

Building on the Win: U.S. Strategy Toward Iran After the 12-Day War





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I. Executive Summary

Years, even decades, of tensions over Iran's nuclear program culminated in just 12 days in June. But though Israeli-U.S. operational excellence prevailed in battle, the question for Tehran and Jerusalem is when, not if, this war continues, and what its final verdict will be. Iran seeks to undo the setbacks of this short but sharp conflict and still refuses to negotiate in earnest, leaving Israel at least to prepare for another round with urgency and purposiveness. At the same time, the regime's severe setbacks and unpreparedness in this war are magnifying its deeper failures to govern effectively or justly, in turn exposing acute vulnerabilities surrounding its ability to rule the country.

The United States must work closely with Israel and other partners to seize the initiative and leverage created by this summer's watershed moment. Though backfooted, Iran's regime already exploits any daylight and letup from its adversaries to rebuild its shattered arsenals and reinforce its grip at home. America now must lead in encircling the regime with concentric pressures to sever its lifelines to China and Russia, deter or defeat its nuclear and military reconstitution, compel it into a stringent and comprehensive diplomatic agreement and, ultimately, exploit the Islamic Republic's weaknesses and encourage its collapse.

A. Impacts and Takeaways

The 12-Day War stands out for Israeli-American operational successes. On the eve of conflict, Iran's nuclear weapons program was widely understood to be near the finish line, with a steadily-shrinking timeline to build a bomb if ordered. With Chinese help, Iran also was developing capabilities to produce some 3,000 ballistic missiles annually to target the entire Middle East. Yet its proxy "Ring of Fire" encircling Israel and U.S. regional bases already had been dealt severe blows, most notably Israel's pummeling of Hezbollah and the implosion of the Assad regime in Syria.

With key U.S. assists in Operation Midnight Hammer, Israel's Operation Rising Lion left Iran's enrichment-related facilities and stockpiles entombed in rubble, many of its air defenses and long-range missile launchers destroyed, and many of its top military commanders and nuclear scientists dead. This upheaval quickly spread as the regime struggled in the wake of conflict to provide even the most basic services like water, electricity, and a remotely stable currency. Fearing the fallout from its increasingly glaring misrule, the regime responded immediately with mass arrests and executions, knee-jerk repression, and witch-hunts of imagined, but convenient, internal enemies. The subsequent "snapback" of tough United Nations (UN) global sanctions by America's "E3" European partners adds to these concerns, not least by signaling a departure from past diplomatic passivity toward Tehran.

However momentous, these trends do not determine the war's strategic outcome. Iran designed its atomic project to survive military action via dispersal, burial, and opacity. The technical extent of its setback is shrouded in ambiguity, as is the regime's approach to reconstitution. Its prewar belief, that open-ended talks kept military options at bay, is no longer valid. It likely never imagined that Israeli strikes would prove so effective, nor that America would ditch decades of reluctance and uphold its own redline on nuclear prevention. But Iran's leaders could be tempted to see U.S. action as opportunistic, piggybacking on Israel's

initial successes. If so, building new leverage and returning to inconclusive talks is the best chance to freeze Israel's freedom of action and buy precious time to recover.

The scope and intensity of Operation Rising Lion reflects Israel's recognition of Iran's nuclear program as one part of a larger threat that includes missiles, sophisticated air defenses, and the "Ring of Fire." Israeli strikes on certain critical infrastructure and domestic security services highlight how, ultimately, ending the regime's threats entails targeting its internal weaknesses and driving it toward collapse. Iranian missile retaliation in June raised concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of Israeli and U.S. air and missile defenses. Tehran's attack on al-Udeid airbase in Qatar also sharpens questions about concentrating U.S. basing infrastructure just across the Gulf from Iran. And Iran's continued refusal of good-faith diplomacy finally moved the E3 partners on snapback.

B. Iran After the War

For all its stunning losses, Iran's outward prewar defiance remains largely unchanged. Hardliners are attempting to entrench control over regime policymaking, contributing to postwar efforts to close off the country's nuclear program entirely from outside eyes—including by threatening to leave the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)—and to begin reviving its nuclear, missile, and other military capacities. Iran also continues flouting U.S. energy sanctions by illicitly exporting oil to China and, more recently, vowing to work with Moscow and Beijing to circumvent snapback.

These moves also strengthen Iran's negotiating position, much of which now boils down to refusing to catalog its enriched uranium stocks, restore access for nuclear inspectors, or resume negotiations with the United States. Tehran demands upfront guarantees that affirm its self-proclaimed "right" to enrich, immunize it from further pressure, and secure compensation for wartime losses. In exchange, it insists enrichment will continue while giving only vague offers about new, incredibly restrictive, inspections. Angling for one-sided concessions that undercut U.S., Israeli, and European leverage and credibility also buys precious time and space for rehabilitation and flouting snapback.

C. Building on a True Win

Tehran's continuing defiance, and the risks of resumed conflict, seem to have faded from America's agenda. Certainly, much has been accomplished that seemed unimaginable until just months ago. American officials rightly assert that snapback helps "create the environment" for a diplomatic solution imposing much stronger restraints on Iran than the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal.¹ Yet real work remains to be done. In concert with Israel, Europe, and other partners, the United States must amplify pressure on the Iranian regime across the board to choke off its revenue streams, isolate it from international assistance, ensure it does not rebuild its nuclear and military capabilities, and ultimately foster the conditions that ultimately contribute to its collapse.

i. The Only Acceptable Deal

The significant if reversible setbacks to Iran's nuclear and missile programs, and its new perception of U.S.-Israeli threats, create a window of opportunity for direct negotiations between Washington and Tehran.

Now is precisely the time to insist on much more stringent parameters than anything Iran was forced to contemplate in prior talks—and to consciously avoid repeating the endless inconclusive negotiations that Iran exploited so effectively in prior rounds of talks. With snapback officially killing off the JCPOA, efforts to resuscitate that deal or use it as a negotiating framework should be abandoned conclusively.

In coordination with the E3, the United States should present Iran a comprehensive, take-it-or-leave-it package reflecting this entirely new playing field. Contingent on Iran ending its nuclear weapons program verifiably and permanently, and agreeing to airtight restrictions on other destabilizing activities, it should be offered essentially normalized relations and the lifting of all UN, U.S., and European Union (EU) sanctions. In line with America's most durable arms control agreements, this should be signed and ratified as a formal treaty with a two-thirds majority vote in the U.S. Senate.

A comprehensive package should include:

- Zero Iranian uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing capacity, including no research and development, storage, manufacturing, or use of centrifuges or their components. The same strictures should apply to heavy water, and to reactors in which it could be used.
 - Creative compromises that allow Iran to retain any enrichment capacity or related infrastructure should explicitly be off the table from the start.
 - Such restrictions must not terminate at predetermined “sunsets,” but obtain indefinitely.
- Elimination of Iran's arsenals, production capacity, development, and proliferation of nuclear-capable delivery vehicles, other missiles, and drones; ending all Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) terrorist activities outside Iran's borders, as well as all military, financial, and other material support for non-state proxy groups globally—all in conformity with snapped-back UN embargoes.
- A comprehensive declaration of Iran's nuclear program to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which inspectors would then verify for completeness and correctness.
 - This should include verified destruction under IAEA auspices of all remaining centrifuges, components, facilities, and related infrastructure.
 - In tandem, robust monitoring and verification commensurate with IAEA requirements to continue certifying the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program, including “anytime, anywhere” access to suspected undeclared facilities like military bases.
 - Strict monitoring and verification measures will be necessary for enforcing restrictions on Iran's missile and other military programs and proliferation as well.
- The release of all citizens of the United States and those of our partners that have been detained in Iran on false charges, and an end to all hostage-taking.

ii. Setting Terms for Successful Talks

America's willingness to negotiate cannot be unconditional. Specific terms for talks should include:

- An explicit, unextendable, near-term deadline for Iran to accede to a deal outlined above, failing which the United States walks away from the table and prevents reconstitution by other means.
- Face-to-face U.S.-Iran talks from start to finish, with diplomacy to be ended the instant Tehran insists on returning to time-consuming and aimless indirect negotiations.
- Full enforcement of UN, U.S., and EU sanctions throughout talks, to avoid counterproductive past practice of trying to induce Iran's goodwill by softening enforcement during diplomacy.
- Keeping military options on the table during talks, to be activated if Iran rebuilds its military or nuclear weapons programs.

iii. Steps to Secure the Win

With its partners, the United States must build upon recent military and diplomatic wins, maximize the chances of an acceptable agreement with Iran, and be best positioned to prevent the regime's nuclear and military reconstitution through other means if talks fail. Specific U.S. steps include:

- Ensuring Iran sees “no daylight” between the United States, Israel, and the E3, by:
 - Reiterating President Trump's warning that resumed nuclear progress will trigger new U.S. strikes, and coordinating these warnings with Israeli threats to renew military action.
 - Proactively supporting Israeli action to stop Iran from rebuilding its missile capabilities as well, and ideally stating that such Iranian steps will trigger renewed U.S. action, too.
 - Sustaining and, where possible, expanding U.S. regional defense diplomacy through Central Command (CENTCOM) to strengthen shared plans and capabilities to counter Iran.
 - Working with the E3 to counter Iranian, Russian, and Chinese efforts to flout and undermine snapback, and convince Iran that such pressure will relent only when it agrees to a deal that meaningfully restricts its activities that triggered these UN embargoes in the first place.
 - Backing IAEA demands for restored access by conveying America's readiness to impose additional serious consequences for continued Iranian obstruction on this front, too.
- Concretely enacting “no daylight” and bolstering Israel's readiness for resumed operations by:
 - Expediting delivery of U.S.-made KC-46A aerial refueling tankers purchased by Israel in 2021 and fast-tracking training for Israeli pilots on these platforms.
 - Prepositioning U.S.-made precision guided munitions (PGM) and other critical weapons and defense materials in Israel, to support either country's readiness in emergency scenarios.
 - Surging production and transferring air and missile defense systems and interceptors that are co-produced with the United States and, as feasible, continuing to deploy U.S. systems in Israel.
 - Sustaining successful prewar and wartime intelligence-sharing on Iran's nuclear, missile, and other military-related activities, including resupply efforts from abroad.

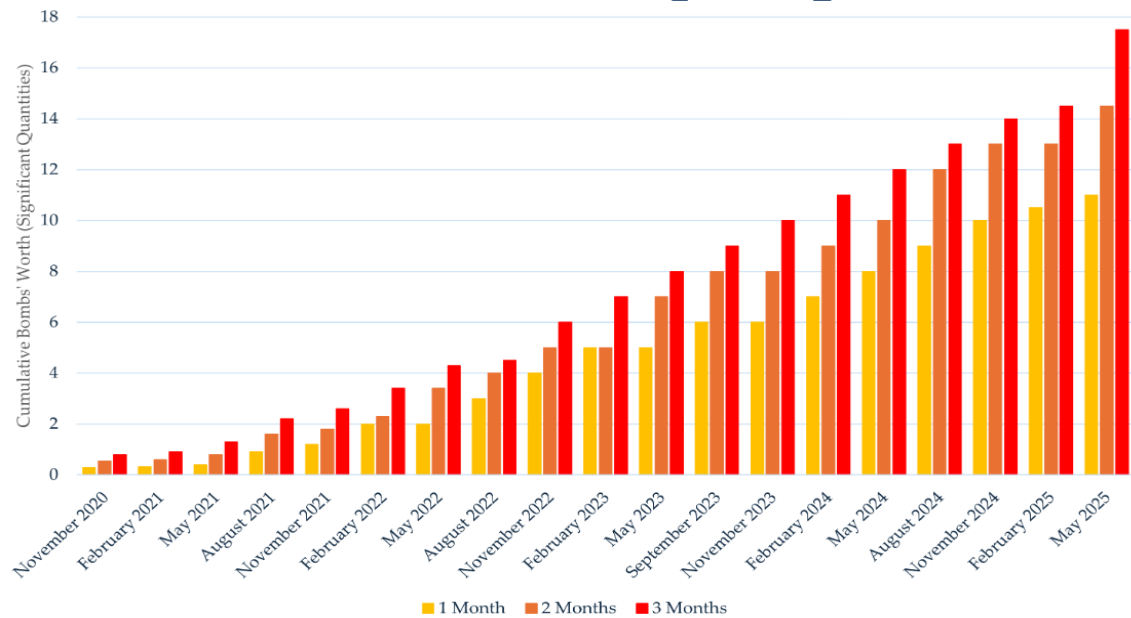
- Updating contingency plans for combined offensive operations to counter Iranian rebuilding efforts, and for combined defense operations in scenarios of resumed conflict with Iran.
- Enhancing and signaling U.S. and Arab partner readiness to counter Iran’s regional threats by:
 - Identifying alternative deployments for U.S. military assets in the region—foremost Israel, Jordan, and western Saudi Arabia—to reduce vulnerabilities exposed in the 12-Day War.
 - Deploying or relocating U.S. strategic bombers and massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) bunker busters to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, rotating carrier strike groups and fast attack submarines, and ensuring adequate force protection for U.S. and partner assets— particularly to enforce snapback sanctions and respond to Iranian threats to leave the NPT.
 - Building on the recent contract to replenish MOP stocks by stepping up overall production of these munitions.²
 - Exercising through CENTCOM to enhance U.S.-led cooperation on regional air, missile, and maritime defenses, and to reassure Arab partners.
- Enforcing genuinely “maximum pressure” sanctions on the Iranian regime, and aiming to contribute to its ultimate collapse, by:
 - Leading efforts of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to sidestep Russian and Chinese obstruction of UN snapback enforcement and sever Iran’s arsenals from the outside world.
 - Aggressively targeting Tehran’s and Beijing’s “ghost fleets” and “shadow-banking” that enable the Iranian regime to sustain vital oil exports and revenues.
 - Synching U.S. enforcement with renewed European sanctions to maximize the combined impact on Iran’s energy, financial, shipping, and other economic pillars of the regime.

II. 12-Day War: Impacts and Takeaways

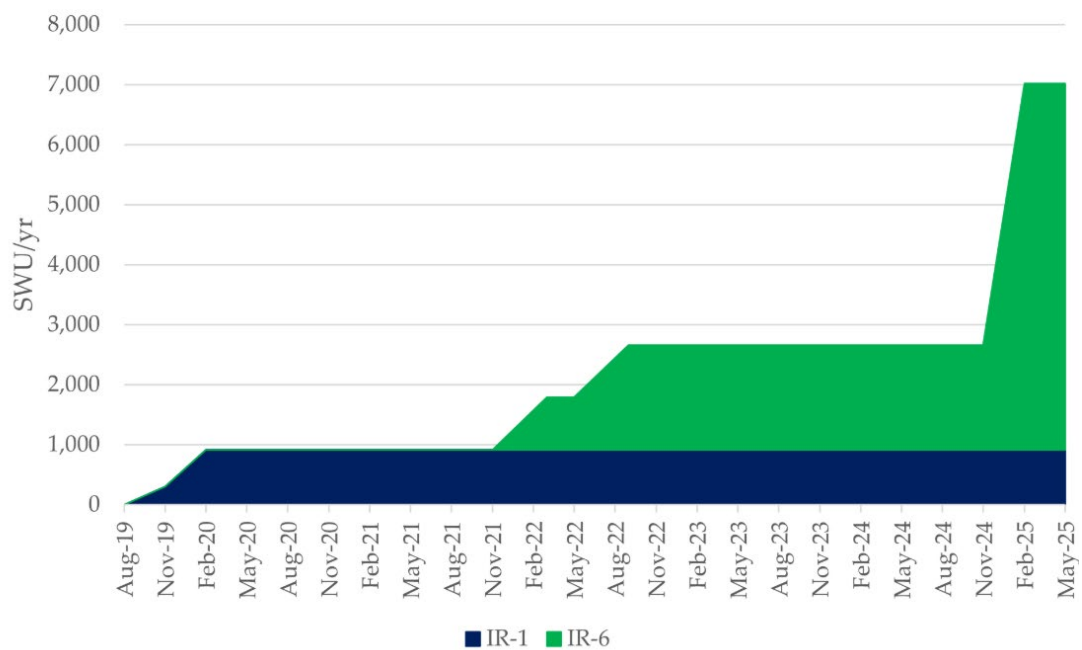
A. Iran's Prewar Buildup

By mid-June 2025, on the eve of Israel's opening airstrikes, Iran's nuclear weapons program was widely understood to be near the finish line. Data from the IAEA showed that Iran's enrichment capacity at deeply-buried Fordo enabled it to complete its first bomb's worth (significant quantity, or SQ) of 90 percent enriched uranium in days, and nearly a dozen total SQs in one month, if it so chose. Immediately prior to the war, Iran announced it would expand this capacity, and make it even more invulnerable to attack, by bringing online hundreds of additional advanced centrifuges at Fordo and opening a new subterranean enrichment site. Concurrently, U.S. and Israeli intelligence communities assessed Iran's scientists were conducting final legwork on a nuclear device, steadily condensing their timeline to finish a bomb if and when instructed by the Supreme Leader. After serious damage from Israeli strikes on Iran's ballistic missile production in October 2024, China accelerated the regime's alarming reconstitution of this arsenal, and aided its plans to produce some 3,000 or more medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) annually that could reach Israel.³ At the same time, Iran's proxy "Ring of Fire" encircling Israel and U.S. regional bases already had been dealt severe blows, most notably Israel's pummeling of Hezbollah and the implosion of the Assad regime in Syria.

Breakout Capacity



Fordo Operating Enrichment Capacity

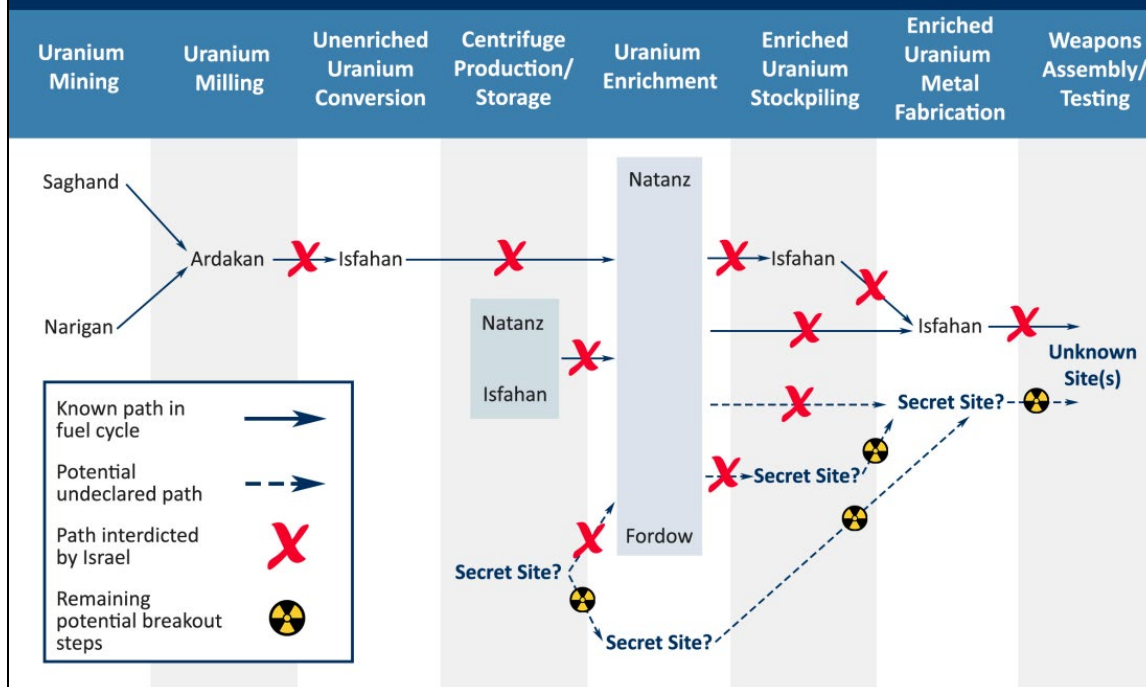


B. Impacts on Iran

Reinforced by U.S. strategic air and sea power, Israel's surprise and operational excellence imposed major setbacks on Iran's nuclear, MRBM, and certain defensive capabilities. At least the sizable majority of Iran's uranium stocks, including its 60 percent highly enriched uranium (HEU), are entombed in the rubble of its enrichment and storage sites at Fordo, Isfahan, and Natanz. Its sole declared facilities for the front and back ends of enrichment, the uranium conversion and metallurgy plants at Isfahan, are demolished along with much of its known centrifuge-production capacity. Many suspected weaponization-related sites are gone, as are many of Iran's top nuclear scientists and their program managers in the Revolutionary Guard. Israel took out the top layers of the IRGC's command and control (C2) in the opening phase of the campaign, in turn enabling the Israeli Air Force (IAF) to severely degrade Iran's air defenses, missile launch capacity, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, MRBM stockpiles. More selectively, the IAF also targeted the regime's defense industrial capacity, internal security apparatus, and key energy infrastructure.⁴

This upheaval quickly spread as the regime struggled in the wake of conflict to provide even the most basic services like water, electricity, and a remotely stable currency. Fearing the fallout from its increasingly glaring misrule, the regime responded immediately with mass arrests and executions, knee-jerk repression, and witch-hunts of imagined, but convenient, internal enemies. The subsequent "snapback" of tough UN global sanctions by America's European partners adds to these concerns, not least by signaling a departure from past diplomatic passivity toward Tehran.

Infographic: Severing Iran's Path to a Nuclear Weapon

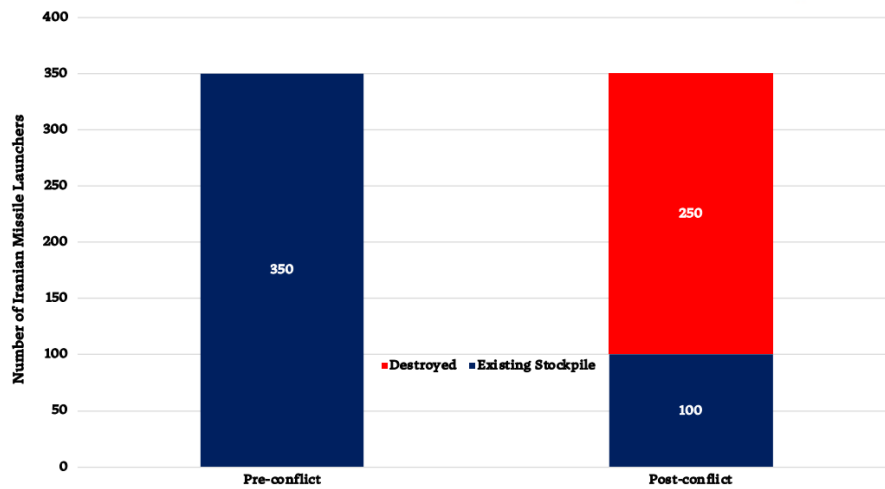


Operational achievements aside, the U.S.-Israeli campaign raises as many pressing questions as it answers about the current and future states of Iran's nuclear weapons and other military enterprises. Tehran designed its atomic project to survive military action via dispersal, burial, and opacity. The IAEA has long warned it cannot verify the absence of undeclared enrichment infrastructure or stockpiles inside Iran, and for years the regime has stonewalled inquiries into covert weaponization work.⁵ In late September, IAEA chief Rafael Grossi warned that Iran retains the capacity to enrich its HEU stockpile to 90 percent purity in a matter of weeks, and that certain amounts of centrifuges and sites to manufacture their components likely survived the war.⁶

And despite appreciable attrition of Iran's ballistic missile launchers, more than a thousand of its MRBMs are estimated to be intact. Its ability to threaten the Gulf with sophisticated shorter-range missiles, drones, and naval forces survived the conflict largely untouched. Alongside all its damaged hardware, much of the regime's operating software—chiefly, IRGC and nuclear-scientific leadership—has been fried, but also can be reinstalled and updated with time.⁷

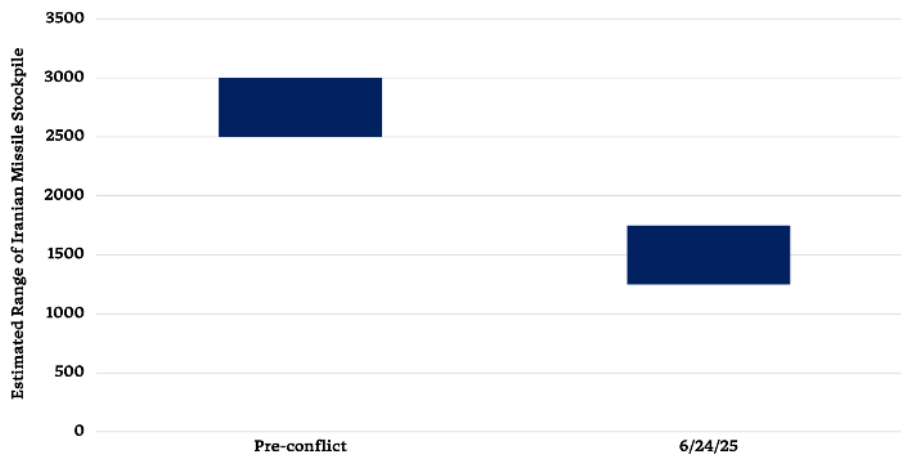
Status of Iranian Missile Launchers

JINSA



IDF Estimates of Iran's Medium-range Ballistic Missile Stockpile

JINSA

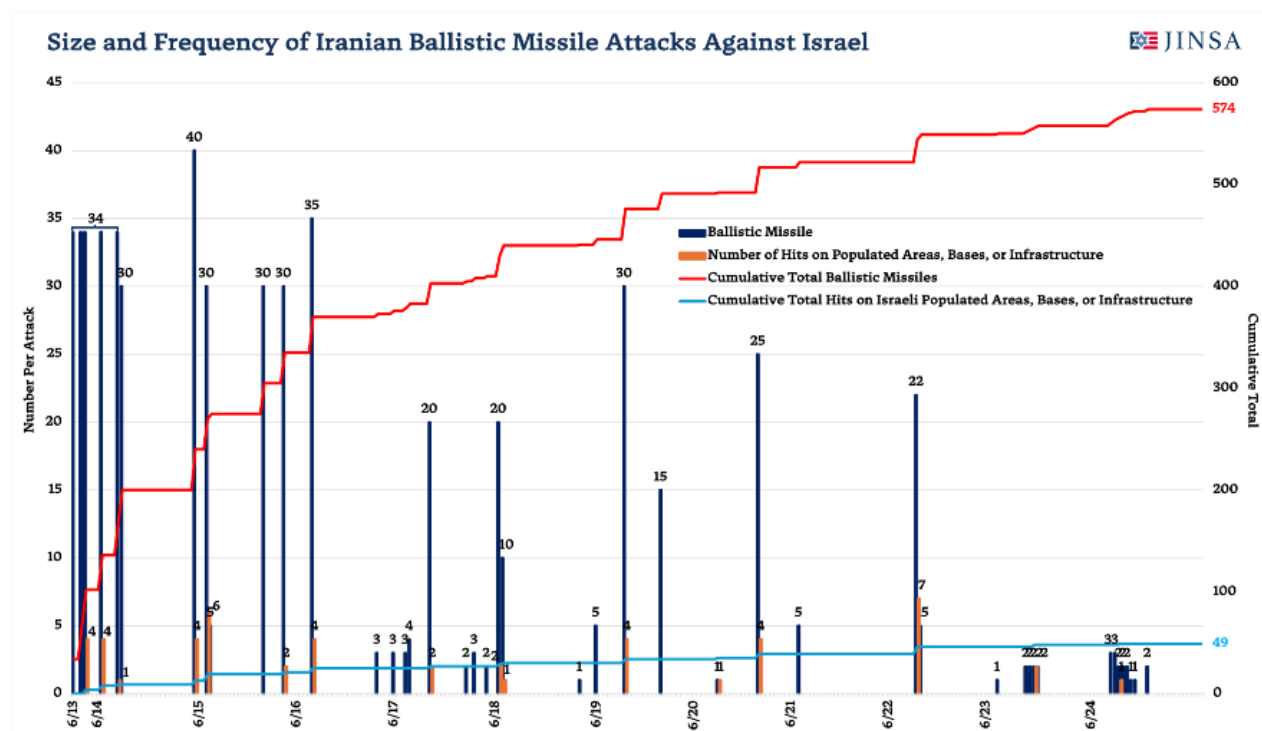


C. Takeaways

Iran's largely sanguine prewar assessments of its adversaries' intentions and capabilities now must be balanced against its wartime experience. Over multiple decades leading up the conflict, Tehran developed a well-founded conviction of American presidents' reliable reluctance to uphold their own explicit nuclear, military, and diplomatic redlines. Apparently right up until Israel's opening strikes on June 13, Iran stuck to its established belief that military action—U.S. or Israeli—remained off the table as long as it feigned interest in reaching a nuclear deal. The war thus abruptly confronted it with the daunting prospect of U.S. weight and willpower lining up behind Israel's readiness for military options. It also forced upon Tehran the unwelcome realization that its enemies could deploy stand-in firepower at will over its skies, and that its nuclear weapons program and other core regime pillars were incredibly vulnerable to serious kinetic degradation.

In addition to technical and material hurdles it faced before the war, Tehran now also must reckon with the psychological uncertainty of being caught and subjected to further military punishment if it tries to rebuild its most threatening capabilities. Israel's operational and intelligence coups have driven these new variables in Tehran's calculus. Thus, there remains the temptation for Tehran's leaders to see, perhaps wishfully, that U.S. intervention stemmed entirely from Israel's unexpected opening successes and, therefore, the regime should resume exploiting diplomacy as the best option to freeze Israel's freedom of action and buy precious time to rebuild.

For Israel, its impressive operational achievements are balanced against underlying concerns that persist into the postwar. After more than two years of intensive planning and frequent adjustments, Rising Lion's intensity and scope reflected Israel's growing recognition that Iran's advancing nuclear front was one piece of a larger strategic threat. Iran's loss of key assets in Lebanon, Syria, and at home to Israeli airstrikes in late 2024 fueled its efforts to overmatch Israel's defenses with high quantities and qualities of ballistic missiles and other projectiles. What Israel first envisioned in 2010 as a one-off operation against a handful of sites thus became, only by 2023-24, a full-scale campaign heavily targeting Iran's military command and control, air defenses, nuclear program, MRBM capabilities, and munitions production and supply chains. Israel's decision, on top of these targets, to strike certain critical infrastructure and internal control organs shows its appreciation that ending the Iranian regime's existential threat ultimately entails exploiting its inherent internal weaknesses and driving it toward collapse.



From Israel's perspective, the campaign also underlined concerns from the multifront conflict since October 7, 2023, for its shared capacity with America to defeat projectile barrages. Israel's decapitation of the IRGC's C2 structure and its sustained strikes on MRBM launchers kept Iran's retaliation well short of

the worst-case scenarios from prewar planning. Nevertheless, the short but sharp conflict raised questions about interceptor stockpiles, efficacy, and cost-efficiency as it unfolded and evermore Iranian missiles hit home—including several with devastating effects in the war’s closing phase.⁸

From America’s perspective, Tehran’s decision to target a U.S. base in the Gulf directly for the first time ever, and the need to evacuate Qatar’s al-Udeid airbase in advance of that strike, sharpens questions about the strategic viability of concentrating U.S. basing infrastructure in large targets just across the Gulf from Iran. For Arab partners, relatedly, the conflict reinforced the worth of U.S.-led defense cooperation and Israel’s value in countering Iranian aggression on the one hand, while also sharpening their sense of threats to their strategic viability posed by Tehran on the other. For America’s “E3” European partners (Britain, France, Germany), Iran’s effectively undiminished refusal after the war to address IAEA concerns convinced them to push ahead and “snap back” stringent UN sanctions even in the face of Tehran’s retaliatory threats.



UN “Snapback” Sanctions Reimposed on Iran

Iranian Activities Sanctioned by UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR)

- All enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including: research and development, construction of uranium-enrichment facilities, all heavy water-related projects, construction of a research reactor moderated by heavy water.
- Any activity related to nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, including launches using such technology.
- Int’l cooperation on enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, use of related materials and technology; or technology related to nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, including energetics, components, and other materials.
- Acquisition or supply of battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large-caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles or missile systems, including spare parts and other related materiel.

Enforcement Authorities and Responsibilities of UN Member States

- All necessary measures to prevent the supply, sale, or transfer from their territories, by their nationals, or using their flag vessels or aircraft, of all items, materials, equipment, goods and technology which could contribute to Iran’s enrichment-, reprocessing-, or heavy water-related activities, or to the development of nuclear delivery systems.
- All necessary measures to prevent providing Iran with technical assistance or training, financial assistance, and the transfer of financial resources related to the supply, sale, transfer, manufacture, or use of prohibited items.
- Freezing financial assets and economic resources owned or controlled by entities engaging in or supporting Iran’s proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities or development of nuclear delivery systems; and preventing entry into or transit through their territories of individuals engaged in, directly associated with, or supporting prohibited activities.
- Inspect all cargo to and from Iran in their territory if there are reasonable grounds to believe the cargo contains prohibited items; seize and dispose of such items; and prohibit provision by their nationals or from their territory of fuel, supplies, or other servicing to Iranian-owned or -contracted vessels believed to be carrying prohibited items.

Iranian Steps Required to Suspend or Lift UN Sanctions

- Suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, as verified by the IAEA, to allow for negotiations.
- Comply fully and without qualification with its IAEA Safeguards Agreement, including by applying modified Code 3.1 and discontinuing any ongoing construction of any enrichment-, reprocessing-, or heavy water-related facilities.
- Resolve all outstanding issues with the IAEA, particularly those which give rise to concerns about the possible military dimensions of its nuclear program, including by providing access without delay to all sites, equipment, persons, and documents requested by the IAEA.

III. Iran After the War

For all its stunning losses, Iran's outward prewar defiance remains largely unchanged as it tries to build new leverage and play for time to recover. At home, hardliners committed to reviving Iran's arsenals are attempting to entrench their control over the regime's foreign and defense policymaking bodies, including veto power over diplomatic outreach.⁹ It formally evicted inspectors in the immediate wake of the conflict, violating its Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, and now it accuses the IAEA director explicitly of sabotage and threatens his personal safety.¹⁰ Satellite imagery suggests Iran is trying to maintain at least residual capacity for its nuclear program, including construction activities at undeclared enrichment-related sites near Natanz untouched by U.S.-Israeli airstrikes and situated even farther underground than Fordo.¹¹ In tandem, its parliament advances legislation to abandon the NPT, part of a broader and intentionally open discussion among regime officials about finishing the bomb. These moves are meant to complicate assessments of the current status of its nuclear weapons enterprise, and of timely detection of potential efforts to reconstitute.

The regime is doing everything possible to rebuild its conventional military capabilities in the meantime. It is cannibalizing and consolidating indigenous air and missile defenses and electronic warfare systems as it pursues, currently unsuccessfully, more advanced systems from China and/or Russia. It claims to have received Russian MiG-29 interceptor aircraft as a stopgap, pending delivery of more advanced Su-35 air defense fighter jets.¹² The regime also is rebuilding missile production facilities hit during the war, seeking assistance from Beijing for crucial guidance systems and planetary mixers to produce missile fuel, and reportedly testing new solid-fueled ballistic missiles.¹³ Tehran continues trying to supply Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen with material to sustain attacks on Israel, while its envoys visit Beirut and Baghdad to stiffen their proxies' spines, weaken U.S.-backed ceasefires, and reassert influence as they work to reassemble a regionwide "Ring of Fire" encircling Israel and U.S. bases.¹⁴ Iran also continues flouting U.S. energy sanctions by illicitly exporting oil to China and, more recently, vowing to work with Moscow and Beijing to circumvent snapback.¹⁵

In addition to rebuilding its shattered arsenals, these moves intend to strengthen Iran's negotiating positions, much of which now boil down to interminable stonewalling. Despite E3 demands for real cooperation to delay or kill snapback, Iran dragged its feet and failed conspicuously to account for its HEU stockpile, resume full IAEA cooperation, and reenter nuclear talks with the United States. Tehran demands tangible upfront guarantees that affirm its self-proclaimed "right" to enrich, immunize it from further pressure, and secure compensation for wartime losses. In exchange it gives only vague and open-ended offers about discussing new, far more limited cooperation with inspectors. It also insists it will continue enrichment—with or without a deal—and that its missiles are not up for negotiation.¹⁶ At best for Iran, this gains concessions that create an entirely new and one-sided framework for nuclear diplomacy by neutralizing U.S., Israeli, and European bargaining power and credibility. At worst, its time-wasting exercise gives valuable top cover to rehabilitate its wartime injuries and work with China and Russia to delegitimize and undermine snapback.

IV. Building on a True Win

Tehran's continuing defiance seems to have faded from America's agenda after such a momentous summer. Paradoxically, the war's successes have caused U.S. and Arab threat pictures of Iran to soften compared to Israel's. This combines with U.S. economic and domestic priorities, and with competing foreign policy issues, to leave Israel holding the frontlines, and the E3 the diplomatic torch, in terms of containing Iran's reconstitution. Tehran thus reverts to muscle memory, exploiting any perceived daylight between America and its partners in order to undo the verdict of the war and build new leverage for diplomatic and military confrontation.

Certainly, much has been accomplished that seemed unimaginable up until just several months ago. American officials rightly assert that snapback helps "create the environment" for a diplomatic solution imposing much stronger restraints on Iran than the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal.¹⁷ Yet real work remains to be done. In concert with Israel, Europe, and other partners, the United States must amplify pressure on the Iranian regime across the board to choke off its revenue streams, isolate it from international assistance, ensure it does not rebuild its nuclear and military capabilities, and ultimately foster the conditions that ultimately contribute to its collapse.

A. The Only Acceptable Deal

The significant if reversible setbacks to Iran's nuclear and missile programs, and its altered perception of U.S.-Israeli threats, create a unique window of opportunity for direct negotiations between Washington and Tehran. Now is precisely the time to capitalize on recent events, to insist on much more stringent parameters for a settlement than anything Iran was forced to contemplate in past rounds of talks in 2012-15, 2021-22, or earlier this year. The regime should understand in no uncertain terms that its latitude for endless bad-faith diplomacy crumbled in the rubble of U.S.-Israeli airstrikes and UN snapback, and with it any hope of a deal remotely resembling the JCPOA. Indeed, with snapback officially killing off the JCPOA, efforts to resuscitate that deal or use it as a negotiating framework should be abandoned conclusively.

In coordination with the E3 and other diplomatic partners, the United States should present Iran a comprehensive, take-it-or-leave-it package reflecting this entirely new playing field—and consciously avoiding the endless inconclusive negotiations that Iran exploited so effectively in prior rounds of talks. Contingent on the regime giving up its nuclear weapons program verifiably and permanently, and agreeing to binding restrictions on other destabilizing activities at home and abroad, it should be offered essentially normalized relations and the lifting of all UN, U.S., and EU sanctions. In line with America's most durable arms control agreements, a new deal should be signed and ratified as a formal treaty with a two-thirds majority vote in the U.S. Senate. The Trump administration should make this clear from the start, both to convey its seriousness in securing a much stronger deal than the JCPOA, and to convince the Iranians that the sanctions relief on offer would be harder to revoke.

i. Zero Nuclear Capability

The cornerstone of such a deal must be zero Iranian uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing capacity. This includes prohibitions on Iranian research and development, storage, manufacturing, and use

of centrifuges and components for these machines. The same strictures should apply to heavy water, and to reactors in which it could be used. More fundamentally, and for the first time, Iran must concede that its self-proclaimed “right” to indigenous enrichment is nowhere granted by the NPT, and that it forswears officially any such claim under a new deal.

Creative compromises that allow Iran to retain any enrichment capacity or related infrastructure should explicitly be off the table from the start, especially in light of how Tehran exploited such proposals to play for time and push for evermore egregious demands in prior talks. Unlike the JCPOA, such restrictions must not terminate at predetermined “sunsets,” but rather obtain indefinitely. This would be in accordance with decades of U.S. arms control, including “gold standard” 123 Agreements for peaceful nuclear cooperation with American partners. It also would align with longstanding U.S. policy, which remains officially in force, to prevent a nuclear Iran. To anticipate Tehran’s inevitable balking at such terms, the Trump administration must state plainly that Iran’s stonewalling, its continual efforts to shift the terms of negotiations, and the consequent 12-Day War have combined to take all previous offers off the table.

ii. Not Just Nukes

Equally important, a deal would need to be comprehensive. This includes eliminating Iran’s arsenals, production capacity, development, and proliferation of nuclear-capable delivery vehicles and conventional missile and drone capabilities. The regime also must halt all IRGC terrorist activities outside Iran’s borders, as well as all military, financial, and other material support for Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, Yemen’s Ansar Allah (“Houthis”), Hamas, and other non-state proxy groups. This ban must apply not just to the Middle East, but globally, given widespread terrorist, narcotics, fundraising, and other illicit activities by the IRGC and its proxies across six continents.

These parameters should be part of a broader ban on Iran’s international missile and arms trades, in conformity with recently snapped-back UN Security Council (UNSC) embargoes and their legally-binding prohibitions against any UN member state helping rebuild Iran’s nuclear, missile, and/or air defense capabilities. Addressing these non-nuclear aspects is necessary to avoid repeats of the rise in Iran’s missile development, proliferation, regional aggression, and cooperation with Russia that followed directly from the JCPOA. This is underscored by Israel’s more recent recognition that the Iranian nuclear problem is of a piece with the regime’s other strategic threats.

iii. Account for Every Iota

No deal would be acceptable without fully accounting for the regime’s nuclear-related activities. The JCPOA’s failure to force Iran to come clean on the possible military dimensions of its program remains one of its most glaring flaws, and these concerns are even more salient today. So much of Iran’s atomic infrastructure has been buried, and perhaps dispersed, in the fog of war. Right before the conflict, moreover, Iran was found in breach of its IAEA safeguards after years of systematically obstructing inspections into undeclared bomb-making endeavors. These dangerous unknowns are now magnified by Tehran’s decision, since July, to bar inspectors from all enrichment-related and suspected weaponization sites. In return for major U.S. and E3 concessions upfront, Iran has offered nothing but highly uncertain and incredibly limited IAEA access to its nuclear facilities.

Iran must provide a comprehensive declaration of its nuclear program, of which the IAEA then would verify the completeness and correctness as a precondition for an acceptable agreement. This should include verified destruction under IAEA auspices of all remaining centrifuges, components, facilities, and related infrastructure. Under a new deal, Tehran also would have to ratify a robust monitoring and verification regime commensurate with the IAEA's needs to continue certifying the peaceful nature of its nuclear program, including "anytime, anywhere" access which the JCPOA promised on paper but Iran denied in practice. All open questions about Iran's past activities must be resolved to the IAEA's satisfaction, and all benefits to Iran of a new deal must lapse immediately upon any violations. Only after meeting these conditions can Iran be considered in good standing with the IAEA and eligible for access to peaceful nuclear energy and technology as stipulated in the NPT. Strict monitoring and verification measures will be necessary for enforcing restrictions on Iran's missile and other military programs and proliferation as well.

iv. No Holding the Deal Hostage

Iran must release all citizens of the United States and those of our partners that have been detained on false charges and end all hostage-taking. This has long been one of the regime's preferred paths to build leverage against Western countries. The JCPOA's failure to include such conditions as part of its implementation resulted in the unwelcome spectacle of pallets of cash, some \$1.6 billion, being flown to Iran, and several Iranians in U.S. custody on terrorism-related charges being set free, in order to secure the release of U.S. hostages. A new deal cannot afford to repeat this mistake of removing all U.S.-led sanctions and other leverage before Iran releases such detainees.

B. Setting Terms for Successful Talks

America's willingness to talk cannot be open-ended or unconditional. Iran and its backers in China and Russia already are trying to drag everything out, spending endless weeks and months negotiating about negotiations, casting about for concessions, and ultimately working to erode U.S., Israeli, and European resolve and hard-won leverage. Simply put, America must be proactive in setting parameters for talks, convincing Iran that pressure will not slacken in the meantime, and avoiding past tendencies that permitted Iran to dictate the pace and course of diplomacy. Accordingly, the United States and its partners should make clear that talks will only proceed under certain conditions, and that Iranian non-compliance will incur immediate and prohibitive costs.

Specific conditions should include:

- An explicit, unextendable, near-term deadline for Iran to accede to a deal meeting the conditions spelled out above, failing which the United States walks away from the table and, with Israel and other partners, is prepared to prevent a nuclear Iran by all means necessary;
- Face-to-face U.S.-Iran talks from start to finish, with diplomacy to be ended promptly the instant Iran insists on returning to time-consuming and aimless indirect negotiations;
- Full and consistent enforcement of UN, U.S., and EU sanctions throughout talks, to avoid the counterproductive practice from prior negotiations of trying to induce Iranian earnestness and goodwill by softening such enforcement during diplomacy; and

- Keeping U.S. and partner military options on the table during talks, to be activated if Iran rebuilds its military or nuclear weapons programs.

C. Steps to Secure the Win

In concert with Israel, the E3, and allies more globally, the United States should build upon recent military and diplomatic victories, maximize the chances of an acceptable agreement with Iran, and best position America and its partners to prevent the regime's nuclear and military reconstitution through other means if diplomacy fails. Tehran currently displays no inclination to negotiate seriously or urgently, as seen in its insistence that the United States, E3, and IAEA meet the regime's concrete demands before it even considers vague, let alone tangible or urgent, reciprocal actions.

i. No Daylight

American pressure on Iran is most reliably successful when synced with its partners, especially Israel and its inherently deep stake in keeping Iran's regime well short of the capacity to carry out its existential threats. One reason for Iranian obstinacy in talks this spring was the lack of overt U.S.-Israeli coordination on military action to uphold President Trump's negotiating deadline. Similarly, Tehran's inflexibility with the E3 on snapback, and with the IAEA, correlates to ambivalent or inconsistent U.S. backing. Real changes in the regime's diplomacy, and its rebuilding efforts with Chinese and Russian assistance, must start with leveraging and conveying the strong shared interest of the United States, Israel, Europe, and Arab partners in preventing Iran's reconstitution.

President Trump's warning from July, that renewed Iranian nuclear progress will trigger more U.S. military strikes, is a welcome change from past U.S. practice. It should be reiterated explicitly in coordination with matching Israeli warnings, and in explicit connection to the snapback of UN bans on Iranian enrichment and related activities. Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer came about because Tehran refused to accept a deal for zero enrichment, come clean to inspectors, and stop weaponization. Now it must have no doubt that such options can be resumed and expanded at will, should it continue down any of these paths. Ideally, Iran would face the same united front when it comes to missile capabilities. At the very least, the United States must state clearly its support for any Israeli action to stop Iran from reviving these game-changing capabilities.

To this same end, prewar U.S. defense diplomacy in the Middle East under the auspices of CENTCOM must be sustained and, where possible, expanded. America's highly visible, and completely unmatched, regional leadership and coalition-building efforts have borne significant fruit in recent years for integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) against Iran-backed projectile threats, combined planning and training, and U.S.-Israeli operational cooperation in the 12-Day War. In so doing, these engagements reassure regional partners, many of whom currently waver between the United States and Iran, that they can do more for regional stability, close the ring around Iran, and reduce the direct risks and burdens for U.S. forces.

Just as a unified front can harness Israeli credibility, the United States should leverage the E3's commendable follow-through on snapback. Clear American leadership will be vital to counter Iranian, Russian, and Chinese efforts to delegitimize renewed UN sanctions, contain the regime's destabilizing

activities, and convince it that such pressure will relent only when it agrees to meaningfully restrict its activities that triggered these embargoes in the first place. Echoing recent comments from Britain's UN representative, American and E3 officials should be of one voice in linking the lifting of these sanctions to an acceptable diplomatic settlement.¹⁸ By the same token, American officials must amplify the IAEA's insistence on restoring access to Iran's nuclear sites, and must convey their own readiness to impose additional serious consequences for continued foot-dragging.

ii. Military Readiness

Working together, the United States, Israel, and other partners need to build upon their wartime accomplishments to detect, deter, and deny Iran's concerted efforts to reconstitute and erase its adversaries' military edge.

Ensuring Israel's readiness for resumed high-intensity operations must be among the top priorities. Specific urgent steps should include:

- Expediting delivery of U.S.-made KC-46A aerial refueling tankers purchased by Israel in 2021 and fast-tracking training for Israeli pilots, particularly in light of constraints exposed during Operation Rising Lion about the capabilities of the IAF's existing tanker fleet;
- Prepositioning U.S.-made precision guided munitions (PGM) and other critical weapons and defense materials in Israel, in keeping with the official purpose of America's forward-deployed arms depot (WRSA-I) to support either country's readiness in an emergency such as wartime;
- Backstopping Israel's air and missile defense batteries and interceptor stocks, all of which are co-produced with the United States, by surging production, transferring additional systems and munitions, and, as feasible, continuing to deploy U.S. air and missile defense systems in Israel;
- Sustaining successful prewar and wartime intelligence-sharing on Iran's nuclear, missile, and other military-related activities, including resupply efforts from abroad; and
- Updating contingency plans for combined offensive operations to counter Iranian rebuilding efforts, and for combined defense operations in scenarios of resumed conflict with Iran.
 - This should include discussions, in advance of potential further rounds of conflict, on how best to ensure Iran's nuclear and other military threats can be more permanently curtailed.

Through CENTCOM, complementary multilateral preparations should include:

- Identifying alternative deployments for U.S. military assets in the Middle East—foremost Israel, Jordan, and western Saudi Arabia—to enhance shared readiness and deterrence by reducing current vulnerabilities of U.S. basing infrastructure exposed in the 12-Day War;
- Deploying or relocating U.S. strategic bombers and massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) bunker busters to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, stepping up MOP production, rotating carrier strike groups and fast attack submarines through regional waters, and ensuring adequate force protection for U.S.

and partner strategic assets—particularly to enforce snapback sanctions and/or respond to Iranian threats to leave the NPT;

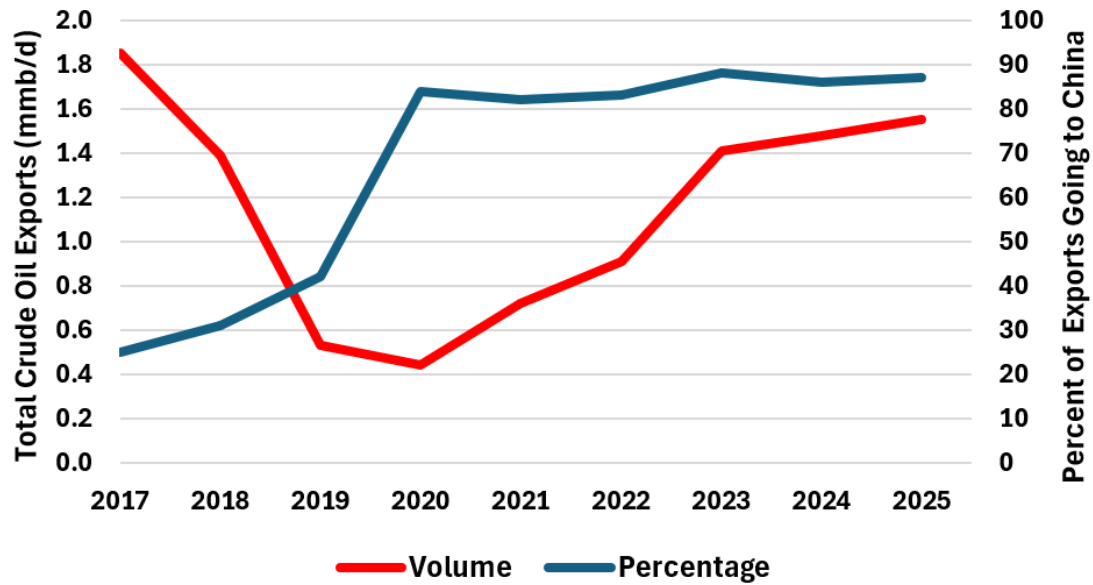
- Building on the recent contract to replenish MOP stocks by stepping up overall production of these munitions; and
- Exercising through CENTCOM to demonstrate and train on updated plans and deployments, enhance U.S.-led regional IAMD and maritime security, and reassure America’s Arab partners.

iii. Maximum Pressure Sanctions

Snapback offers a golden opportunity to enforce genuinely “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran, increase the chances it negotiates in earnest, and constrain its ability to recover from wartime losses whether or not it chooses to talk. Critically, renewed UN embargoes are robust in terms of the Iranian activities they target, and the legally-binding enforcement responsibilities and authorities they place on all UN member states.¹⁹ They also underpin U.S. and European secondary sanctions on Tehran’s most lucrative revenue streams. This is a timely opportunity, too, as the regime reels from internal social and economic effects, accumulated over years, of its gross corruption and mismanagement of the country’s financial, energy, natural, and human resources.

Iran, Russia, and China already are working to delegitimize snapback and flout its restrictions. Already with Tehran’s urging, Moscow can be expected to veto a new UN Panel of Experts to enforce the renewed UN embargoes.²⁰ Anticipating such moves, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is a perfectly viable alternative for enforcing international law. American leadership will be crucial here for interdicting Iran’s revenue-generating exports and assistance from China, Russia, and North Korea for the regime’s nuclear and military programs. Because Iran’s backers, particularly China, have been opportunistic in their military support for Tehran, a broad U.S.-led coalition that conducts effective oversight can heighten their reticence to deal with the risks and hassles of giving such destabilizing assistance to Iran. The same applies to more neutral countries and their willingness to let such assistance transit their territories.

Iranian Crude Oil Exports



In parallel, the United States must fully enforce its own sanctions on the Iranian regime’s core revenue-generating sectors, first and foremost oil-related exports to China. The Trump administration has taken certain steps since the 12-Day War to bolster enforcement.²¹ Yet Tehran’s and Beijing’s extensive use of “ghost fleets” and “shadow-banking” to transport and transact these sales still leads to Iranian exports and revenue growth.²² Concomitantly, their ability to defy U.S. threats of punishment undermines American credibility when it comes to deterring China and others from violating snapback and other sanctions.

With the return of UN snapback, the E3’s formal departure from the JCPOA, and the snapback of EU and British sanctions on Iran’s energy, financial, shipping, and other key economic sectors, the United States and its partners have an excellent opportunity to maximize pressure on Tehran’s revenues from energy exports and other vital streams, and to signal transatlantic unity to Iran, Russia, and China alike. Washington, Brussels, and London must coordinate closely on enforcement to truly optimize the combined effects on Iran. As a crucial predicate, all parties must ensure these sanctions are aligned with one another, so as to avoid counterproductive situations where certain U.S. entities potentially become subject to European penalties or vice-versa.

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