

ISRAEL'S BEGIN DOCTRINE PREVENTIVE STRIKE TRADITION AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR PURSUITS

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The Begin Doctrine declares any regional enemy that intends to destroy the State of Israel cannot be permitted to obtain weapons of mass destruction, principally, nuclear weapons. Global efforts to prevent the Iranian government from producing a nuclear bomb are showing to be ineffective, as Tehran is closer than ever to achieving that capability. With the emboldened Axis of Resistance, evidenced chiefly by the incursion into Israel by Hamas on October 7 and potential escalation by Lebanese Hezbollah and proxies in Syria, Israel may determine it strategically necessary to conduct a debilitating strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

It has now been over 40 years since Israel launched a preventive airstrike on the Osirak nuclear complex near Baghdad, Iraq. Then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin ordered the strike and thereby inaugurated what has become known as the Begin Doctrine, which holds that “no regional enemy committed to the destruction of the Jewish state can be allowed to obtain weapons of mass destruction.”¹

Israel acted again in 2007, this time in Syria, where another nuclear reactor optimized for plutonium production was under construction. The al-Kibar complex was destroyed via air attack. In both the Iraqi and Syrian cases, defender reactions were minimal and did not lead to war, and Israel suffered no losses. International responses to both attacks were also minimal, though in the Iraqi case, both condemnation and short-lived sanctions followed. The Syrian attack was actually supported by the international community since the reactor was illegal—Syria had not made it known to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and North Korea had supplied the reactor.²

Iran is now the third regional enemy of Israel suspected of seeking nuclear weapons. Recently retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley estimated in September 2023 that Iran may be able to construct a nuclear warhead in “just a few months”

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1. Jay Solomon, “What Happens When Everyone’s Trying to get Nukes?,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

2. Amos Yadlin, “Israel’s Shadow War with Iran Doesn’t Have to Strain Relations with the U.S.,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

once it obtained sufficient enriched material for a warhead.³ Debates in Israel are ensuing about whether the Begin Doctrine can be enforced in the same way it was against Iraq and Syria.⁴ In those cases, nuclear programs were contained to one site and easy to strike, and both took place before the reactors went hot. Iran learned from those attacks. The Islamic Republic has spread its nuclear infrastructure to multiple locations and placed the most critical complexes underground, where they are more difficult to target.

Still, Israel is more willing to take risks since the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, and the US military has expanded its cooperation with Israel, especially after President Joseph Biden's efforts to revive JCPOA broke down in 2022, even suggesting support of Israel's stance against Iran.⁵

Moreover, Israel has a history of conducting persistent offensive campaigns. Directed against Hezbollah and Palestinian terror groups, such campaigns are often referred to as "mowing the grass," or keeping radical factions off-balance so they cannot conduct major attacks against Israel. One analysis suggests the "term in Israel's strategic parlance . . . reflects the assumption that Israel finds itself in protracted intractable conflict with extremely hostile non-state entities, which is qualitatively different than inter-state conflict" and that "Israel's use of force can achieve only temporary deterrence."⁶ Thus, mowing the grass suggests further military action will be necessary in the future—the grass will regrow and need mowing again.

While mowing the grass was intended for nonstate actors, the Israeli military has adopted another term for use in its ongoing proxy war with Iran, which until recently, has mostly played out over the skies of Syria in order to deny Iranian weapons to Hezbollah and the Palestinian terror organization Hamas. Israel refers to its strategy by the Hebrew acronym, MABAM, meaning "campaign between wars," as a new phase of war between "preparing for war" and "conducting war."⁷ This concept is related to mowing the grass in that Israeli actions to deny weapons to terror groups are also prolonging the need for the next large-scale conflict. Sustained, low-intensity conflict is the state of affairs between wars and fits the current situation being played out between Israel and Iran's proxies—the so-called Axis of Resistance, notwithstanding the war against Hamas that began in October 2023. Such low-level actions remain below

3. Michael Singh, "Iran's Nuclear Diplomacy: Feint and Advance," Policy Watch 3782, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

4. Keren Setton, "On the Brink: Unpacking Israeli's Unilateral Strike Threat against Iran," *Jerusalem Post*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/>.

5. Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Israel's Dangerous Shadow War with Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

6. Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, " 'Mowing the Grass': Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict," *Journal of Strategic Security* 37, no. 1 (2014): 67–68.

7. See Joshua Dryden, "Iran, Israel, and the Struggle for the Skies over the Middle East," *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 91, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

the threshold of both retaliation by Iran and condemnation by the United States and international community.

Still, beyond the skies of Syria and the borders with Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, such actions have also played out against the nuclear infrastructure of Iran. Israel has supposedly conducted cyberattacks, sabotage, and assassinations over the past decade or more in an effort to slow Iran's progress toward attaining a nuclear weapon. Furthermore, Israel is primed to launch an all-out kinetic air attack as soon as it decides Iran is on the verge of crossing the nuclear threshold.

In 2008 in fact, Israel conducted a massive aerial exercise over the Mediterranean Sea believed to simulate an air attack on Iran.⁸ It was rumored that in May of that year then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asked President George W. Bush for permission to overfly Iraq—whose airspace was controlled by the United States at that time—enroute to Iran, which Bush repudiated.⁹

Israel is less likely to seek an American green light when it decides to attack Iran the next time around. Such a time is probable in the near future, particularly in response to the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, which was made possible by Iran.¹⁰ For this reason, the United States and its Gulf partners will need to be ready for the repercussions of an extensive Israeli air campaign targeting Iranian nuclear sites.

Israel's Campaign between Wars

Israel is suspected of sabotaging Iranian nuclear infrastructure and assassinating key nuclear scientists in order to slow Iran's progress toward a bomb, though in both cases the evidence has been circumstantial. Israel has not claimed responsibility.

In 2010, Belarussian cybersecurity experts discovered the first instance of such sabotage, a cyberattack on the Natanz uranium enrichment plant in Iran. Over a period of months, the Stuxnet malware damaged approximately a thousand of the plant's six to eight thousand spinning centrifuges and was meant to make Iranian scientists believe they were using defective equipment in the underground enrichment halls. Investigative journalists gaining access to anonymous sources have said the cyber weapon was the joint effort of both Israel and the United States and was likely an effort to reduce Israel's need for an overt air force attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure at that time.¹¹

The next case of potential sabotage occurred at Parchin in 2014. The Parchin military base includes a missile testing complex, and some suspect that detonator testing

8. Donald Macintyre, "Israel's Dry Run 'Attack on Iran' with 100 Jet Fighters," *Independent*, June 21, 2008, www.independent.co.uk/.

9. David Sangor, "U.S. Rejected Aid for Israeli Raid on Iranian Nuclear Site," *New York Times*, January 11, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

10. Nicholas Carl, Brian Carter, and Katherine Zimmerman, "Iran's Hand in Attacks Targeting US, Israel," AEIdeas, American Enterprise Institute, October 20, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/>.

11. Ron Rosenbaum, "Richard Clarke on Who Was behind the Stuxnet Attack," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/>.

has also taken place there. As a military complex, Iran has severely restricted access to International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, even while the JCPOA agreement was in place during 2015–18.¹²

A large explosion occurred at the center of the Parchin facility and may have been accidental.¹³ A second explosion and fire occurred six years later in July 2020, this time at Khojir, an adjacent facility to Parchin just outside Tehran. Satellite imagery shows widespread fire damage over several acres and remains of burnt buildings. Less than a week after the Khojir incident, yet another explosion rocked Natanz, this time aboveground in buildings where new advanced centrifuges were prepared for enrichment use.¹⁴

In April 2021, a bomb exploded in one of the underground enrichment halls at Natanz, likely destroying multiple centrifuges as occurred via cyber means in 2010 with Stuxnet. Foreign media sources attributed this attack to a covert operation by Israel's Mossad, but no one has claimed responsibility.¹⁵ Aljazeera reported in March 2022 a similar attack attempt against the Fordow underground enrichment facility was foiled. Notably, this attempt occurred just days after talks in Vienna resumed for Biden's effort to restore JCPOA.¹⁶

Even more recent—in January 2023—short- range quadcopter drones, which were unofficially attributed to be of Israeli origin, attacked a military facility near Isfahan. No indications of damage were included in the report, though Iran claims minimal damage resulted from the attack.¹⁷ Interestingly, the attack came only two days after the conclusion of Juniper Oak, the largest combined US- Israel military exercise in history, intended to enhance interoperability of US and Israeli air, land, and naval forces, which involved 100 US and 42 Israeli aircraft and was likely intended to send a deterrent message to Iran.¹⁸

In terms of assassinations, seven nuclear scientists have been targeted and six killed since 2007. Ardeshir Hosseinpour was poisoned and died in January of that year.¹⁹ Three car-bomb attacks against Iranian scientists occurred in 2010, killing two and

12. Olli Heinonen et al., *Revisiting Parchin: Institute for Science and International Security* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, August 22, 2017), <https://www.fdd.org/>.

13. "Satellite Images Show Explosion Took Place within the Parchin Military Complex," Haaretz, October 9, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/>.

14. Joe Truzman, "Explosions Damage Site at Iranian Missile Complex and Nuclear Facility," Long War Journal, July 7, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/>.

15. Yadlin, "Israel's Shadow War."

16. Maziar Motamedi, "Iran Says Israel 'Sabotage' on Fordow Nuclear Plant Foiled," Aljazeera, March 14, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

17. Daniel Shapiro, Holly Dages, and Thomas Warrick, "Experts React: What's behind the Drone Strike on an Iranian Military Facility?," Atlantic Council, January 30, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

18. Michael Eisenstadt, "The Juniper Oak Military Exercise: Implications for Innovation, Experimentation, and U.S. Policy Toward Iran," Policy Watch 3698, Washington Institute, February 1, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

19. Yossi Melman, "U.S. Website: Mossad Killed Iranian Nuclear Physicist," Haaretz, February 4, 2007, <https://www.haaretz.com/>.

injuring one. In 2011, Darioush Rezaeinejad was killed by motorcycle gunmen; in 2012, Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan was killed by another car bomb.²⁰ And finally, during November 2020 Iran's chief nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, was killed in a sophisticated attack by a remote sniper rifle mounted in the bed of a pickup truck.

The above-mentioned incidents and assassinations have certainly slowed, but not halted, Iran's progress toward a nuclear bomb and provide evidence of Israel following its MABAM, or campaign between wars strategy, directly against Iran. While not yet considered a nuclear power, Iran has enough enriched uranium to construct five nuclear warheads within three weeks.²¹ So in spite of its restrictions, Iran no longer abides by the JCPOA agreement since the United States withdrew, and it also inhibits intrusive inspections by the IAEA. In short, Iran's progress is not being sufficiently monitored at its uranium enrichment sites.

Moreover, its intentions as a pariah state are clear. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei praised the October 2023 devastating Hamas terror attacks on Israel. Further, Tehran was likely complicit in the cruise missile attacks—intercepted by the US Navy in the Red Sea—launched from Yemen toward Israel two weeks into the crisis to support Hamas in the ongoing conflict.²²

Iran continues to train and equip Hezbollah and encouraged its attacks on Israel, and it supports Syria in efforts to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power. Syria has also fired upon Israel in support of the 2023 Hamas attack.²³ Even Shia militia from Iraq have reportedly moved toward the Syrian border with Israel on the Golan Heights and expressed its “full readiness” to supply fighters and weapons to support Hamas. These militias are also funded and trained by Iran.²⁴

Such a confluence of Iranian proxies willing to join the Hamas fight has to concern Israel: Iran is close to weaponizing an atomic bomb and aiding and abetting what may become the largest war against Israel since 2006, involving not only Hamas, but also Hezbollah, Syria, the Houthis of Yemen, and Iraqi Shia militias, all of which are trained and armed by Iran.

At the time of this writing, Israel's army has invaded Gaza and has moved forces to defend its northern border with Lebanon. The United States is supporting deterrence with assets in the Mediterranean region.²⁵ Moreover, it is reported that there is “greater

20. Mehdi Jedinia, “History of Assassinations of Iran's Top Nuclear Scientists,” Voice of America, December 3, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

21. “Iran's Nuclear Timetable: The Weapon Potential,” Iran Watch, September 21, 2023, <https://www.iranwatch.org/>.

22. Emily Olson, “Pentagon Says It Shot Down Yemen Missiles That May Have Been Headed towards Israel,” NPR, October 20, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/>.

23. “Israel Fires Back after Syrian Shells Land in Israeli Territory,” Reuters, October 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

24. “IntelBrief: Hand on the Trigger: Iranian Proxies Threaten to Escalate the Conflict with Israel,” Soufan Center, October 19, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/>.

25. Sam LaGrone, “USS Eisenhower Now Operating in the Red Sea,” USNI News, November 3, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/>.

consensus than ever before in the Israeli defense establishment about the need to confront Iran militarily, because there is no other way to prevent them from becoming nuclear.”²⁶ According to Dennis Ross, “Iran is hardening its defenses, meaning Israel could lose the option to attack.” Ross also noted Israel “will never allow themselves to lose the option” and that “you don’t wait until it is one minute to midnight.”²⁷

Thus, fighting the Iranian proxies is not enough. The elevated tensions in the region demonstrate that Iran is already at war with Israel.

Iran’s Nuclear Capability

The campaign between wars is failing to stop Iran’s nuclear progress. Israel may decide to take the fight to the source. For Israel, the Begin Doctrine necessitates it.

Constructing a nuclear weapon requires 1) sufficient fissile material; 2) a detonator and metal uranium, or plutonium, sphere; and 3) a delivery mechanism. Iran already has the missile technology and inventory to deliver a bomb.²⁸ In terms of fissile material, the 2015 JCPOA agreement negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 countries was intended to ensure Iran stayed below the fissile-material threshold and froze all progress toward a weapon. But US President Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 has been followed by Iranian violations. New centrifuges that had been reduced by JCPOA have been added back to the cascades. In October 2021, the new head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization announced his country had produced more than 120 kilograms of 20-percent-enriched uranium, in violation of the agreement, and also enriched some to the 60-percent level.²⁹

More recently and of even greater concern, IAEA inspectors found traces of uranium enriched to 83.7 percent at Fordow, dangerously close to the 90-percent weapons-grade level, and Iran’s known stockpile of 60-percent-enriched uranium has grown to 87 kilograms, enough for several nuclear weapons; this is confirmed by Iran Watch.³⁰ In sum, Iran likely has sufficient fissile material for atomic weapons that could be enriched to weapons grade within three weeks. It is reported to have a bomb design, is fabricating uranium metal, and may be conducting detonator experiments.

Building a detonator and creating a metal sphere of uranium is the most difficult task, but a September 2021 IAEA report concluded Iran has been converting uranium into a metal form needed for a weapon, and that Pakistan handed over bomb design

26. Marilyn Stern, “Efraim Inbar: Israel Will Confront Iran Militarily, Deal or No Deal,” Middle East Forum, June 24, 2022, <https://www.meforum.org/>.

27. Ethan Bronner and Henry Meyer, “Will Israel Attack Iran? What to Know about Netanyahu’s Military Posturing,” *Time*, June 13, 2023, <https://time.com/>.

28. Lazar Berman, “Word Games: What Does Lapid Mean When He Pushes ‘Other Options’ on Iran?,” *Times of Israel*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>.

29. Simon Henderson, “While Washington Argues, Iran Makes Nuclear Advances,” Washington Institute, October 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

30. “IAEA Report Says Pressing Iran on Enrichment to Near Bomb-Grade,” Reuters, February 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and “Iran’s Nuclear Timetable.”

documents to Iran some years ago, which are thought to be an adaptation of a Chinese design given to Pakistan. The report also mentioned initiator experiments, inferring efforts to produce a detonator may be ongoing in Iran, and concluded that Iran now has the ability to build a nuclear weapon.³¹

And finally, Iran has a ready-made delivery system that can reach Israel in the form of the Shahab 3 and 4 intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The biggest unknown is whether Iran can build a weapon small enough for its missiles. Should it be able to do so and cross the nuclear threshold, Iran is likely to become much more emboldened in its foreign policy, which is a problem for Israel, the Gulf region, Europe, and the United States as well.

Another worrying development is a strategic cooperation deal signed between China and Iran in 2021, which includes a commitment to military cooperation, research, and intelligence sharing. In addition to concerns about the intelligence sharing, given that the above-mentioned Chinese bomb design passed to Iran via Pakistan, it is not beyond imagination that more nuclear technology sharing might accompany the new ties between Iran and China. The deal also gives Iran a break from US sanctions since China has agreed to invest \$400 billion in Iran in exchange for oil.³² Moreover, when considering North Korea was engaged in construction of the Syrian reactor, it is possible the Kim regime could be aiding Iran as well; the two are known to have exchanged missile technology.³³

The most pressing question at this time is whether Israel's MABAM strategy is sufficient to keep Iran from reaching the nuclear threshold. If not, Israel is likely to use its airpower to enforce the Begin Doctrine and eliminate what it can of Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

Arguments against Attacking Iran

Former Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) Intelligence Chief Amos Yadlin identified three critical arguments against attacking a nuclear complex in enemy territory. The first involves operational risks. Nuclear infrastructure is highly valuable and well protected, and attack risks casualties and mission failure—note the botched US attempt to rescue its embassy personnel in Tehran in 1979. In the case of Iran, highly capable S-300 anti-aircraft missiles protect key sites from aerial bombardment, meaning Israeli fighter jets may not escape getting shot down, which they avoided in Iraq and Syria.

The second argument involves political risks. The international community generally opposes preventive strikes and labels them as acts of aggression and illegal under international law rather than as defensive actions. The third argument concerns the

31. Henderson, "Washington Argues."

32. TOI Staff and Agencies, "Ex-IDF Intel Head: Iran-China Megadeal Includes Worrying Military Info-Sharing," *Times of Israel*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>.

33. United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), "Iran and North Korea: Proliferation Partners," UANI (website), August 19, 2022, <https://www.unitedagainstanucleariran.com/>.

risk of deterioration into war: the enemy response could be “wide and painful.”³⁴ Iran can retaliate with long-range missile volleys launched from its territory but also with shorter-range missiles and artillery from Syria and from ship-borne sources in the Mediterranean. Its proxy forces in Lebanon and Gaza can conduct terror attacks or launch missiles, drones, and artillery supplied by Iran.

The operational risks are the greatest, but allowing Iran to obtain nuclear weapons is an even greater existential threat to Israel. The risks are numerous—increasingly accurate ballistic missiles that can reach Israel from Iran, more capable drones that can be launched from proxy territories, the training and arming of proxies, cyberattacks, Iranian military deployments to Syria, and plots to kill or kidnap Israeli citizens. Israel is already experiencing volleys of missiles, proxy attacks, and cyber and drone attacks. Iraqi militias are deploying to Syria, and Hamas has taken over 200 hostages.

Political risks are mixed. The global response to the war with Hamas may be an indicator regarding the international response to an attack by Israel on Iran’s nuclear facilities. The United States, United Kingdom, France, India, Norway, and Austria have clearly sided with Israel in the ongoing conflict—some 84 nations have issued statements supporting Israel’s right to self-defense. Iran, Qatar, and Lebanon lead the way in backing Hamas, along with some other Middle Eastern states.³⁵ So there are many more significant and powerful political partners siding with Israel than there are with Iran.

Additionally, US support includes military aid and deterrence deployments of two carrier battle groups along with an amphibious ready group carrying 3,000 Sailors and Marines to the region. The United States is also resupplying Israel with antiballistic missiles for the Israeli Iron Dome missile defense system, and the cruisers and destroyers accompanying the carrier battle groups in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East region are armed with Aegis missile defense systems.³⁶

The final risk—deterioration to war—has come to fruition. Iran continues to promise retaliation from its so-called Axis of Resistance, referring to its proxies Hamas, Hezbollah, and others in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.³⁷ In sum, Israel is already facing the risks spelled out by Yadlin since the October Hamas rocket attacks and incursion into Israel, and Israel’s resulting ground invasion of the Gaza Strip.

In terms of international efforts to forestall a potential Israeli attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities, the Biden administration focused on renewing JCPOA in its early days in office. But last year, negotiations collapsed in light of antiregime protests in Iran, an expanding Russian-Iranian relationship over the war in Ukraine, and intensifying

34. Amos Yadlin, “The Begin Doctrine: The Lessons of Osirak and Deir ez-Zor,” INSS Insight No. 1037, INSS – Institute for National Security Studies, March 21, 2018, <https://www.inss.org.il/>.

35. “Hamas-Israel Conflict: A Look at the Countries Supporting Palestinian Militant Group,” CNBCTV18.com, October 9, 2023, <https://www.cnbctv18.com/>.

36. Sam LaGrone, “Pentagon Extends USS Gerald R. Ford Deployment, Will Move U.S. Marines Closer to Israel,” USNI News, October 17, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/>.

37. Henry Ridgwell, “Iran Warns Israel of ‘Axis’ Response as Fears Grow of Regional War,” Voice of America, October 13, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

clashes between Iran and Israel.³⁸ Moreover, Iran has increased its attacks against US service members, partners, and interests in the Middle East beginning in 2021 to levels not seen since 2018. In effect, diplomacy is “off the table.”³⁹

Notably, Israel praised the United States’ withdrawal from the Iran deal and is against renewal. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long been opposed to such a deal and relations between him and President Barack Obama were strained during negotiations which led to the JCPOA agreement.⁴⁰

Risks of Iranian Proliferation

Iran’s president Ebrahim Raisi has developed a defense posture revolving around two principles: enhancing Iran’s ability to swiftly retaliate against the United States and its sanctioning efforts, as well as delinking Iran’s economy from Western influence by building a self-reliant and Asia-focused economy. This suggests Iran will deal less with the West and as a result, will be less influenced by US or P5+1 efforts to thwart Iran’s nuclear program.⁴¹ Raisi also believes Iran is a natural regional hegemon, a modern-day successor to the Persian and Safavid empires.⁴² Attaining nuclear weapons will confirm his perception of great power status.

A nuclear Iran presents a complex security challenge, not just for Israel, but also for the Middle East region and beyond. As one security studies analysis argues, there are six specific concerns.

- A nuclear Iran will limit US, European, and Israeli military mobility in the Gulf region and give Iran significant leverage over neighboring Arab states.
- Iran’s foreign policy will be more ambitious, emboldened, and risk-accepting—its support and encouragement of the October 2023 Hamas attack provides ample evidence of this already, even without nuclear weapons.
- Iran will provide more support to and defend its proxies.
- Iran’s support for terrorism will increase and could include nuclear terrorism.

38. “Iran Update – September 2021,” JINSA [Jewish Institute for National Security of America], October 1, 2021, <https://jinsa.org/>; Natasha Bertrand et al., “Intelligence Shows Iranian-backed Militias Are Ready to Ramp Up Their Attacks against US Forces in the Middle East,” CNN, October 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/>; and Ellen Mitchell, “US Troops in Iraq, Syria Attacked 13 Times in Past Week, Pentagon Says,” *Hill*, October 24, 2023, <https://thehill.com/>.

39. Kaye, “Shadow War”; and “Iran Update.”

40. Max Greenwood, “Netanyahu Lauds Trump’s ‘Bold Decision’ to Pull Out of Iran Deal,” *Hill*, May 8, 2018, <https://thehill.com/>.

41. Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, “Iran Won’t Back Down: As Nuclear Talks Resume, Tehran Isn’t Looking to Compromise,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

42. Ariel Levite, “Deciphering Iran’s Nuclear Strategy,” September 10, 2021, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>; and see also Roby C. Barrett, *Iran, Illusion, Reality, and Interests*, Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) Report 12-8 (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU, September 2012), ch. 1–2, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

- Iran is likely to confront Israel directly.
- Iranian nuclear weapons will undermine the Non-Proliferation Treaty due to the potential creation of a cascade effect as other states, namely Saudi Arabia and Turkey, vow to become nuclear powers in response to Iran's weapons.⁴³

It should also be said that Iran's continued violations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have already weakened the document since the United States has so far failed to inhibit Iran's evolution towards a bomb.

Israeli Government Policy and Attack/Defense Assets

According to the US Institute for Peace, as early as 2021, "Israel's top military official announced that funding and preparations for an attack on Iran's nuclear sites had 'dramatically accelerated' " and highlighted eight combined US-Israeli military exercises conducted so far in 2023. The IDF has also formed a new intelligence unit to prepare for potential hostilities with Iran.⁴⁴

Most experts agree Iran is already a nuclear threshold state, so the implication may be that an attack could be forthcoming. In 2021, while he was serving as Israeli foreign minister, Yair Lapid emphasized that "other options are on the table if diplomacy fails . . . by saying other options, I think everyone understands here, in Israel, in the Emirates, and in Tehran, what it is that we mean."⁴⁵ A year later, Biden assured Lapid, then serving as Israel's prime minister, that the United States would never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.⁴⁶

In May 2023, Netanyahu held a mock wartime security cabinet meeting in a bunker. Analysts believe this demonstrated a substantial increase in the probability of an attack on Iran: Lapid is now the key opposition leader and "on the same note" as Netanyahu on Iran; the inner security cabinet that decides on war is hawkish on Iran; and the perceived window of vulnerability is closing as Iran builds a relationship with Russia and hardens its defenses against attack.⁴⁷

Netanyahu has also stated that "95 percent of Israel's security problems come from Iran."⁴⁸ More notable, most experts agree delaying Iran's development of a nuclear weapon can only be accomplished in three ways: economic pressure, which the United States has been pursuing since 2005 in the form of sanctions; covert attacks, which

43. Alex S. Wilner, "Apocalypse Soon? Deterring Nuclear Iran and Its Terrorist Proxies," *Comparative Strategy* 31, no. 1 (2012): 18–40, <https://doi.org/>.

44. "Israel: The Iran Threat & Options," United States Institute of Peace – *Iran Primer* (blog), September 11, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/>.

45. Berman, "Word Games."

46. "U.S. Will Never Allow Iran to Acquire a Nuclear Weapon, Biden Tells Israel's Lapid," Reuters, August 31, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

47. Bronner and Meyer, "Will Israel Attack Iran?"

48. "Israel: The Iran Threat."

have caused meaningful delays, but only slowed progress by months (and have been attributed to Israel by anonymous media sources); and the military option.⁴⁹

The Military Option

With the likelihood that sanctions and covert attacks will continue to be minimally effective in stalling Iran's march toward a nuclear weapon, the remainder of this article focuses on Israel's military preparations, which suggest an Israeli military attack on Iran in the not-too-distant future. The Begin Doctrine will apply to Iran in the same way it did to Iraq and Syria.

Some have asked why Israel did not strike Iran's nuclear program when it was less developed and easier to target. In 2010, Netanyahu ordered IDF Chief Benny Gantz to prepare for an attack, which Gantz resisted. Netanyahu wanted to attack Iran's nuclear program again in 2012, but the United States discouraged his efforts.⁵⁰

More recently, former Deputy IDF Chief Uzi Dayan has stated his belief that Israel now has the operational capability to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, though it would still prefer that Washington take the lead or at least share in the effort.⁵¹ Presently, Netanyahu is said to be leading his most-hawkish coalition, meaning his opportunity to attack Iran is likely to garner more support than past efforts.⁵²

Air-Launch Capabilities

Israel is in the process of acquiring stealth-capable F-35 fighter jets from the United States and will soon have 50 in its inventory.⁵³ It recently announced that it will buy 25 more, which will bring its total to 75.⁵⁴ These fifth-generation assets are invisible to surface-to-air missiles, which defend nuclear targets in Iran. Accordingly, these fighter assets have given Israel much greater capability than they had just a few years ago to attack Iran's nuclear targets.

Moreover, Israel now has the required earth-penetrating weapons for its fighters. With inventories of the US-supplied GBU-28 deep-penetrating bunker-buster, Israel can penetrate the underground uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and possibly Fordow; at the same time, the United States provided Israel with an ample supply of

49. Berman, "Word Games."

50. Charles Bybezezer, "'Begin Doctrine' at Bay: Why Israel Did Not End Iran's Nuclear Program in Its Infancy," Media Line, June 6, 2018, <https://themedialine.org/>.

51. Bronner and Meyer, "Will Israel Attack Iran?"

52. See Dan Williams, "Tapped to Head New Hard-Right Government, Netanyahu Pledges Israeli Unity," Reuters, November 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

53. Seth J. Frantzman, "Israel Reveals First Time It Used F-35 to Shoot Down Iranian Drone," *Defense News*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

54. Julia Frankel, "Israel to Buy More F-35 Fighter Jets from U.S. Deal Expands Fleet by 50% and Deepens Partnership," AP, July 2, 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

small diameter bombs in May 2023, another earth-penetrating weapon.⁵⁵ Israel had also previously designed its own 500-pound bomb, the MP-500, another bunker-buster that can penetrate four reinforced concrete walls.⁵⁶ Remaining known nuclear infrastructure and missile sites are aboveground and can be struck with standard conventional weapons.

Sea-Launch Capabilities

The Dolphin submarine is also crucial to an attack plan using submarine-launched cruise missiles. These low-flying missiles have projected ranges of 1,500 kilometers, meaning they could be launched from the Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, or Arabian Sea, to reach targets in Iran and travel below radar, thus complicating Iran's missile and artillery defense systems' ability to shoot them down. Israel has six submarines carrying five or more of these missiles each, and they are also armed with torpedoes for defense or attacking shipping assets. Interestingly, the newest (sixth) Dolphin may also have vertical launch tubes for ballistic missiles.⁵⁷

Air Defense Capabilities

More important to Israel are its defensive assets since Iran's retaliation capability is much greater than Iraq's or Syria's were at the time of the preventive strikes. Israel has an overlapping missile defense system designed to thwart missile attacks.

Israel's first layer of defense is the Arrow antiballistic missile, designed to shoot down intermediate-range missiles such as Iran's Shahab 3 and 4 systems. The Arrow is centered on protecting Tel Aviv and Haifa from long-range attack.⁵⁸ One was recently launched and successfully shot down a surface-to-surface missile launched from the Red Sea region—most likely by the Houthis in Yemen who claimed responsibility for the attempted strike on Israel.⁵⁹ David's Sling is Israel's second layer of defense. Operational in 2017, this system is similar to the US Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system and was designed jointly with American defense contractors. The first batteries have been deployed and are designed to protect most of Israel from medium-range missile threats.⁶⁰ Note that the United States is also adding additional THAAD and Patriot batteries to the Middle East—likely to Israel—as an effort to deter

55. Dan De Luce and Courtney Kube, "Can Israel Take Out the Tunnels That Hamas Uses to Move Its Fighters and Weapons?," NBC News, October 13, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.

56. Tzvi Ben Gedalyahu, "Video: Israel Tests Its Own Bunker Buster Bomb," Israel National News, March 14, 2012, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/>.

57. H. I. Sutton, "Israel's Submarine Secret: New Dolphin-II's Could Have VLS," Naval News, January 19, 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/>.

58. Hemnath Kumar, "Arrow 3 Air Defence Missile System, Israel," Air Force Technology, September 16, 2022, <https://www.airforce-technology.com/>.

59. Emanuel Fabian, "In First, Arrow Downs Eilat-Bound Missile from 'Red Sea Area'; Houthis Claim Attack," Times of Israel, October 31, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>.

60. Judah Ari Gross, "Israel to Deploy David's Sling, Final Piece of Missile Defense Shield," Times of Israel, March 20, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>.

Iran and its allies' increased attacks against American troops in the region, which are likely in response to the October 2023 Hamas war.⁶¹

As a third layer of defense, Israel developed the Iron Dome missile defense system to defeat short-range incoming missile and artillery attacks from Hamas and Hezbollah. This system is well known for its success in protecting Israeli cities near Gaza. The Iron Dome has successfully shot down well over 90 percent of its targets, saving hundreds of lives on the ground.⁶²

Resilient Population

Finally, Israel may have the best-prepared society to withstand attacks: the nation has over a million bomb shelters, and all citizens are outfitted with gas masks and trained in emergency procedures. A large share of citizens are also members of Israel's reserve army, meaning they are trained for resilience during incoming missile volleys or against any other form of attack.

Conclusion and Implications for US Policy

Considering all the wars Israel has fought in its short history as a state—1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, the Palestinian intifadas of 1987 and 2000, two insurgencies in Lebanon and a limited war of attrition that continued several years after the 1967 war, the Hezbollah war of 2006, Gaza conflicts in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, and the ongoing Gaza War of 2023—its civil society is “best described as a ‘national security’ culture, focused upon the survival of a state ever involved in war or gearing up for war.”⁶³

For Israel, “security has always taken priority over economics, personal concerns, or other governmental matters.”⁶⁴ The war mentality has driven Israel to preparedness in both the offensive and defensive means described above. And noting that this most recent Hamas attack is the most violent to date, and that Israel declared war on Hamas and seeks its destruction, it is also reasonable to assume Israel will do everything in its power to cut off Iran's resupply and support efforts. It may conclude attacking Iran may be the best means to do so.

And while Israel would prefer not to “go it alone” against Iran, it is prepared to do so if necessary. US strategists estimate it will take 12,000 sorties requiring more than a week to execute in order to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and that is something Biden is not ready to commit to.⁶⁵ His administration—at least before the October 2023 Hamas attacks—indicated preference for a return to the now-dead nuclear deal.

61. Andres Martinez, “US Sends More Missile Defense Systems to Middle East,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

62. Anshel Pfeffer, “The Costly Success of Israel's Iron Dome,” *Atlantic*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>, Talbot.

63. Brent Talbot, “Stuxnet and After,” *Journal of International Security Affairs* 21 (Fall/Winter 2011): 70.

64. Talbot.

65. Edward Luttwak, “The Prospects of a New Iran Deal,” *Strategika* 74, August 2, 2021, <https://www.hoover.org/>.

Such preference may mean the US administration is likely to continue to pressure Israel to not attack Iran on its own due to the risk of an expanded war and danger to US assets and partners in the region.⁶⁶

Still, Biden's support to Israel during the ongoing Hamas war is encouraging—he labeled the Hamas attack “sheer evil,” and his main caution has been against occupying Gaza. He even called the current crisis “an inflection point in history—one of those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future for decades to come.”⁶⁷ Perhaps that rationale will persuade him to be more supportive of going after Iran—the source of Hamas' evil attack and of all the Iranian proxies threatening Israel at present.⁶⁸

Considering Iran is also facing an internal rebellion, one led by women protesting the mandatory hijab requirement, one Iranian expert suggests the focus of US policy should be on “championing the aspirations of the Iranian people to live in a free society at peace with the world.”⁶⁹ Doing so suggests enabling their freedom by countering government censorship. Elon Musk's effort to activate Starlink over Iran as a counter to its shutting down the internet during the 2022 hijab protests exemplifies this.⁷⁰ After all, events in Iran represent a social media-inspired movement much like the Arab Spring, so continued flow of the reporting of new killings, beatings, and arrests of women and others protesting against the Islamist government may weaken its hand, while at the same time turn its attention from nuclear proliferation.

Another option is to work with Arab partners and European allies to “contain Tehran” until it is defeated from within.⁷¹ But that is likely to take more time than Israel can afford. Instability within Iran will at least distract it from its ongoing efforts to destabilize this resource-rich region of the globe. Easing sanctions, trading Americans for ransoms, and other forms of cooperation at a time when Iran is persecuting its own citizens and supporting terrorism against Israel reward the regime for its evil deeds and send the wrong signal to Allies, partners, and enemies alike.

In the meantime, the United States must realize Israel is primed to attack Iran to enforce the Begin Doctrine with or without US approval, and thus, should be prepared for Iranian reprisals in the Gulf region. Biden has made the right choice sending carrier strike groups and an amphibious ready group, along with more missile defenses to the Middle East.⁷² These may help deter Iranian attacks on Israel, and particularly against US forces stationed in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf, as well as Gulf partners Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Æ

66. Luttwak.

67. Solcyre Burga and Mallory Moench, “Everything President Biden Has Said about the Israel-Hamas War,” *Time*, October 23 2023, <https://time.com/>.

68. Summer Said, Benoit Faucon, and Stephen Kalin, “Iran Helped Plot Attack on Israel over Several Weeks,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

69. Karim Sadjadpour, “What the West Should Learn from the Protests in Iran,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

70. Nicholas Gordon, “Musk Says He's ‘Activating Starlink’ in Iran As Its Government Blocks the Internet to Stop Spreading Protests,” *Fortune*, September 26, 2022, <https://fortune.com/>.

71. Karim Sadjadpour, “Iran's Hollow Victory: The High Price of Regional Dominance,” *Foreign Affairs* 101 (March/April 2022): 36–39.

72. LaGrone, “Pentagon Extends.”