

## Actually, We Absolutely Do Need to Escalate in Iran

By [Bret Stephens](#) Opinion Columnist

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Iranians celebrate in Tehran on Tuesday after the attack on Israel. Credit...Atta Kenare/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Long before he met with his overdue demise last week, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, offered a theological explanation for why Israel had come into existence.

“The Jews will gather from all parts of the world into occupied Palestine,” he said in a 2002 speech, [of which there is an audio recording](#). “Not in order to bring about the Antichrist and the end of the world but rather that Allah the glorified and most high wants to save you from having to go to the ends of the world, for they have gathered in one place — they have gathered in one place — and there the final and decisive battle will take place.”

In other words, Israel was one-stop shopping for killing all Jews.

I thought of Nasrallah’s words on Tuesday while watching images of Iranian ballistic missiles raining down on Israel, fortunately causing only slight damage, thanks mainly to Israeli and American air defenses. What if one of those missiles had been tipped with a nuclear warhead — a warhead whose construction Western intelligence agencies, even Mossad, had somehow missed? If nothing else, it would have fulfilled Nasrallah’s prophecy and his fondest hopes.

That possibility is no longer far-off. This year, Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that Iran was [within a week or two](#) of being able to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear bomb. Even with the requisite fissile material, it takes time and expertise to fashion a nuclear weapon, particularly one small enough to be delivered by a missile. But a prime goal for Iran’s nuclear ambitions is plainly in sight, especially if it receives technical help from its new best friends in Russia, China and North Korea.

Now’s the time for someone to do something about it.

That someone will probably be Israel, which has spent two decades successfully delaying, but not stopping, Iran’s nuclear program through [sabotage](#), [assassinations of leading scientists](#), [cyberattacks](#), [document heists](#) and other covert acts. As I write, Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, is promising consequences for Iran’s attacks, though it isn’t yet clear what they might be. The last time Iran tried to hit Israel with ballistic and cruise missiles, in April, President Biden put heavy pressure on Israel to rein in its response to a symbolic minimum.

It would be a mistake to give the same advice now. Iran presents an utterly intolerable threat not only to Israel but also to the United States and whatever remains of the liberal international order we’re supposed to lead. It is waging [a war on unarmed commercial ships](#) through its Houthi proxies in Yemen. It has used other proxies to

attack and [kill American troops](#) stationed in allied countries. It encouraged or ordered Hezbollah to fire nearly 9,000 munitions into Israel, supposedly in solidarity with Hamas, before Israel finally began retaliating with full force last month. And it appears to be seeking Donald Trump's assassination, according to [reporting by The Times](#) — a direct assault on American democracy, no matter how anyone feels about the former president.

There needs to be a direct and unmistakable American response. Iran currently produces many of its missiles at [the Isfahan missile complex](#). At a minimum, Biden should order it destroyed, as a direct and proportionate response to its aggressions. There is a uranium enrichment site near Isfahan, too.

Elsewhere, Iran's economy relies overwhelmingly on a vast and vulnerable network of pipelines, refineries and oil terminals, particularly on [Kharg Island](#) in the Persian Gulf. The administration can put the regime on notice that the only way it will save this infrastructure from immediate destruction is by ordering Hezbollah and the Houthis to stand down and to pressure Hamas to release its Israeli hostages. We can't simply go on trying to thwart Iran by defensive means only — fighting not to win but merely not to lose.

Critics of a hard-line approach will reply that it invites escalation. Yet for nearly four years, the administration's diplomatic outreach to Tehran, along with its finely calibrated responses to Iranian aggression, has done nothing to deter it from striking us and our allies. Notice that the Iranians began asking for the nuclear negotiations they spurned for the past three years only once they started to fear that Trump might return to office. Bully regimes respond to the stick.

As for Israel, it has demonstrated again that its investment in missile-defense technologies [that critics said would never work](#) has paid off, chiefly in hundreds or thousands of lives saved. The same type of counterconventional wisdom will serve it well as it completes Hezbollah's decapitation in Lebanon and Hamas's evisceration in Gaza. Wars, once entered, need to be fought through to an unequivocal victory.

That's a point Americans have chosen to ignore in recent years, and not to our benefit. As Israelis consider their response to Iran's missile outrage this week, they know they have no such luxury.

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