



# PROCEEDINGS

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT ON DETERRENCE AND NONPROLIFERATION

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Implications of the Middle East Conflict on Deterrence and Nonproliferation” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on July 22, 2025. The symposium examined the strategic, geo-political, operational, and proliferation impacts of the recent “12-day War” between Iran and Israel and the deterrence implications of the U.S. military strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities.*

### **David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)**

***David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.***

Israel’s attack on Iran’s nuclear enterprise—and the supporting U.S. strikes on Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan—have changed the Middle East and overarching strategic dynamic in significant ways:

- From a deterrence perspective, the United States has demonstrated that actions have consequences by its seriousness, consistent with U.S. policy over multiple administrations, in denying the Iranian regime access to nuclear weapons. It also once again proved the value of missile defenses in not only protecting citizens against enemy missile attack but creating additional opportunities for restraint, evaluation of the situation, and de-escalation of crises.
- From an extended deterrence and assurance perspective, *Operation Midnight Hammer* has arguably strengthened the credibility of the American commitment to the security of friends and allies by demonstrating that America’s words of support and “ironclad” assurances to allies and strategic partners will be backed with actions.
- From a military/operational perspective, the U.S. strikes highlighted the value of having capabilities that can hold at risk an adversary’s hard and deeply buried targets, assets which, it can be inferred, the adversary holds in high value. Why bury an asset deep underground unless you consider it of such high value that it must be protected against destruction? Knowing what an adversary values most and having the ability to hold those targets at risk is key to tailored deterrence.
- From a proliferation perspective, Israel’s action has been called one of the most significant counterproliferation acts in recent history perhaps dissuading nuclear weapon state wannabees and other regional powers from contemplating the acquisition of their own nuclear weapons.
- From a geo-strategic perspective, the so-called “12-day war” has arguably exposed the fragility of the Iranian regime and may yet provide the impetus for heightened



domestic unrest, reduced Iranian support to terrorist organizations, and possibly even the beginning of the end for the Iranian clerical regime.

The U.S. military action has also once again raised the issues of the legality of “preemptive” versus “preventive” strikes, the appropriate balance of war powers between the executive and legislative branches, and the applicability of Just War theory to this particular conflict. All of these issues deserve consideration in weighing the effects and implications of the Israeli and American military actions.

Importantly, it is critical to understand what lessons are being drawn by U.S. friends and allies, as well as by U.S. adversaries. Certainly, China, Russia, and North Korea— notwithstanding their public condemnations of the Israeli and American military actions— are taking stock of the impact of the strikes on their “Axis of Authoritarians” and their willingness, desire, and capabilities to confront the United States or U.S. allies militarily.

In my view, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of these issues for deterrence and for regional and global stability. With this as background and hopefully useful context, we are fortunate to have a great lineup of experts on our panel today.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Keith B. Payne**

***Keith B. Payne is President of the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy.***

Since 1976, no Republican or Democratic administration has deployed missile defenses to reduce U.S. homeland vulnerability to Russian or Chinese strategic missiles.

Signaling a new initiative, President Trump’s January 27 Executive Order, entitled *The Iron Dome for America*, calls for a U.S. missile defense system to protect U.S. citizens, territory, infrastructure, and military forces against all opponents. It also calls for the examination of cooperation with allies to protect their territories, populations and military forces. The Trump Administration has given the label “Golden Dome” to a new homeland defense system that moves progressively toward these new defensive goals.

There are several lessons from the Twelve-Day War regarding the likely value of missile defenses. There is considerable difference between defending against intercontinental missiles armed with nuclear weapons and defending against shorter range missiles that are conventionally armed. Nevertheless, lessons from the war can apply broadly.

During the war, Israel’s layered missile defenses reportedly intercepted some 90 percent of the 500-550 missiles Iran launched at Israel. Apparently 36 of the Iranian missiles that penetrated Israeli defenses detonated in population centers, killing 28 persons, inflicting thousands of injuries, and displacing over 13,000 Israelis.

While Iran had pursued diverse offensive missile systems for decades, Israel focused on fielding multiple layers of missile defense. The effectiveness of Israel’s layered defenses

demonstrates their potential value for the deterrence of aggression by decisively denying aggressors the expectation that their missiles will be of reliable military or coercive effect.

For example, Russia, China and North Korea appear to anticipate that limited missile threats to the United States will enable them to coerce Washington away from coming to the aid of U.S. allies—thereby enabling their expansionist plans against U.S. allies. Layered U.S. missile defenses could usefully deny opponents' confidence in such coercive threats and help restore the effectiveness of U.S. extended deterrence for allies; layered defenses could also undercut enemy confidence in the potential military effects of even large-scale nuclear attacks—thereby helping to deter such attacks.

The war also demonstrated the unparalleled value of defenses in the event deterrence fails. The up to 470 Iranian missiles that were intercepted over Israel certainly would have inflicted thousands of additional casualties and billions of dollars in additional civilian and military destruction.

There are, of course, considerable differences in protecting against Iran's hundreds of conventionally armed missiles and defending against thousands of nuclear warheads on intercontinental missiles. Even Israel's remarkably successful 90 percent defensive success rate could lead to intolerable destruction if an attack against the United States involved thousands of Russian and Chinese nuclear warheads.

Critics of Golden Dome seem to emphasize only this massive attack scenario to cast doubt on the potential value of missile defense. However, it is only one of many possible nuclear attack scenarios confronting Washington, and perhaps the most likely to be deterred by the U.S. potential to defeat adversaries' offensive military goals via defenses, and respond with a massive nuclear reply. In other very plausible conflict scenarios, missile defense protection of society and infrastructure could prove extremely valuable in limiting damage.

For example, if deterrence fails to prevent Putin's coercive threats of limited nuclear attack, layered defenses could greatly reduce U.S. civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure and society.

The war also readily demonstrated that a requirement that missile defenses be "cost effective at the margin," is an absurd standard. It mandates that defensive interceptors must not cost more to produce and deploy than the offensive missiles to be intercepted. However, the likelihood that Iranian missiles cost considerably less than the Israeli interceptors that defended against them was hardly the priority concern for Israel as its missile defenses prevented the destruction of hundreds of civilian and military targets. A more helpful comparison is of the cost and effectiveness of alternative approaches to destroying enemy missile capabilities in different scenarios. Space-basing may be a winner in this comparison.

In addition, in the absence of Israel's layered defenses, Israel would have been compelled to engage in much more expansive offensive operations against Iran to destroy Iranian missiles, launchers, and storage sites on the ground prior to their launch. The effectiveness of Israel's layered missile defenses was necessary to enable a critical limit on Israel's escalation of the war.

Finally, the Twelve-Day War demonstrated conclusively the importance of readily available interceptor quantities. The multiple waves of Iranian missile attacks apparently

stressed the available inventory of U.S. interceptors, particularly had they been needed elsewhere simultaneously. Given Iran's impressive rate of missile production, the competition between offensive missiles and available interceptors could have been disastrous for Israel, given the limited production rate of interceptors in Israel and the United States. This is an important lesson for the defense of the United States and allies. For example, the total number of deployed U.S. interceptor launchers for homeland defense now stands at 44—an absurdly low level of capability given the missile threats now facing the United States.

In short, the production and fielding of missile defense capabilities must be shaped by the number and character of the missile threats to be deterred or defeated. That is a fundamental lesson of the Twelve-Day War.

In conclusion, continuing to abide by old deterrence notions of mutual assured destruction vis-à-vis Russia and China is now sheer idiocy. The success of layered missile defenses in the Twelve-Day war illustrates their potential effectiveness for denying the coercive effects of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean limited offensive missile threats, and helping to undercut the potential military effects of even large-scale nuclear attacks—thereby helping to deter such strategies. The Twelve-Day War also demonstrated that: 1) layered missile defenses can contribute critically to saving lives and limiting escalation; 2) layered missile defenses can be a necessary complement to offensive air operations to destroy enemy missile capabilities; 3) “cost-effective at the margin” must not be a decisive criterion for fielding missile defense; and finally, 4) the United States and allies must move urgently to produce missile defense capabilities in quantities sufficient for multiple, and possibly simultaneous, great power missile attacks.

My bottom-line today is that missile defenses cannot replace nuclear deterrence, but they can contribute to deterrence, help place a limit on escalation, and help uniquely to limit damage in some contingencies in the event deterrence fails. There should be no going back.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Ilan Berman**

***Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council.***

To truly understand the context of Israel's June 2025 campaign against the Iranian nuclear program, it is necessary to see it as the culmination of two trends.

The first is the twenty year-plus “shadow war” that had been waged between the Islamic Republic and the Jewish state. The defining feature of this conflict was that the hostilities were real but indirect – exchanged via proxies, and not from the territory of one to the other. This asymmetric contest lasted for years, but we have recently witnessed a pronounced shift in this dynamic. The change began in 2024, with Iran's direct ballistic missile attacks on Israel, first in April and then again in October. Israel responded to the April 2024 attack with a limited strike, one intended simply to signal to the Iranian leadership that it possessed both the capability and the will to retaliate in devastating fashion. That message, however, was

not sufficiently absorbed by the Iranian regime. As a result, Israel's subsequent retaliatory strike on Iran, in October 2024, was more forceful, destroying the totality of the regime's air defense architecture. "Operation Rising Lion," as the June 2025 campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities was officially dubbed, was the culmination of this escalation, with Israel seeking to exploit the opening created by the recent elimination of Iranian air defenses to strike a significant blow to both nuclear development and to the country's military leadership.

The second trend encapsulated by the June 2025 offensive was Israel's long overdue response to Iran's long-running effort to erode Israeli deterrence and Israeli security through the use of proxy groups. That Iranian effort had come to a head on October 7, 2023, when the terrorist group Hamas carried out a brutal series of coordinated attacks against communities in the south of Israel, resulting in 1,200 Israelis dead and over 250 kidnapped.

The events of October 7th represented a truly multi-domain failure.

Politically, it highlighted the bankruptcy of Israel's approach to the Palestinians, which had become a "management" strategy in recent years, as Israeli officials focused on other priorities (such as engaging with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf). Notably, Israel's approach to the Palestinians was predicated upon two erroneous assumptions. The first was that it was capable of mitigating threats emanating from the Gaza Strip as a result of superior surveillance and electronic warfare capabilities. The second was that, over time, Israeli economic prosperity and dynamism would have a "trickle down" effect and breed moderation on the part of the Palestinians, and that Hamas – in power in the Gaza Strip since 2007 – would, over time, transition from an overwhelmingly ideological actor into a more pragmatic one.

In the intelligence domain, the events of October 7th also saw a breakdown in the country's famously robust capabilities, with responsible agencies failing to predict the attacks or identify key early warning indicators. Militarily, we witnessed a breakdown in the military chain of command on October 7th itself; the Israel Defense Forces did not deploy to targeted communities for the better part of a working day, leaving Israeli citizens to fend for themselves, with tragic results.

October 7th was also very much a failure of deterrence. The Iranian regime had spent a generation building up what has come to be known as a "ring of fire" around Israel. It did so by supporting substate actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and others, to wage a war of attrition against the Jewish state. Over time, this asymmetric strategy led to an erosion of Israeli deterrence, as the country failed to significantly target these groups and their existence became a fact of life for Israeli civilians. The effect was to impose significant constraints on Israeli security options and national security calculations.

What we've seen since October 7th, then, has been a systematic Israeli effort to dismantle the "ring of fire." This is true not just in Gaza, where Israel continues to carry out its military operation against Hamas. It also encompasses last fall's aerial campaign against Hezbollah in the south of Lebanon, which witnessed a significant attrition of the movement's military cadres and the elimination of most of its prodigious arsenal of short- and medium-range rockets. In parallel, we also witnessed, in December of last year, the collapse of another

Iranian proxy, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. While this was not a consequence of Israeli action, it was nonetheless a significant development in the context of Israeli security. The culmination of all this was Israel's decision to act decisively to target Iran's nuclear capability.

“Operation Rising Lion” was a massive success, from an Israeli perspective – one that has successfully re-established Israeli deterrence. The objective now is for the country to solidify the resulting geopolitical and security gains. This should include a further expansion of the “Abraham Accords,” as the wave of normalization agreements midwived by the Trump administration during its first term in office are known. It requires a further attrition of Iranian proxies, such as Yemen’s Houthis. And it lays the groundwork for a broader security architecture in the Middle East – something that was discussed by the Trump administration during its first term in office, but has made little headway since.

All of this, however, is predicated on other variables. In the context of the U.S.-Israeli “special relationship,” the most important factor is what happens next in the Gaza Strip. Some sort of resolution to the Gaza campaign, which is now entering its twenty-second month, is a prerequisite to progress on these other fronts.

It's also useful to remember that Iran also gets a vote. Already, we see the Iranian regime acting in some significant, albeit predictable, ways.

First, we are witnessing signs that Iran is accelerating succession planning for a very logical reason. Iran’s Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, is 86 years old, infirm, and suffering from a range of ailments. However, he has studiously avoided appointing a successor. Instead, he has tried to manage and tried to navigate the complicated web of Iranian domestic politics by playing one faction off against the other. That is not a sustainable strategy any longer. The Iranian regime understands that it needs to project the appearance of permanence, and that requires a level of succession planning that we haven't seen so far.

Second, expect a further expansion in the power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is already very much a state within a state. By some estimates, it controls a third or more of the national economy of Iran, it is the custodian of the regime’s strategic programs, and it has been steadily ascending in national prominence over the past decade. But in this conflict, we saw decision-making on the part of the IRGC that was wholly independent of Iran’s civilian clerical leadership, and that may be a portent of things to come. We are beginning to move in a direction in which Iran is not, strictly speaking, a purely religiously based regime. Rather, while it may still be driven by religious imperatives, the IRGC is emerging as an independent stakeholder and actor.

Finally, we are now witnessing an effort by the Iranian regime to solidify or “harden” its rule. Just in the last month, we've seen 1,500 or more arrests of ordinary Iranian citizens, based upon specious claims that they were collaborating with Israel or with regime opposition forces. The goal here is, very transparently, to consolidate power. Israel’s military campaign, and the American augmentation of it, has exposed some deep fissures within the Islamic Republic. What we will see in the immediate future is a regime working overtime to eliminate any sign, either to its domestic opposition or to the outside world, that it is vulnerable.