

# U.S. & Israel “Plan B” for Iran

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*Iran is rapidly approaching the nuclear threshold, even as its officials recently announced they will return to stalled negotiations about reentering the JCPOA nuclear agreement by the end of November. Beyond diplomacy, the United States and Israel declared their readiness to explore “other options” for preventing a nuclear Iran, with Israel recently accelerating military operational preparations including increased funding, planning and exercising. In addition to developing its own credible threat of force, the United States should promptly take action to bolster Israel’s self-defense capabilities to gain additional diplomatic leverage against Iran.*

## What Happened?

- Israel has increased its operational planning and funding for potential military conflict with Iran in recent weeks as American and Israeli officials publicly [discuss](#) “other options” beyond diplomacy to address Iran’s nuclear program, should there be no return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal.
- Shortly thereafter, on November 3, European Union representative Enrique Mora [announced](#) a seventh round of talks to revive the JCPOA will convene in Vienna on November 29, after the sixth round ended inconclusively in last June.
- On November 9, Israel’s [top general](#) told the Knesset that the Israel Defense Forces are “accelerating operational planning and preparedness to deal with Iran and the military nuclear threat.”

## Why Is It Important?

- Four decades of U.S. and Israeli interaction with the Iranian regime show how credible military options can compel significant changes in Tehran’s behavior and strengthen prospects for successful diplomacy.
- As in 2012-13, Iran’s nuclear program currently is advancing appreciably, including in ways that cannot easily be reversed, while diplomacy slowly plods along. This raises the specter of unilateral Israeli military action to prevent Iran crossing the nuclear threshold.

- » In his [speech to the UN General Assembly](#) in September, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett declared “Iran’s nuclear program has hit a watershed moment, and so has our tolerance. Words do not stop centrifuges from spinning.... We will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.”
- » In July, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid [reportedly told](#) American officials that “Iran is quickly advancing toward becoming a nuclear threshold state.” In September, [he added](#), “Israel will not allow Iran to become a nuclear state or even a nuclear threshold state.”
- » A [JINSA brief](#) from late September assessed how, if *Iran’s current plans for expanding its nuclear program move forward, it could reach the point of being able to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon in well under one month – a concerningly small, and shrinking, window that could prompt Israeli action.*
- As Iran’s nuclear program advanced and the Vienna talks yielded no progress, American officials publicly expressed their growing impatience with Iranian diplomacy and the need for alternatives.
  - » On September 30, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [explained](#) that “the ball remains in [Iran’s] court, but not for long.” He added, “there is a limited runway [for talks], and the runway is getting shorter.”
  - » U.S. special envoy for Iran Robert Malley [clarified](#) the administration’s position on October 13: “of course, we have to prepare for a world, which we are doing now, where Iran doesn’t have constraints on its nuclear program and we have to consider options to deal with that.”
    - That same day, Secretary Blinken told [FM Lapid](#) “we will look at every option to deal with the challenge posed by Iran.”
  - » President Biden [told reporters](#) on October 28 that “we, of course, retain all other options to be able to deal with this program as necessary.”
  - » During an [interview with 60 Minutes](#) on October 31, Secretary Blinken stressed “as we always say, every option is on the table,” and specifically did not rule out military means if Iran “is not prepared to engage quickly in good faith.”
  - » These statements were accompanied by [recent comments](#) from Prime Minister Bennett and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz suggesting Israel did not oppose U.S. efforts to resolve the Iranian [nuclear crisis](#) diplomatically – a goal which could be supported by credible military alternatives.
- In recent months, Israel has devoted increasing funding to advanced military capabilities and other preparations for potential operations against growing threats from Iran, including its nuclear program.
  - » Following a [JINSA policy recommendation](#), in February the Israeli government borrowed against future funding outlined in the Obama-era ten-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on U.S. defense assistance to Israel, in order to expedite purchase of U.S.-made weapons systems and munitions, according to sources knowledgeable of the events who spoke with the authors.
  - » On July 28, Israeli officials [agreed](#) on a 58 billion shekel (NIS) defense budget for FY2022 (approximately \$17.8 billion). This reportedly included roughly \$2.15 billion to prepare offensive and defensive capabilities for potential conflict with Iran, after no such funds had been allocated in recent years.

- » On October 18, the Israeli government [reportedly](#) agreed to allocate NIS 5 billion (\$1.5 billion) to develop capabilities for a military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, with NIS 2 billion (\$620 million) coming from the FY2022 defense budget and the rest coming from the current budget.
  - The NIS 5 billion (\$1.5 billion) reportedly would go toward purchasing various manned aircraft, intelligence-gathering drones and other armaments to neutralize Iran’s deeply buried and heavily fortified nuclear sites.
  - Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Gen. Aviv Kochavi [said](#) that Israel had “greatly accelerated” preparations for action against Iran’s nuclear program and [that](#) “a significant chunk of the boost to the defense budget, as was recently agreed, was intended for this purpose. It’s a very complicated job, with much more intelligence, much more operational capabilities, much more armaments.”
- In parallel, the IDF is revamping its operational planning against Iran.
  - » Gen. Kochavi [publicly](#) declared in January 2021 that the IDF was preparing fresh “operational plans” for military options against Iran, and in August that Tehran’s nuclear progress has prompted the IDF “to speed up its operational plans.”
  - » In late October, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) [resumed](#) training for a possible strike on Iranian nuclear facilities as Gen. Kochavi ordered the IAF to train “intensely” and instructed that new funds be set aside for this purpose after a two-year hiatus.
    - On November 1, the IDF [launched](#) a surprise readiness exercise, calling up reserve units as part a month-long series of exercises dubbed “Hewn Stone,” to improve preparedness for operations against Hezbollah, which could arise as part of a broader Israeli conflict with Iran.
  - » On October 13, the U.S. Air Force [announced](#) it had carried out a successful test of its new “bunker buster,” the GBU-72 Advanced 5K Penetrator. The 5,000-pound bomb, which could be transferred to Israel, could be used for strikes on deeply-buried and fortified Iranian nuclear sites.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should take immediate steps to “coordinate with Israel and other partners in the region,” as Robert Malley recently [put it](#), in order to both strengthen the prospects for successful diplomacy and develop credible alternatives if Iran continues advancing its nuclear program and stonewalling real progress in Vienna.
  - » This offers immediate benefits for shared deterrence – given the effectiveness, intensity and persistence of Israel’s ongoing campaign against Iran’s nuclear and regional expansions – without raising the direct costs and risks for the United States.

- As outlined in JINSA's [recent report](#) on credible military alternatives to open-ended diplomacy with Iran, and building on President Biden's frequent invocation of the "ironclad" U.S. partnership with Israel, American policymakers should start making threats of a "Plan B" more credible by stating publicly that military force can indeed prevent a nuclear Iran and that, together with Israel and other partners, the United States is prepared to execute such options if necessary.
- In addition to undertaking its own military readiness activities, which will require time and effort, the United States also must take action to bolster Israel's self-defense against Iran, including:
  - » Ensuring adequate Israeli stocks of U.S.-made precision guided munitions (PGM) such as the highly accurate Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and GBU-39/B small diameter bomb (SDB).
    - One specific option is to use the Pentagon's Special Defense Acquisition Fund (SDAF), through which the United States would purchase such weapons in advance of their sale to Israel, thereby giving U.S. defense companies a head-start on production and shortening delivery times without imposing additional costs on the United States. In recent years the fund's authorization from Congress has been tied to procuring and stockpiling PGMs.
  - » Expediting delivery of U.S. weapons systems already pledged to Israel, and for which Israel has taken measures to move forward the purchase date – most urgently KC-46A aerial refueling tankers, but also F-35 and F-15 multirole aircraft and CH-53K helicopters, among other systems.
  - » Taking steps to ensure Israel possesses sufficiently robust multi-layered air defenses to mitigate – and if possible deter – massive retaliation by Iran and its proxies, chiefly Hezbollah, for any Israeli preemptive action against Tehran's nuclear infrastructure. This includes additional batteries of, and interceptors for, Israel's Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow systems, all of which are co-produced with the United States.