

# RESTORING DETERRENCE: DESTABILISING THE IRANIAN REGIME

BY BARAK M. SEENER



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CENTRE  
FOR NEW  
MIDDLE  
EAST

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## About the Author

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**Barak M. Seener** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society and the founder of Strategic Intelligentsia and the Gulf Futures Forum. Barak also co-hosts *The Geo-Godfather Wars* podcast on geopolitical affairs. Previously, Barak was a Global Intelligence Manager at HSBC and the Middle East Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on whose behalf he has debriefed international defence and security policy makers and diplomats on matters relating to Middle East security. He has lectured at both NATO and the Royal College for Defence Studies and also staged the world's first conference on Palestinian statehood at RUSI in London, which was hugely successful. The conference examined the security implications for the region, bringing together leading Israeli, Palestinian, US and European representatives in 2011. Prior to joining RUSI, Barak was one of the Henry Jackson Society's founders in Westminster and was the Henry Jackson Society's Greater Middle East Section Director.

Barak published a book in 2018 entitled *Commercial Risks Entering the Iranian Market: Why sanctions make investment in the Islamic Republic of Iran a high-risk proposition*. He has also published and provided analysis and expert commentary for a range of international broadcasters including *Al-Jazeera*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *Chinese CCTV*, *Fox News*, *Sky News*, *Voice of America*, and news outlets such as *Bloomberg*, *Reuters*, *Associated Press*, the *Evening Standard*, *Jerusalem Post* and *Xinhua*.

Barak has written for publications including *Newsweek*, *The National Interest*, *The American Interest*, *Jane's Intelligence Review* and *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* on counter-terrorism, US-China dynamics, risks to supply chains, globalisation and the end of the liberal international order, transatlantic relations, universal jurisdiction, nuclear proliferation and Middle East issues including the Arab Spring, tensions in Libya, Egypt and Syria, strategic and security dynamic between Iran and the Gulf, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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## About Us

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### About The Henry Jackson Society

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**The Henry Jackson Society** is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances that keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world. The Henry Jackson Society is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales under company number 07465741 and a charity registered in England and Wales under registered charity number 1140489.

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### About the Centre for New Middle East

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The **Centre for New Middle East** is a one-stop shop designed to provide opinion-leaders and policy-makers with the fresh thinking, analytical research and policy solutions required to make geopolitical progress in one of the world's most complicated and fluid regions.

Established following the fallout from the Arab Spring, the Centre is dedicated to monitoring political, ideological, and military and security developments across the Middle East and providing informed assessments of their wide-ranging implications to key decision makers.

## Executive Summary

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The time has come for a new policy towards Iran. The US-led policy of deterrence has failed spectacularly. Its two goals were to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear bomb and to contain Iran's aggression in the Middle East. Now, Iran is on the brink of acquiring a nuclear weapon, has extended its sphere of influence across the region and, on 13 April 2024, directly attacked Israel for the first time.

This paper analyses Iran's grand strategy in the Middle East and explains how the US and Israel have contributed to the failure of deterrence. It argues that for too long, Iranian aggression has been unchallenged. Even when the US has been directly targeted by Iranian proxies, successive administrations have refused to respond directly to Iran and hold the regime accountable. The strategy was to localise conflict, avoid regional escalation and prevent broader war from breaking out in the Middle East. Ironically, it has led to the exact opposite. By attempting to prevent war, the US has encouraged conflict to erupt. The reason why: the calculus of the Iranian regime is primarily driven by regime survival and fosters disruption to insulate itself and extend its strategic depth. As such, Tehran responds to strength not diplomacy.

Israel has also miscalculated its strategy towards Iran. Like the US, Israel has focused on targeting Iran's proxies rather than associating them with their state sponsor. To this end, Israel has avoided a broader strategy of attempting to destabilise the regime.

This report makes the sober case for why the US and Israel now need to adopt a broader and more holistic strategy towards Iran and its proxies. This will entail Israel expanding its projection of power to target Iranian facilities on Iranian soil, and could be accompanied by the US conducting disproportionate responses to destabilise the Iranian regime with the effect of paradoxically restoring deterrence. Measures should include:

- Removing US carriers from the Persian Gulf, granting the US strike capability while insulating them from drones, mines and anti-ship missiles.
- Targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) <sup>1</sup> bases such as the Pasdaran base and senior IRGC personnel on Iranian or foreign soil.
- Conducting cyber-attacks on Iran's critical infrastructure.
- Targeting Iran's drone and missile facilities.
- Targeting Iran's oil infrastructure, including refining and processing facilities, domestic distribution pipelines and terminals, and the hydrocarbon export ports and related facilities.
- Targeting Iran's air defence capabilities, including airfields, command and control and anti-aircraft batteries.
- Targeting Iran's nuclear programme, including uranium conversion and uranium-enrichment programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> IRGC, also known as 'Sepah' or 'Pasdaran', was created after the 1979 revolution as the custodians of the revolution. Its primary mission is to protect the regime but it also has control over large sectors of the Iranian economy.

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## Introduction

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The West's policy of deterrence towards Iran lies in tatters. Iran's malign activities have included taking hostages, seizing ships, firing missiles at US military vessels and firing missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia via Yemen and directly at Israel. Furthermore, Iran sponsors terrorist proxies, such as the Houthis, Hezbollah, Khatib Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, which has enabled the latter to conduct the 7 October 2023 massacre in Israel. The status quo is not tenable.

The Iranian regime is on the brink of becoming a nuclear power. Iran has normalised the production of 60% uranium <sup>2</sup> (which has no civilian use) while shunning the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and conducting limited metallurgy with its nuclear programme.<sup>3</sup> Since 7 October 2023, its regional strategy has become emboldened. It has unleashed its proxies to take over vast swaths of territories in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Iran's goal: to encircle Israel, attack US assets across the region and target international shipping.

To a great degree, it has been the countries nominally most interested in preventing Iranian advances – the US and Israel – that have enabled Iranian deterrence to unravel. For decades, Iran served as a regional disruptor, escalating its malign activities and assessing its adversaries' responses. Whenever the US failed to respond to Iranian aggression, or reacted in a minimal and symbolic manner, this set a precedent for Iran to establish a new norm. This has been made worse by successive US administrations offering Iran sanctions waivers. Currently, the US lacks an Iran strategy. Moreover, the Biden Administration has a limited interest in isolating Iran diplomatically.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the US has adopted an atomised approach by distinguishing between Iran and its proxies in the region. This has resulted in the US's failure to hold the regime accountable for its aggression, instead focusing on its allied parties. Similarly, Israel has taken to merely striking at Iran's proxies that are active at its borders but never putting the regime itself at risk.

As a result, Iran has taken the strategic initiative in the region to assert its malign activities, and the US has often merely reacted to Iran's lead. Iran has achieved asserting its strategic objectives in the region by wielding an organic approach of hiding behind its proxies which insulate the regime while granting it flexibility of operations over an expansiveness of territory. The US-led Abraham Accords created a regional security architecture designed to deter Iran. Instead of deterring Iran, the new regional security architecture has protected Sunni states and Israel against Iran but has also caused Iran to respond and create its own regional security framework in the form of 'unifying the arenas' <sup>5</sup> and its 'ring of fire' <sup>6</sup> strategy to encircle Israel and expel the US from the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Rubin, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), notes that Iran does not require 20kg of 90% highly enriched uranium – the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was 75% enriched. Iran does not require a perfectly fissile bomb. With a dirty bomb, it could inflict a huge amount of economic damage to an adversary. (Henry Jackson Society, "Israel Crisis Update: The Changing Threat from Iran", *YouTube* video, 22 April 2024, <https://youtu.be/yg0Y4-HVUUUs?si=uczxUngMAXKU1BPz>).

<sup>3</sup> Norman Roule, former US National Intelligence Manager for Iran (NIM-I) at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, questions: "If Iran conducts a cold test of its nuclear programme, do we believe with this list of non-response to red lines crossed that the international community would respond with military action? Can we decisively mention which action would cross a red line?" (Ibid).

<sup>4</sup> Norman Roule notes that Iran's export of a record amount of oil – 1.8 barrels per day in March 2024, the highest rate in five years – is indicative of this fact. (Ibid).

<sup>5</sup> This term has also been referenced as 'convergence of the arenas' and 'unification of the arenas'; it is frequently referred to by Iranian leaders as part of a strategy in which Iran seeks to converge the Palestinian and Lebanon fronts in its war against Israel and launch simultaneous attacks against Israel using drones, rockets and precision missiles. This strategy of dragging Israel into a multi-arena war was devised by General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force in the Revolutionary Guards, who was assassinated by the US Army in Iraq in January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> This phrase was coined by Major General (res.) Yaakov Amidror, the former head of the Research Division of Israeli Military Intelligence, to describe Israel surrounded by Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and foreign militias in Syria. Amidror has identified that, "The guiding principle of the Ring of Fire is clear: Iran remains distant and ostensibly uninvolved, because it has no direct responsibility for any action by these elements, and there is no way to prove that it is 'the hand that rocks the cradle.' Iran is like an octopus whose center and brain are not responsible for the actions of its long arms – and therefore there is no legitimate possibility of acting against it with overt force." ("Iran's 'Ring of Fire'", The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, 8 April 2024, <https://jiss.org.il/en/amidror-irans-ring-of-fire/>).

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Being unchecked in the Middle East has led Iran to destabilise other hemispheres and align with Russia and China to undermine the liberal international order.

Fundamentally, the US and Israel cannot allow Iran to achieve nuclear weapons status. On this basis, re-establishing deterrence requires threatening the regime's sense of survivability. This can be achieved by associating Iranian proxies with the regime itself and responding to attacks by targeting IRGC officials and facilities on Iranian soil.

## Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy

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Iran seeks to destabilise the Middle East. To do so, it is projecting its power over a 5000-kilometre strategic depth into Iraq, through Jordan and into the West Bank and Israel's Green line, and beyond, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>7</sup> Iran has also wielded the Houthis in Yemen to launch attacks against Israel<sup>8</sup> as well as ships in the Red Sea. Iranian military adviser Yahya Safavi has referred to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea as "strategic points", adding that future wars will be sea-based and air-based.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Iran is contesting the US's strategy of anchoring its strategic interests in the Middle East via the Abraham Accords. The current head of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), General Michael E. Kurilla, says that Iran's goal is to push US forces out of the region. In early 2022, at his confirmation hearing, Kurilla observed that:

Tehran's primary projection tools are ballistic missiles, UAVs, and expanding maritime capabilities. Iran's missile inventory includes both medium-and short-range ballistic missiles capable of holding many regional targets at risk. Iranian surface-to-air missiles pose a significant threat to U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets operating in international airspace. Additionally, naval cruise missile technologies will strengthen Iran's Anti-Access Area Denial efforts and increase Tehran's ability to hold critical sea lines of communication at risk and threaten countries in the region with greater speed, precision, and lethality. Iran also leverages a network of proxy forces to advance its power base and build strategic depth. Iran repeatedly demonstrates a willingness to share advanced conventional weapons with Shia militant proxies and partners throughout the region.<sup>10</sup>

By mid-2024, Iran's capabilities have become even more advanced.

Iran's strategy of fostering unrest is increasing as it inches closer and closer towards nuclear weapons status.<sup>11</sup> As it does so, Iran is intensifying its proxy warfare in the region. This serves to divert the attention of the international community away from its nuclear ambitions, which are intertwined with the regime's sense of survivability.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) declared in its February 2024 report that: "Coupled with decreased transparency over its nuclear program, for the first time in years, we are facing the real possibility that Iran may weaponize its nuclear capabilities and build nuclear weapons."<sup>13</sup>

Iran used the 7 October 2023 massacre in Israel as a diversion. At the end of November 2023, while the international community's attention was turned towards Gaza, the Iranian regime

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<sup>7</sup> Israel's Green Line is the demarcation line agreed by Israel and its Arab neighbours in the 1949 Armistice Agreements that ended Israel's War of Independence.

<sup>8</sup> The Houthis operate from Yemen which is 2000km from Israel. This is further than Iran's Western border which is 700km from Israel, Tehran which is 1000km from Israel and Isfahan which is 1200km from Israel.

<sup>9</sup> "Iran Military Adviser Emphasizes Continued Red Sea Blockade", *Iran International*, 6 March 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403060680>.

<sup>10</sup> "Senate Armed Services Committee Advance Policy Questions for Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla, USA Nominee to be Commander, United States Central Command", 8 February 2022, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kurilla%20APQ%20responses.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> This does not only entail Iran's uranium enrichment but its purchase of dual usage technologies.

<sup>12</sup> Kamal Kharrazi, an adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader, expressed: "We have no decision to build a nuclear bomb but should Iran's existence be threatened, there will be no choice but to change our military doctrine." ("Iran to change nuclear doctrine if existence threatened, adviser to supreme leader says", *Reuters*, 9 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-change-nuclear-doctrine-if-existence-threatened-adviser-supreme-leader-says-2024-05-09/>).

<sup>13</sup> "The Iran Threat Geiger Counter: Reaching Extreme Danger", Institute for Science and International Security, 5 February 2024, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/the-iran-threat-geiger-counter-reaching-extreme-danger/>.

increased the production of its enrichment of 60% U-235 uranium at Natanz and Fordow to approximately nine kilograms per month.<sup>14</sup> This is a violation of both the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). IAEA chief Rafael Grossi has voiced concern that “Iran’s stance is not only unprecedented, but unambiguously contrary to the cooperation that is required.”<sup>15</sup> On 10 February 2024, the IAEA estimated that Iran could enrich enough uranium for five fission weapons within a few weeks.<sup>16</sup> In line with this, Fordow is scaling up production of highly enriched uranium – just shy of weapons grade levels.

Iran is now closer to nuclear weapons capability than at any time in the country’s history. While the building of a nuclear warhead deliverable by a missile could be perhaps two or more years away, current and former nuclear officials have noted that “The making of a crude nuclear device could follow in as little as six months after a decision is made”.<sup>17</sup> By March 2024, at the IAEA’s quarterly meeting, IAEA director Rafael Grossi admitted that the inspectorate had lost “continuity of knowledge about the production and stock of centrifuges, rotors, heavy water and uranium ore concentrate” in Iran.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, as Iran is moving ever closer to getting the bomb, it is unleashing its proxies in the Middle East to devastating effect.

### ***Iran’s ‘Unification of the Arenas’ Strategy***

The Abraham Accords fostered integration and co-dependency among signatories, coupled with the prospect of Saudi Arabia’s normalisation of relations with Israel. This new regional dynamic, however, has been directly counterbalanced by Iran coordinating Hezbollah from Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad from Gaza, Iraqi Shia militias, and the Houthis in Yemen as part of its strategy of the ‘unification of the arenas’. This is a more ambitious strategy than Iran merely seeking to extend its Shiite crescent from Iran through Iraq to Syria, Lebanon and the Israeli border at the Golan Heights.

The aim of the ‘unification of the arenas’ strategy is to create a buffer zone in the eastern Mediterranean. In so doing, Iran is establishing defensive lines at a greater distance from its borders. But this strategy is not only defensive to increase Iran’s strategic depth. It also provides Iran with new offensive outposts from which to target Israel. Via its proxy groups, Iran is now encircling Israel from Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza. As a result, Iran and its proxies are extending the Shiite crescent to create a multifront war across seven different arenas to threaten Israel. This led Yoav Gallant, Israel’s Defense Minister, to say in April 2023 that, due to the increased threats posed by Hamas and Hezbollah, “This is the end of the era of limited conflicts. We are facing a new security era in which there may be a real threat to all arenas at the same time... Today, there is a noticeable phenomenon of the convergence of the arenas.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Francois Murphy, “Iran undoes slowdown in enrichment of uranium to near weapons-grade -IAEA”, *Reuters*, 26 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-undoes-slowdown-enrichment-uranium-near-weapons-grade-iaea-2023-12-26/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Iran’s Exclusion of Inspectors ‘Extreme, Unjustified,’ UN Watchdog Says”, *Voice of America*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-s-exclusion-of-inspectors-extreme-unjustified-un-watchdog-says-/7356403.html>.

<sup>16</sup> “Iran’s Nuclear Timetable: The Weapon Potential”, *Iran Watch*, 9 April 2024, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/irans-nuclear-timetable-weapon-potential>.

<sup>17</sup> Joby Warrick, “Nuclear deal in tatters, Iran edges close to weapons capability”, *The Washington Post*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/04/10/iran-nuclear-bomb-iaea-fordow/>.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Wintour, “Diplomats fear growing power of Iranian factions that want nuclear weapons”, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/10/diplomats-fear-growing-power-of-iranian-factions-that-want-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Iddon, “‘Convergence Of Arenas’: What Israel’s Future Wars Might Look Like”, *Forbes*, 29 April 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2023/04/29/convergence-of-arenas-what-israels-future-wars-might-look-like/?sh=4ad8fb995555>.

Iran has established a joint operations room to coordinate the intelligence, military and logistical planning of operations by its proxies. The goal is, ultimately, to overwhelm Israel.<sup>20</sup> Iranian proxies, including Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad, have also been meeting frequently in Iran with regime officials to coordinate multiple fronts against Israel and advance the regime's strategy of 'unifying the arenas'. The head of Hamas's political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, met in Tehran with Iranian Chief of Staff Mohammed Bagheri and Supreme leader Ali Khamanei in March 2024.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Ziad al-Nakhalah, the head of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, met with Iran's foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian.<sup>22</sup>

For General Kurilla, the events of 7 October show "Iran exploited what they saw as a once in a generation opportunity to reshape the Middle East to its advantage." He added: "For decades now, Iran has worked to strategically encircle the region with its proxies. And in the past six months, we have seen every proxy in the Iranian threat network operationalized in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, and Yemen."<sup>23</sup>

In the process, Iran is destabilising Jordan, which has a peace agreement with Israel, and escalating tensions in the West Bank, Syria and Lebanon.<sup>24</sup> From Jordan, Iran is using intelligence operatives, terrorists and criminal gangs to send enormous quantities of arms to the West Bank.<sup>25</sup> Iran seeks to topple the Hashemite kingdom and replace it with a new Hamas-led government. By doing so, Iran seeks to produce an alternative Gaza in Jordan.<sup>26</sup> If Israel has learned anything from 7 Oct, it is that it must take measures to prevent terrorist networks from entrenching themselves in the West Bank. Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, Israel has arrested some 3700 wanted Palestinians in the West Bank, including more than 1600 affiliated with Hamas.<sup>27</sup>

Iran's aim to engulf Israel via 'unification of the arenas' cannot be separated from the regime's desire to acquire the nuclear bomb. As Israel's former national security adviser, Major General (res.) Yaakov Amidror said in 2019: "Under a nuclear umbrella, the Iranians will be free to do whatever they want in the Middle East including to build this ring of fire and to use it against Israel in the future... If they succeed to build this ring of fire (in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan the West Bank and Gaza), no one in Israel will have the ability to decide to stop the Iranian nuclear program."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Amir Hossein Vazirian, "Iran's unification of the arenas campaign against Israel: Foundations and prospects", Middle East Institute, 26 September 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-unification-arenas-campaign-against-israel-foundations-and-prospects>.

<sup>21</sup> "Iran's Military Chief Commends Hamas Leader, Vows Unwavering Support", *Iran International*, 29 March 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403293215>.

<sup>22</sup> "Iran-backed Palestinian leader vows victory over Israel in the war in Gaza", *Associated Press*, 30 March 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-palestinians-leader-israel-islamic-jihad-nakhalah-d507575f170f47e87432a48d4606ec03>.

<sup>23</sup> Jim Garamone, "DOD Leaders Detail Conditions in Middle East, Africa to House Committee", US Department of Defense, 21 March 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3714624/dod-leaders-detail-conditions-in-middle-east-africa-to-house-committee/>.

<sup>24</sup> While Jordan came to Israel's defence on 13 April in the face of the Iranian missile barrage, as the Hashemite Kingdom depends on US and Israeli support for its survival, King Abdullah's anti-Israel rhetoric had earlier inflamed local protests such as the Jordanian Youth Gathering that urged the protestors at the Israeli Embassy in Amman to "support the resistance in Gaza" and cancel Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel ("Jordanian protest group calls for more demonstrations against Gaza war, peace treaty with Israel", *AFP*, 31 March 2024, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/jordanian-protest-group-calls-for-more-demonstrations-against-gaza-war-peace-treaty-with-israel/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/jordanian-protest-group-calls-for-more-demonstrations-against-gaza-war-peace-treaty-with-israel/)). Such protests against Israel undermine Jordan's own security by offering Iran the opportunity to tap into and exploit local protests against the regime.

<sup>25</sup> Weapons are transported from Syria to Lebanon, where criminal gangs collect them at the Israeli border and move them to the West Bank. An alternative route to smuggle the weapons is from Syria through Jordan which shares a porous border of around 300 miles with Israel.

<sup>26</sup> Due to the conflict in Gaza and the depletion of Hamas, Iran's access to Gaza is increasingly limited. Therefore, Iran is seeking for both Jordan and the West Bank to serve as an alternative.

<sup>27</sup> Emanuel Fabian, "IDF kills 2 Palestinians, including Hamas commander, in northern West Bank clashes", *Times of Israel*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-kills-2-palestinians-including-hamas-commander-in-northern-west-bank-clashes/>. According to the Palestinian Authority health ministry, more than 450 West Bank Palestinians have been killed during that time period (Ibid).

<sup>28</sup> TAUVID, "Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror on Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation Dilemmas", *YouTube* video, 14 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoJWUOZMMo4>.

Indeed, had Iran been able to provide Hamas with a nuclear umbrella on 7 October 2023, Israel would have been constrained in dismantling Hamas and its terrorist infrastructure in Gaza. Similarly, had Iran been able to offer the Houthis a nuclear umbrella, international shipping in the Red Sea would have been threatened as the US and UK would not have been able to target the Houthis. A nuclear umbrella could also lead to an uptick in international terrorism such as in 2015 when the Metropolitan Police and MI5 uncovered a Hezbollah bomb plot in North London. MI5 revealed in 2022 that Iran had tried to assassinate or kidnap 10 British citizens.

## US Failure to Respond to Iranian Aggression

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The Biden Administration currently lacks an Iran strategy. At the start of his presidency, Biden said that his priority was “how we move forward and what is needed to allow us to move back into the JCPOA”.<sup>29</sup> By November 2022, President Biden admitted that the JCPOA was “dead”.<sup>30</sup> There has been no public Iran strategy formulated since to replace it.

Rather than holding Iran accountable for its advances in its nuclear program, the Biden administration sought to prevent Britain and France’s efforts to censure Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency’s member state board in early June 2024.<sup>31</sup>

The Biden Administration and its predecessors have failed to contain Iran by all too often considering the Iranian regime as a strategic partner. Like Israel, the US would respond to Iranian aggression by targeting Iranian proxies such as Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq or the Houthis in Yemen. The US strategy was to localise reprisals to avoid escalating tensions in the region. But this did not work. By adopting a limited response, the US enabled Iran to continually breach the barrier of what was deemed acceptable. This only contributed to greater escalation and regional unrest.

The Biden Administration’s ‘appeasement’ towards Iran is not new. Successive administrations have failed to forcefully respond to Iran’s targeting of US forces across the region. This has further emboldened the Iranian regime while undermining the option of deterring Iran.

Examples of how successive administrations have failed to hold the regime accountable include:

- The Bush Administration believed that the US shared common interests with Iran in Afghanistan. As such, it anticipated that Iran would assist in stabilising Afghanistan and hoped this would lead to a reduction in terrorism and insurgency. Senior US officials considered Iran’s role as mediator with the Northern Alliance during the post-war reconstruction talks at Bonn as critical.<sup>32</sup> But it was a major miscalculation: Iran went on to train and aid Shiite extremists in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, leading the Bush Administration to include it as part of the ‘Axis of Evil’.
- The Obama Administration’s JCPOA in 2015 explicitly overlooked Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism and its ballistic missile programme. Furthermore, the JCPOA gave Iran access to US\$150 billion<sup>33</sup> which included cash payments.<sup>34</sup> Iran would proceed to break limits set by the JCPOA on uranium enrichment. The US was reluctant to forcefully respond to Iran’s breaching of the nuclear deal as, rather than seeking to eliminate Iran’s capacity to develop nuclear weapons, the JCPOA sought merely

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<sup>29</sup> “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Suga of Japan at Press Conference”, The White House Briefing Room, 16 April 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/16/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-suga-of-japan-at-press-conference/>.

<sup>30</sup> Barak Ravid and Hans Nichols, “Biden in newly surfaced video: Iran nuclear deal is ‘dead’”, *Axios*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/12/20/biden-iran-nuclear-deal-dead-video>. Despite the ‘death’ of the JCPOA, it lives on not only in name, but with European support.

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Norman, “Biden Administration Presses Allies Not to Confront Iran on Nuclear Program”, *Wall Street Journal*, 27 May 2024 <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-opposes-european-plan-to-censure-iran-over-nuclear-work-85ad7fc6>.

<sup>32</sup> The US Secretary of State at the time thought that the common interests with Iran on Afghanistan could serve “as an avenue for rapprochement with Iran”. (Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016, p.42).

<sup>33</sup> Tom Norton, “Fact Check: Did the US Under Obama Give Iran \$150 Billion?”, *Newsweek*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-give-iran-150-billion-barack-obama-jack-posobiec-1835083>.

<sup>34</sup> “5 Times the Obama Admin Insisted Cash Was the Only Way to Pay Iran”, US Foreign Affairs Committee, 19 September 2016, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/blog/5-times-obama-admin-insisted-cash-way-pay-iran/>.

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to restrict Tehran's capabilities.<sup>35</sup> This enabled Iran to continue to advance with a breakout capacity whenever it wanted.

- In September 2019, when Iran attacked the Saudi Aramco oil refinery, President Trump wrote on Twitter that the US was "locked and loaded" to take action on Saudi Arabia's behalf. However, a day later, Trump said, "I'm somebody that would like not to have war" and "No, I haven't promised Saudis that. We have to sit down with the Saudis and work something out. That was an attack on Saudi Arabia, and that wasn't an attack on us. But we would certainly help them."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when Iran shot down US surveillance vehicles over international waters in 2019, the Trump Administration failed to respond.
- In 2020, after a US airstrike killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force,<sup>37</sup> the IRGC fired over 12 ballistic missiles at two Iraqi military bases. Over 100 American soldiers suffered traumatic brain injuries, but the US did not launch any retaliatory strikes.<sup>38</sup>
- In 2021, Saraya Awliya al-Dam, a pro-Iran group, fired three rockets at a US-led coalition base in Erbil. One US serviceman was injured and a US contractor killed. There was no response from the US.<sup>39</sup>
- In February 2024, the US did retaliate for three soldiers who were killed on 28 January 2024 by a suicide drone strike on a base in Jordan. The US mounted airstrikes against 85 targets in Iraq and Syria, including command and control operations, intelligence centres, rockets and missiles, unmanned aerial vehicle storages and logistics and munition supply chain facilities of militias and their IRGC sponsors. The US, however, telegraphed its intended strikes over the course of nearly a week. It even notified the Iraqi Government beforehand. This granted Iran the opportunity to move key people and assets out of harm's way. Moreover, not only did the US not target Iranian territory, but it also refrained from targeting senior IRGC officials or Iranian naval assets that were outside Iran.<sup>40</sup>

There is an inverse relationship between attempting to de-escalate tensions via proportional responses or being non-responsive to Iranian aggression on the one hand and tensions actually escalating on the other hand. To mitigate this, the US should consider an attack by an Iranian proxy as a direct attack by Iran itself which should be met with a disproportionate<sup>41</sup> US military response.

Successive administrations have overlooked Iranian attacks because they have either been thwarted or caused only minor casualties. This was a mistake and only encouraged Iran to

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<sup>35</sup> "Opinion: The emerging Iran nuclear deal raises major concerns", *The Washington Post*, Editorial, 5 February 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-emerging-iran-nuclear-deal-raises-major-concerns-in-congress-and-beyond/2015/02/05/4b80fd92-abda-11e4-ad71-7b9eba0f87d6\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-emerging-iran-nuclear-deal-raises-major-concerns-in-congress-and-beyond/2015/02/05/4b80fd92-abda-11e4-ad71-7b9eba0f87d6_story.html).

<sup>36</sup> Steve Holland and Rania El Gamal, "Trump says he does not want war after attack on Saudi oil facilities", *Reuters*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1W10X6/>.

<sup>37</sup> The US's strike against Soleimani in Iraq was a notable, if lamentably also singular, robust response to Iranian aggression.

<sup>38</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "Patriot missile defense systems now active in Iraq, say US officials", *The Associated Press*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2020/04/13/patriot-missile-defense-systems-now-active-in-iraq-say-us-officials/>.

<sup>39</sup> Bethan McKernan and Julian Borger, "Rocket attack on US airbase in Iraq kills civilian contractor", *The Guardian*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/16/rocket-attack-us-airbase-iraq-kills-civilian-contractor>.

<sup>40</sup> "Shock and Awe as America Strikes Iran's Proxies", *The Economist*, 3 February 2024, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/02/03/shock-and-awe-as-america-strikes-irans-proxies>.

<sup>41</sup> For the purpose of this report any references to 'disproportionate' responses are not in relation to harming civilians. I refer to 'disproportionate' in terms of scale of response against Iran as opposed to its proxies and targeting IRGC personnel and facilities on Iranian soil. This in line with the international legal definition of 'proportionality' in that military advantages outweigh the expected harm to civilians or civilian property (Article 51(5) (b) API) of the 1977 Additional Protocol I.

carry out more attacks. This has led to the establishment of a 'new normal' whereby Iran can strike via its proxies and suffer little consequence. It is at the heart of Iran's current strategy.

Tehran is continually seeking to establish 'new normals' of accepted terrorism that do not engender much international condemnation. For example, Iran is now able to wield proxies such as the Houthis to close the Bab el-Mandeb Strait or conduct piracy near the Strait of Hormuz, or to use both the Houthis and Hezbollah to fire rockets at Israel. To a large extent, this 'new normal' has been enabled by the US differentiating between Iran's proxies and the regime that sponsors those proxies.

Associating the regime in Tehran with its proxies would lead the US to conduct escalatory responses to attacks perpetrated by these proxies. This could ironically have the desired effect of de-escalation. The regime in Tehran responds to strength, not diplomatic manoeuvres.

Make no mistake, the Mullahs are weak and put their survival above everything else. If they feel threatened, they will back down to prioritise their own survival. They fear a direct military conflict with the US. This was evidenced when, after a drone attack on 28 January 2024, carried out by Iraqi Shia militias on a US base in north-eastern Jordan that killed three soldiers, Esmail Qaani, commander of the IRGC, instructed the Iraqi militia to cease attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria. In turn, the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades suspended attacks against US forces in the region. Similarly, Khamanei has advocated for military commanders to adopt a policy of "strategic patience" to avoid a direct military confrontation with Israel or the US.<sup>42</sup>

To effectively re-establish deterrence, Israel and the US must associate proxies with the regime itself and demonstrate willingness to target IRGC officials on Iranian soil. It is time to show Iran that its aggression will be met with force. Sanctions have simply not worked.

## ***The Unravelling of the Sanctions Regime***

The US has consistently failed to hold the regime in Tehran accountable for its malign and destabilising activities across the region. All the US has done is impose sanctions. But even then, it has only done so half-heartedly. Successive administrations have actually offered Iran sanctions waivers. This has undermined deterrence: Iran has used the funds to sponsor terrorism internationally.

US General Kurilla has admitted, "There is a risk with sanctions relief that Iran would use some of that money [earned after sanctions are lifted] to support its proxies and terrorism in the region. And if they did, it could increase risk to our forces in the region."<sup>43</sup> This assessment has not been shared by the Biden Administration or its predecessor that went beyond offering sanctions relief. In January 2016, the Obama Administration delivered US\$400 million in cash as the first instalment in a US\$1.7 billion settlement<sup>44</sup> that saw the release of four American prisoners.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Raz Zimmt, "'Unification of the arenas' might turn from an opportunity for Iran into a threat", *Iran Source*, 22 March 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/unification-arenas-iran-resistance-axis-hamas-hezbollah/#:~:text=This%20escalation%20could%20potentially%20draw%20Iran%20into%20an,at%20enhancing%20the%20balance%20of%20deterrence%20against%20Israel>.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Haboush, "Biden's CENTCOM chief pick says sanctions relief for Iran risks support for terrorism", *Al Arabiya News*, 8 February 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/02/08/Biden-s-CENTCOM-chief-pick-says-sanctions-relief-for-iran-risks-support-for-terrorism>.

<sup>44</sup> This was part of a settlement over a failed arms deal during the period of the Shah's rule.

<sup>45</sup> Elise Labott, Nicole Gaouette and Kevin Liptak, "US sent plane with \$400 million in cash to Iran", *CNN*, 4 August 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/03/politics/us-sends-plane-iran-400-million-cash/index.html>.

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The Biden White House initially said that it was prepared to lift all the sanctions reimposed by President Trump.<sup>46</sup> In 2023 alone, the US offered sanctions waivers to Iran totalling at least US\$16 billion.<sup>47</sup> Previously:

- Following its withdrawal from the JCPOA, the US imposed sanctions on Iran. Yet on 5 November 2018, the Trump Administration granted eight countries (South Korea, China, India, Italy, Greece, Taiwan, Japan and Turkey) a separate waiver that allowed them to purchase oil from Iran.<sup>48</sup> The Trump Administration announced it would stop granting these waivers on 22 April 2019. The waiver ended on 2 May 2019.<sup>49</sup>
- President Trump approved a 90-day waiver in December 2018 that was renewed on 19 March 2019<sup>50</sup> and again in June 2019 for 120 days.<sup>51</sup>
- In May 2020, the Trump Administration renewed a four-month sanctions waiver for Iraq to continue importing Iranian electricity which he extended by 60 days in late September and then by 45 days at the start of November to end just before President Biden's inauguration.<sup>52</sup>
- On 4 February 2022, the Biden Administration restored sanctions waivers in an attempt to revive nuclear talks. The waivers also induced Iran to allow international nuclear cooperation projects.<sup>53</sup>
- The Biden Administration approved 120-day sanctions waivers to allow Iran to export natural gas or electricity to Iraq on 31 March 2021,<sup>54</sup> 28 March 2022<sup>55</sup> and 21 March 2023.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>46</sup> By June 2021, the US Treasury had sought to encourage Iranian cooperation in negotiations to revive the JCPOA and had repealed sanctions on former senior National Iranian Oil Company officials and several companies involved in shipping and trading petrochemical products. Iran adopted a maximalist approach that it would only comply with the JCPOA if all US and international sanctions were lifted. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif asserted that "Iran will come back into full compliance with its nuclear deal immediately after the incoming Biden administration in the US proves its bona fides by lifting all sanctions". (Patrick Wintour, "Iran says it will comply with nuclear deal if Biden lifts all sanctions", *The Guardian*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/03/iran-comply-nuclear-deal-biden-lifts-all-sanctions>).

<sup>47</sup> "US Threatens More Sanctions To Disrupt Iran's 'Malign' Activity", *Iran International*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202404169760>.

<sup>48</sup> Ashish Kumar Sen, "A look at the implications of Trump's decision to end sanctions waivers for countries importing Iranian oil", *New Atlanticist*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-ends-sanctions-waivers-for-countries-importing-iranian-oil/>.

<sup>49</sup> Julian Borger, "US toughens stance on Iran, ending exemptions from oil sanctions", *The Guardian*, 23 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/23/us-toughens-stance-on-iran-ending-exemptions-from-oil-sanctions>.

<sup>50</sup> Natasha Turak, "Trump Grants Iraq a New 90-Day Sanctions Waiver to Buy Iranian Energy: Source", *CNBC*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/19/trump-administration-grants-iraq-a-new-90-day-iran-sanctions-waiver.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Shawn Donnan, "US Grants Iran Waiver to Continue Buying Iranian Electricity", *Bloomberg*, 15 June 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-15/u-s-grants-iraq-waiver-to-continue-buying-iranian-electricity?embedded-checkout=true>.

<sup>52</sup> "US Extends Iraq Sanctions Waiver Until Before Biden Inauguration", *AFP*, 21 November 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/us-extends-iraq-sanctions-waiver-until-before-biden-inauguration/articleshow/79337364.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>53</sup> "The waivers had allowed Russian, Chinese and European companies to carry out non-proliferation work to effectively make it harder for Iranian nuclear sites to be used for weapons development", (Humeysa Pamuk, "U.S. restores sanctions waiver to Iran with nuclear talks in final phase", *Reuters*, 5 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-administration-restores-sanctions-waiver-iran-talks-final-phase-2022-02-04/>).

<sup>54</sup> Maryam Sinaee, "US Renewed Iran Sanctions Waiver For Iraq As Nuclear Talk Resumed", *Iran International*, 4 December 2021, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211204773340>.

<sup>55</sup> "US issues new sanctions waiver for Iraq to import Iranian electricity", *The Cradle*, 29 March 2022, <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/4413>.

<sup>56</sup> Arshad Mohammed, "Iraq-Iran gas-for-oil barter would likely violate US sanctions", *Reuters*, 14 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/iraq-iran-gas-for-oil-barter-would-likely-violate-us-sanctions-2023-07-14/>. The Biden Administration approved 120-day sanctions waivers to allow Iraq to purchase natural gas and electricity from Iran. These waivers continue to be renewed every 120 days. The latest was on 13 March 2024. U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press briefing on 14 March 2024: "With respect to the waiver itself, yes, we did issue this waiver, and I would emphasize, as you've heard me before, that these are waivers that have been regularly issued to Iraq going back to 2018 under a previous administration. This is now the 21st time that this particular waiver has been issued." (Matthew Miller, "Department Press Briefing - March 14, 2024", U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-march-14-2024/>).

- In April 2023, the Biden Administration renewed waivers permitting Russian state-controlled firms to work at the Fordow nuclear plant where Iran is enriching uranium.<sup>57</sup>
- In September 2023, the Biden Administration unfroze US\$6 billion of Iran's oil money in exchange for five detainees.<sup>58</sup>
- In November 2023, the Biden Administration offered Iraq a four-month waiver that enabled the release of around US\$10 billion.<sup>59</sup>

Sanctions waivers fuel Iran's ability to act with impunity. In turn, they enable and embolden the Iranian regime to consistently take the strategic initiative in the region.

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<sup>57</sup> Adam Kredo, "Biden Gives Iran and Russia Green Light To Continue Nuclear Work", *The Washington Free Beacon*, 6 February 2023, <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/biden-gives-iran-and-russia-green-light-to-continue-nuclear-work/>.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Wintour and Haroon Janjua, "Five Americans head home in \$6bn US-Iran prisoner swap deal", *The Guardian*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/five-americans-fly-out-of-iran-in-6bn-oil-money-prisoner-swap#:~:text=In%20an%20elaborate%20and%20delicate,before%20heading%20back%20to%20Washington>. A lawsuit brought by Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-Texas) and victims of past terrorist attacks in Israel claimed that the Biden Administration received internal warnings of the "high risk" of terrorist groups being the beneficiaries of financial support in the West Bank and Gaza which would be a violation of the Taylor Force Act, signed into law by President Donald Trump. Yet the Biden Administration "knowingly and unlawfully" subsidised Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups US\$1.5 billion knowing that it was allocated for "tunnels, rockets, weapon procurement, and command and control infrastructure" in the West Bank and Gaza. The State Department obtained a March 2021 waiver from the US Treasury that admitted that US aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other groups in the West Bank and Gaza was at "high risk" of falling into the hands of Hamas and other terrorist groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Prior to cutting off funding to UNRWA following reports that its employees participated in the 7 October attacks, the Biden Administration provided more than US\$1 billion in aid to UNRWA. Rep. Ronny Jackson asserted that "Biden and Blinken have blood on their hands, and sending millions of fungible American taxpayer dollars to UNRWA has directly led to Palestinian terror against Israel." Josh Christenson, "Biden 'knowingly and unlawfully' gave \$1.5B that helped fund Hamas, other terror groups: suit", *New York Post*, 15 April 2024, <https://nypost.com/2024/04/15/us-news/biden-admin-knowingly-and-unlawfully-gave-1-5b-in-us-aid-that-helped-fund-hamas-terror-groups-suit/>.

<sup>59</sup> "Biden Allows Iran to Access Another \$10 Billion Amid Gaza War", *Iran International*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202311150106>.

## Iran's Regional Leadership

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Iran is setting the tone in the Middle East. Iranian proxies have threatened the US with impunity if it supports Israel in the conflict against Hamas in Gaza. Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Badr Organization that oversees IRGC-linked militias in Iraq, proclaimed that the IRGC “will consider all American targets legitimate”<sup>60</sup> if the US gets involved. This was echoed by Abdel-Malek al-Houthi, leader of Yemen’s Houthi rebels, who issued a similar warning saying the Houthis would target American forces with drones and “other military options”.<sup>61</sup> He stated that the Houthis are in “complete coordination” with other members of the IRGC-backed so-called “axis of resistance”.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the Iraq-based Kataib Hezbollah said in October 2023 that it would use missiles, drones and its special forces to target US bases.<sup>63</sup> Ahmad “Abu Hussein” al-Hamidawi, head of the Kataib Hezbollah militia, said in a statement, “Our missiles, drones and special forces are ready to direct qualitative strikes at the American enemy in its bases and disrupt its interests if it intervenes in this battle.”<sup>64</sup>

The Biden Administration’s non-response to threats made by Iran’s proxies has enabled Iran to destabilise the regional security landscape and place the US in the position of merely responding to as opposed to pre-empting Iranian-led threats. In this respect, the US is following Iran’s lead. As a result, this erodes the US’s deterrence towards Iran<sup>65</sup> while making the US dependent upon the compliance of Iran and China vis-à-vis its security interests in the region. An example of this was the US failed attempt in January 2024 to rely on China intervening with Iran as a means of halting Houthi attacks against international shipping.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, Iran took the strategic initiative in January 2024 when the Biden Administration’s Middle East czar, Brett McGurk, and Special Envoy on Iran, Abram Paley, met in Oman with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani and requested that Iran restrain Yemen’s Houthi rebels.<sup>67</sup> The US entreated Iran itself for Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria to cease targeting US forces. In response, Iran was able to attempt to create a fissure between the US and Israel as Kani pressed for the US to broker a ceasefire in Gaza.<sup>68</sup> In turn, the Biden Administration became increasingly critical of the manner in which Israel was executing the

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<sup>60</sup> “Iran’s allies in Iraq, Yemen threaten U.S. over intervention in Israel”, *Reuters*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/senior-iraqi-political-figure-threatens-target-us-interests-if-it-backs-israel-2023-10-10/>.

<sup>61</sup> “Yemen’s Houthis warn they will fire missiles, drones if US intervenes in Gaza conflict”, *Reuters*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/yemens-houthis-warn-they-will-fire-missiles-drones-if-us-intervenes-gaza-2023-10-10/>.

<sup>62</sup> Gerald Feierstein, “Houthi rise in prominence among Iran’s ‘axis of resistance’”, *Defense News*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2023/12/04/houthis-rise-in-prominence-among-irans-axis-of-resistance/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Iran’s allies in Iraq, Yemen threaten U.S.”.

<sup>64</sup> Lucia Binding, “US shoots down drones targeting its troops in Iraq as regional tensions flare”, *Sky News*, 19 October 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/us-shoots-down-drones-targeting-its-troops-in-iraq-as-regional-tensions-flare-12987495>.

<sup>65</sup> The current reality is not aligned with General Kurilla’s assertion, “Today, CENTCOM’s priorities are to deter Iran, counter violent extremist organizations, and compete strategically with China and Russia”, (“CENTCOM Commander’s Opening Remarks During his House Armed Services Committee Testimony”, 23 March 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Transcripts/20230323HASC.pdf>).

<sup>66</sup> “US asks China to urge Iran to curb Red Sea attacks by Houthis – FT”, *Reuters*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-urges-china-help-curb-red-sea-attacks-by-iran-backed-houthis-ft-2024-01-24/>. General Kurilla noted that “what it shows is that China, not only do they have their economic information and military instruments of national power... coming into the region, we are now seeing really for the first time their diplomatic instrument of national power”, (“House Armed Services Committee Hearing U.S. Military Posture and National Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East and Africa”, 23 March 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3340646/house-armed-services-committee-hearing-us-military-posture-and-national-security/>).

<sup>67</sup> “US held secret talks with Iran over Red Sea attacks”, *Financial Times*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/89b01990-7657-45ea-baaa-1f214b40f1cb>.

<sup>68</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Eric Schmitt, “Iran and U.S. Held Secret Talks on Proxy Attacks and Cease-Fire”, *The New York Times*, 15 March 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/15/world/middleeast/iran-us-secret-talks.html>. This dynamic of the US beseeching Iran to de-escalate its attacks on US forces has contributed to the Biden Administration’s growing critique of Israel’s approach in Gaza.

war in Gaza. It went on to advocate a ceasefire in Gaza. This contributed to Israel's growing diplomatic isolation while fostering schisms within Israeli society. An article in *Tasnim News* highlighted the "increase[ing] multilayered crisis inside the Zionist regime", heralding that Israel is more "isolated than ever"<sup>69</sup> and revealing that the effect of this diplomatic about-turn has worked in Iran's interests.

Iran feels emboldened by this situation. After attacking Israel directly on 13 April 2024, Iran's mission to the UN issued the bold statement on X that this "is a conflict between Iran and the rogue Israeli regime, from which the U.S. MUST STAY AWAY!".<sup>70</sup> The Biden Administration surrendered to Iran's demands by seeking Israel's commitment not to carry out a large strike in Iran in response to Tehran's attacks against Israel. Egyptian officials relayed to the Qatari news outlet Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that "The American administration showed acceptance of the plan previously presented by the occupation government regarding the military operation in Rafah in exchange for not carrying out a large-scale attack against Iran."<sup>71</sup>

The US sought to justify not holding Iran accountable for its escalation by denying the fact that a direct attack by Iran against Israel constitutes an erosion of deterrence and an increase in escalation. This led President Biden to relay to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US wouldn't support any Israeli counterattack against Iran. The blame was inverted: it became Israel's responsibility, not Iran's, to avoid causing regional escalation. The Biden Administration expressed concern that a swift Israeli response could fail to factor in the potential strategic fallout, and that Netanyahu was trying to "drag the US more deeply into a broader conflict."<sup>72</sup>

Of course, the US played an important role in the recent direct confrontation between Iran and Israel. But for the US, this incident proved that victory is not to effectively deter Iran. Rather, it is simply to successfully defend against Iran, as happened when Israel, the US, UK, Saudi Arabia and Jordan intercepted Iran's ballistic and cruise missiles on 13 April 2024. "You got a win. Take the win.",<sup>73</sup> President Biden told Netanyahu.

By directly attacking Israel, Iran tested the boundaries of what is acceptable. It was essential for Israel to respond to Iran's aggression. It did so by penetrating Iran's air defences and targeting its S-300 air defence in Isfahan which protects Iran's Natanz nuclear facility. Had Israel not responded to Iran's attacks it would have created a new normal whereby Iran could directly target Israel and not anticipate any consequences. This new precedent would be reinforced if Iran extended a nuclear umbrella to its proxies which could also grant it a degree of cover if it launched direct attacks from Iranian soil. Moreover, the US's commitment to not holding Iran accountable weakens the Abraham Accords as it sets a precedent for signatories and Saudi Arabia that the US security umbrella is ineffectual.

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<sup>69</sup> "Israel Gripped by Multiple Internal Crises: Iranian FM", *Tasnim News Agency*, 31 March 2024, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2024/03/31/3061276/israel-gripped-by-multiple-internal-crises-iranian-fm>. Sima Shine, Head of the Iran Program at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and former Head of the Research & Evaluation Division of the Mossad, noted that apart from being politically condemned internationally, Israel was entrenched in a prolonged war in Gaza that also saw its population having to relocate from the north and the south. (Henry Jackson Society, "Israel Crisis Update: The Changing Threat from Iran").

<sup>70</sup> Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations, New York (@Iran\_UN), X/Twitter post, 13 April 2024, 11:06pm, [https://twitter.com/Iran\\_UN/status/1779269993043022053](https://twitter.com/Iran_UN/status/1779269993043022053).

<sup>71</sup> Cited in *Middle East Eye*, "US agrees to Israel's Rafah plan in return for not carrying out major Iran strike: report", 18 April 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/live-blog/live-blog-update/us-agrees-israels-rafah-plan-return-not-carrying-out-major-iran-strike>.

<sup>72</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Iran attacks Israel: No drones, cruise missiles breached Israeli airspace", *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 April 2024, <https://m.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-796838>.

<sup>73</sup> Harriet Barber, "'You got a win. Take the win.' Joe Biden tells Netanyahu", *The Telegraph*, 14 April 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/04/14/biden-tells-netanyahu-us-will-not-support-a-strike-on-iran/>.

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As a result, while member states to the Abraham Accords shared intelligence and intercepted the drones and ballistic missiles that Iran launched at Israel, cooperation and even co-dependency within the region's new security architecture underpinned by CENTCOM has its limits.<sup>74</sup> As opposed to the Biden Administration, the Gulf States and Israel do not consider regional defence against Iranian attacks to be synonymous with deterring Iran. As a result, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states believe the Biden Administration lacks leadership. As such, they are concerned about alienating Iran and are seeking to avoid regional escalation by directly confronting Iran or its proxies.

Arab countries including the UAE are denying the US access to from using military facilities on their soil to target Iran.<sup>75</sup> Already in February 2024, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Turkey denied the US the right to use their bases and airspace to retaliate against Iran or attacks emanating from its proxies in Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea.<sup>76</sup> Fundamentally, the Abraham Accords has remained unaffected by the 7 October attacks. However, Hamas's attacks on Israel hindered normalisation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Thus, it is essential to re-establish deterrence to ensure the survivability of the Abraham Accords. To do so, the Accords need to be deepened or extended.<sup>77</sup>

### ***The New Security Architecture of the Abraham Accords***

Despite Iran's unleashing of its proxies to undermine the connectivity between the signatories of the Abraham Accords, strategic ties between the signatories remain unaffected by the conflict in Gaza.

The US is anchoring its strategic interests in the region via a new regional security architecture produced by the Abraham Accords that is also being used by the US to offset groups such as ISIS Khorasan in Afghanistan. Furthermore, General Kurilla has asserted that the US was building regional partnerships as part of this strategy. Kurilla stated: "We look at...our partners to be the regional constructs to deter Iran."<sup>78</sup> Iran is isolated precisely by the co-dependency fostered by the Accords between signatories. Moreover, their co-dependency is coupled by their deepened partnership with the US. This fuels Iran's aspiration to strategically encircle the region to drive the US out.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The Middle East Air Defense (MEAD) is driving the emerging regional security architecture. For more on this, see Barak M. Seener, "Unfreezing the Abraham Accords: A New Transatlantic Strategy for Greater Peace, Stability and Integration in the Middle East", Henry Jackson Society, 22 February 2024, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Unfreezing-the-Abraham-Accords-by-Barak-Seener.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> See also Politico, Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward and Nahal Toosi, "UAE restricts US ability to launch retaliatory airstrikes against Iran proxies", *Politico*, 14 February 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/14/united-arab-emirates-retaliatory-airstrikes-iran-00141460>.

<sup>76</sup> "Qatar and Kuwait Prohibit US from Using Its Air Bases, Airspace for Strikes on Iran", *Defense Security Asia*, 12 April 2024, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/qatar-and-kuwait-prohibit-us-from-using-bases-airspace-for-strikes-on-iran/>. Norman Roule notes that due to the US's non-action vis a vis Iran, Gulf allies seek a détente with Iran. They will not engage in robust opposition to Iran unless they receive cover. They will explore a dynamic in how Saudi Arabia and the US evolve their negotiations for their strategic agreement discussions. Furthermore, Iran set a precedent to Gulf allies that the direct or proxy attacks against Israel can be done to Gulf states. In response, Gulf states will require the US to commit to more than a small number of aircraft in their countries to launch attacks on Iran or its proxies. If the US will not remain the next day, the proxies will attack Gulf states. (Henry Jackson Society, "Israel Crisis Update: The Changing Threat from Iran").

<sup>77</sup> For more on this, see Seener, "Unfreezing the Abraham Accords".

<sup>78</sup> "House Armed Service Committee Hearing". A reason for the US's reliance on the Abraham Accords to deter Iran is as it seeks to wield the connectivity created among signatories to anchor the US's strategic interests in the Middle East while it pivots towards Asia to contend with great power competition with China. For more information on this, see Seener, "Unfreezing the Abraham Accords".

<sup>79</sup> Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla, USA to be General and Commander, United States Central Command", 8 February 2022, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-03\\_02-08-2022.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-03_02-08-2022.pdf). Iran's determination was identified by Kurilla, who, in a testimonial to the Senate Armed Services Committee on 8 February 2022, stated that Iran sought to drive US forces out of the region while avoiding escalation into major conflict. ("Senate Armed Services Committee Advance Policy Questions for Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla"), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kurilla%20APQ%20responses.pdf>.



Despite General Kurilla's exhortation that interoperability must be enhanced to "deter and, when required, defeat Iranian conventional military capability across multiple domains" <sup>80</sup> there is no evidence that the Abraham Accords has deterred Iran. Rather the interoperability serves to defend signatories against Iran. As a result, despite General Kurilla stating that "we must continue investing in technology, to include Artificial Intelligence and machine learning platforms and programs, to increase our ability to detect, defend, and respond to conventional Iranian military capabilities," this does not constitute deterrence, but defence. In a similar vein, General Kurilla promotes defence as opposed to deterrence when he says, "Iran has a very capable offensive cyber capability. We see that playing out in the CENTCOM region right now. So I think the areas that we can also work on is hardening our cyber defences of our partners in the region." <sup>81</sup>

On 13 April, this defence architecture was effective at defending Israel against Iran's unprecedented direct attack, when it launched 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles and 120 ballistic missiles from its soil. Yet effective interception is no substitute for deterring Iran from launching these attacks in the first place.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla to be General and Commander, United States Central Command", 8 February 2022, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-03\\_02-08-20221.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-03_02-08-20221.pdf),

## Israel's Strategic Response

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Israel's strategy towards Iran has long been to prevent Iran from establishing a military base on its border with Syria. Furthermore, Israel has sought to delay Iran's nuclear programme rather than to prevent it from reaching the nuclear status.<sup>82</sup> To this end, Israel has engaged in the 'war between wars' with the Iranian regime. This is part of a shadow warfare strategy that has gone on for nearly 45 years and has enabled the two sides to avoid direct conflict until recently.

As part of this strategy, Israel has conducted airstrikes on Iranian proxies or the IRGC when it operates near Israel's borders, especially in Lebanon and Syria. But this was a purely reactive strategy. It did not deter Iran's strategy of 'uniting the arenas' while having broader regional implications. Both Israel and the US maintained a limited focus on responding to Iranian proxies, as opposed to addressing the source of tensions that is the Iranian regime. Consequently, the US and Israel's deterrence against Iran eroded.

An example of this limited strategy in action was Israel's airstrikes on 1 April 2024 on Iran's consulate in Damascus, killing seven IRGC officers, including two senior commanders. Despite Iran's response on 13 April 2024, when it launched direct drone and missile attacks on Israel, the 1 April strike may further prompt an Iranian reaction in the UAE to threaten the Abraham Accords or Straits of Hormuz. Making a veiled reference to the Abraham Accords, Alireza Tangsiri, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard's Navy Commander, stated that Iran perceived Israel's presence in the United Arab Emirates as a threat and warned that Tehran could close the Strait of Hormuz if deemed necessary. Tangsiri added, "We know that the Zionists [Israel] were not brought to the UAE for economic purposes, but rather for security and military work. This is a threat to us and should not happen."<sup>83</sup>

Israel must abandon its limited strategy of merely responding to attacks by Iranian proxies or at striking Iranian proxies on its borders to prevent them from establishing a military foothold. Israel must expand its power projection to strike at facilities inside Iran and destabilise the Iranian regime. This would prevent the Iranian regime from achieving deniability by hiding behind its proxies and reconstitute deterrence. Israel can achieve this as it has ample aerial and naval capabilities to deliver ordinances deep into Iran including against sites that the Iranian regime considers protected. All Israel requires is to undertake the strategic decision to deploy them. Israel's air force possesses the F35 and F15 that have long-range strike capabilities. Israel also has Jericho missiles that have not been used fully in an operational setting, but the potential exists for Israel to deploy them and not only rely on manned platforms such as fighter jets.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> According to Sima Shine, Israel had a policy of targeting arms being supplied from Iraq to Syria through the Kamal checkpoint or an international airport. As a result, Iran perceived Israel as less able to harm Iran than the US and only the US had the ability to deter Iran. (Henry Jackson Society, "Israel Crisis Update: The Changing Threat from Iran").

<sup>83</sup> "IRGC naval chief threatens to close key strait, says response to consulate attack coming", *Reuters* and *Times of Israel*, 9 April 2024, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/irgc-naval-chief-threatens-to-close-key-strait-says-response-to-consulate-attack-coming/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/irgc-naval-chief-threatens-to-close-key-strait-says-response-to-consulate-attack-coming/).

<sup>84</sup> Interview between Barak Seener and Lt. Col. (Ret.) Jonathan Conricus on 23 May 2024.

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## Iran's Global Strategy

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Beyond its strategy of 'uniting the arenas' in the region, Iran is also aligning with China and Russia as part of the 'axis of resistance'. The goal: to push the US out of the Middle East and undermine the liberal international order. As such, Iran has moved beyond 'uniting the arenas' to 'uniting the theatres' by serving as a source of instability in foreign theatres. This has led Iran to supply Shahed-136 drones to Russia to use in Ukraine and also to export drones to Venezuela.<sup>85</sup> Iran in turn is awaiting the SU-35 which is a fourth-generation Russian fighter aircraft.<sup>86</sup> Letting Iran go unchecked in the Middle East has allowed it to spread to new theatres – to devastating effect.

Apart from Iran's arc of influence threatening Israel from its northern borders, Tehran is forming a second Iranian crescent in Africa's Sahel region in places such as Sudan, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad. Those countries are experiencing a crisis in governance and a surge in Islamist terror. This second Shiite crescent could destabilize Egypt and threaten Israel from across its southern border.<sup>87</sup>

In turn, as foreign theatres have also blended into the Middle East via the 'axis of resistance', Iran, Russia and China have conducted joint naval drills that could impact the Houthis' capabilities. The Houthis, with Iran's backing, have refrained from attacking Russian and Chinese vessels. They are, thus, part of a broader global shift in which Iran, Russia and China work together and seek to reduce US power. By requesting China to serve as an intermediary with Iran and the Houthis, the Biden Administration is shoring up the 'axis of resistance'. In contrast to Iran, Israel is constraining its resources to one arena at a time and cannot contend with Hezbollah and Iran simultaneously. This demonstrates the efficacy of Iran's strategy of 'uniting the arenas'. The US is also following suit and unifying theatres. Between May 2021 and February 2023, arms and ammunition intercepted by the US that Iran had transferred to its Houthi proxies in Yemen was sent to Ukraine.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Tim Stickings, "Iran-fuelled drone race shapes the war in Ukraine", *The National*, 22 February 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2024/02/22/iran-fuelled-drone-race-shapes-the-war-in-ukraine/>. General Kurilla said that "Iran has developed a full-scale production pipeline for supplying weapons to Russia". ("Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2025 and The Future Years", U.S. Central Command, 7 March 2024, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3700887/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-posture-of-united-states-central-command/>).

<sup>86</sup> Paul Iddon, "Iran Might Receive Its First Su-35 Flanker Fighters From Russia Next Week", *Forbes*, 20 April 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2024/04/20/iran-might-receive-its-first-su-35-flanker-fighters-from-russia-next-week/#:~:text=It%20is%20widely%20believed%20Iran,by%20its%20war%20against%20Ukraine.>

<sup>87</sup> Ronen Levi and Asher Fredman, "Another Crescent for Iran to Exploit", *Newsweek*, 28 May 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/another-crescent-iran-exploit-opinion-1905350#:~:text=Iran%20is%20also%20seeking%20to,steps%20towards%20acquiring%20Nigerian%20uranium.>

<sup>88</sup> Jonathan Landay, "US sends seized Iranian weapons to Ukraine", *Reuters*, 9 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-sends-seized-iranian-weapons-ukraine-2024-04-09/>.

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## Conclusion and Recommendations

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Escalation in the Middle East is an inevitability as Iran is on the brink of becoming a nuclear power and, as a result, is ramping up its aggression across multiple theatres. Attempts by the US to localise the threat posed by Iran will contribute to greater escalation and plays into Iran's 'ring of fire' strategy which promotes its deniability of its proxies' attacks. The US and Israel will be forced to adopt a set of robust responses which they have respectively sought to avoid for all these years to prevent the Iranian regime from achieving the nuclear status.

Furthermore, to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power and to effectively counter Iran's 'uniting the arenas' strategy, the US and Israel should consider strategies to destabilise the Iranian regime. Israel should extend its power projection to target IRGC facilities and personnel on Iranian soil with the aim of destabilising the regime. The US and Israel should associate Iranian proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Hezbollah al Haq and the Houthis with the regime that sponsors them. The US should expand its campaign against the Houthis. Their goal should not be simply to defend international shipping but to degrade the Houthis' capabilities in the Red Sea and to target Houthi leaders.

Furthermore, targeting Hamas in Rafah should not be deemed a separate campaign from striking at the Houthis in Yemen or IRGC leaders on Iranian soil. This will have the desired effect of reconstituting deterrence by showing Iran that there are consequences for its malign activities. This could take the form of:

- Removing US carriers from the Persian Gulf which is narrow and shallow; this would make US ships less vulnerable to Iranian drones, mines and anti-ship missiles while sending a message to the Iranian regime that it may be targeted<sup>89</sup>
- Targeting IRGC bases such as the Pasdaran base and senior IRGC personnel on Iranian or foreign soil
- Conducting cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure
- Targeting drone and missile facilities
- Targeting Iran's oil infrastructure, including refining and processing facilities, domestic distribution pipelines and terminals, and the hydrocarbon export ports and related facilities
- Targeting Iran's air defence capabilities, including airfields, command and control and anti-aircraft batteries
- Targeting Iran's nuclear programme, including uranium conversion and uranium-enrichment programs.

It should not be acceptable for Iran to align with Russia and China as part of the 'axis of resistance' and provide Russia with drones. Just as Iran 'unites the arenas', the US should do the same and punish such attempts. Iranian-sponsored terrorism in one area or theatre should be met with a US response in another, including on Iranian soil.

The Iranian regime should be made aware that its meddling in Ukraine will warrant strikes on IRGC representatives in Lebanon and in Iran alike. A campaign of disproportionate responses

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Rubin noted that if US carriers are located 600km away in the Indian Ocean, the US can strike Iran, however Iran cannot respond with any accuracy. (Henry Jackson Society, "Israel Crisis Update: The Changing Threat from Iran").

to Iran's malign activities is likely to have the desired effect of reigning in the Iranian regime and establishing red lines. Furthermore, a strategy of destabilising the regime will ultimately also undermine Iran's participation in the 'axis of resistance', which is aimed at disrupting foreign theatres such as Ukraine and challenging the liberal international order.



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