

# On War with Iran, a U.S.-Israeli Division of Labor?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Believing that conflict is more likely than a diplomatic deal and that Israel will be involved in the fighting, Jerusalem has been intimately coordinating its military planning with Washington despite certain differences in their policy priorities.**

**W**ith the United States and Iran poised between diplomacy and war, Israel is preparing for hostilities that would likely include a sizable role of its own. Iran has been weakened considerably of late, but Israel still regards the Islamic Republic as its most dangerous enemy and therefore considers itself a major stakeholder in the current standoff.

Not long after the twelve-day war with Iran last June, Jerusalem came to realize that it would have to take additional military action sooner or later given the regime's efforts to rebuild strategic capabilities that pose a major threat to Israel. This view—which was repeatedly relayed to Washington—drew on the main lesson that Israel learned from the war that began on October 7, 2023: namely, that it could no longer allow the emergence of strategic threats in its neighborhood in the hope of containing them, but must instead nip them in the bud.

The situation shifted dramatically when the United States took the lead against Iran following the eruption of major protests in December. Whereas Israel led the way last June while Washington joined the war effort afterward, this time Jerusalem will have to adjust to whatever option the Trump administration chooses—though Israeli officials are trying to shape that choice. From their perspective, the current situation in Iran presents not only a threat but also a unique opportunity. The regime is at a historic low—the result of a failing economy, collapsing infrastructure, irreparable divides with most of the population, degraded strategic capabilities, and a shattered regional axis. Indeed, the June war exposed Tehran as a paper tiger and may have contributed to the re-eruption of internal dissent soon after. Israel's conclusion is that the regime is extremely vulnerable, and that further pressure at this point could deny it important assets, further weaken it, and possibly hasten its demise.

As for the possibility that the United States and Iran might reach a viable diplomatic settlement to avoid war, Jerusalem is skeptical. For one thing, there is little chance that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will accept current U.S. demands, which in his view are both humiliating and likely to invite more pressure that aims at toppling the regime. For another, Israel's decisionmaking circle largely believes that President Trump is loath to give up the ample leverage Washington has amassed against an enfeebled Iran just for the sake of a "weak deal"—meaning an agreement that lifts sanctions and throws a lifeline to a wounded regime without effectively addressing the long-term strategic threats posed by its nuclear and missile programs and its destabilizing regional activities. Even so, Israeli officials are on the alert lest Washington winds up accepting a deal focused solely on the nuclear dimension—a scenario that would leave out the missile program (a major concern for Jerusalem, as discussed below), limit Israel's freedom of action, and strike a blow to the hopes of the Iranian people at a critical moment.

For now, Jerusalem is operating under the assumption that President Trump will ultimately opt for military action, and that Iran will retaliate by attacking Israel, among other targets. Israel is poised to hit back very strongly in this scenario and has fully coordinated its potential response options with the U.S. defense establishment. As Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu **stated last week (<http://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-officers190226>)**, "If the Ayatollahs make the mistake of attacking us, they will experience a response they cannot even imagine." This reflects the thinking that Israel's retaliatory operations—not to mention U.S. operations—should be so devastating that they shelve the strategic threats posed by Iran for years, not just a few months. During the June war, Israel focused on strategic and military targets; it barely touched regime targets and avoided economic targets completely. This time, all target types are on the table (though hitting critical economic infrastructure is a very sensitive decision and would require close consultations with Washington).

Even if Iran does not strike Israel during a military showdown with the United States, Jerusalem could very well decide to join the American war effort in earnest. While Israel remains intent on neutralizing the regime's strategic capabilities, seeing an opportunity to complete what was not achieved during last year's war, it is not leaving out the internal Iranian scene. Israeli planners are fully cognizant that an air campaign by itself cannot bring about regime change, but they believe military operations could play a valuable role in degrading the regime and emboldening further mass protests.

Israeli planners have also given thought to the most immediate military imperatives of a U.S. operation, whether it takes the form of a major, sustained campaign or limited strikes designed to boost U.S. diplomatic terms. Namely, any opening U.S. strike should include suppression of Iranian retaliatory capabilities (e.g., missiles that threaten Israeli, American, and allied targets) and naval capabilities (to reduce any maritime threats in the Strait of Hormuz).

## **Addressing the Ballistic Missile Threat**

**A** ccording to Israeli intelligence sources, Iran has prioritized efforts to reconstitute its ballistic missile capabilities over the past few months, seeing them as a critical tool of deterrence and response given the regime's weakened air defenses and shattered regional axis. The June war convinced Tehran that Israeli defenses are vulnerable to its missiles. Consequently, the regime hastened its efforts to produce large quantities of liquid-fueled ballistic missiles, aspiring to overwhelm those defenses with larger salvos. Its arsenal is now approaching 2,000 ballistic missiles, and its current production rate is estimated at around 100 per month and growing. It is also producing mobile launchers, which became a bottleneck for the program following the war.

In Israel's view, the prospect of Iran fielding thousands of ballistic missiles within the next few years is a major strategic threat that must be prevented or preempted. In recent consultations with Washington, including at the top leadership level, Israel asked that any U.S. deal with Iran include limitations on the quantity and range of these missiles. At minimum, Israel sought to guarantee its freedom of action against this threat should the United States decide not to address it diplomatically or militarily. Israel's first request was seemingly not heeded—in recent public

comments about negotiations with Iran, senior U.S. officials have referred solely to the nuclear dimension (though President Trump's latest State of the Union address did mention Iran's quest to develop a missile capable of reaching the United States). In private, however, Israeli government sources claim that their request for freedom of action was guaranteed.

In this regard, Israel's best defense is a good offense—if war erupts beyond a surgical strike and triggers an Iranian attack on Israel, Jerusalem would likely seek to play a major role in the conflict by ordering operations to take out Iran's missile program. This means not only hunting missiles and launchers but also destroying development and production infrastructure. The idea would be to buy several years' respite from the Iranian ballistic missile threat—time that Israel could use to upgrade its air defenses with laser systems and other capabilities (and, hopefully, witness regime change in Tehran).

## The Nuclear Threat

The June war dealt a severe blow to Iran's nuclear program, and the regime has been cautious about its activities on that front ever since for fear of triggering additional strikes. Even so, Israeli intelligence indicates that Tehran has embarked on a slow but deliberate process of preparing the ground for the program's eventual reconstruction. Rather than attempting to jump right back into enriching uranium (which is difficult anyway given the level of damage at major enrichment and storage sites), the regime has focused on digging deep underground facilities that it believes will be immune to U.S. and Israeli airstrikes. Consequently, Israel has asked Washington to ensure that **any new deal (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/good-deal-iran-requirements-preventing-future-nuclear-breakout>)** not only prohibits future enrichment activities on Iranian soil, but also denies the physical infrastructure required for any such efforts (underground or otherwise) and mandates intrusive inspections to enforce compliance.

## The Proxy Threat

Israel is also following Tehran's efforts to secure the involvement of its regional proxies in a potential war, including significant engagement with Hezbollah by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Although the Lebanese group refrained from firing a single bullet during the June war and has been weakened by conflict with Israel, it still possesses dangerous military capabilities and has exerted substantial efforts to restore its prewar footing. Alarmed by these efforts and frustrated with Lebanon's **apparently insufficient will and capacity (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-nervously-watches-iran-washington-should-double-down-disarmament>)** to disarm Hezbollah, Israel has carried out an intensifying stream of pinpoint strikes against the group's military targets and rearmament efforts. If Hezbollah attacks Israel during the next war with Iran, one should expect a major Israeli military push against the organization inside Lebanon.

## Toward a Joint Strategy

While U.S.-Israeli dialogue on Iran has been very intimate at all levels, some natural differences remain in their policy priorities. If the United States decides to advance a diplomatic deal, those differences will come to the fore. Alternatively, if it decides to strike Iran—a more probable outcome at this point—then the two allies will likely agree on a military division of labor that suits them both.

In formulating what such operations might look like, both Washington and Jerusalem seem intent on incorporating two main goals in their plans: denying Iran dangerous strategic capabilities (nuclear and missiles) and degrading the regime. Yet despite wanting to see a different regime in Tehran, neither ally seems to have a viable plan for getting there. Whatever President Trump decides in the near term, the United States and Israel need to jointly develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy for advancing that second shared goal. Among other things, this strategy should include ways of providing significant support to protesters inside Iran, deepening the divide between the regime and

the people, opening cracks within the regime's repressive network, and identifying and empowering Iranians who could effectively lead efforts to challenge the regime. Military strikes could play an important role by decapitating the regime's leadership, degrading the repressive network's centers of gravity, and potentially emboldening the oppressed populace. Yet kinetic action may prove insufficient without a wider strategy for eroding the regime.

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