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## Preventive Military Action: The Worst Way to Deal With Iran's Nuclear Program

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The Obama administration will need to explicitly remove the threat of a preventive military strike to successfully convince Tehran to forgo the option of developing nuclear weapons and to grant greater access by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The U.S. and Israeli governments privately understand that a military strike would be one of the worst possible ways to deal with the threat of Iranian proliferation. The threat of preventive war only reinforces the arguments of those factions in Iran who believe that Iran needs nuclear weapons. Therefore, U.S. policymakers should stop threatening or implying that they may authorize a preventive military strike and get down to productive negotiations to arrive at a solution.

### Highlights

- Continuing reference to the “military option” is counter-productive for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.
- If Israel or the United States launched a preventive attack to try to destroy Iran’s nuclear program, both countries would be drawn into the fight.
- With active U.S. participation in an attack, Iran’s ability to pursue nuclear weapons would definitely be set back, perhaps even for years, but an attack would prompt Iran to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and undertake a crash program to develop nuclear weapons.
- Iran might be able to recover relatively quickly from an air attack and build nuclear weapons within a few years because of the progress it has already made in developing a full fuel cycle for uranium enrichment.
- A U.S. preventive attack on nuclear sites would have to be accompanied by a major air assault on Iran’s military to blunt the impact of a likely response to the attack. The United States could not prevent missile launches against Israel, proxy attacks by Hezbollah, or disruption of oil shipments through the Persian Gulf leading to a spike in the global price of petroleum products.
- If Israel initiated the attack, the U.S.-Israeli relationship would sustain a serious setback. The U.S. public would eventually hold Israel as well as Iran responsible for the resulting pain and hardships.
- U.S. relations with other friends and allies would also suffer serious damage. President Barack Obama’s major foreign and domestic initiatives would be derailed, and his presidency irrevocably defined by the ensuing conflict.
- With the likely continuation of concerns over Iranian nuclear proliferation and the inherent unpredictability of military undertakings, an air war with Iran would run the risk of becoming a land war as well.
- The U.S. and Israeli governments likely understand these realities. Israel’s continuing talk of preventive strikes is mostly directed at influencing the United States. Washington’s reference to Jerusalem’s threats is mostly directed at influencing Iran.
- Ironically, these references only inhibit Washington and Jerusalem from achieving the principal objectives they each seek: keeping Iran in the NPT and out of the nuclear weapons club.

**D**uring the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Congress and the public were significantly influenced by the Bush administration's misleading presentation of flawed intelligence concerning the potential resumption of Iraq's nuclear weapons program. The classified analyses submitted some two months prior to the invasion predicting the condition of a postwar Iraq went unnoticed by the public and were largely unheeded by the administration. Many of the sobering warnings contained in these documents proved to be prescient.

Now, as with Iraq then, the evidence of an ongoing Iranian nuclear weapons development program is ambiguous, even if Iran's growing capacity to enrich uranium is clear. Dennis Blair, U.S. director of national intelligence, assessed in March 2009 that Iran had not yet made a decision to produce highly enriched uranium for a nuclear warhead or bomb but that it was "at a minimum...keeping open the option to develop deliverable nuclear weapons."<sup>1</sup>

The threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran has been recognized by U.S. policymakers and political commentators alike. There is a consensus that the impact of a nuclear-armed Iran, especially its potential for fueling an arms race in the Middle East, would be negative, despite a lack of agreement on whether the impact would be manageable or potentially catastrophic.

With Iran's ability to develop deliverable nuclear weapons still some years away, President Barack Obama said his administration "will seek engagement with Iran based upon mutual interests and mutual respect." In the first public statements revealing some of the conclusions of the ongoing U.S. policy review on Iran, U.S. officials indicated in April that Washington would break

from previous practice and send a representative to all future meetings of a six-country dialogue with Tehran. Such talks involve proposals for a negotiated resolution to concerns about the nuclear program and sanctions for Iran's failure to comply with UN obligations.

Although it has not ruled out the possibility, the Obama administration has de-emphasized resort to preventive military action if diplomatic efforts fail to limit Iran's nuclear program and create greater transparency about its nuclear activities. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in April, "The only way we can prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon is for the Iranians themselves to decide that it's too costly."<sup>2</sup> Vice President Joe Biden said the same month that Israel's newly elected prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, would be "ill advised" to launch a preventive military strike.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as Iran continues to defy the UN Security Council's call for a suspension of its uranium-enrichment activities and the requests of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for more information about past nuclear activities and future plans, the cries for unilateral military action against Iran to halt its nuclear program continue to be heard.<sup>4</sup> The rhetorical flourishes bear striking similarities to the rising chorus heard in the months leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Anything less than a rollback of Iran's enrichment capability is held to be unacceptable.

Moreover, some commentators consider attempts at diplomacy with Iran to be useless, or they advocate putting a deadline on further attempts to negotiate with Tehran. The prospect of four more years of bellicose rhetoric from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may lead some to believe diplomacy will fail and a nuclear-armed Iran is inevitable unless preventive

## The Ghost of Preventive War Past

**In January 2003, the National Intelligence Council circulated two intelligence community assessments focusing on the anticipated postwar environment in Iraq. These top secret analyses were fully coordinated across the intelligence community and widely disseminated among senior policymakers. Among their other conclusions, the documents warned that:**

- "Iraq was a deeply divided society that likely would engage in violent conflict, unless an occupying power prevented it";
- "al Qaeda probably would see an opportunity to accelerate its operational tempo and increase terrorist attacks during and after a US-Iraq war";
- "the United States' defeat and occupation of Iraq probably would result in a surge of political Islam and increased funding from terrorist groups";
- "the new Iraqi government would require significant outside assistance to rebuild Iraqi water and sanitation infrastructure";
- "Iraq's neighbors would jockey for influence in Iraq with activities ranging from humanitarian reconstruction assistance to fomenting strife among Iraqi ethnic and sectarian groups"; and
- "military action to eliminate Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) would not cause other regional states to abandon their WMD programs or their desire to develop such programs."

Source: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments About Postwar Iraq," May 31, 2007.

military strikes are launched. Given the grave consequences of the last military operation ostensibly intended to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it behooves us to think long and hard about contemplating another such adventure and to consider as well the potential benefit of taking the option of preventive military strikes off the table.

A realistic analysis of the impact military force would have in trying to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran is largely missing in the public discussion.

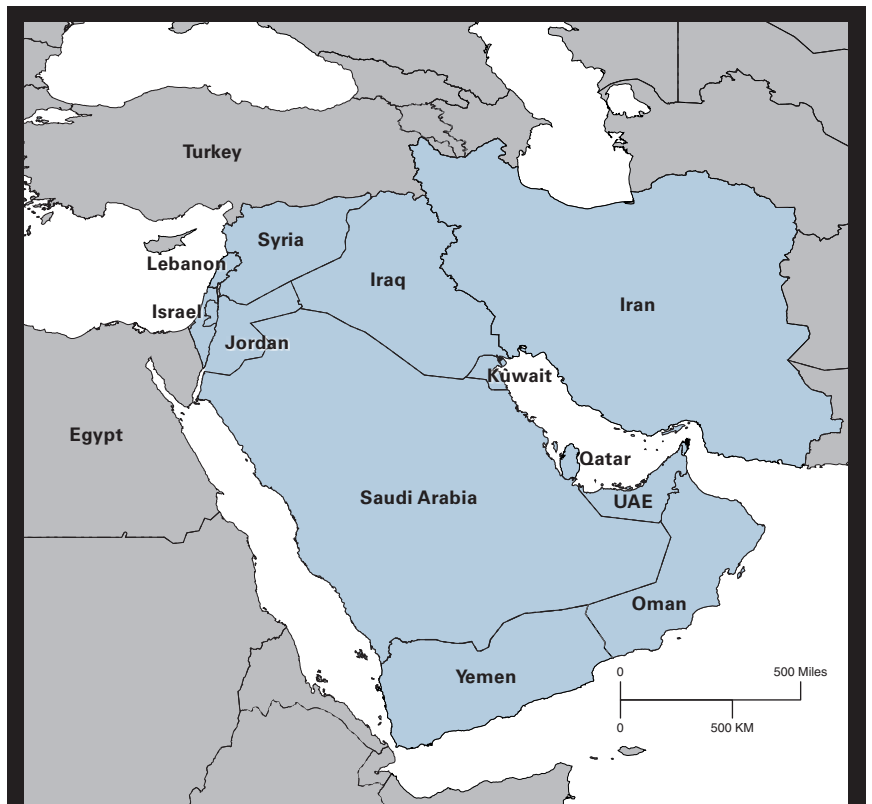
- If Tehran is weighing a decision to build nuclear weapons, rather than being content to maintain the option of building nuclear weapons, would the threat of a preventive attack discourage or encourage weaponization?
- If Tehran has already decided to weaponize, would the use of military force be effective in preventing the Iranians from completing the process?
- If Tehran succeeded later in acquiring nuclear weapons, would the prior use of military force by the United States strengthen international norms against nuclear proliferation, and would it contribute to or detract from long-term containment of a nuclear-armed Iran?

### Israeli Military Options

Two countries have openly raised the issue of preventive attacks against Iran, Israel and the United States, but only the former has argued that a nuclear Iran would pose an “existential threat.” Israel has signaled in a variety of ways that it would seriously consider an attack to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability, most recently in a statement by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak: “I repeat what I have always said, we are not taking any options off the table.”<sup>5</sup>

The Obama administration evidently is giving little encouragement to Israel for a proxy strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. In reaction to Obama’s June 4 Cairo speech, the respected Israeli peace activist and commentator Uri Avnery opined, “As from now, no one can even dream about an American OK for an Israeli attack.”<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the present government of Israel may still believe that if it took unilateral action, the United States would stand behind it, blocking any punitive action in the UN Security Council, rendering active military and economic assistance, and perhaps finishing up with the destruction of Iran’s surviving capabilities. Organizations such as the Heritage Foundation have been explicit in advo-



**Iraq looms large in considering potential routes for any Israeli preventive air attack on Iran. Israeli aircraft could conceivably achieve surprise by skirting Iraq on the in-bound flight. Returning through Iraq and Jordan would be an attractive alternative to over-flying a fully alerted Turkey, Syria, or Saudi Arabia, but the political cost for U.S-Iraqi relations would be very high.**

cating contingency plans for a possible preventive strike to disarm Iran and believing that “Washington would be remiss in trying to prevent an ally [Israel] from doing its best to defend itself.”<sup>7</sup> Dissonant to Obama’s hopeful and conciliatory tone, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recently warned Tehran that Iran’s nuclear program could provoke a “first strike” by “some other enemy.”<sup>8</sup>

In order to appreciate the seriousness of Israeli threats, one need only recall past demonstrations of the formidable prowess of Israel’s air force and the willingness of its government to defy international sentiment. Even though Iran’s nuclear sites are located much farther away from Israel than the nuclear-related targets of previous Israeli strikes in Iraq and Syria, a massive Israeli air force exercise over Greece and the eastern Mediterranean Sea in June 2008 demonstrated the feasibility of covering the 1,500 kilometers between Israeli air force bases and the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant.

The already formidable geographic obstacles are further complicated by the fact that Iraq sits astride a direct route of attack. Iraqi airspace is still monitored and patrolled by the U.S. military, although now officially under the control of the Iraqi government. Seeking to keep Iraq and the U.S. military in the dark by skirting the corners of Iraq or exploiting holes



in radar coverage might conceivably work for Israel maintaining tactical surprise in-bound toward Iran. The return flight, however, would be a different matter. Israel would probably have to turn to the United States and Iraq for a number of critical needs, such as refueling, emergency landing of damaged aircraft, and supporting search and rescue missions.

Moreover, in the wake of an attack, Iran would be bent on retaliating against Israel through long-range missile strikes and proxy attacks by Hezbollah and Hamas. Presuming U.S. complicity in the attacks, Iran might also target U.S. shipping in the Persian Gulf, bases in the region, troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and businesses and citizens worldwide. Iran would receive some international sympathy, particularly in the Muslim world, for military responses to an attack that was preventive rather than defensive and unsanctioned by the UN Security Council.

Given the limited if regionally dominant armed forces available to Israel, an Israeli strike would presumably target the highest priority pieces of the nuclear complex and perhaps Iran's means of rapid retaliation, such as fixed medium-range missile sites and fighter-bomber bases. It would not have the resources to launch a U.S.-style, weeks-long onslaught. Even

with a more modest agenda, assuming it could find a workable egress-regress strategy for striking Iran, Israel would not be able to replicate the degree of success it achieved in preventive strikes against Iraq and Syria. The Iranian targets are much more extensive and less vulnerable. The Natanz facility is mostly underground in vast, hardened halls. Israeli "bunker-busting" ordnance is limited, dwell time would be short, revisiting targets might not be an option, and, if Russia delivers S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran, its future air defenses would be quite sophisticated.

### U.S. Military Options

In the first week of Obama's term, his White House spokesman made clear that the new president "wanted to preserve all his options" on Iran and explicitly confirmed that the "military option" remained on the table.<sup>9</sup> The "military option" is generally regarded as shorthand for making a preventive strike against Iran before it has developed and deployed nuclear weapons. The United States could launch a more sustained and damaging air assault on Iran's declared and suspected nuclear facilities than Israel. Indeed, if Israel started an air war, the United States would have to finish it, if only to limit the damage from Iran's



Majid Saeedi/Getty Images

**The Arak Heavy Water Production Plant, located 250 kilometers southwest of Tehran, would be among the likely targets for any preventive attack.**

likely retaliation. Iran is assessed to have already deployed dozens of Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missiles, which can target Israel, and is believed to be capable of mass-producing additional ones. It has also successfully tested a new solid-fuel ballistic missile of similar range, the Sajjil.

Yet, the United States could not end Iran's nuclear weapons potential with air strikes. U.S. intelligence would not be able to identify all of the component parts of the Iranian nuclear complex. As noted in a 2007 analysis by David Albright and Jacqueline Shire,

tanz to create highly enriched uranium, exposing Iran to possible international action. The U.S. intelligence community judged accordingly that any production of weapons-grade material was less likely to come from the centrifuges at Natanz in the first place than from a covert facility, which might already exist, utilizing the experience already gained and infrastructure currently outside the reach of IAEA inspectors.<sup>14</sup> If true, a military attack on any part of Iran's nuclear infrastructure would delay Tehran's ability to build nuclear weapons less than if Iran were dependent on known facilities.

**...undertaking a preventive attack would be the best way to ensure that the Iranian government made the wrong decision about its nuclear weapons option and would effectively stanch internal pressures for reform.**

"[T]he invisible or black areas of Iran's gas centrifuge program are growing."<sup>10</sup> The consensus among analysts, therefore, is that the success of an air assault would be incomplete and that a determined Iran could recover relatively rapidly from a crippling U.S. air campaign, rebuilding within a few years in a way that would make it much less vulnerable to subsequent strikes and infused with a redoubled determination to defy the United States. Gates recently acknowledged this reality in stark comments to Marine Corps students at Quantico, predicting that a preventive strike would result in delaying the Iranians "one to three years" but then would "cement their determination to have a nuclear program, and also build into the whole country an undying hatred of whoever hits them."<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. National Intelligence Council has assessed "with high confidence that Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so."<sup>12</sup> According to the last report of the IAEA, Iran has now installed more than 7,200 centrifuges, with nearly 5,000 currently enriching uranium; is testing more sophisticated centrifuge designs; and is estimated to have produced more than 1,300 kilograms of low-enriched uranium (LEU) at an increased rate.<sup>13</sup> Most experts believe that Iran has the expertise and experience necessary to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons. If it wanted, it could break out of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), enriching the LEU to weapons-grade and then converting this material in gaseous form to the metallic form used in nuclear weapons. The IAEA, however, would quickly detect use of the existing stocks of LEU and/or the centrifuges at Na-

### Ground Truth

No one should be sanguine about the ease of keeping a military strike against Iran limited in time and scope or of rapidly reaching an end game. With a population of more than 70 million, Iran has nearly three times as many people as Iraq, as well as a more challenging topography for U.S. military operations. The Iranians demonstrated an ability to suffer heavy losses against a technologically superior army for nearly eight years in the war Saddam Hussein unleashed in 1980, and they did so with little international support. The heavy commitment of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan during recent years and the current lack of a large strategic reserve suggest that confronting Iran militarily would lead to drastic personnel measures and an explosion of defense spending. It is small wonder that U.S. military leaders actively discourage the preventive strike option.

### Political Impact

An Israeli military attack on Iran would be viewed as a U.S.-Israeli attack by much of the world, even if Washington disclaimed paternity. At the end of the day, the United States would be locked in armed combat in Israel's defense. It could easily become the defining event of the Obama administration and lead to the derailing of many of the major international and domestic initiatives Obama has ambitiously undertaken. One of the first casualties would be hopes for a satisfactory exit from Iraq. The Shia-dominated government in Baghdad has worked hard to maintain good relations with Washington and Tehran. Requiring it to facilitate a U.S. preventive attack on Iran or, worse, an Israeli preventive attack

on Iran would be a bridge too far. Something would have to give, and that would most likely be a workable U.S.-Iraqi relationship.

The extent of damage from launching a preventive attack would depend on many variables: specific circumstances leading to direct U.S. involvement, civilian casualties in Iran and Israel, the resort to terrorism by Iran and its proxies, the duration and depth of traffic disruption in the Persian Gulf, impact on the price of oil and the international economy, and the actions of the United Nations, both the Security Council and the General Assembly, in response. Certainly, sustaining the search for stability in Pakistan and nation building in Afghanistan would become much more difficult. Other serious damage to Obama's top agenda items would be unavoidable.

In light of the grievous damage to U.S. interests that would ensue from conducting joint U.S.-Israeli military operations against Iran and the emotional impact stimulated by a new wave of dead and wounded Americans, the U.S.-Israeli relationship would probably also be transformed and not in a way that Israel would want. If Israel had initiated the attack, the American public would eventually hold Israel as well as Iran responsible for the resulting suffering and hardships.

Last but certainly not least, undertaking a preventive attack would be the best way to ensure that the Iranian government made the wrong decision about its nuclear weapons option and would effectively stanch internal pressures for reform. Iran is currently a party to the NPT, hosts regular visits of IAEA inspectors, and publicly rejects nuclear weapons development, possession, and use as un-Islamic. Each would be likely to change in response to an attack. In 2008, Shlomo Ben-Ami and Trita Parsi assessed that a successful bombing campaign by the United States or Israel "would simply guarantee a nuclear armed and vengeful Iran five years down the road."<sup>15</sup> These authors predicted that, in response to a preventive strike, Iran would most likely withdraw from the NPT and decide to seek the construction of an actual nuclear weapon, not just the capability to build one. They also judged that "any military attack would reduce rather than increase the likelihood of a democratic takeover."<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

One does not have to have a very potent crystal ball to see that a preventive attack on Iran is one of the worst options for dealing with Iran's nuclear program. The governments in Jerusalem and Washington already know this, whether their intelligence communities have done formal analyses or not. The Israeli government apparently believes, though, that publicly entertaining the option will stiffen the United States' spine in dealing with Tehran. Some Americans apparently believe that publicly holding out this possibility will be another inducement

for Tehran to make concessions. Yet, Iran must be convinced that nuclear weapons are not needed for regime survival in order for it to forgo nuclear weapons and grant the IAEA sufficient access to convince the international community that it has done so.<sup>17</sup> Economic sanctions may constitute leverage to limit uranium enrichment or gain access for IAEA inspectors. Keeping the option of preventive attack on the table, however, makes the hoped-for resolution of Iran's nuclear program more elusive by muddling the most important message for Tehran to receive: U.S. forces will be used only to defend against Iran, not to attack it.

## ENDNOTES

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