

U.S.-Israel Exercises Signal Capabilities to Iran, Not U.S. Willingness to Strike

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The United States and Israel recently concluded their largest ever combined military exercise, Juniper Oak, a massive, week-long, multidomain drill clearly designed to signal to Tehran the full extent of U.S.-Israeli joint military capability. This is the culmination of a two-year trend of U.S.-Israel exercises increasing in frequency and operational focus on the Iranian threat. Yet, as significant as the exercise was, it is unlikely that, by itself, it will serve as an effective deterrent against Iran.

Deterring Iran from attaining a nuclear weapons capability requires convincing the Iranian regime that either the United States, on its own or together with Israel, or Israel operating on its own are not only capable, but willing to execute a preventive strike against its nuclear facilities. However, the United States has not demonstrated a credible willingness to act militarily against Iran, regardless of the joint U.S.-Israeli capabilities displayed in Juniper Oak. Although Israel has repeatedly proven its willingness to act, Juniper Oak underscored that the United States has not expedited delivery to Israel of the capabilities Israel needs to make a strike as effective as possible.

To strengthen deterrence against Iranian nuclear development and aggression, the United States should employ more consistent military force when Iranian-backed groups target U.S. troops, consider kinetic action to disrupt Iran's supply of drones to Russia, expedite the delivery to Israel of capabilities that would strengthen its ability to strike independently—particularly KC-46A aircraft refueling tankers and additional F-15s—and replenish the U.S. prepositioned ammunitions stockpile in Israel with precision-guided munitions.

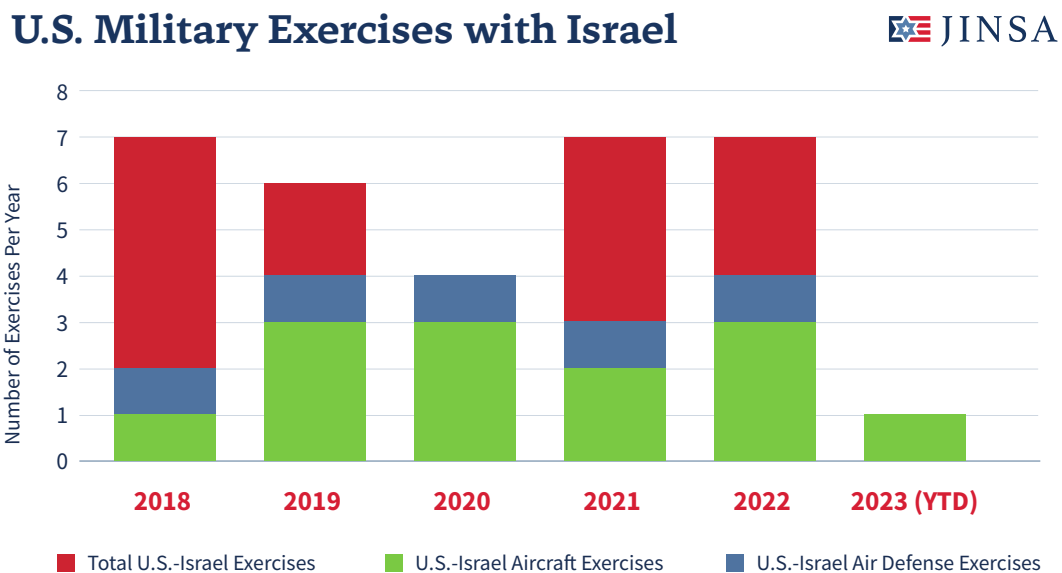
What Happened?

- The United States and Israel conducted their largest joint military exercise ever, [Juniper Oak 2023](#), from January 23-26, involving live fire, simulated bombings, and mid-air refueling operations.
 - » The Juniper Oak exercise included: over 6,400 U.S. military personnel; 100 U.S. aircraft, including 2 KC-46A aircraft refueling tankers, 4 B-52 bombers, 4 F-35s, as well as F-15s, F-16s, FA-18s, AC-130s, and AH-64s; 12 naval vessels, including a U.S. aircraft carrier strike group; High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS); and Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS).
 - » The exercise also included 1,500 Israeli personnel, 6 F-35Is, 18 F-16s, 8 F-15s, 2 G-550 reconnaissance aircraft, 2 B707 refueling aircraft, 4 helicopters, and 2 drones.
- Juniper Oak followed shortly after a [joint U.S.-Israel exercise](#) from November 29-20, 2022, another Iran-focused effort that involved a smaller number of U.S. fighter jets and less advanced refueling aircraft.

Why Is It Important?

- The Juniper Oak exercise is a productive signal of U.S. willingness to demonstrate its unique capability to quickly flow major military assets to the region and cooperate with Israel in a large-scale contingency such as a strike to destroy Iran's nuclear program. The inclusion of B-52 bombers and (for the first time) KC-46A refueling tankers are particularly noteworthy in this regard. The administration's support for such a show of force with Israel should be applauded.
- Nevertheless, demonstrating that the U.S. has the capabilities to destroy Iran's nuclear program is only one half of the U.S. deterrence equation. Convincing Iran that the U.S. also has the will to use those capabilities will require more from the administration than simply an impressive show of force.
- Additionally, in the event that Washington chose not to act or was pre-occupied with other global challenges, fully integrated deterrence should also mean ensuring that Israel, America's most formidable regional partner, also has the capabilities on its own to destroy Iran's nuclear program.
 - » Deterring further Iranian nuclear advancement requires convincing the Iranian regime that either the United States, on its own or working with Israel, or Israel operating independently are willing and capable of launching a preventive strike on its nuclear facilities.
 - » Yet, the United States has not demonstrated a credible resolve to use military force against Iran. And despite Israel's willingness to operate against Iran directly, the United States has not expedited delivery of the systems that would make its operations as effective as possible, namely KC-46A aircraft refueling tankers.
- Since 2020, the United States has been increasing the frequency and number of its military exercises involving Israel.
 - » In 2020, the United States held only four total joint military exercises with Israel, compared to seven in 2018 and six in 2019.
 - » In both 2021 and 2022, that number increased to seven joint exercises.
 - » The brief, two-month interlude between the previous exercise in November 2022 and Juniper Oak suggests the pace of military coordination between the United States and Israel is quickening even further.
- Since 2022, the increasing number of U.S.-Israel military exercises have been operationally focused on the Iran threat.
 - » Before 2022, U.S. exercises with Israel had primarily focused on air defense or were multilateral interoperability exercises with other U.S. partners.
 - In 2021, for example, the United States participated in seven exercises including Israel. Of those, the only two that involved U.S. aircraft were multilateral drills, including the annual multilateral Blue Flag exercise and Israel's first participation in the UAE's annual Desert Flag exercise.

- An exception to this trend occurred in 2020, when there were three U.S.-Israel Enduring Lightning exercises involving American F-45 fighter jets and the last two also including U.S. refueling aircraft.
- » Beginning in 2022, U.S.-Israel exercises seemingly became more overtly focused on training for joint missions against Iran—particularly through the inclusion of U.S. aircraft refueling Israeli fighters.
- In 2022, there were seven exercises including Israel, with two bilateral and one multilateral drills involving U.S. aircraft.
- Dozens of aircraft participated in a November 2022 exercise, including one U.S. KC-135 tanker that refueled Israeli jets.



- Juniper Oak expanded and accelerated all of these trends, marking not only the largest ever joint U.S.-Israel military exercise but also the one most clearly designed to deter Iran.
 - » The United States and Israel [reportedly](#) developed the Juniper Oak exercise in two months, even though such a complicated exercise would normally require at least a year of preparation.
 - » Juniper Oak’s [missions](#) of “U.S. and Israeli command and control, air operations in maritime surface warfare, combat search and rescue, electronic attack, suppression of enemy air defenses, strike coordination and reconnaissance, and air interdiction” were the necessary components for a joint U.S.-Israel combined operation against Iranian nuclear targets.
 - The participation of KC-46As during Juniper Oak could provide Israeli pilots and aircraft a first opportunity to practice refueling on the tankers.

U.S. Platforms Participating in Joint U.S.-Israel Military Exercises

	F-15	F-16	FA-18	F-35	B-52	AC-130	KC-10	KC-135	KC-46	AH64	EA-18	MQ-9	Air Defenses
Juniper Oak January 2023													
November 2022													
Air Defense Exercise July 2022													
Refueling Exercise May 2022							Possible	Possible					
Iniochos March-April 2022													
Blue Flag October 2021													
Juniper Falcon July 2021													
Desert Flag March 2021													
Enduring Lightning III October 2020													
Enduring Lightning II August 2020													
Enduring Lightning March 2020													
Juniper Cobra March 2020													
Blue Flag November 2019													
Cobra Warrior March 2019													
Tri-Lightning June 2019													
THAAD Air Defense Exercise March 2019													
Iniochos March 2018													
Juniper Cobra 2018													

- While an important signal of a possibly more coercive U.S. approach toward Iran (especially in the context of the administration’s moribund efforts to resurrect the Iran nuclear deal), the effectiveness of Juniper Oak as a deterrent against Iran will remain limited by the fact that United States has not demonstrated a willingness to use military force against Iran—whether to prevent a nuclear Iran, stop Iran’s supply of drones to Russia, or to even protect U.S. forces.
 - » While President Barack Obama [pledged](#) to use “all elements of American power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon,” President Biden and his administration have been less clear in their commitments. The current administration states that diplomacy is the only way to address Iran’s nuclear program more frequently than it commits to using all means available to doing so.
 - Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said](#) on January 28 that “all options are available on the table to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.” However, Biden administration Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley recently [argued](#) that “diplomacy never ends” while promising that at some future, undetermined point in time, “all options will be on the table.”
- In the face of Iran’s brazen direct challenge to America’s vital interest in seeing Russian forces defeated in Ukraine, the administration also seems to have taken off the table any use of U.S. force to disrupt and deter Iran’s supply of lethal drones (and potentially missiles) to Moscow. U.S. officials on background were very quick to disassociate the United States from any involvement in the January 28 strike against an Iranian “munition” facility in Isfahan, pointing the finger at Israel instead.
 - » Nor has the administration been willing to retaliate consistently for Iranian-backed attacks on U.S. forces in the Middle East.
 - During the Biden administration, Iranian-backed groups have launched 80 attacks on U.S. troops or contractors in Iraq and Syria, firing over 230 projectiles, including 170 rockets and 60 drones, according to JINSA’s [Iran projectile tracker](#).
 - Yet, the Biden administration has launched only three rounds of retaliatory airstrikes on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.
- Juniper Oak also served to highlight all the capabilities that the United States has that could boost the effectiveness of an Israeli military strike—capabilities that, in some cases, the United States refuses to expedite delivery of, such as:
 - » KC-46A Aircraft Refueling Tankers
 - Israel has purchased [4 KC-46A aircraft](#) but they are not scheduled to arrive until 2025 and 2026. Israel [requires the aircraft refueling tankers](#) to replace its fifty-year old Ram tankers.
 - » Precision-guided Munitions (PGMs)/WRSA-I Stockpile
 - With the United States recently transferring artillery from its stockpile in Israel, called WRSA-I, to Ukraine, there is an [opportunity to replenish it](#) with PGMs that the Israeli Air Force could use. The United States owns the contents of WRSA-I but Israel can pull from the stockpile and pay for weaponry it uses, as it has done at least twice during the 2006 Lebanon and 2014 Gaza wars.

- However, the unguided “dumb” weapons in WRSA-I have become obsolete and the stockpile no longer serves this strategic purpose for Israel, which heavily depends on precision weaponry. As is evident during operations in Ukraine, PGMs will be critical in case of a modern high-intensity war involving Iran and Hezbollah.

- » F-15 Fighter Jets

- In mid-January, Israel sent an official [Letter of Request](#) to purchase 25 F-15-EX fighter jets, with reports that the Israeli air force hopes to double that order.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should continue increasing the frequency and quality of bilateral military drills with Israel. CENTCOM should also develop new and expand existing multidomain and multilateral exercises that include America’s regional Arab partners and Israel.
 - » In particular, CENTCOM should expand its readiness against incoming airstrikes and seek to develop an integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) network across its area of responsibility (AOR).
- While Juniper Oak promoted joint U.S.-Israel capabilities, to further prepare Israel to operate independently in case of a regional escalation, the United States should:
 - » Expedite the delivery of KC-46A aircraft to Israel. JINSA has [previously recommended](#) that the United States expedite Israel’s acquisition of these aircraft by moving Israeli production slots earlier in the queue to strengthen the credibility of its military deterrent.
 - » Expedite the procurement and delivery process for Israel to acquire additional F-15 fighter jets.
 - » [Replenish WRSA-I](#) with much-needed PGMs, specifically Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tailkits and GBU-39 and GBU-53/B small diameter bombs, and potentially other much-needed weapons.
- To signal America’s willingness to use military force against Iranian aggression, President Biden should direct CENTCOM to preempt and retaliate against those militias responsible for strikes on U.S. forces, including their Iranian backers.
- With America’s highest immediate national security priority being ensuring the defeat of Russian forces in Ukraine, the Biden administration should clearly signal to Iran that it will not only use sanctions and diplomacy but also military force and covert action to disrupt and inflict costs on Iran’s challenge to U.S. vital interests.