

The Last Resort

Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran

Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt



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Front cover: An F-15 fighter jet flies through Middle Eastern skies at dusk, December 28, 2006. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Sebastian Scheiner.

AGENDA: IRAN

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Introduction

ACCEPTED WISDOM suggests that preventive military action against the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program would entail significant risks and uncertain prospects of success: no guarantee exists that Iran's nuclear infrastructure would be destroyed, that significant delays would be imposed on the program, or that destabilizing Iranian responses could be averted.

Moreover, much of the public debate regarding preventive action has focused on military-technical considerations: Does the United States (or Israel) have the intelligence needed to hit the right targets? Does either have the means to destroy those parts of the nuclear infrastructure located in hardened, buried facilities? Is there an optimal moment to strike, and when is it too late?

These questions (discussed in greater detail in annex 1), however, are not the primary questions that need to be asked, and they highlight the fact that the accepted wisdom is based on an inappropriate metric for measuring the success of preventive action: the amount of destruction visited upon Iran's nuclear infrastructure may matter less than whether or not Iran decides to rebuild.

The accepted wisdom also ignores context: preventive action that follows provocative Iranian steps, such as an announcement that it is leaving the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), could have a much different effect than action not linked to a perceived Iranian provocation. The accepted wisdom is also based on assumptions not grounded in the Islamic Republic's track record of retaliation after military attack, which is decidedly mixed. Nearly all retaliatory options entail considerable challenges and risks for Iran.

This study subjects those assumptions to critical scrutiny to better understand the potential conse-

quences of preventive military action against the Iranian nuclear program, as well as the prerequisites for a successful policy of preventive action—should the United States decide to go this route. The following two main issues are examined:

- How much does the why, when, and how of military action matter for determining the effect on U.S. interests and on the Iranian nuclear program?
- What nonmilitary steps would need to accompany military action to constitute a comprehensive strategy for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge?

This study does not advocate military action against Iran's nuclear program. The time is not right for such a decision, and diplomacy continues to offer at least a modest prospect of success. Moreover, advocating such a course of action would be irresponsible without knowing whether the United States has the sensitive target intelligence needed for such an operation.

Nevertheless, sometime soon—perhaps later this year, perhaps within a few years—the time for such a decision may come. Therefore, the time *is* right to assess the possible consequences of such a course of action and to underscore the fact that preventive military action poses not only military-technical challenges, but also political challenges. A decision about prevention should therefore not only rest on an assessment of how much damage can be inflicted on Iran's nuclear infrastructure by bombs and missiles, but on an assessment of how effectively the political challenges associated with prevention can be met, and possible Iranian responses mitigated.

Context Matters

THE POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS of preventive action would depend, to a significant extent, on U.S. and Iranian domestic conditions as well as on regional and international conditions at the time. For instance, a preventive strike carried out in the midst of an active diplomatic process, at a time when U.S. intelligence assessed that Iran was still years away from having the means to build an atomic bomb, would most likely be received very differently from a military strike carried out in the wake of an Iranian decision to withdraw from the NPT (whether or not it withdrew with the proclaimed intention of developing nuclear weapons)—particularly if Iran had withdrawn after rebuffing compromise solutions proffered by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC P-5).

Iranian Reaction

The domestic politics of the Islamic Republic would have a major effect on Iran's reaction to preventive action. President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's revolutionary stance, be it on economics, cultural matters, social policy, or foreign affairs, has infuriated many in the elite—reformers and technocrats—as well as Ahmadinezhad's many conservative opponents. By mid-2007, the nuclear program had become a central factor in Iran's increasingly heated factional disputes, and critics of President Ahmadinezhad from across the political spectrum warned that his foreign policy stance was unnecessarily risky and provocative.¹ Ahmadinezhad's response was to escalate his rhetoric, claiming he was guided by the Hidden Imam and charging that his opponents were "traitors" (he went so far as to have a respected former nuclear negotiator arrested for spying, charges that were quickly dismissed).

Against complaints implying he was a wild-eyed radical who threatened Iran's security by his taunting of the international community over the nuclear program, Ahmadinezhad's riposte was to dismiss out of hand any possibility of a U.S. strike. If a U.S. strike had occurred at that time, some in Iran might have blamed Ahmadinezhad for miscalculating at least as much as they would have blamed Washington for overreacting.

In contrast, a preventive strike would be received very differently if launched when the nuclear program was not a central issue in Iranian domestic politics. For instance, after the publication of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear program in November 2007, domestic Iranian criticism of Ahmadinezhad's inflammatory rhetoric subsided, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei congratulated Ahmadinezhad for the historic victories achieved by his tough stance on the nuclear issue.² The consensus in Iran seemed to be that Iran no longer faced the danger of a preventive strike. Were one to occur in such circumstances, the reaction would presumably be outrage at the United States for trying to deprive Iran of its "inalienable" right to nuclear technology at a time when even the U.S. intelligence community seemingly was soft-pedaling Iran's nuclear ambitions.

World Politics

The perceived immediacy and magnitude of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program would greatly influence how a preventive strike is received by publics in the United States, Iran, and elsewhere. A military strike would most likely be poorly received if serious doubt exists about the urgency of the problem—because

1. For instance, former president Akbar Rafsanjani (now head of the Expediency Council and generally seen as the quintessential wily decisionmaker) warned that the country was in a special situation, implying that it faced the risk of attack. BBCPersian.com, "National Unity, in What Sense and How?" March 8, 2006. Available online (www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/03/printable/060308_jb_rafsanjani.shtml).
2. Speaking to the Assembly of Experts—whose speaker is Rafsanjani—on February 26, 2008, Khamenei said: "One of the examples of achievements in the last twenty-nine years is the nuclear issue. Here the Iranian nation has rightfully and justly reached a great success and a remarkable achievement. The personal role of the president and his resistance in the nuclear case is very clear." "Iran Leader Hails Ahmadinezhad for 'Nuclear Success,'" Agence France-Presse, February 26, 2008. Available online (<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5j4XveJWSfzCDx59K1WXT0x6KXbJA>).

diplomacy holds promise, because Iran is not believed to be close to having a nuclear weapon, or because a reasonable chance of living with a nuclear-armed Iran seems possible.

Particularly important would be whether Iran were clearly violating its NPT commitment and were on the verge of acquiring a nuclear weapon. If Iran openly acknowledged it has done so, the case for preventive action would look stronger. For this reason, Iran would presumably deny violating the NPT or being on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons. In that case, a key question will be how much confidence is placed—by Americans, Iranians, and people elsewhere—in assessments of Iran's progress.

Even if broad agreement existed that a crisis regarding Iran's nuclear program was at hand, where the world would assess blame for the crisis could turn on various other factors. For instance, are the P-5+1³ united in their stance regarding Iran? Have the P-5+1 proposed compromises that go far toward meeting Iranian objections? Are International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections going well? The international community's perception of U.S. and Iranian leaders would also be important. Is the U.S. administration respected for its judgment and commitment to multilateral diplomacy? Is Tehran bullying or threatening other regional states?

If the matter were seen as urgent and Iranian hardliners were seen as the source of the problem, then many—in the United States, Iran, and elsewhere—might reluctantly accept preventive action as an unfortunate necessity. This perception could influence an Iranian decision to rebuild or to respond militarily. For instance, whereas European acceptance of preventive action would have seemed implausible in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the mood in France, at least, has shifted. Not only do Presi-

dent Nicolas Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner make tough statements about Iran's nuclear ambitions, but so do many prominent intellectuals.⁴ This shift in French mood is a good example of how the context would affect who is blamed, and by whom, which could in turn affect Iran's response to preventive action.

Assessing Iran's Progress

Part of the problem in assessing Iran's progress (which has a direct bearing on the perceived immediacy and magnitude of the threat) is that Iran has several options for acquiring fissile material for a bomb. The November 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) asserts that Iran is most likely to take a clandestine route to a nuclear capability:

We assess with moderate confidence that Iran probably would use covert facilities—rather than its declared nuclear sites—for the production of highly enriched uranium for a weapon. A growing amount of intelligence indicates Iran was engaged in covert uranium conversion and uranium enrichment activity, but we judge that these efforts probably were halted in response to the fall 2003 halt [in its nuclear weapons program], and that these efforts probably had not been restarted through at least mid-2007.⁵

This judgment leaves much unsaid. It states that covert (or more correctly, clandestine) facilities might be used to produce “highly enriched uranium” but says nothing about where the raw material would come from.⁶ Would Iran divert some of the low-enriched uranium it is now producing, or some of the uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) gas it is producing in its openly declared conversion facility? (That gas is the feedstock for the centrifuges that can produce either low-enriched or highly enriched uranium.) Or would Iran produce

3. The P5+1 are China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States plus Germany.

4. Francois Heisbourg, the director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and the Center for Security Policy in Geneva, in *Iran, le choix des armes?* (Paris: Editions Stock, 2007)—a book about the policy options toward Iran in light of its nuclear program—sums up the situation, “One would be right to conclude that the recourse to force would be marginally less calamitous than the acceptance that Iran crosses the nuclear threshold” (author's translation) (p. 171).

5. National Intelligence Council, “National Intelligence Estimate: Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” November 2007, Key Judgment F.

6. Presumably, the NIE means “clandestine”—namely, that which is concealed—rather than the term it uses, “covert,” meaning that which is not acknowledged.

UF6 and low-enriched uranium in clandestine facilities? The NIE does not say, although the difference is quite important from the point of view of detection.

If Iran were to use its declared facilities to produce the raw material, it would face the problem of avoiding the IAEA's highly effective accountability mechanisms, with all the attendant risk of discovery and subsequent international crisis. The IAEA has devoted much effort to developing highly sensitive and reliable methods of accounting for declared nuclear material. An announcement by the IAEA that significant quantities of safeguarded nuclear materials had gone missing in Iran would almost certainly spark an international crisis. In contrast, if the IAEA were reasonably satisfied with Iran's nuclear accounting, then any U.S. assertion that something was amiss would be unlikely to impress either U.S. or world opinion.

The NIE implies that Iran might try to get the bomb by relying exclusively on clandestine facilities, which would require a significant undeclared infrastructure. That the world would accept Iran's pursuit of a clandestine parallel nuclear weapons program on the basis of U.S. intelligence assertions alone seems unlikely. After all, U.S. intelligence has a decidedly mixed record at evaluating what it thought was unimpeachable evidence about nuclear programs—a track record that looks worse in light of the reversal of the intelligence community's 2005 “high confidence” judgment (that Iran had a nuclear weapons program) in the November 2007 NIE.

Undoubtedly, some would ask how the United States could be certain that Iran had clandestine facilities, unless it knew where they were. Furthermore, if it knew where they were, why not provide the IAEA with the location and demand that Iran permit an inspection? The remarkably successful detective work by the IAEA in North Korea, Iraq, and Iran shows that its inspectors can determine much if allowed access. The IAEA's track record with on-site inspections is much better than that of U.S. intelligence with its heavy reliance on remote detection and collection. In such circumstances, U.S. and world opinion would more likely favor IAEA inspections than military action based on questionable intelligence information.

Much the same argument would apply if the United States were to claim that Iran had acquired bomb-grade material on the black market. A U.S. assessment that Iran had made black-market purchases would be greeted skeptically unless the United States could identify the provenance of the material and international inspectors could find it—which is unlikely, given how easily small quantities of fissile material could be concealed.

In fact, not even an Iranian announcement that it had produced a nuclear weapon would necessarily be taken at face value, given the implausible statements Iranian leaders regularly make about their ability to produce advanced conventional weapons such as fighter aircraft. So the black-market route would pose a particularly problematic challenge. If the United States were to undertake preventive action without corroborative data from the IAEA, a subsequent Iranian decision to rebuild its nuclear program or openly pursue nuclear weapons might receive a sympathetic hearing in the court of world opinion.

Conversely, a possibility also exists that the IAEA would fail to find convincing evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapon, even in the face of widely held suspicions—in the region and elsewhere—that Iran had the material for a bomb. The absence of “smoking-gun” proof would be a very difficult circumstance in which to conduct a military strike. Besides the military problem—without solid evidence about where the bomb material or facilities are located, a military strike might not destroy them—the political problem would be that Iran could benefit from both the perception that it has the material for a bomb and the sympathy of those who believe that the international community should act only when the IAEA has uncovered evidence of a weapons program. A preventive strike against suspected sites could give rise to circumstances that might allow Iran to withdraw from the NPT with impunity.

Thus, although skeptical U.S. or world opinion might not preclude U.S. preventive action, it would most likely result in widespread criticism of prevention and could lead Iran to conclude that it would face little effective opposition or risk of follow-on strikes if it decided to withdraw from the NPT, to rebuild, or to openly pursue a nuclear weapon.

Even acquisition of “smoking-gun” evidence that Iran already had an untested nuclear weapon⁷ could make a preventive strike an extremely high-risk gamble: some might see the acquisition of such information as providing a last chance to prevent Iran from going nuclear, while others would argue that prevention under such circumstances would be tantamount to going to war with a nuclear Iran. For all practical purposes, waiting for a “smoking gun” may amount to de facto acquiescence in a nuclear-armed Iran.

In sum, context matters, and the reaction of Iran, as well as U.S. and international opinion, to prevention would depend upon the domestic, regional, and international circumstances in which preventive action occurs, the perception of the immediacy and magnitude of the Iranian nuclear threat, and the credibility of claims by the United States about the status and nature of Iran’s nuclear program. This last factor may depend, at least in part, on the position of the IAEA on this matter.

7. The problem—no smoking gun, but widespread suspicion—could get worse after Iran completes the heavy water reactor it is building in Arak. That reactor could be operational in about the same time frame, 2013–2015, in which the November 2007 NIE estimates that Iran might have enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb; Iran claims the Arak reactor will be ready several years earlier than that. The Arak reactor is well designed to produce plutonium, which would give Iran an entirely different route to the bomb (a bomb requires one of two fissile materials, either plutonium or highly enriched uranium). Such plutonium would have to be extracted through a chemical process called reprocessing. Reprocessing can be done rather quickly, and facilities large enough to extract sufficient plutonium for a bomb can be quite small (unlike commercial reprocessing facilities, which are massive). The Arak reactor would give Iran another way to “break out” of the NPT by quickly producing fissile material for a bomb from a declared facility.

Measuring Success and Failure

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT PREVENTIVE military action generally focus on how much destruction can be inflicted on Iran's nuclear facilities. That, however, is not the sole or even most important measure of success; military action alone will not stop Iran's nuclear program. Even if all Iran's nuclear facilities were flattened, preventive action would risk courting failure if Iran remained willing and able to rebuild. For the United States and its allies, the most desirable outcome of military action would be a decision by Tehran to halt or dismantle what remains of its program.

Thus, military action that destroyed much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure would probably be deemed only partly successful—and perhaps ultimately counterproductive—if done so that it led to widespread condemnation of Washington, emboldened Tehran to rebuild, loosened international constraints on Iran's nuclear program (because Iran was seen as a victim and therefore within its rights to defend itself by acquiring nuclear weapons), and deterred the United States from undertaking further action against nuclear programs in Iran or elsewhere. In contrast, a preventive strike that inflicted limited damage but convinced Tehran its nuclear program was too risky and costly (because of widespread international support for strong diplomatic, economic, and if need be, repeat military measures against Iran) would have to be deemed a success.

Delayed Outcomes

A number of possible circumstances exist in which success or failure might not be immediately apparent:

- If Iran experienced significant domestic political change or changes in its regional environment that subsequently caused it to cease rebuilding or to abandon its nuclear program. For instance, a domestic political crisis that resulted in a freer, more democratic system might cause Tehran to reevaluate the cost of its nuclear program in terms of its relationship with the outside world. Conversely, a precipitous drop in oil prices, the emergence of a stable,

pro–United States Iraq, or progress toward resolving problems in the Levant that Iran has exploited (in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon) might cause it to slow or halt its nuclear program to reduce its international isolation or forestall pressure on the regime.

- If significant delays were imposed on the program (on the order of several years) and the United States retained the political and military freedom of action needed to strike again, if necessary. This situation would require continuing confidence that rebuilt nuclear facilities had been identified and that political conditions at home and abroad remained conducive to subsequent military action.
- If Iran vows to rebuild its nuclear program and to strike U.S. interests, yet in fact does nothing of the sort. Iran has at times engaged in such a pattern of pledging to act boldly but in practice doing little.

What Constitutes Failure

If the hallmark of successful prevention would take the form of an Iranian decision to halt or abandon its nuclear program, failure would take the form of an Iranian decision to accelerate work on its program. One of the potential risks of prevention, therefore, is that it might cause Iran's leadership to conclude that the country needed nuclear weapons to deter and defend against the United States, resulting in the program being assigned a priority it does not seem to have enjoyed to date.

The IAEA's investigations show that Iran's clandestine nuclear activities date to 1985, suggesting that Iran has been engaged in less of a nuclear race than a nuclear saunter. One explanation for this is that whereas North Korea's nuclear program is motivated by desperation, Iran's is motivated by aspiration—the desire for prestige and influence. The danger is that much as Saddam Hussein decided after the 1981 Israeli raid on the Osiraq reactor to dramatically expand Iraq's nuclear

program, so, too, Iranian leaders could decide after a strike that their program deserves greater priority and should be pursued with greater urgency.

Imposing Costs by Striking Iran's Infrastructure

Because the ultimate goal of prevention is to influence Tehran to change course, effective strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure may play an important role in affecting Iran's decision calculus. Strikes that flatten its nuclear infrastructure could have a demoralizing effect, and could influence Tehran's assessment of the cost of rebuilding. But the most effective strikes may not necessarily be against nuclear facilities. Iran is extraordinarily vulnerable to attacks on its oil export infrastructure. Oil revenue provides at least three-fourths of government income and at least 80 percent of export revenues.¹ Oil export facilities are extremely vulnerable; nearly all of Iran's oil goes through a small number

of pumping stations and loading points that are along the country's Persian Gulf coast, readily accessible for attack from sea or air. If forced to cope without oil export revenues, Iran has sufficient foreign exchange reserves to get by for more than a year, but the political shock of losing the oil income could cause Iran to rethink its nuclear stance—in ways that attacks on its nuclear infrastructure might not.

To be sure, in a tight world oil market, attacking Iran's oil infrastructure carries an obvious risk of causing world oil prices to soar and hurting consumers in the United States and other oil-importing countries. That result, however, need not be the case if sufficient excess capacity existed in countries ready to increase output to compensate for the loss of Iran's exports. Moreover, if the choice is between higher oil prices and a Middle East with several nuclear powers, higher oil prices and reduced economic growth are not clearly the greater evil.

1. In recent years, in parallel with its increasingly erratic economic policy, Iranian government finances have become more opaque, with a multiplicity of accounts and much expenditure occurring off-budget. Comparing declared oil revenue to declared expenditure is not particularly useful. A necessarily approximate calculation suggests that oil income is equal to about three-fourths of estimated spending.

Iran: Domestic Consequences

ONE OF THE MAIN CONCERNS about preventive action relates to fears that it would prompt a “rally round the flag” effect in Iran, thereby enabling the regime to further entrench itself and consolidate its control over the country. Would the population rally behind the regime, or would a military strike serve as a wedge to deepen the current divide between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian people? Would such a strike turn the Iranian population—previously the most pro-American (or perhaps least anti-American) population in the region—against the United States? If a nationalist, anti-American backlash is a possible response to prevention, can such an outcome be mitigated?

Political Impact of Bombing

Some have argued that, historically, just as strategic bombing has tended to stiffen the resolve of enemy populations, preventive military action would prompt a “rally round the flag” effect in Iran. In fact, one of the few rigorous empirical studies on the effect of strategic bombing, the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey conducted just after World War II, shows that strategic bombing succeeded in demoralizing enemy populations in Germany and Japan during the war, but because those countries had no organized opposition and because the regimes’ mechanisms of social and political control remained intact, the demoralizing effect of bombing had no practical political consequence.¹

Indeed, the experience of the Islamic Republic shows that the reaction to bombing depends upon the context. When Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, air raids on Tehran and other major cities in

the initial days of the war inflamed nationalist passions and rallied the population behind the regime; even the former Shah’s son volunteered to fight (his offer was turned down). In March–April 1988, however, after eight years of war, when Iraq escalated the “war of the cities” by launching 189 missiles in two months (nearly all against Tehran), the effect on Iranian morale was devastating, despite the relatively small number of casualties caused by the missile strikes. One-quarter of the population of Tehran fled the city, contributing to the Iranian decision in July 1988 to end the war.²

A further factor to consider is that a preventive strike against Iran would undoubtedly be very different from the strategic bombing of World War II or the Iran-Iraq War. The Iranian people are *not* an enemy population; thus, for various moral/ethical and legal reasons, U.S.—or for that matter, Israeli—planners would seek to minimize collateral damage (i.e., civilian casualties). Anecdotal reporting from recent wars in the Balkans and Iraq featuring precision strikes indicates that after a few days of bombing, civilians realized that as long as they stayed away from military facilities or potential strategic targets, they could go about their business reasonably safely, even during air raids.³ That fact is likely to undercut the intensity of the reaction to any preventive strike.

The Iranian debate over whether and how to retaliate for a preventive strike would almost certainly be intertwined with the struggle for power among different factions within the Iranian political elite and influenced by the efforts of those various factions to maneuver for advantage vis-à-vis their rivals. Should

1. United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on German Morale* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1947), pp. 1–3; Fred Charles Ikle, *The Social Impact of Bomb Destruction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 27–34, 197–199.
2. Warren Richey, “Iranians Await Iraqi Attacks in Campgrounds and Luxury Hotels,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), April 15, 1988.
3. Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 81–84 and 98–101, describe why the initial Iraqi airstrikes had little effect, in particular, and how Iran’s quick reaction with its own airstrikes boosted Iranian confidence. On page 206, they describe why the airstrikes against Tehran in 1985 during the first serious round of the “war of the cities” had little effect on public opinion. By contrast, on page 503, they describe the many factors that caused such a strong Iranian reaction to the missile strikes, including war exhaustion, fear of chemical weapons, and Iran’s inability to retaliate effectively. On page 367, they write, “According to some reports, nearly a million Iranians had fled Tehran by mid-March, and several million more fled by late-April.”

key Iranian politicians portray the attack as the unnecessary outcome of reckless regime policies, the long-term effect of a preventive strike with regard to anti-American sentiment and the entrenchment of the regime might not be so great. In that case, the opinion of a relatively small number of top revolutionary officials who belong to Iran's Supreme National Security Council—and that of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in particular—would be of paramount importance.⁴

No grounds exist to believe with any degree of certainty that a preventive strike would lead to a popular uprising against the regime. Wars have sometimes sparked popular revolutions (e.g., the Russian Revolution in 1917) or democratic transitions (e.g., the ouster of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 following a NATO bombing campaign—Operation Allied Force), but such events are rare. A preventive strike would almost certainly affect Iran domestically in some way, but predicting with any degree of confidence whether the political consequences would be favorable or unfavorable from the viewpoint of the United States or Israel is impossible. Although political turmoil is quite possible, grounding support for prevention in the hope that military action could lead to regime change would be unwise.

At the same time, one cannot assume that a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure would necessarily prompt a nationalist backlash. The Iranian public's reaction would likely be a function of the context and nature of the attack. In that light, any military action would most likely be planned with an explicit aim of preventing such a reaction. A raid that successfully destroys the nuclear facilities but inflames nationalist passions, engenders bitter anti-Americanism among ordinary Iranians, and consolidates popular support for an otherwise unpopular regime would come at a very high price.

Mitigating Unintended Consequences

Mitigating such a reaction may be possible, however. The following two actions could undercut the potential for a nationalist backlash:

- Conducting a high-profile information campaign, emphasizing that military action was directed against the regime, rather than the people of Iran. The campaign would emphasize (a) that the regime wants “the bomb” to enable it to fend off domestic and international criticism of its human rights record, to parry pressure for political change, and to threaten its neighbors; and (b) that prevention might, therefore, spare the people of Iran further war and even greater suffering down the road.
- Coupling strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities with strikes on headquarters and barracks of the Ministry of Intelligence and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—organizations tied to Iran's nuclear program that are responsible for repression at home and terror abroad. Especially if such attacks on Tehran's apparatus of repression were portrayed in a high-profile information campaign as actions taken against the regime's domestic terror apparatus, the raids might limit the regime's ability to exploit a backlash for its own purposes.

Such an information campaign or strikes on the regime's repressive apparatus could backfire, however, if those actions convinced the regime that the United States was bent on toppling it and that it therefore needed nuclear weapons to ensure regime survival. Supreme Leader Khamenei is already convinced that the United States is trying to provoke a popular revolution, replicating what happened in the former Soviet bloc, and he worries that Iran is vulnerable to such a U.S. campaign.⁵

Khamenei is quite correct that Washington would be delighted by regime change. At present, however,

4. On Khamenei's powers, see Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), pp. 7–8, 27–28.

5. Khamenei's concern about an Eastern European-style overthrow of his regime, reinforced by his reading of the 1997–1999 experience with Iran's reform movement, is about cultural influences, civil society organizations, and propaganda—not about military action. Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), especially pp. 17–19.

U.S. policy is to work for a deal with the current Iranian regime about the nuclear issue. That would presumably remain U.S. policy, even in the event of preventive military action. The challenge, should the United States decide to go that route, would be to conduct military

and information campaigns that mitigate a nationalist backlash and that undercut and isolate the regime, while at the same time signaling the Islamic Republic's leaders that the United States is prepared to make a deal if they abandon their nuclear program.

Prospects for Iranian Retaliation: The Historical Record

THE POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS of preventive military action should be viewed in the light of historical experience, as well as the various factors that could lead Iran to retaliate for a strike on its nuclear program. The Islamic Republic's track record of responding to military provocations or attacks is decidedly mixed. Of seven past incidents examined here (including four armed confrontations between the United States and the Islamic Republic), Iran engaged in no significant retaliatory action in three cases, which underscores the critical importance of situational factors in such matters.

U.S. Embassy Hostage Rescue Attempt

During the planning for the April 1980 Tehran embassy hostage rescue, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was so concerned that a rescue attempt would prompt violent attacks on U.S. embassies throughout the Muslim world that he ordered the withdrawal of more than 900 American officials and family members from posts he considered vulnerable and resigned his position (one of the few cases of a secretary of state resigning in protest).¹ In the event, the failed rescue produced no recorded popular backlash outside Iran; in Iran, the popular reaction was muted, and despite bellicose statements after the raid, the Iranian government took no action, although it may have calculated that the failure of the mission and the attendant humiliation of the United States obviated the need to act.

Strategic Bombardment during the Iran-Iraq War

From the start of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq episodically attempted to batter Iran into submission by hitting economic targets (especially its oil industry) and civilian population centers; these attacks reached their height during the 1988 "war of the cities." Iran responded with missile attacks on Iraqi cities and broadened the conflict by attempting to destabilize a number of Gulf Arab governments; Iran also attacked international shipping. Iran's responses, however, backfired: terror and subversion against Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia strengthened those governments' resolve to support Iraq, the attacks on international shipping drew the navies of several Western countries into open confrontation with Iran, and the missile attacks on Baghdad spurred Iraq to develop a family of extended-range Scud missiles capable of reaching Tehran.²

Operation Earnest Will

In 1987–1988, during the final stages of the Iran-Iraq War, the United States, Britain, and other European countries organized convoys of "reflagged" foreign oil and gas tankers at the request of the government of Kuwait and escorted them as they traversed the Persian Gulf, to protect them from Iranian attacks. After reflagging operations began in mid-1987, Iranian small-boat attacks (using small-arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades, and artillery rockets) dropped off sharply,

1. Harold Saunders, "Diplomacy and Pressure, November 1979–May 1980," in Warren Christopher, Harold H. Saunders, and Gary Sick, *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 90–92. Gary Sick, who worked the issue in the Carter White House, described the worry that "the Islamic world might have reacted by sparking a conflagration with the West generally and the United States in particular." Gary Sick, "Military Options and Constraints," in Christopher, Saunders, and Sick, *American Hostages in Iran*, p. 162. In his memoirs, Vance cites his fear the attempt "could jeopardize our interests in the Persian Gulf and perhaps lead Iran to turn to the Soviets" as well as "uniting the Moslem world against the West." None of these developments happened. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 408. As for bellicose Iranian statements, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's address after the rescue attempt included the warning, "Carter must realize that attacking Iran is tantamount to an attack on all Moslem countries, that world Moslems are not indifferent to this. Carter must know that an attack on Iran would result in the stop of the flow of oil to the entire world." "Transcript of Khomeini Remarks," *New York Times*, April 26, 1980, p. 6. Two days later, Iranian foreign minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh outlined Iran's plans to block the Strait of Hormuz in the event of a new U.S. rescue attempt.
2. Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 495–503, evaluate the use of missiles in the Iran-Iraq War. On pages 363–368, they describe how earlier Iranian missile strikes against Baghdad (which is much closer to the border than is Tehran) had by 1988 led Iraq to develop undetected long-range missiles capable of hitting Tehran, and how an Iranian airstrike against an oil refinery provided Iraq the occasion to start the March–April 1988 war of the cities that was so devastating to Iranian morale.

and Iran shifted to less easily attributable methods of attack, such as mines, although causing at least as much damage as it had previously. In September–October 1987, Iran resumed more audacious attacks, including strikes by Silkworm missiles, leading the United States to destroy two oil platforms used by the Revolutionary Guards as a base for their attacks and to damage a third. Iran responded by launching, in the next three days, three Silkworm missiles at Kuwait's main oil export terminal, crippling Kuwaiti oil exports. Iranian attacks on shipping rose during the next six months from about six attacks per month to about ten attacks per month.³ In short, Iran's response to Operation Earnest Will was to step up its own operations.

Operation Praying Mantis

After the destroyer USS *Samuel B. Roberts* sustained heavy damage from an Iranian mine on April 14, 1988, the United States sank two Iranian oil platforms on April 18—the same day that Iraqi forces retook the Fao Peninsula (thanks in part to intelligence provided by the United States) in a battle that was to be a turning point in the war.⁴ Iranian naval forces responded by attacking several U.S. ships. As a result, the U.S. Navy sank most of Iran's remaining operational surface combatants. After this episode, Iranian attacks on shipping fell off sharply from ten per month to two per month for the remainder of the war. The only other Iranian response to the U.S. operation was to file suit at the International Court of Justice for the hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to the two oil platforms (Iran lost the suit). In sum, Iranian forces did not shy

away from confronting a much larger, more capable U.S. force, and they prosecuted the fight to the best of their ability but pulled back after being bloodied.

IranAir Airbus Downing

In July 1988, during the final phase of the Iran-Iraq War, the cruiser USS *Vincennes*, believing that it was under attack by Iranian warplanes, accidentally shot down an IranAir Airbus, resulting in the death of all 290 passengers aboard. This event, which came amid signs of growing indirect U.S. support for the Iraqi war effort and shortly after Iraq's successful Fao offensive, convinced the Iranian leadership that the United States was joining the war on the side of Iraq, leading Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to conclude a ceasefire with Iraq. Iran apparently never retaliated for the shootdown, despite the considerable bitterness among ordinary Iranians over the matter. The United States accepted responsibility for the deaths of the passengers and paid compensation.⁵

Buenos Aires Bombing

After Israeli forces killed Hizballah secretary general Sheik Abbas Musawi and his family in February 1992, as part of the ongoing struggle between Hizballah and Israel, Hizballah collaborated with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security to bomb the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires on May 19, 1992.⁶ Then, in June 1994, Israeli attack helicopters and strike aircraft hit a Hizballah base at Ayn Dardara, Lebanon, resulting in the death of dozens of Hizballah recruits and their Iranian trainers. One month later, Hizballah and Iran jointly

3. Martin Navias and E. R. Hooten, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping during the Iran-Iraq Conflict, 1980–1988* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), pp. 132–168; John Kifner, “Missile Reportedly Fired by Iran Damages a Kuwaiti Oil Terminal,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1987, pp. A1, A9; John Cushman, Jr., “2 Platforms Called Based for Raids,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1987, p. A10; and Bernard Trainor, “Attacks by U.S. in Gulf: Will Iran Get Message?” *New York Times*, October 20, 1987, p. A10. The listing of each attack on ships in Sreedhar and Kapil Haul, *Tanker War: Aspect of Iraq-Iran War* (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1989), shows that Iran attacked thirty ships in the ninety days from October 15, 1987, through January 14, 1987, and twenty-seven in the ninety days from January 15, 1988, to April 15, 1988.

4. Navias and Hooten, *Tanker Wars*, pp. 168–181. Sreedhar and Haul, *Tanker War*, shows seven attacks in the ninety days from April 19, 1988, to July 8, 1988.

5. In the days after the incident, then Majlis speaker (soon to become president) Akbar Rafsanjani said, “We suggest that the United States has some additional crimes stored away for Iran, and that is why we do not push for any revenge. Wise people understand why we do not take revenge.” Quoted in Youssef Ibrahim, “Iranian Plays Down Revenge,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1988, p. 1. Interestingly, a few hours before the shootdown, Rafsanjani gave a major speech criticizing past Iranian policies for having created unnecessary enemies. Youssef Ibrahim, “As Iran Mourns, Khomeini Calls for ‘War’ on U.S.,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1988, p. A9.

6. An additional factor, according to Miguel Angel Toma, the director of Argentina's SIDE intelligence agency in 2002–2003 and investigator in the embassy bombing, was Iranian anger at new Argentine policy, after the 1989 civilian government replaced the previous junta, to cancel nuclear and missile agreements. “Official: Iran Ordered Terrorist Bombing in the Americas,” FoxNews.com, October 5, 2007. Available online (http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,298300,00.html).

carried out a bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, resulting in the death of eighty-five and the wounding of hundreds more. In short, Iran helped its main proxy and ally, the Lebanese Hizballah, to avenge Israeli attacks by engaging in terrorism halfway around the world.

Taliban Murder of Iranian Diplomats

In August 1998, at the height of the Afghan civil war, the Taliban overran the major opposition city of Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan, defeating forces that had long been armed and financed by Iran, while massacring several thousand Shiite Hazaras.⁷ The Taliban also murdered eleven Iranian diplomats as well as other Iranian citizens, drawing strong condemnation by the UN Security Council. Furious at the treatment of their Shiite Afghan allies, the murder of their diplomats, and the prospect the Taliban would achieve complete victory in the civil war, Iran mobilized over 200,000 troops on the Iran-Afghanistan border in October. Even though the international situation was conducive to an Iranian military response (the Taliban slaughter of innocent Shiite civilians and the destruction of world-famous Buddha statues at Bamiyan in September had repulsed many around the world), Iran did not attack Afghani-

stan; apparently, Iran did not want to be drawn into an Afghan quagmire. Instead, Iran joined the Russian Federation in rushing more arms to Ahmed Shah Massoud, the de facto leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, facilitating his successful October–November 1998 counteroffensive, which recovered huge swaths of territory and inflicted thousands of casualties on the Taliban. This episode shows that although Iran may eschew direct action when necessary, it is quite adept at acting through proxies and allies to secure its interests and punish its enemies.

Three conclusions can be drawn from these past experiences: (1) Tehran recognizes that at times its interests are best served by restraint, although it will react when circumstances permit; (2) its responses have sometimes been ill conceived and ill timed from the viewpoint of Iranian interests but at other times have been on terms favorable for Tehran (e.g., relying on a delayed asymmetric response in a distant theater of operations, using proxies or terrorist surrogates); and (3) Tehran has not always reacted swiftly to foreign attacks to assuage nationalist passions—and it has sometimes not responded at all. When it has responded, it often did so on its own timeline, and at a time and place of its own choosing.

7. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 74. This paragraph is largely based on Rashid, pp. 72–79. See also UN Security Council Resolutions 1193 (August 28, 1998) and 1214 (December 8, 1998).

Nature, Scale, and Scope of Preventive Action and the Iranian Response

THE NATURE, SCALE, AND SCOPE of any preventive action would most likely influence the nature, scale, and scope of any Iranian response.

Covert Action

Covert action probably entails the least risk of political complications or a harsh Iranian response. Such action could include efforts to encourage the defection of key engineers or scientists, the introduction of fatal design flaws into key pieces of equipment or of destructive viruses into critical computer systems, or the sabotage of critical facilities. In the event of covert action, Iranian authorities may not be able to determine, for instance, whether damage to a critical facility was caused by an industrial accident or sabotage. Even if Tehran suspected sabotage, it might not be able to determine whether such action was the work of Iranian dissidents or foreign intelligence services. Such uncertainty would greatly reduce the risks of a nationalist backlash and Iranian retaliation.

Covert action entails many challenges, however, not least of which is that of access to the facilities to be targeted. Iran's nuclear infrastructure is extensive, and for that reason, it would be difficult to disrupt. Additionally, covert actions would have to be sustained over time to succeed. Because of these difficulties, covert action would probably not have a broad, long-term effect on Iran's nuclear program or obviate the need for military action.

Strikes on Clandestine Facilities

Another option would be strikes on clandestine facilities (if they exist), similar to the Israeli strike on a suspected Syrian nuclear site on September 6, 2007. That raid was a great political success: not one Arab country objected publicly to the raid, which magnified the effect of the action by showing Syria's leaders how isolated they are. Furthermore, Syria was in a quandary over how to respond to the raid; protests would entail potential embarrassment over having to reveal

that a clandestine facility in fact existed. As attractive as this scenario may be, its applicability to the Iranian situation is questionable. Iran has large declared facilities that could produce the fissile material for a nuclear weapon without relying on clandestine facilities. Therefore, if the United States or Israel were to hit Iran's nuclear infrastructure, they would have to hit not only possible clandestine facilities, but also parts of Iran's now overt nuclear infrastructure that could contribute to a nuclear weapons program.

A Comprehensive Strike

Assuming a more extensive strike that targets major components of Iran's overt nuclear infrastructure still leaves unanswered the question of the relationship between the scale and scope of a strike and its likely political impact. That effect might be considerably less if the strike were a single event, rather than a series of actions over time. Another factor could be the extent of the damage, although this factor is harder to game out. After all, if large and important parts of the infrastructure (or significant quantities of fissile material) survive an initial strike, Iran might be reluctant to hit back too hard, lest it provoke another strike against the remaining assets.

The response of the Iranian people, if not the regime, is also likely to be influenced by the number of Iranian civilians inadvertently killed in a strike. Some elements of Iran's clandestine nuclear infrastructure dismantled since 2002 were located in or near civilian population centers, and quite possibly civilians would be killed in a strike because of their proximity to the intended target or because of a mishap (incorrect identification of the target or a delayed bomb release caused by a mechanical mishap). Moreover, several known nuclear facilities are located near population centers (the Bushehr reactor, the Esfahan conversion facility); their destruction could release plumes of highly toxic chemicals or radioactive materials into the atmosphere, affecting nearby civilians.¹

1. The December 1984 accident at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, led to the immediate death of at least 2,000 and thousands more since then.

The United States might couple a strike on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure with attacks against key elements of its armed forces (e.g., its navy, its inventory of strike aircraft, or its missile and rocket forces) to hinder Iranian retaliation. Such a strike could last a week or more. Significant numbers of civilians and hundreds, if not thousands, of military personnel could be killed. Iran’s military consists of large numbers of conscripts drawn from all parts of the country and from all walks of life (although many Iranians from better-off families can buy their way out of service); losses in the Iranian military are likely to be felt throughout Iran, on all levels of Iranian society.² This factor would probably increase pressure on the Iranian government to retaliate.

And If Israel Attacks?

Iran might not respond to an Israeli attack in the same way it would respond to a U.S. attack. Although Tehran might assume that an Israeli attack had the blessing of the United States, it might not want to expand a conflict with Israel to include the United States (to be sure, some Iranian decisionmakers might favor doing

so to further undermine America’s regional standing). Instead, Iran might strike back at Israel by means of terrorism (perhaps against vulnerable Israeli or Jewish targets overseas), while rhetorically attacking the United States to score propaganda points. Or, it might seek to placate advocates of retaliation against the United States by stepping up support for attacks against American forces in Iraq rather than opening a new front against the United States, thereby limiting the potential for escalation. Finally, Iran might retaliate against both Israel and the United States to encourage a joint response by the two and thereby further cement the association of United States with Israel in the eyes of many Arabs and Muslims. Were Iran to simultaneously take on Israel and the United States, however, it would most likely pay a high price for any propaganda victory it would extract from its actions.

Although the scale and scope of the attack would most likely influence the scale and scope of the Iranian reaction, as previously mentioned, domestic political considerations and the regional political-military context would likewise influence an Iranian decision about how to respond.

as well as long-term health problems for tens of thousands more. In Iran, which continues to deal with the painful legacy of chemical weapons use against its soldiers and civilians in the Iran-Iraq War, a major release of this sort could affect dramatically the attitude of the population toward such a strike. See Faranaz Falahati, Mohammad Reza Soroush, Amir Ali Salamat, Shahriar Khateri, and Ali Reza Hosseini, “A 20 Year Cancer-Related Mortality Follow-up Study of Mustard Gas Exposed Iranian Veterans,” *ASA Newsletter*, no. 103 (August 27, 2004).

2. This reaction would probably be likely even if strikes were focused exclusively on the Revolutionary Guards. Although in the 1980s, the Guards drew mainly from volunteers, since the 1990s, the Guards have reportedly drawn from a broader slice of the population, and most units today are believed to be similar in makeup to the regular armed forces.

Possible Iranian Responses

SHOULD IRAN DECIDE to respond to preventive military action by the United States or Israel, Iran has a wide range of options. At the same time, however, the United States and its allies have various means at their disposal to deter or raise the costs, reduce the benefits, or mitigate the effect of Iran's responses—perhaps making them less attractive to Tehran. Several of these responses are discussed below.

Withdraw from the NPT

Iran has garnered legitimacy for its nuclear program from its claimed adherence to the NPT and its assertion of an “inalienable” right to enrichment technology in accordance with article IV of the treaty. As a result, Iran would encounter a number of problems should it withdraw from the NPT in the wake of a U.S. or Israeli attack. Such a stance would undercut Iran's poststrike public diplomacy, complicate efforts to portray itself as an aggrieved victim, and complicate efforts to obtain nuclear technology from abroad to rebuild its nuclear program. To be sure, in the wake of an attack, Iran could claim its right, under article X, to withdraw from the treaty. It would probably do so only if it believed that it had the ability to rebuild its nuclear program on its own, without relying on foreign sources for materials or technology. To preclude such an eventuality, the United States could support the passage of a resolution by the UN Security Council, under chapter VII, article 41, of the UN Charter, that would require a state withdrawing from the NPT to divest itself of whatever technology it

acquired as a treaty member or risk economic sanctions or destruction of the facilities.¹

Disrupt Regional Oil Exports

According to a recently published, unclassified U.S. defense intelligence assessment, “Iran's navy ... could stem the flow of oil from the Gulf for brief periods by employing a layered force of diesel-powered KILO submarines, missile patrol boats, naval mines, and sea and shore-based anti-ship cruise missiles.”² Although Iran could disrupt the flow of oil from the Gulf, causing at least temporary panic in world oil and financial markets, it could not block the Gulf for long. Large tankers are very difficult to sink; their large size and the strength and compartmentalization of their hulls reduce their vulnerability to attack. Mines can be swept and sea lanes cleared. In addition, the Strait of Hormuz is sufficiently broad and deep to enable tankers to bypass the hulks of wrecked or sunken ships. Nevertheless, clearing and securing the strait for maritime traffic in the wake of an Iranian attempt to disrupt shipping there could take a month or more.³

What Iranian policy objective would be served by this course of action is unclear. Attempting to close the strait would harm Iran at least as much as it would harm any of its adversaries, because Tehran presently has no other way to bring to market its oil (which accounts for 80 percent of its foreign exchange earnings);⁴ nearly all its oil and gas exports pass through the strait. Moreover, four of its six principal ports are located on its Persian Gulf coast; these handle about 85 percent of all Iranian

1. France made an excellent proposal on this point, namely, “a State that withdraws should—in any case—no longer make use of all nuclear materials, facilities, equipment or technologies acquired in a third country before its withdrawal. Such facilities, equipment, and nuclear material should be returned to the supplying State, frozen, or dismantled under international verification.” “Strengthening the Nuclear Non-proliferation Regime: Working Paper submitted by France,” NPT/Conf.2005/PC.III/WP.22, May 4, 2004.
2. Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, USN, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, prepared testimony on the “Global Threat” before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 11, 2003, and the Senate Armed Services Committee, 108th Cong., 1st sess., February 12, 2003. Available online (www.dia.mil/publicaffairs/Testimonies/statement10.html).
3. Dennis Blair and Kenneth Lieberthal, “Smooth Sailing: The World's Shipping Lanes are Safe,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007, pp. 7–13.
4. International Monetary Fund, “Islamic Republic of Iran: 2005 Article IV Consultation—Staff Report; Staff Statement; Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Islamic Republic of Iran,” IMF Country Report No. 06/154, April 2006. Available online (www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2006/cr06154.pdf).

imports by tonnage.⁵ Attempting to close the strait would also invite reprisals against Iran's oil production infrastructure and exports via the Strait of Hormuz. Most important, attacks on shipping in the Gulf would politically isolate Iran from its oil-producing neighbors, from oil-importing nations, and from countries that care about freedom of navigation. Iran would risk UN Security Council action. The last time Iran attacked neutral navigation in the Gulf, during the Iran-Iraq War, its actions prompted foreign (U.S. and European) military intervention in the Gulf, to Iran's disadvantage.

Nonetheless, in word and action, Iran has focused on the strait as a pressure point to use in the event of an attack against its nuclear program. On numerous occasions going back to the Iran-Iraq War, senior Iranian officials have warned that if Iran is not allowed to export oil via the Persian Gulf, no country from the region will be allowed to do so.⁶ Moreover, Iranian military exercises frequently involve scenarios entailing the blockage or closure of the Strait of Hormuz.⁷

Assuming that Iran will threaten shipping in the Strait of Hormuz would thus be prudent. One step the United States might take to mitigate the effect of such a move would be to calm oil markets by announcing, simultaneously with any military action, that oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve would be released if Iranian action caused any shortfall in oil exports from the Gulf—while encouraging other members of the International Energy Agency that hold similar reserves to do the same. The United States could also work out in advance arrangements for providing government-guaranteed insurance for Gulf shipping, in the event that tensions raise rates to levels where shipping is seriously impeded.

Moreover, knowing when it planned to strike, the United States could deploy additional military assets to the Gulf prior to a strike to deter and, if necessary, counter any Iranian attacks on shipping. And other countries, such as NATO allies and major Asian oil importers, could ratchet up pressure on Tehran not to interfere with shipping in the Gulf by declaring their commitment to freedom of navigation there and their readiness to come to the defense of any Gulf state threatened by Iran.

Finally, prior to a strike, Gulf Cooperation Council states could be encouraged to expand the capacity of pipelines that bypass the Strait of Hormuz.⁸ Saudi Arabia's Petrolina has the capacity to carry 5 million barrels per day (b/d) to the Red Sea coast—a capacity that could be increased quickly to more than 8 million b/d through use of drag reduction agents. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is building a pipeline to carry 1.5 million b/d to the Gulf of Oman coast past the strait; with drag reduction agents, that pipeline's capacity could be increased to over 2.5 million b/d. These two pipelines alone could carry more than 60 percent of the 17 million b/d flowing through the strait.

Halt Iranian Oil Exports

Iran could halt its own oil exports. It has sufficient hard currency reserves on hand (more than \$70 billion) to fund imports for at least a year and a half. However, the effect of an Iranian oil embargo would depend on the reaction of other oil producers. By early 2008, other Gulf oil producers (Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular) have returned to their traditional position of having sufficient excess capacity to make up for the withdrawal of Iran's oil exports from the world

5. Farjam Behnam, Karan Behrooz, and Farhad Shahabi, eds., *Iran Almanac* (Tehran: Iran Almanac, 2003), pp. 372–373; Statistical Center of Iran (SCI), *Iran Statistical Yearbook 1383 [2004–2005 CE]* (Tehran: SCI, Department of Publication and Information, 1384 [2005 CE]), pp. 474–476.
6. For instance, in 2007 Khamenei said, "If the Americans make a wrong move towards Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely face danger, and the Americans would not be able to protect energy supply in the region." Thom Shanker, "Rice Dismisses Iranian Cleric's Warning on Oil," *New York Times*, June 5, 2006.
7. Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Military Forces in Transition: Conventional Threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), p. 198. For more information regarding ongoing Iranian naval exercises see Bill Samii, Iran: Naval Doctrine Stresses 'Area Denial,' Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 6, 2006; available online (www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/04/ECC7CC43-5786-4FAF-A4EF-5D093184A90A.html) and Fariborz Haghshenass, "Iran's Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare," *PolicyWatch* no. 1179 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2006). Available online (www.thewashingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2548).
8. As discussed in detail there are the ways to offset an Iranian cutoff of its oil exports, as well as efforts under way in the Gulf states to protect critical infrastructure.

oil market; that margin is likely to grow as world economic growth slows and oil production capacity grows under the stimulus of the high prices of recent years. An agreement by oil producers to increase production could potentially offset any Iranian embargo.

Attack U.S. and Allied Assets in the Gulf

Iran could attack critical infrastructure in the Gulf. For instance, Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil processing facility is the largest in the world, handling more than half the kingdom's daily exports. Damaging this plant could result in the reduction of crude-oil exports from Saudi Arabia by several million b/d for up to several months.⁹ However, after a 2006 al-Qaeda attack on Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia improved security at oil installations.

Alternatively, Iran could attack water desalination plans on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, which provide more than 60 percent of the drinking water consumed by the Gulf Arab states.¹⁰ Because the Gulf states rely so heavily on desalinated water and have so little storage capacity for processed water, an attack on desalination plants in the Gulf could quickly have a significant effect on the health and welfare of the population there. This vulnerability could be mitigated, however, by a variety of conventional infrastructure protection measures and by making the infrastructure more robust by, for instance, linking the water systems of various Gulf Cooperation Council countries so that an attack on one country's facilities could be offset by drawing on other plants (a permanent link would take years, but interim measures could considerably reduce the vulnerability).

Dragging Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states into a conflict with the United States would, however, have substantial downsides for Iran, and would mean repeating one of its major errors in the Iran-Iraq War.

Iran could attack U.S. naval assets in the Gulf. Iran seems confident that its small-boat swarming tactics

could inflict painful losses on elements of the 5th Fleet.¹¹ Not only could Iran proclaim a propaganda victory by bloodying the U.S. Navy, but also such attacks would be consistent with the Iranian navy's emphasis on revolutionary Shiite values, such as stoic endurance, devotion to the cause, and martyrdom ("if we die, we win, if we defeat the enemy, we win"), as opposed to foreign concepts such as "overwhelming force" and "decisive operations." Were Iran to attack, the U.S. response would almost certainly cripple or destroy Iran's navy.

Attack U.S. Interests in Iraq

Iran could ratchet up support for Shiite militias and "special groups" engaged in attacks on U.S. and Coalition Provisional Authority forces in Iraq. Thus far, Iran seems to have been pulling its punches in terms of the support it provides these groups, but in the wake of a preventive strike, it could dramatically intensify such support, increasing the flow of components for improvised explosive devices as well as more advanced anti-armor and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft weapons. In addition, it could sponsor suicide bombings against coalition forces by Shiite groups. Coalition forces would have to intensify efforts to interdict smuggling routes and ratlines used by Iran to bring in weapons and personnel to deal with an intensified Iranian threat.

Attack Israel through Lebanon

Iran might urge Hizballah to launch rocket attacks against Israel in response to a U.S. strike, thereby harming a key U.S. ally, scoring points on the Arab street, and undermining efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. Iran has invested significant efforts and resources in building up Hizballah's military capabilities for just such a purpose (including, reportedly, more than 30,000 rockets), and Hizballah plays a key role in Iran's deterrence calculus. However, Hizballah, recovering from its summer 2006 war with Israel, would

9. Simon Henderson, "Al-Qaeda Attack on Abqaiq: The Vulnerability of Saudi Oil," *PolicyWatch* no. 1082 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 28, 2006). Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2446).

10. "Desalination Plants in the Persian Gulf," IDS Water, September 14, 2007. Available online (www.idswater.com/water/asia/desalination/2064/newsrelease_content.html).

11. See Fariborz Haghsheenas, "Iran's Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare," *PolicyWatch* no. 1179 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2006), which also discusses Iran's naval strategy. Available online (www.thewashingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2548).

presumably be reluctant to jeopardize its base of support in the Shiite community, reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon, and its efforts to rebuild its military forces. The United States might seek to reduce the likelihood of such an eventuality by quietly indicating that, as in 2006, it would support a tough Israeli response to Hizballah rocket attacks. The United States might also accelerate cooperation with Israel on the development and deployment of systems to defend against short-range rocket attacks.

Attack the Israeli Nuclear Reactor at Dimona

Iran might respond to a U.S. or Israeli attack on its nuclear infrastructure in kind, by launching a missile strike on the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona. At the outset of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran unsuccessfully attacked Iraq's Osiraq reactor on September 30, 1980 (nearly a year before the successful Israeli strike of June 1981). During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq attacked Iran's nuclear power plant at Bushehr seven times between 1984 and 1988, but Iran is not known to have retaliated for those strikes. Iraq, in contrast, retaliated for the Israeli attack on Osiraq nearly a decade later by launching a missile against Dimona during the 1991 Gulf War (the missile carried a concrete-filled warhead, presumably to penetrate the reactor's reinforced concrete containment structure). The missile, however, missed its mark.¹² Israel has presumably taken steps to protect Dimona with missile defenses. Even if one or more missiles were to get through, it is not clear that they would be sufficiently accurate to enjoy a high probability of a hit against Dimona.

Sponsor Terror and Subversion

Iran's capacity for terror and subversion remains one of its most potent levers in the event of a confrontation with the United States, given Iran's inability otherwise

to challenge the United States on anything near equal terms. In response to a U.S. attack, Iran might sponsor terrorism in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—all of which host important U.S. military facilities—to sow fear among the Arab Gulf states and cause them to curb or deny U.S. access to military facilities in the Gulf. Thanks to its ties to the Lebanese Hizballah and, more recently, its provision of safe haven, if not assistance, to al-Qaeda, Tehran would have the means to launch a bloody terrorist campaign against U.S. interests on several continents, and perhaps even in the United States itself.

Iran and Hizballah have the means to launch such a campaign: Hizballah retains a presence and a support infrastructure that could be used to mount terrorist attacks in the United States itself, while Iranian agents surveil U.S. personnel and installations around the world from time to time.¹³ Moreover, some U.S. officials believe that al-Qaeda personnel in Iran were involved in the planning for the May 2003 bombings of three residential compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that killed twenty-five (not including the nine bombers).¹⁴ If it decided to do so, Iran could inspire or initiate attacks on U.S. interests in the Middle East, Europe, South America, and in the United States—thanks to its ties to Hizballah and al-Qaeda, as well as its own intelligence assets. However, efforts to roll up known Iranian intelligence agents, networks, and Iranian-supported terrorist cells around the world in the immediate aftermath of an attack would most likely mitigate the effect of an Iranian retaliatory response.

Escalate into Full-Scale War

Some analysts worry that U.S. strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure could escalate into a full-scale war. Limited strikes could lead to a series of tit-for-tat responses against an ever-broadening array of targets,

12. "War of Words as Iran Threatens Israel," Agence France-Presse, August 19, 2004. Available online (<http://iranvajahan.net/cgi-bin/news.pl?!=en&cy=2004&m=08&d=19&a=1>).

13. Statements of Robert S. Mueller III, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "War on Terrorism," 108th Cong., 1st sess., February 11, 2003 (available online at www.fbi.gov/congress/congress03/mueller021103.htm); 109th Cong., 1st sess., February 16, 2005 (available online at www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/mueller021605.htm); and 110th Cong., 1st sess., January 11, 2007 (available online at www.fbi.gov/congress/congress07/mueller011107.htm).

14. Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt, "Al-Qaida Figure Tied to Riyadh Blasts; U.S. Officials Say Leader Is in Iran with Other Terrorists," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2003, p. A1.

eventually leading to a major ground war with Iran that neither side wanted or expected.

Even in the midst of a progressively escalating conflict with the Islamic Republic, however, it is very difficult to believe that the United States would launch a ground invasion of Iran. Although as part of a preventive strike, the United States might attack the Iranian military to limit Iran's ability to retaliate, standoff attacks could, in a matter of weeks, destroy all major elements of Iran's conventional military forces. Although in the course of preventive action, U.S. ground forces might unwisely seize oil platforms or islands in the Persian Gulf to prevent their use by the Iranian military or to facilitate their use by the U.S. military—actions that would almost certainly engender a nationalist backlash in Iran—anything beyond that is most unlikely.

Thanks to its Iraq experience, U.S. political and military leaders are painfully aware that the United States lacks the forces necessary to invade, occupy, and administer a country with triple Iraq's population and four times its landmass, especially given the likelihood that a small but significant minority would be quite prepared to resist a U.S. occupation. More likely, a conflict would settle down after several weeks of high-intensity military operations into a protracted, low-intensity conflict, involving terrorist attacks by Iranian agents or surrogates against U.S. interests around the world, and U.S. retaliatory actions against Iran. Even such a limited war scenario, however, would involve numerous challenges and complications for U.S. military planners and policymakers.

The Broader Context

THE RIPPLE EFFECTS of preventive military action would most likely be felt far beyond the confines of the U.S.-Iran relationship and would affect U.S. interests around the globe. Worth remembering is that when the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviet Union did not consider the effect of its action on its relations with third countries. Soviet leaders were therefore deeply shocked at the U.S. reaction, starting with the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.¹ Likewise, preventive military action would probably affect Israel, other U.S. allies and friends, and broader U.S. objectives.

Relations with Israel

Not surprisingly, Israel is probably more favorably disposed toward preventive action than is the United States. A nuclear-armed Iran could dangerously alter the strategic balance in the region, handcuffing Israel's room to maneuver on the Palestinian and Lebanese fronts, dealing a sharp blow to moderate Arab regimes ready to live in peace with Israel, and emboldening anti-Israeli Islamic extremists around the world. Even more worryingly for Israel, a nuclear-armed Iran is seen as an existential threat.² Israeli concerns include the possibility of nuclear terrorism, the potential for miscalculation in a crisis, or the possibility that an irresponsible or fanatical Iranian leader might be tempted to use Iran's nuclear arsenal to expunge "the cancer" of Israel from the region—regardless of the consequences for the Palestinians or Iran. Moreover, some Israelis believe that a nuclear Iran would make life in Israel nearly intolerable and lead to increased emigration.³

Any U.S. decision about preventive military action must factor in what Israel might do if the United States does not act—including the possibility of unilateral action by Israel. An Israeli preventive strike would have many disadvantages for the United States.⁴

- An Israeli strike would convert a global issue about Iran's failure to comply with its obligations under international treaties into a bilateral Israeli-Iranian issue on which many around the world would side against Israel. This situation could undercut efforts to pressure Iran not to rebuild its nuclear program.
- An Israeli strike could engender international criticism of such magnitude—given hostility in many circles to Israel—that Iran would be confident it could rebuild without incurring significant international disapproval.
- Many around the world would assume that Washington gave Tel Aviv a "green light," if not active assistance, so the United States might face much the same reaction as if it had carried out a raid itself.
- Finally, an Israeli strike might inflict less damage than would a U.S. strike—although as stated previously, the amount of damage done is not necessarily an accurate predictor of long-term policy success.

The worst of all situations would be if Israel were to take preventive action contrary to the wishes of the United States, do the job badly, and through military

1. "Soviet Union Denounces Carter for Forcing U.S. Boycott of Olympics," Associated Press, April 13, 1980.

2. The existential character of the Iranian threat to Israel, and the U.S. ability to ride out an Iranian nuclear attack, is analyzed in Chuck Freilich, *Speaking about the Unspeakable: U.S.-Israeli Dialogue on Iran's Nuclear Program* (Policy Focus no. 77) (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2007), p. 4. Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=284).

3. See Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren, "Israel's Worse Nightmare: Contra Iran," *The New Republic*, January 30, 2007, p. 16. Available online (www.michaeloren.com/article.php?id=2). Citing a recent poll showing that 27 percent of Israelis would consider emigrating if Iran went nuclear, the authors quote Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh: "Who will leave? Those with opportunities—the elite."

4. The contrary argument is made by Freilich in "Speaking about the Unspeakable," pp. 12–13: "One can also argue that the United States would actually like to see Israel go ahead without American advance knowledge. An Israeli operation would relieve the United States of responsibility for dealing with an issue to which it attaches great importance, not just for strategic reasons, but also as a moral commitment to Israel in the face of an existential—holocaust-like—threat. Unsupported Israeli action would also somewhat alleviate the appearances of what the Muslim world would portray as 'collusion' in any event."

action convince regional and world opinion that Iran needs nuclear weapons to defend against Israel. In such a case, U.S.-Israeli relations would suffer, while the threat from Iran's nuclear program would increase.

To avert such an outcome, U.S. policymakers should consider carefully what they would do if they concluded that Israel was likely to take preventive military action, especially if they were skeptical that Israel could be effective. One option would be for the United States to preempt Israel, so to speak, and act on its own. Another option would be to let Israel proceed. A third option would be to offer a variety of political and military inducements and guarantees to Israel (including some kind of extended deterrence guarantee) to persuade it not to attack Iran. A fourth option would be for the United States to propose a joint U.S.-Israeli action, although it is difficult to see what political or military advantages this would bring the United States. In any case, the most senior U.S. and Israeli leaders should consult about such a very delicate issue. If they can hold open and useful discussions about which of these options—all of which are risky and unpleasant—is best, then the response to the Iranian nuclear threat might broaden and deepen the U.S.-Israeli strategic partnership rather than undermine it.

Relations with Other Allies and Friends

The United States cannot count on its friends and allies unquestioningly to accept its intelligence evaluations concerning Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions—a problem exacerbated by the publication of the key judgments of the November 2007 NIE. Nor, in light of the widespread perception that the United States bungled Iraq, can the United States count on its friends and allies to accept Washington's assessments about what needs to be done about Iran's nuclear problem. A U.S. preventive strike on Iran conducted without ample discussion with friends and allies could be very badly received and could undercut efforts to create a broad international front to persuade Iran not to rebuild poststrike.

A U.S. preventive strike would be more effective if European allies participated: not because the Europeans would bring to bear military assets the United

States lacks—although Britain and France at least could make substantive military contributions—but for the all-important political effect. A European role would make more credible to Iran the threat that poststrike international pressure would be sustained and could include follow-on strikes unless Iran were to reach an agreement with the major powers about its nuclear program. It is vital for the United States that the dispute be seen by Tehran as the world community insisting that Iran live up to its international treaty obligations, not as a dispute between Washington or “the West” and the Islamic Republic. That said, such a European role could most easily be imagined if the precipitating occasion for the military strike is some particularly bold and aggressive Iranian step, such as withdrawal from the NPT, perhaps accompanied by a declaration of intent to build nuclear weapons.

The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf would have good reason to keep a low profile during any U.S.-Iranian confrontation. Most are small and highly vulnerable to an Iranian response. Their size and location explains their long-standing policy of quietly urging the United States to stand tough against Iran—and providing U.S. forces the access, basing, and overflight rights required to do so, while publicly making accommodating gestures to Iran. Providing tacit assistance to a U.S. strike would be entirely consistent with their strategic situation and past practice, so long as Washington has the good sense not to mention it.

An added factor would be potential negative publicity in the Gulf. The monarchies do pay some attention to public opinion, although usually less so on questions of vital national security than on domestic issues. How public opinion in the Gulf or in other Arab countries would react to a preventive strike on Iran is by no means clear. The September 6, 2007, Israeli strike on an alleged nuclear site in Syria drew no noticeable reaction from publics (or from governments) in Arab countries, even though the target was an Arab country (which presumably would get more sympathy than Persian/Shiite Iran) and the perpetrator was Israel. That (lack of) reaction suggests the circumstances of a strike would greatly influence public reaction. Dire

warnings about explosions by the Arab street are often made but seldom come to pass.

The United States is not likely to seek, or receive, assistance in any form from Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, or any of Iran's other bordering neighbors. Those countries have enough problems of their own; they do not wish to get involved in a fight between the United States (or the other great powers) and Iran.

Other U.S. Objectives

In addition to the Middle East, a U.S. preventive strike on Iran's nuclear program could affect a number of important U.S. global interests, including its economy, its deterrent posture, its image as a country that respects the rule of law, and its relations with Russia and China.

Economic. Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei reportedly told German foreign minister Joschka Fischer that the West would not act against Iran's nuclear program because it would never tolerate \$140 per barrel oil.⁵ He made that comment when oil prices were around \$50 per barrel. The tightening of the world oil market since then could even further exacerbate the problem of high oil prices in the aftermath of preventive action (since the baseline precrisis price is even higher now than when the scenario was first considered). Nevertheless, the relatively small macroeconomic impact from the tripling of world oil prices in 2004–2007 suggests that oil price shocks do not represent the threat they have been reputed to be. Indeed, the political dynamic in the United States in recent years suggests that when crude oil prices rise, the American public's reaction is to demand less reliance on Middle East oil, not to change U.S. Middle East policy. Therefore, concern about the

potential economic impact of prevention may not be as important as once believed in deciding whether to use force against Iran's nuclear program.

Deterrent posture. Some have argued that U.S. global influence will not come from being loved but from being feared.⁶ Others have suggested that the second Bush administration, for all its strong rhetoric, has done little in response to several developments that it had previously said would be "unacceptable" were they to come to pass, such as a North Korean nuclear weapons test.⁷ For those foreign leaders who think the United States is a country that talks tough and does little, preventive action might restore the U.S. image as a country that will use force when its vital national security interests are threatened. For those foreign leaders who think the United States is a bully that resorts too quickly to force, a strike against Iran would confirm that image. In either case, the U.S. deterrent posture would most likely be strengthened, although the effect of prevention on America's image as a responsible actor, and its attractiveness as an ally, will depend on whether prevention is seen as justified in various capitals around the world.

Multilateral diplomacy and respect for the rule of law. The war in Iraq has undercut the U.S. image as a country that upholds international law and works to empower international institutions. No matter what circumstances might lead the United States to launch a preventive strike against Iran, some circles will insist that, as in Iraq, Washington was using UN Security Council resolutions and international treaties as a pretext for military action. The magnitude of the problem will depend on the reputation of the U.S. administra-

5. As described in Dennis Ross, "Middle East Muddle," *National Interest* 92 (November–December 2007), p. 34.

6. In chapter 17 of *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote, "Upon this a question arises: whether it is better to be loved than feared? ... Because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved." An example of the charge that this attitude inspires neoconservatives and the Bush administration is the July 10, 2003, House speech by Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.); available online (www.house.gov/paul/congrec/congrec2003/cr071003.htm).

7. Not only did President Bush say that it would be unacceptable if North Korea did certain things that it then did, but also he went on to say, "the proclaimed actions taken by North Korea [its 2006 claim to have tested a nuclear weapon] are unacceptable." He immediately added, however, that "The United States remains committed to diplomacy," while not referring to any other consequences North Korea might face for its defiance. In this context, the meaning of the term "unacceptable" seems to be something the United States strongly deplors but that will have no consequences other than diplomatic. "President Bush's Statement on North Korea Nuclear Test," White House, October 9, 2006. Available online (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061009.html).

tion as a champion of the rule of law and on the extent to which Iran is seen as having caused the crisis by rejecting reasonable diplomatic initiatives and acting belligerently.

Relations with China and Russia. Although a detailed assessment of U.S. relations with China or Russia is beyond the scope of this study, both are great powers and past rivals that could decide, at some future date, to resume their competition with the United States for global influence. If a U.S. strike on Iran (regardless of its effect on Iran's nuclear program) resulted in a dramatic deterioration in U.S. relations with either or both of these great powers (because Beijing or Moscow

concluded that Washington was reckless or aggressive, or because Beijing was adversely affected by high oil prices following a strike), U.S. interests would face a potentially serious setback. Conversely, if a U.S. strike so impressed Russia or China with U.S. resolve that they decided to avoid military competition, then the strike would yield important benefits for the United States. If a U.S. strike were to lead to a protracted U.S.-Iranian military confrontation, Russia and China might see an opportunity to arm Iran, to profit from the conflict, if not to bleed the United States. At any rate, such possible outcomes should be factored into any discussion about the risks and challenges of preventive action against Iran.

Weighing Prevention and Deterrence

SHOULD DIPLOMACY FAIL to halt Tehran's nuclear program, and should Tehran continue to make slow but steady progress toward accumulating fissile material for a possible weapons program, U.S. policymakers will face growing pressure to weigh the relative costs and benefits of the remaining policy options available to them: prevention and deterrence.

If the potential risks, challenges, and consequences of prevention (as previously outlined) are daunting, the risks and challenges of deterrence are even more so. Deterrence is not an easy, low-risk alternative. The cost/benefit calculus pertaining to prevention versus deterrence as a means of dealing with Iran's nuclear program may be one of the most complex and difficult policy choices facing U.S. policymakers today, given the uncertainties of the prospects for success and the possible price of failure for each.¹

If one were to juxtapose the risks and benefits of prevention and deterrence, the resulting balance sheet might look something like this:

- Prevention, on the one hand, entails significant near-term risk of Iranian retaliation for an uncertain outcome whose benefits may be relatively short lived (e.g., imposing delays of a few years on Iran's nuclear program), unless further military action is taken. Yet, if diplomacy fails, then despite all the risks, preventive force may be the only way to avert the possible emergence of a nuclear Iran and the associated danger of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, as well as a grave weakening of the global nonproliferation regime.
- Deterrence, on the other hand, defers a crisis but runs high risks. Some of those risks are incremental: for instance, the risk that under a nuclear umbrella, Iran will feel free to return to subverting Gulf monarchies

and to more actively support terror against Israel, the United States, and others. The possibility also exists of catastrophic failure, which could lead to deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions. And perhaps the greatest risk of allowing Iran to develop even an ambiguous nuclear weapons capability is that many other countries—including some Middle East powers, but also others around the world—would be tempted to follow the Iranian example, subverting the NPT, and creating a world in which nuclear war becomes frighteningly more possible.

Moreover, deterring a nuclear Iran is likely to prove much more difficult than nuclear deterrence was during the Cold War, for a number of reasons:

- The international community may not have the political will to assemble a broad coalition of states to deter a nuclear Iran, or the staying power to maintain such a coalition over a period of decades.
- The complicated Middle East regional security environment increases the risk that an assertive Iran might miscalculate and unintentionally find itself at war, with the attendant possibility of escalation.
- Given its preference for indirection, dissimulation, and deniability, Tehran may be tempted to attempt the covert delivery of a nuclear device or weapon.
- Regime factionalism raises potential command-and-control problems; the same radical elements that provide support to terrorists also control aspects of Iran's nuclear program, raising the risk that if the system of checks and balances built into the Iranian governmental structure were to weaken, the result might be nuclear terrorism.²

1. Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt, eds., *Deterring the Ayatollahs: Complications in Applying Cold War Strategy to Iran* (Policy Focus no. 72) (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2007).
2. Gregory Giles, "Command-and-Control Challenges of an Iranian Nuclear Force," in Clawson and Eisenstadt, *Deterring the Ayatollahs*, pp. 12–15.

- Some radical regime elements are not particularly well informed about the outside world, appear to be confident that God is on their side, and may welcome confrontation with the outside world as a means of reviving the spirit and values of the Islamic Revolution or of hastening the return of the Mahdi, the Shiite messiah whose reappearance will signal the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.³

A policy of deterrence has additional complications. Should Iran get the bomb, a number of other states in the region (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey), or elsewhere (Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, and Japan), likely would be tempted to do so as well, thereby undermining global norms against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, complicating the challenge of deterrence in a proliferated world and greatly increasing the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used.⁴

Moreover, if Washington wants the international community to pursue a policy of deterrence rather than prevention vis-à-vis Iran, it will have to persuade Israel to go along, which may well require security assurances sufficient to keep Israel from acting unilaterally to deal with what it perceives as an existential threat. Constructing such security assurances will be no small challenge; changes in U.S. nuclear declaratory policy, additional military assistance, and perhaps even a formal defense treaty with Israel may be necessary.⁵

To further complicate matters, prevention and deterrence are not necessarily mutually exclusive options. Prevention may succeed in delaying Iran's nuclear program, but no assurance exists that prevention will halt it. In the end, prevention may be a detour on the path to deterrence—and a very costly one at that. Therefore,

considering the possible effect of prevention on the stability of a potential deterrence relationship with a nuclear Iran is vitally important if after absorbing one or more preventive strikes, Iran succeeds in acquiring nuclear weapons. Would the legacy of prevention make for a more or less stable deterrence relationship with a nuclear Iran? Would the legacy of a potentially painful and costly war incline the leaders of the Islamic Republic to greater prudence and caution in the future than they have practiced in the past? Or would it add an additional layer of baggage to the U.S.-Iranian relationship and create yet another blood debt to be repaid?

The failure of diplomacy or prevention to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons could complicate deterrence in other ways. U.S. policymakers have set a very high rhetorical bar with regard to the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. President Bush has said the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran is "unacceptable," while Vice President Cheney has said the United States will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.⁶ As a result, should Iran, despite these warnings, succeed in acquiring nuclear weapons, the United States might have more difficulty establishing the credibility of future verbal warnings, threats, and "red lines" and establishing a stable deterrent relationship with a nuclear-capable Iran than might otherwise have been the case.

Finally, accepting the need to develop the policy tools to deter a nuclear Iran does not necessarily signify permanent acceptance of a nuclear Iran. After all, as a result of a successful policy of deterrence and containment, Tehran might eventually conclude that nuclear weapons have brought it little benefit and have come at a high political and economic cost, leading Iran to

3. See Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy* (Policy Focus no. 79) (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2008), especially pp. 29–33. Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=286).

4. Some in the United States share that judgment. In January 2008, Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) said, "Unfortunately the nuclear non-proliferation and arms control regimes have suffered significant setbacks in recent years" (<http://lugar.senate.gov/press/record.cfm?id=291477>, viewed May 14, 2008). For a more-detailed evaluation of the state of the nonproliferation regime, see "Toward Universal Compliance: A 2007 Report Card," in George Perkovich, Jessica Tuchman Mathews, Joseph Cirincione, Rose Gottemoeller, and Jon Wolfsthal, *Universal Compliance: A Strategy for Nuclear Security* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), pp. 206–256.

5. Chuck Freilich, *Speaking about the Unspeakable: U.S.-Israeli Dialogue on Iran's Nuclear Program* (Policy Focus no. 77) (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2007), pp. 15–18. Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=284).

6. President George W. Bush, Interview with Radio Farda, March 20, 2008. Full transcript available online (www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/03/75DB77B0-8BAA-4F09-A7C8-761EBEF4A476.html). Richard Cheney, "Vice President Cheney: Address to The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference," October 21, 2007. Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=361).

dismantle its nuclear arsenal (as South Africa did, as a result of domestic regime change and dramatic changes in the international environment). To be sure, under current circumstances, such an outcome seems implausible, and basing U.S. policy on hopes for such an about-face on the part of Tehran would be unrealistic and unwise. And by the time Tehran agreed to abandon its nuclear arsenal, nuclear know-how and fissile material might have already leaked or been shared by Tehran with affiliated terrorist groups or allied states, or the region might be in the grips of a nuclear arms race that could prove very hard to reverse.

In the end, clear-cut answers may not exist to the question of the relative costs and benefits of prevention versus deterrence. Some policymakers may be tempted to cut through the complexity of the problem by basing their decisions on a fundamental foreign policy principle of the post-September 11 era: the most dangerous nations cannot be allowed to obtain the most dangerous weapons. Others may prefer to avoid an immediate confrontation as well as another Middle East war

by eschewing prevention, perhaps hoping that Iran will over time evolve to be less threatening and more accepting of the regional status quo, and that deterrence can be relied upon to keep the peace. As much as the issue of prevention versus deterrence may be discussed now, the serious debate is only likely to occur when the question becomes acute, in a clarifying moment of truth during a crisis. The Cuban missile crisis experience suggests that when threats to vital interests are imminent, the positions of key decisionmakers can shift in ways that could not previously have been predicted on the basis of their precrisis stances.⁷

However, the dilemma is that Iran's nuclear activities may never bring about the type of clarifying moment that forces hard choices. If instead, Iran's program advances steadily and without fanfare, and Iran eschews the type of provocative acts that could galvanize the international community against it, the risk is that U.S. decisionmakers may continuously postpone difficult decisions until Iran's status as a nuclear power and its prominent regional role become a *fait accompli*.

7. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1999), pp 255-324, emphasize the extraordinary complexity of decision-making about matters as vital as the Cuban missile crisis, including many factors which may lead policymakers to change their position during the course of a crisis.

Conclusion: Understanding What Prevention Entails

THE DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS aimed at Iran's nuclear program may yet succeed. Iran is in a fundamentally weak position that has been temporarily masked by a combination of circumstances favorable to the Islamic Republic. The more effort the international community puts into pressing Iran, the more likely Iran's leaders will become sensitive to their weaknesses and decide to postpone, if not halt, their nuclear ambitions.

If, however, Iran continues to work on its nuclear program, the United States and its allies will face a difficult decision about how to react. The potential risks, challenges, and consequences of prevention are daunting, but the risks and challenges of deterrence are even more so. Deterring a nuclear Iran is likely to prove much more difficult than nuclear deterrence was during the Cold War. In the end, clear-cut answers may not exist to the question of the relative costs and benefits of prevention versus deterrence.

Measuring Success

Much of the public debate has been based on an inappropriate metric for measuring the success of preventive action, namely: the amount of destruction visited upon Iran's nuclear infrastructure. That may ultimately matter less than whether or not Iran decides to rebuild. A preventive strike that inflicted limited damage but convinced Iran (perhaps as a result of poststrike diplomacy and economic sanctions) that its nuclear program was too risky and costly would have to be deemed a success. If, however, Iran were to persevere in rebuilding destroyed facilities and reviving its program, additional military action would eventually be needed (though one can never rule out the possibility that a single military strike might be followed by an unpredictable series of unrelated events—sanctions, revolution, or war—that could result in the suspension of the nuclear program, just as Iraq's efforts to rebuild its nuclear program in the wake of the successful Israeli Osiraq raid in June 1981 were disrupted by Opera-

tion Desert Storm in 1991, and subsequent UN sanctions and weapons inspections).

Either way, preventive military action would, by necessity, be a prelude to further action: multilateral diplomacy to press Iran not to rebuild, or additional military strikes after the infrastructure was rebuilt. Therefore, success in prevention should be judged *not only* in terms of damage done to Iran's nuclear infrastructure and delays imposed on its nuclear program, but also by whether prevention precludes or facilitates follow-on diplomacy or military action.

If follow-on strikes are not feasible for military-technical or political reasons, preventive action may turn out to be no more than a detour (and a potentially costly one) on the way to a nuclear Iran. This fact should inform any discussion about the possibility that a departing Bush administration could use military action to "solve" the Iranian nuclear problem. The success of any such "parting shot" might hinge as much on how Americans, Iranians, and the world view the action, as on the degree of destruction achieved.

Should the United States opt for preventive action, success would hinge in no small part on its ability to craft a sustainable policy that effectively integrates diplomatic, military, and informational instruments to destroy key nodes in Iran's nuclear infrastructure, forestall or mitigate the effect of Iranian retaliation, and set the conditions for successful poststrike diplomacy or military action.

Achieving the right balance among these means and ends will require an unusual degree of strategic insight and judgment. Military action would be more likely to succeed if it is taken in tandem with careful preparations to: counter possible Iranian responses; calm jittery oil markets; address the concerns of the American public, the Iranian people, and the international community; and lay the groundwork for poststrike diplomacy and sanctions to press Iran not to rebuild its nuclear program. Whether all these conditions can be met, remains unclear.

Context Is Crucial

The accepted wisdom about preventive military action against the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program ignores context. The perceived immediacy and magnitude of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program would greatly influence how a preventive strike is received by publics in the United States, Iran, and elsewhere. Particularly important would be whether Iran were clearly violating its NPT commitments and were perceived to be well on the way to acquiring nuclear weapons. If preventive action is taken at a time when many around the world see the matter as urgent and the Iranian hardliners as the source of the problem, then there could be widespread reluctant acceptance of prevention as an unfortunate necessity. That would create better conditions for poststrike diplomacy or military action, and the Islamic Republic might be more likely to halt its nuclear program in the wake of a strike. How the action is viewed by policymakers and public opinion in the United States, Iran, and the rest of the world is central to the success of such action.

Moreover, launching a preventive strike based on a political consensus arrived at through a public debate on the issue or consultation with Congress could make conducting follow-on strikes politically more feasible. Policymakers, however, face a conundrum: consulting Congress could give the Islamic Republic time to evacuate and disperse critical equipment and materials from its nuclear facilities, whereas failure to consult could foredoom a policy of prevention by undermining public and congressional support needed to sustain such a policy over the long run. To succeed, preventive action needs to be a sustained policy, not a one-off affair, and for the policy to be sustainable over time, it requires broad-based public and bipartisan political support.

A widely condemned military action would not solve the problem; it would make matters worse.

Indeed, if Iran used a strike as a pretext for leaving the NPT and openly developing nuclear weapons, and if U.S. and world opinion were so angered by the strikes that they refused to support further pressure against Iran's nuclear ambitions, then prevention could paradoxically turn out to be the event that eventually ensures Iran's open pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Force can only be effective if its legitimacy is widely acknowledged. Central to its success must be a considerable measure of acceptance—by the American public, by key U.S. allies, by the international community at large, and even by important political currents inside Iran. These key publics must believe that the Islamic Republic is refusing reasonable diplomatic proposals; that no good prospects exist for stopping Iran's nuclear program short of military force; and that a nuclear Iran is an unacceptable threat to its people, the region, and international peace and stability—if not the global nonproliferation regime.

That last criterion is probably the hardest to meet. If in fact the moment arrives when the first two criteria are met—diplomacy is stymied and Iran's program is far advanced—a searching debate will have to take place in the United States and around the world about the relative merits of preventive action and deterrence. How that debate unfolds will be at least as important for the success of preventive military action as any military-technical considerations.

Even those who believe that preventive military action against Iran's nuclear program is undesirable may agree that such action might eventually become necessary. Precisely because a diplomatic resolution is preferable, steps should be taken now to strengthen the credibility of the military option, in order to bolster the prospects for successful diplomacy, and to lay the groundwork for a successful policy of preventive military action should it eventually become necessary.

Annex 1: Military-Technical Considerations Related to Preventive Military Action

MUCH OF THE PUBLIC DEBATE regarding preventive action against Iran has focused on military-technical considerations related, in particular, to target intelligence, weaponeering, and timing.¹ Does the United States (or Israel) have the intelligence needed to hit the right targets? Does it have the means to destroy those parts of the nuclear infrastructure located in hardened, buried facilities? When would be the best time to strike Iran, and when would be too late?

Target Intelligence

Accurate target intelligence is the sine qua non of effective preventive action. On the one hand, because of the risks preventive action would entail—and because of past and recent intelligence failures regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere—policymakers would most likely set a high bar for action.

On the other hand, the intelligence community has chalked up a number of important successes uncovering nuclear programs in North Korea (1993) and Libya (2003), as well as the Abdul Qadir Khan nuclear supplier network (2003). In light of these successes, and recent revelations about Iran's nuclear program apparently derived from leaks from inside the program, one should not rule out the possibility that the intelligence community might be able to provide sufficiently accurate target intelligence to enable the destruction of key nodes in the program.

A key question is whether Iran has a parallel clandestine nuclear program. Whether that is the case is unclear, although the 2007 NIE seems to indicate that the U.S. intelligence community believes it to be so. Absent credible intelligence on this matter, the key question becomes whether linkages exist between the two, such that military strikes that damage the declared program adversely affect and impose delays on the clandestine program. In that case, a lack of intelligence concerning the parallel clandestine

program might not prevent the United States from inflicting damage on it.

Weaponeering

Part of Iran's overt nuclear infrastructure is located in buried, hardened facilities, and it is likely that any clandestine facilities that exist would also be located underground. Destroying buried, hardened targets with either conventional or nuclear penetrator munitions involves tremendous uncertainties, such as the quality of the target intelligence, the configuration of the facility, its depth underground, the composition or geology of the earth overburden atop the facility, and hardening measures taken to protect it. Some analysts claim that nuclear earth-penetrating munitions (such as the B61 Mod 11 bomb) would be required to destroy key Iranian nuclear facilities, such as the centrifuge enrichment plant at Natanz. Given what is known about Natanz (a relatively shallow "cut-and-cover"-type facility), large conventional penetrator munitions could possibly disable or destroy the facility, even if repetitive strikes were necessary to penetrate the earth overburden and concrete burster slabs atop the target.

The U.S. military is currently testing a 28,000-pound Massive Ordnance Penetrator bomb, which is several times larger than the largest penetrator munitions currently in the inventory and which will be able to penetrate much deeper than previous conventional penetrators. Conventional attack should therefore not be ruled out as an option, although physical destruction is not the only way to deal with this particular type of target set.

Timing

If the United States were to strike, would sooner be better than later? At what point does it become too late to strike? At least three factors could influence the timing of an operation: the quality of the intelligence picture,

1. See also Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran: The Complex Calculus of Preventive Military Action," *PolicyWatch* no. 1152 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 25, 2006). Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2520).

the maturity of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and the state of its scientific-technical human resources pool.

- **The intelligence picture.** By about 2004, the international community had a detailed picture of large parts—perhaps the entirety—of Iran's previously undisclosed nuclear program, although some clandestine facilities may have remained undetected. Since February 2006, however, Iran has barred IAEA inspectors from visiting sites other than those where safeguarded materials are present, thus raising the level of uncertainty regarding its nuclear program. New intelligence, however, could expose ongoing activities or previously undisclosed clandestine nuclear facilities in Iran. It is therefore impossible to assess, solely on the basis of publicly available information, how the passage of time is affecting the intelligence picture.

- **The nuclear infrastructure.** Destroying workshops engaged in the production of centrifuge components as soon as possible would be desirable because of their potential to contribute to a clandestine program. Regarding major facilities, although some are complete (e.g., the conversion plant at Esfahan), others are in the early phases of construction (e.g., the research reactor at Arak), and still others are approaching the point at which they are becoming choice targets (e.g., the centrifuge enrichment plant at Natanz). Striking facilities that are in the early phases of construction now would yield little benefit; waiting until they are closer to completion makes sense, although protective measures at these sites might well improve with the passage of time. Even with respect to the more mature facilities, such as Natanz, the point at which maximum benefit is extracted by its destruction is unclear.

- **The scientific-technical human resources pool.** Much of the talk about preventive action focuses on striking facilities, but people are the backbone

of the program. Finding a way to neutralize key scientists, engineers, and project managers (e.g., by encouraging them to emigrate) is critical to successful prevention. Here, sooner is clearly better than later, for with the passage of time, these individuals gain experience and know-how, which they are likely to share with other Iranian—and perhaps foreign—colleagues.

When is it “too late” to act? Finally, there is the question of when prevention is “too late”? While optimally, prevention should be timed to cause maximum disruption to research and development activities, efforts to master key technological processes, and the construction of key facilities, it is not clear when this might be. It seems clear, however, that should the United States or Israel decide to act, they should do so before enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon has been produced, and most likely dispersed to concealed locations.

Political considerations. The U.S. and Iranian political calendars could also affect the timing of an operation. Some observers have stated that President Bush might launch a preventive strike just before leaving office, believing that his successor might not have the courage to do so. However, launching a preventive strike absent domestic and international support for such an undertaking could preclude follow-on diplomatic or military measures, and thereby perhaps foredoom a policy of prevention. Moreover, striking prior to Iran's June 2009 presidential elections could prompt a nationalist backlash that could greatly increase the reelection prospects of President Ahmadinezhad, and therefore reduce the prospects for a diplomatic solution to the crisis over Iran's nuclear program.

In sum, there may be no optimal moment to strike at Iran's nuclear infrastructure; rather, a successful policy of prevention could require successive military strikes against a number of targets, in tandem with a variety of nonmilitary measures, carried out over an extended period time.

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