. While a diplomatic agreement that verifiably dismantles Iran's nuclear and missile programs remains the best means of defusing the Iranian threat, there remains a distinct possibility that Iran will refuse to return to negotiations absent unacceptable U.S. concessions. Whether new talks commence or not, it will be necessary to return immediately to a campaign of maximum military, economic, and political pressure on Iran. Most importantly, the United States and Israel must be agreed and coordinated in resuming military operations in response to credible indications that Iran is seeking to rebuild its nuclear and missile programs and strategic air defenses.

I. New Strategic Equation

The 12-day war exposed and revealed certain new strategic realities. First, Iran was and is much weaker than many expected. The Israeli-U.S. attack significantly degraded or destroyed key elements of the Iranian regime's ability to threaten the Middle East. This includes its military command and control, declared nuclear facilities and key personnel, medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) capabilities, air defenses, and certain critical infrastructure. Israel humiliated Iran with its stunning military successes. It achieved air supremacy within 48 hours—more quickly than Israel expected—and flew virtually at will over Iran for the following ten days. The war confirmed Iran's profound counter-intelligence weaknesses.

Second, Iran could not rely on any so-called allies to come to its aid—not its friends Russia or China and not its longstanding but severely weakened proxy Hezbollah. Nor were Iran-backed militias in Iraq or Houthi rebels in Lebanon a factor. When the chips were down, the Iranians were on their own. Countries in the region detest the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Third, the United States and Israel collaborated in this military campaign. Iran evidently did not think Israel would attack, and certainly did not take U.S. threats seriously either. The U.S.-Israel campaign sends a strong signal to Iran and others of the close bonds between the two countries and the likelihood the United States will at least support Israel, if not collaborate again, should Iran seek to rebuild its ballistic missile and nuclear programs.

Fourth, there is no evidence that Iran's strategic intentions have changed. The concrete objectives of destroying Israel and driving America out of the Middle East remain. Iran's regime outwardly projects defiance since the ceasefire. Authoritative voices within the regime are even explicitly inciting followers to kill U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Iran's foreign minister vowed his country would redouble its nuclear enterprise and better protect its facilities against any further military strikes. Supreme Leader Khamenei claims "the Islamic Republic slapped America in the face" by retaliating against U.S. forces in Qatar, and he threatens to conduct further responses. Iran has formally suspended cooperation with inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and leading officials and regime organs speak of possibly leaving the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) altogether.

Fifth, Iran is down but not out, meaning that this is not a time for any Israel-U.S. triumphalism. Over time, battle damage assessments will provide greater precision about setbacks resulting from strikes on Fordow, Natanz, Isfahan, and other nuclear assets. But Iran built its nuclear program to survive military action, and there remains enough ambiguity to safely assume it retains some material, infrastructure, and know-how to resume progress, if it chooses. Though it likely faces hurdles to reconstitute its MRBM and air defense capabilities, many of the regime's short-range offensive arsenals remain intact for threatening U.S. assets and Arab partners in the vicinity of the Gulf. Finally, while the Tehran regime suffered many blows, there were no evident defections or any major protests or uprising. The regime was weak before the war and is weaker now, but already a major campaign of renewed domestic repression and executions has commenced to deter and foil potential threats to regime survival.

II. Consolidating the Win

The best and preferred option for ensuring that Iran no longer threatens Israel, the United States, or the region is for it to reach a new agreement to verifiably dismantle its nuclear weapons program and curb its most problematic military activities. Iran, however, may reject any return to negotiations in the absence of preemptive and counter-productive concessions from the United States. Alternatively, it might seek to manipulate a return to negotiations in order to stymie attempts to further dismantle, or prevent it from restarting, its nuclear program—buying time for U.S.-Israel daylight to re-emerge and resuming the steady process of undermining American deterrence and resolve. The United States and Israel must be prepared for both scenarios. With either, it will be imperative to maintain concerted pressure on Iran using all elements of power, including a credible U.S.-Israeli threat to resume military strikes, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation and pressure. But whether or not negotiations commence, the guiding principle for Washington and Jerusalem—and their joint message to the Iranian regime—must be that they are prepared to resume, and as necessary escalate, military operations should Iran attempt to rebuild the capabilities that were targeted during the recent 12-day war.

III. Parameters for U.S. Postwar Policy in the Absence of a New Deal

If, as seems likely in the near term, Iran refuses to re-enter negotiations to dismantle the most threatening elements of its nuclear and missile programs, the United States and Israel must be agreed and fully prepared to act, together or individually, to ensure Iran is not able to reverse the damage inflicted during the recent war by reconstituting its most threatening activities. Justified “triggers” for renewed strikes should include credible indications that Iran is:

- rebuilding its strategic air defenses;
- diverting any part of its stockpile of enriched uranium or any other key nuclear equipment;
- maintaining secret sites related to parts of the nuclear fuel cycle or weaponization;
- reestablishing or augmenting lines for the production of long-range missiles or missile launchers;
- importing dangerous military or technological capabilities from abroad;

After achieving agreement on the “triggers” that would justify resumed military strikes, Washington and Jerusalem should use appropriate diplomatic channels to communicate their intentions and purposes to the Iranian regime as clearly as possible. It should also be made clear to Iran that maintaining its refusal to cooperate with the IAEA, withdrawing from the NPT, and rejecting new negotiations will be important factors influencing the U.S.-Israel threshold for resuming military action. These steps would also accelerate efforts at the IAEA board of governors to refer Iran’s nuclear file back to the UN Security Council and trigger the snapback of UN sanctions.

While no means a perfect analogy, the model that the United States and Israel should have in mind is the one governing the current ceasefire in Lebanon that has seen Israel, with U.S. approval, conduct over 500 strikes since November 2024 to enforce its redlines and stop Hezbollah’s reconstitution near its northern border.

To provide the early warning needed for prompt preventive measures to defeat any Iranian effort to reconstitute critical elements of its nuclear weapons and missile program, it will be essential to prioritize

even closer intelligence cooperation between the United States, Israel, and other capable Western partners. Accordingly, all necessary resources and attention should be devoted to ensuring that policymakers have as comprehensive an understanding of Iran's postwar recovery efforts as possible, as well as the regime's intentions.

IV. U.S. Demands in New Negotiations

To reliably secure U.S. interests and assert that Iran's nuclear weapons program is no more, and to deter or prevent any reconstitution efforts, any new agreement with Iran must meet several, core redlines:

1. Declared and undeclared infrastructure and stockpiles relating to Iran's nuclear fuel cycle must be fully accounted for and destroyed, including uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) conversion, enrichment, storage, and metallurgy, as must its facilities to manufacture and stockpile centrifuges and components.
2. Iran must agree to and abide by a comprehensive, and highly intrusive, IAEA monitoring and verification regime that confirms the dismantlement, destruction or removal outside the country of its declared enrichment-related facilities and stockpiles, allows for unfettered access to search for, inspect, and as necessary dismantle possible undeclared nuclear facilities, and which resolves in entirety and perpetuity the agency's outstanding concerns about Iran's suspected undeclared weaponization and enrichment-related activities.
 - Iran must provide the IAEA with a complete declaration of its nuclear program past and present, including all related personnel, suspected undeclared sites, and relevant documentation.
 - Given Iran's systematic breaches of its safeguards obligations, any inspections regime to verify the completeness and accuracy of this declaration must go beyond Iran ratifying the IAEA Additional Protocol and adhering to Modified Code 3.1, to include explicit provisions and enforcement mechanisms for "anywhere, anytime" access to suspected undeclared sites, such as the deeply buried site at Pickaxe Mountain, including IRGC and other military-related sites where past illegal activities occurred.
3. Iran must verifiably give up or otherwise destroy its nuclear-capable ballistic and cruise missile arsenals, manufacturing capabilities, and research and development (R&D) programs.
4. Iran must be prohibited from transferring strategic capabilities to its proxies or other forces abroad and from providing or receiving technical assistance or transfers relating to its nuclear and missile programs.

V. Restoring Maximum Pressure to Enable Diplomacy

The regime's unpreparedness for Israeli strikes reflected, among other things, a well-founded confidence that it could exploit U.S. diplomacy to sideline military options, keep America and Israel off the same page strategically, and expand its nuclear program ever further. Though the regime just absorbed incredibly heavy and unexpected blows, in previous such instances it has slowly revamped aggression on the ground, in enrichment halls, and at the negotiating table the more it becomes clear that U.S. pressure is not consistent or sustained. Examples include restarting enrichment in 2005 after a year-long pause following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and resuming proxy attacks on U.S. forces in the months following its unrequited retaliation for the 2020 killing of Qasem Soleimani.

That is why even if U.S.-Israeli strikes successfully destroyed Iran's core nuclear facilities and personnel, it is vitally important to signal to Tehran that follow-on— indeed, intensified—military operations, economic pressure, and diplomatic isolation remain squarely on the table, and that American-Israeli coordination is tighter than ever. Such deterrence and denial efforts can be reinforced by broader diplomacy and sanctions. Re-exerting pressure on Iran to reach a negotiated settlement of its remaining ability nuclear and military threats should entail:

1. The United States and Israel should coordinate plans to bolster shared readiness for potential follow-on operations, and signal to Iran that such plans are being operationalized, including:
 - Expedited U.S. resupply and transfers of already-procured platforms and materiel to Israel, including KC-46 aerial refueling tankers, multirole combat aircraft, air-to-ground munitions, air and missile defense interceptors, spare parts, and basic ammunition.
 - Proactive planning and combined exercises to boost operational coordination on U.S. aerial refueling of Israeli aircraft, ISR and other intelligence-sharing, combat search and rescue (CSAR), regional integrated air and missile defense (IAMD), cyber, and maritime security.
 - » In addition to bolstering readiness for operations against Iranian regime assets, some of the efforts can also counter Iran's retaliatory threats against the Gulf and elsewhere.
 - As needed, U.S.-Israeli overflights and other shows of force to signal readiness to Iran and warn against potential future non-compliance with international inspectors or sanctions.
 - » President Trump's threat of renewed U.S. strikes, should Iran resume production of highly enriched uranium (HEU), is a necessary and illustrative example of such signals.
2. The United States, Israel, and other international partners should insist on the immediate resumption of already legally required IAEA inspections to permit a full accounting for the post-war state of Iran's nuclear program, in particular its large stockpile of enriched uranium and advanced centrifuges not deployed at Natanz and Fordow.
3. The United States should coordinate with its "E3" European partners (Britain, France, Germany) the timely "snapback" of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on Iran before this option expires in October 2025, and fully enforce U.S. secondary sanctions.

- In light of likely Russian-Chinese vetoes of a new UNSC resolution mandating a much more rigorous IAEA inspections regime, snapback offers the best diplomatic option to hinder external support for Iran’s nuclear and military reconstitution, and to sustain international prohibitions on Tehran’s weapons proliferation to its proxies.
 - There should be no talk of “Make Iran Great Again” until the Tehran regime is overthrown by its people, with the help of U.S. and Western pressure, and replaced by a government genuinely dedicated to the welfare of its people and non-aggression. The United States should immediately and fully restore all existing U.S. sanctions against Iran and those that do business with it. In particular, a renewed U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran should curb Iran’s significant oil exports to China, said to net the regime some \$54 billion annually. Cutting of Iran’s revenues is critical to making it harder to rebuild its nuclear and military infrastructure and forcing it to the negotiating table.
4. Without compromising the credibility of U.S.-Israeli-E3 pressure, Iran could be offered certain inducements to cooperate, all of which should be contingent on fully resolving the IAEA’s concerns and remaining in compliance with a stringent new monitoring and verification regime:
- A “gold standard” agreement for a peaceful civilian nuclear energy program, under full NPT safeguards, that prohibits nuclear fuel production or reprocessing of any kind.
 - Conditional relief from U.S. secondary sanctions that does not entail lifting Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designations against the IRGC and other regime-related entities.

VI. Conclusion

What Israel and the United States did and accomplished in last month’s 12-day war was momentous and historic. It saved the Mideast from the potential catastrophe of a nuclear Iran. It is critical now for the two countries to consolidate their success and ensure the job is finished. Doing so is not only vital to their national interests, but the sine qua non for truly transforming the Middle East and building the more peaceful, secure, and prosperous region to which they both aspire.