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Current Middle East Security Challenges

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The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, the National Defense University, and the Institute for National Security Studies held a two-day nonproliferation dialogue in Israel, April 29–30, 2018. The purpose of the dialogue was to exchange views on evolving threat perceptions, perceived gaps in goals, priorities, and policies, and identify further opportunities for deepening US–Israel cooperation in countering the proliferation of WMD and related threats. The following policy memo is based on the author's presentation delivered during the dialogue.

The United States and Israel face the same main security challenges in the Middle East. The two countries' security interests are so intertwined that it is difficult, and probably incorrect, to speak of separate threats.

Restraining Iran, and maybe one day fighting Iran, should be a joint US–Israeli endeavor.

That does not mean the two states always prioritize the security threats in the same way, nor that we will always choose to address them using the same methods or on the same timetables.

The threats certainly do not affect both states in the same way, as Israel is much closer geographically to the threats, and therefore may experience a different level of risk tolerance. That is quite understandable and needs to be acknowledged. The United States, on the other hand, has multiple other global responsibilities and threats to attend to, such as North Korea, China, and Russia. That reality can create a concern among Israelis that the United States is not sufficiently invested, attentive, or willing to contribute to combatting the threats in the Middle East.

There are four main categories of security threats in the Middle East, some of which overlap with one another:

- State enemies, chiefly Iran;
- Non-state actors, such as Hezbollah, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hamas, and al-Qaeda;
- Weak states, in the form of instability, poor governance, and uncontrolled territory; and,
- Proliferation threats, including nuclear, chemical, ballistic missile, cyber, and conventional technologies.

The threats posed by Iran encompass each of these categories. Whereas Israel once faced potentially existential threats from the armies of its Arab neighbors, that threat no longer exists. Today, the only state actor in the region that can pose a major, and potentially existential, threat to Israel is Iran, driven by the extreme ideology of its current regime to dedicate itself to that nefarious goal. Iran, lacking a land border or conventional forces that could pose an existential threat to Israel, uses the full force of its national assets to pool a wide range of non-conventional and asymmetric capabilities to create an existential threat against Israel, in which it encompasses the other categories of threat.

Iran as Israel's Multifaceted Threat

Proliferation: Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons is currently constrained and delayed by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but they have almost certainly not

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abandoned their efforts, at least in aspirational terms. Iran continues to develop ballistic missiles of sufficient range to reach Israel, and over time, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. Iran poses an extensive and aggressive cyber security threat aimed at critical infrastructure in Israel and other neighboring states.

Non-state actors: Iran has long supported terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, providing arms, training, and financing. In the case of Hezbollah, Iran's support has elevated their military capability almost beyond the level of a non-state actor, contributing to Hezbollah's dominance of Lebanese politics and steady advance to influence and even control Lebanese state institutions. This threat is at constant risk of escalation by the import (and potential local production) of precision-guided missiles that could threaten critical targets in Israel.

State weakness: Iran capitalizes on the weakness of neighboring Arab states to exert strong influence in local politics (Iraq and Lebanon), provide weapons to favored proxies (Lebanon and Yemen), and allow proxies to attack Iran's adversaries (mostly Yemen, but also Syria and Lebanon). In Syria, Iran has intervened directly to support its ally, the Bashar al-Assad regime, and gain influence and a foothold for direct action against Israel by inserting its own forces, supporting Shia militia, and providing technology, including missiles and drones.

Other Threats

Israel's security is also threatened by non-state actors not connected to Iran. While significant, these threats are generally less acute. State weakness has created opportunities for non-state actors such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other Sunni radical groups to operate against Israel from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Syria, Libya, and potentially Jordan.

In terms of proliferation, the main non-Iranian threat relates to Syrian chemical weapons. It has become fashionable to attack the 2013 US–Russian agreement to remove Syria's chemical weapons, but the agreement led to the destruction of over 1,200 tons of the country's declared chemical weapons stockpile, and there should be no question that this benefited the security of Israel and its neighbors. The ongoing use of chemical weapons by Syrian forces, however, shows clearly that the Assad regime did not declare all elements of its chemical weapons program to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), as it was required to do in 2013 upon acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), thus leaving behind residual stocks and/or the capability for renewed production. Syrian use of chemical weapons poses a critical violation of the CWC and the international norm against such use. The April 13 US-led strikes against Syria's chemical weapons infrastructure were therefore an appropriate response, though arguably the United States could have done more to deter future chemical weapons attacks by hitting Syrian air force assets that would degrade the regime's ability to conduct future chemical weapons attacks. It is worth noting that the Assad regime's most recent chemical attacks have been with chlorine—a material used for industrial purposes, and as such it is readily available and not a banned substance under the CWC. The Convention nevertheless prohibits its use as a weapon. There is limited evidence, however, of mass production of other chemical weapons. Not surprisingly, there is no evidence that Israeli security leaders currently view Syria's chemical weapons as a strategic threat, which is why they have not resumed the distribution of gas masks to Israeli citizens that was suspended in 2013.

These threats require continued attention and coordination but are generally more manageable than those connected with Iran.

There is one additional overarching factor that is not a threat on its own, but exacerbates all of the other threats, and that is the increased Russian presence in the region: its military forces deployed to Syria, its backing of the Assad regime, its alignment with Iran, and its supply of weapons to a range of actors. Russia's presence inherently includes the possibility of constraining Israeli freedom of action, if, for example, Moscow suspended de-confliction with the Israeli Air Force or supplied Syria with S-300 air defense systems. The Russian advance also coincides with a US inclination, across two administrations, to reduce regional military involvement and avoid open-ended and broad military commitments in the Middle East. Both

the Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump administrations have encouraged regional partners to take on a greater role in managing their security requirements, both because of the strain of recent US losses in Iraq and Afghanistan, and due to competing commitments for US attention and resources.

Unites States–Israel Cooperation

How should the United States and Israel work together to address these security threats?

First, the United States and Israel should seek to align and coordinate their strategies as much as possible. That requires comprehensive consultation across all lines of both governments. The relations cannot be managed by just a handful of people in the White House and the Prime Minister's Office. Even if the coordination on the US side is led by the National Security Council, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his department need to be critically involved and engaged with their Israeli counterparts daily. Secretary Pompeo's early visit to Israel signaled that coordination will be undertaken more effectively than in the first year of the Trump administration.

Second**,** both countries should work to maximize pressure on Iran with a united front, which includes European partners as well. The decisions that will be made in the months ahead, following the United States' withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal will have a significant impact on the broader strategic questions throughout the region. Though difficult to do over time, maintaining Iranian adherence to the nuclear restrictions of the JCPOA, and building upon them, would create the strongest basis for an effective strategy.

It is neither in the United States's nor Israel's best interest to pursue a strategy that will likely lead Iran to resume its nuclear activities, bringing the threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb back to the fore, and distracting resources and attention from dealing with closer and nearer term threats, including Iran's presence in Syria, and potentially accelerating a Saudi effort to match Iran's nuclear and missiles capabilities. While Iran will feel the sting of increased sanctions, pressure on Iran will be eased in other ways. First, Iran will have openings to exploit and widen divisions between the United States and its allies. And second, the regime will gain a new tool to combat internal pressures, attempting to shift the blame for economic hardships that have fueled recent protests about the regime's mismanaged response to US sanctions.

Going forward, the United States should avoid weakening whatever is left of the nuclear deal. The goal must be to gain French, British, and German agreement on a number of measures to improve the JCPOA, including:

- New sanctions if Tehran doesn't curtail the development and testing of nuclear-capable missiles;
- Buttressing the right and ability of UN inspectors to regularly access military sites, with severe penalties for noncompliance;
- Shoring up sanctions pressure in any realm that does not impinge directly on the nuclear deal. The Europeans should agree to the principle of imposing sanctions on Iranian entities that had sanctions lifted under the JCPOA for non-nuclear violations. These include the Central Bank of Iran and the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order, the Supreme Leader's estimated $200 billion conglomerate, which should be sanctioned due to non-nuclear sanctioned activities, such as human rights violations, terror sponsorship, ballistic missiles, and financing the slaughter in Syria.
- France, the United Kingdom, and Germany should also designate Hezbollah a terrorist organization in its entirety and do the same to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and press the entire European Union to adopt these measures.

Disagreement over how to deal with the sunset provisions in the JCPOA contributed to the breakdown of US–European Union talks because they were the most difficult to address without opening the deal to renegotiation. But the United States and its allies could still try to seek agreement on unified re-imposition of nuclear sanctions if Iran acts to drop its nuclear breakout time below one year, even beyond the sunset clauses of the JCPOA.

Third, the United States should maintain its forces in Eastern Syria. US absence from Syria would make it easier for Iran to entrench its forces

in territory formerly under ISIS control, establish permanent military bases, and remove obstacles to establishing a land bridge for funneling weapons from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon all the way to the Mediterranean. It would also deny the United States a seat at the table when negotiations resume on the post-war order in Syria. More broadly, it will create a widespread impression in the Middle East that the United States is not standing by its allies, and that Israel and its other regional allies are left to handle the Iranian threat alone. Talk of a ground force assembled by Arab states to replace US forces in Syria is pure fantasy. To demonstrate its commitment, the United States should drop talk of a transactional approach that insists Saudi Arabia and others pay for a US military presence.

Fourth, while it is unrealistic for the United States to take the leading kinetic role in combatting Iran in Syria, everything possible should be done to enable Israel to conduct its operations to confront that threat in a way that suppresses it, short of full-scale war.

The United States needs to continue to defend Israel's freedom of action in Syria by vouching for the legitimacy of these raids, as both the Obama and Trump administrations have done. Well-coordinated statements and demonstrations in support of Israel's right to defend itself help reinforce the correct understanding that Israel is not the aggressor but responding to Iran's threats. That is truer than ever, now that Iran has attacked Israel for the first time directly, firing twenty rockets from Syria at Israeli front-line military positions on May 10, 2018.

The United States should supplement its support with diplomatic efforts, aiming at three key targets: Russia, Lebanon, and Iran. Israel handles its own de-confliction with Russia effectively, but the United States should engage Russia to reinforce Israeli requests that Moscow impose constraints on Iranian provocations and military capabilities in Syria, and not act in such a way that would unreasonably constrain Israeli operations. In Lebanon, which will suffer greatly if Hezbollah joins the fray, the United States should underscore Israeli messages of deterrence. And Iran should hear, at least indirectly via European governments, that the United States will hold Iran accountable for any attacks against Israel.

The United States needs to support Israel in operational ways, both now and in the event of a major escalation. US–Israeli intelligence cooperation, including the sharing of real-time data and strategic deployment of resources, is at its height. It needs to focus intently on Iran's activities in Syria to identify them and enable Israeli strikes.

Missile defense is another area in need of strengthened cooperation. Israel's medium- and long-range missile defense systems (David's Sling and Arrow 3, respectively) are now deployed and operational, but still limited in the coverage they provide. An accelerated production schedule of interceptor missiles would help Israel expand its coverage to be better defended in the event of a full-scale conflict. The 2016 US–Israel Memorandum of Understanding on military assistance provides $500 million per year for Israeli missile defense programs. Congress and the administration should consider providing Israel an advance on those funds to enable those systems to defend more critical Israeli targets, like airfields and power plants, sooner.

Fifth, the United States should continue to build up the capabilities of its Arab partners in the Gulf so they can contribute to their own self-defense and collective efforts to push back against Iranian aggression. Israel will have to accept some advanced capabilities in the hands of its Arab neighbors, while working with Washington to ensure that its Qualitative Military Edge—Israel's ability to defeat any credible conventional military threat by itself—is maintained.

Finally, the United States and Israel must undertake the necessary planning to address the Iranian threat through military means, if all else fails.

To be sure, there are reasons that neither the United States nor Israel should rush to that outcome, besides the obvious risks and costs.

Israeli planning and acquisitions (such as the Gideon plan, the Israeli military's five-year modernization plan and the US–Israel Memorandum of Understanding) have been based on the scenario of the JCPOA remaining in place. Israel military leaders had hoped to use the time gained by the JCPOA to develop

intelligence and military options for 2025 that may not have existed in 2015. Thus far, there has been zero joint US–Israeli strategic planning for the scenario of the JCPOA's disappearance.

For over a decade, thousands of American troops have trained with their Israeli counterparts on a plan to defend Israel in a major ballistic-missile war in a biannual exercise known as Juniper Cobra. This exercise is an important signal of US solidarity with Israel. Drawing on lessons from the exercise, US commanders must be ready to deploy those troops and their associated assets on a moment's notice, to ensure that America's support would arrive in time to be relevant to the fight.

As for taking the fight to Iran itself, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned in his February 2018 Munich Security Conference speech that, if necessary, Israel would hit back at Iran on its territory, and not limit itself to striking Iran's proxies or forward deployed elements. Israel has capabilities, including the F-35, that make that threat more than rhetorical. But in the event of a major war, Israeli planners may be more focused on homeland defense and near-theater offense, rather than stretching to a long-range attack. Indeed, in a wartime scenario, Israel's primary military requirement from the United States may be timely resupply of the ammunition and ordnance necessary to strike key targets in Lebanon and Syria.

But, *in extremis*, where Israel faces a major challenge on its northern front, including the possibility of its missile-defense capabilities being overwhelmed, the United States needs to have its own offensive role, in the form of airstrikes against Iranian targets, planned, coordinated, and ready, with the ability to explain it to Congress and the American people. Such preparation provides deterrence, which hopefully ensures Iran will not risk such extreme adventurism.

US and Israeli strategists also need to have a deep conversation about a sensitive subject. The First Northern War—a two-front war in both Lebanon and Syria, with Iran fully engaged—is now widely considered inevitable by many Israelis. Israel has long been preparing for another war with Hezbollah but has sought to postpone it as long as possible. The question at hand is whether a shift in Israeli strategy is warranted. If a conflict is inevitable, the question must be asked: is there an Israeli interest, or an American one, in such a conflict taking place sooner rather than later, before the Iranian threat in Syria consolidates too much, before Hezbollah gains a domestic capability to produce precision-guided missiles, or indeed before Iran is able to regenerate its nuclear capabilities?

It is questionable whether any Israeli government could defend to its own public a decision to initiate such a war, which will surely bring a high cost in Israeli military and civilian casualties. And it would be reckless in the extreme for the United States to nix the JCPOA to rush toward a military confrontation with Iran.

But allies must not surprise each other, and there are legitimate strategic questions about the timing and methodology of confronting this threat that need to be discussed. Restraining Iran, and maybe one day fighting Iran, should be a joint US–Israeli endeavor. In addition to supporting Israel in its self-defense in this new phase, the United States needs to ensure the two countries are coordinated for every possible future phase.

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