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# U.S. and Israel Display Combat Capabilities, But Deterrence Against Iran Still Deficient

*The United States appears to be trying to increase its deterrent signaling toward Iran. The U.S.-Israel Juniper Oak 23.3 military exercise in mid-July—the eighth joint training already this year—and the late-July deployment of U.S. combat aircraft, naval vessels, and Marines to the Middle East are all clearly geared toward demonstrating U.S. military capabilities. But such activities are not enough to convince Tehran that America has a willingness to act itself—or support its Israeli partner in acting—against Iran’s nuclear program or regional aggression. To show that it remains undeterred, Iran has launched its own military exercises and weapons displays in recent weeks.*

*To bolster deterrence in the region, the United States should continue its own deployments and patrols, but also ensure that Israel is equipped with the necessary armaments—particularly KC-46A refueling tankers—to defend itself. However, combat capabilities alone will not suffice to maintain deterrence. Clear statements of resolve, an articulation that the United States backs Israel’s right to defend itself against Iran, and the use of consistent kinetic action when Iranian proxies target U.S. troops are all necessary components of successful deterrence against Iran.*

## What Happened?

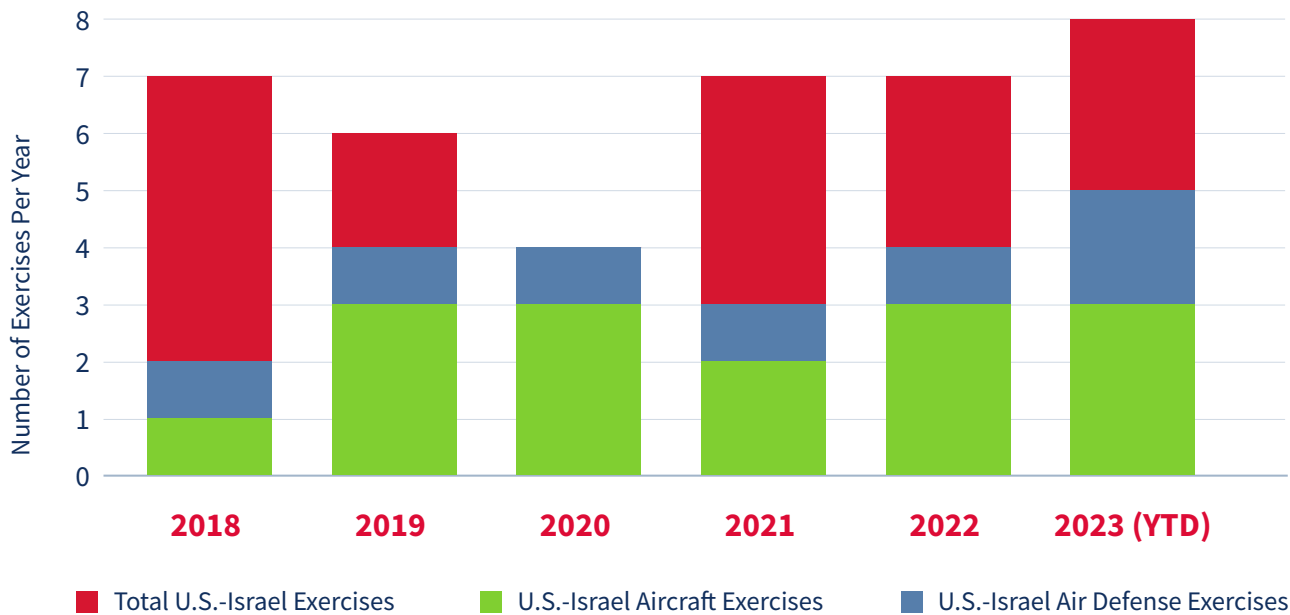
- From July 10-14, the United States and Israel [conducted](#) the Juniper Oak 23.3 joint military exercise, which [involved](#) simulating airstrikes against long-distance targets, area and cyber defense operations, and electronic warfare.
  - » The exercise included six U.S. F-16 aircraft, a KC-10, a KC-46A, an unspecified number of Israeli fighter aircraft, and the IDF’s enemy simulation squadron, known as the 115th Flying Dragon squadron.
    - However, the KC-46A tankers, a system Israel has purchased but is waiting to acquire, did not refuel Israeli Air Force (IAF) fighter jets as part of the drills.
- The United States also [deployed](#) a squadron of A-10 attack aircraft to the region in April, deployed a guided missile destroyer to the region on July 14, and announced the deployment of F-16 and F-35 fighter jets to the region on July 17.

- » The F-16 fighters jets had arrived in the Gulf as of July 21, and the F-35s [arrived](#) in the Gulf on July 26.
- Subsequently, the U.S. announced on July 20 that it had also [deployed](#) the 26th Marine expeditionary unit (MEU) and an amphibious ready group (ARG) to the region.
  - » An MEU is a quick reaction force typically comprised of around 2,500 Marines. The ARG consists of three warships capable of launching helicopters and watercraft, including the Bataan amphibious assault ship, an amphibious transport dock, and a dock landing ship.
- On July 23, Iran began conducting air force drills [involving](#) nearly 100 fighter aircraft, bombers, and drones.
  - » Iran also announced on July 25 that it had [added](#) a new fleet of long-range precision cruise missiles to its naval fleet.

## Why Is It Important?

- With Iran’s nuclear program advancing and its regional aggression continuing, the United States appears to be trying to establish deterrence against Tehran through military signaling: it has undertaken ever more Iran-specific exercises with Israel while also deploying more of its own forces to the Middle East. Although these recent U.S. military activities might demonstrate U.S. capabilities, they remain insufficient to persuade Iran of U.S. willingness to use them. Instead, they only serve to highlight continued U.S. reluctance to provide its partner Israel with the tools it needs to defend itself against a nuclear Iran most effectively.
- The Juniper Oak 23.3 exercise expands a beneficial trend of the United States using military exercises to signal greater interoperability and cooperation with Israel for large air operations, such as potentially against Iran’s nuclear program.
  - » Starting in 2022, U.S.-Israel exercises have visibly appeared to focus more overtly on training for joint air operations against Iran, particularly through the U.S. aircraft refueling Israeli fighters.
  - » In 2023, that trend accelerated even more. There have already been eight U.S.-Israel exercises this year, as many or more as occurred in each of the last six years.
  - » Like the Juniper Oak 23.2 exercise in January, Juniper Oak 23.3 in mid-July included American KC-46As, but neither drill involved the KC-46A tankers actually refueling Israeli fighter aircraft. The absence of exercises involving American KC-46As refueling Israeli aircraft undermines the drills’ purpose of bolstering Israel’s credible deterrence.

# U.S. Military Exercises with Israel



- Recent increased U.S. deployments of aircraft, naval vessels, and Marines to the region are also intended to signal U.S. capabilities to Tehran.
  - » U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla [stated](#) on July 20 that “these additional forces provide unique capabilities, which alongside our partner nations in the region, further safeguard the free flow of international commerce and uphold the rules based international order, and deter Iranian destabilizing activities in the region.”
- However, demonstrating military preparedness is not sufficient to deter Tehran from expanding its nuclear program. Deterring Iran would require the regime’s leadership believing that either the United States, on its own or alongside Israel, or Israel operating independently are willing and capable of launching a preventive strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities.
  - » While signaling enhanced interoperability and air operations cooperation sends an important signal of the potential joint U.S.-Israel capabilities, the lack of a clear U.S. willingness to use force against Iran undermines the deterrent effectiveness of Juniper Oak 23.3 and other air drills. Indeed, the United States repeatedly has demonstrated that it is unwilling to use force in response to Iranian aggression.
    - While Iran has brazenly and directly challenged America’s vital interest to help Ukraine defeat Russian forces, the Biden administration has [failed to disrupt](#) Iran’s supply of lethal drones to Moscow.
    - The United States has also been reticent to consistently strike Iranian-backed militia engaged in attacking U.S. forces in the Middle East. During the Biden administration, Iranian-backed groups have launched nearly 90 attacks on U.S. troops or contractors in Iraq and Syria, firing over 260 pro-

jectiles, including roughly 190 rockets and 70 drones, according to JINSA's [Iran projectile tracker](#). Yet, the Biden administration has launched only four rounds of retaliatory airstrikes on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.

- In addition, since January 2021, Iran has [carried](#) out over 40 different acts of aggression against international commercial vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20 percent of global petroleum flows. These repeated illegal obstructions of international trade, including a fatal [incident](#) in which two crew members were killed, have yet to elicit a strong U.S. response, highlighting the U.S.'s credibility problem.
- » Nor has the United States sufficiently demonstrated its support for Israel's military option against Iran. If anything, exercises like Juniper Oak only serve to highlight Israel's urgent need for the KC-46A refueling tanker—a significant [upgrade](#) over Israel's 50-year old "Ram" tankers—and the continued U.S. reluctance to expedite their delivery.
  - Israel has already [agreed](#) to acquire four KC-46A aircraft from the United States, to be delivered by the end of 2026, but the current strategic environment demands greater expediency.
  - As five members of Congress wrote in a [letter](#) last year urging the Department of Defense to expedite the delivery of KC-46As to Israel, "we have seen firsthand in Ukraine the consequences of not proactively assisting our allies to prepare to defend themselves."
  - Both the Senate and House versions of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2024 include provisions directing the U.S. Air Force to expeditiously train Israel's pilots on the KC-46A, and forward-deploy at least 1 U.S. KC-46A to Israel until the arrival of Israel's own KC-46A tankers.
- That U.S. joint exercises with Israel and increased regional deployments have been insufficient to deter Iran has been demonstrated by its response: increased military activity and drills.
  - » The recent Iranian drills serve as a reminder of Iran's conventional capabilities to attack Israel and other U.S. allies in the region as well as step up its other malign activities such as disrupting global trade in the Strait of Hormuz.
  - » The Iranian air force drills were undertaken in close proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, where earlier this month Iran [attempted](#) to seize two oil tankers in international waters and even opened fire on one of them, nearly striking the crew's living quarters.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- CENTCOM should continue increasing the frequency and quality of bilateral military drills with Israel, in particular through KC-46A refueling exercises on Israeli fighter aircraft.
  - » CENTCOM should also hold joint exercises in which Americans KC-46As are used to refuel Israeli fighter aircraft, and unequivocally state in press releases that it is doing so.

- While Juniper Oak promoted joint U.S.-Israel capabilities, as JINSA's recent report [No Daylight: U.S. Strategy if Israel Attacks Iran](#), argues, to maximize Israel's independent freedom of action and effectiveness before it initiates potential operations against Iran's nuclear program, the United States should:
  - » Expedite delivery of the tankers to Israel and forward-deploy KC-46As to Israel in the interim.
    - 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.
  - » Begin training Israeli Air Force pilots on the KC-46As prior to delivery to ensure their operability on day one, similar to how Japan's pilots [received training](#) before it acquired the tanker aircraft.
  - » Accelerate the procurement and delivery process for Israel to acquire additional F-15 fighter jets, including exploring the option of providing F-15s through the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program, as well as other multirole aircraft that would be necessary for long-range missions.
  - » Replenish America's stockpile of weaponry in Israel, [WRSA-I](#), with much-needed precision guided munitions (PGMs), specifically Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tailkits and GBU-39 and GBU-53/B small diameter bombs. Israel can draw upon this U.S.-owned stockpile in an emergency, as it has done on at least two occasions, but it has become [obsolete and depleted](#).
  - » Ensure that Israel is equipped with sufficient batteries and interceptors for use in its Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome air and missile defense systems in order to guarantee Israel's air defenses are sufficient to withstand the substantial cache of drones, rockets, and missiles in the possession of Iran and its proxies.
  - » Develop concrete plans for the establishment of an integrated air and missile defense system in the region, with a necessary first step being the creation of a common operating picture (COP) including Israel and as many Arab partners in the region as possible.
  - » Coordinate its regional objectives with Israel and make sure that the two countries are engaged closely in contingency planning.
- The United States should ensure freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, a principal U.S. interest and a key pillar of American foreign policy doctrine across successive presidential administrations, by augmenting integrated maritime defenses such as Task Force CTF 154 and [increasing](#) the deployment of unmanned surface vehicles to the region.
- The United States should also increase the scope and consistency of its force deployments to the Middle East in order to showcase its commitment to deterring Iranian aggression, as it did last week by [deploying](#) fighter jets, a naval destroyer, and an amphibious readiness group and marine expeditionary unit to the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz.