



Beyond Worst-Case Analysis Iran's Likely Responses to an Israeli Preventive Strike

By Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights

Iran's initial response to an Israeli preventive strike would likely be to lash out at Israeli and Jewish targets while seeking to avoid a broader conflict with the United States or its Gulf Arab neighbors. Yet Tehran would be sorely tempted to take additional actions that might increase the chances of such escalation.

An Israeli decision to launch a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear program would be influenced by a variety of factors, including the prospects for imposing meaningful delays on the regime's progress, Tehran's most likely response, and the possible impact on ties with Washington. In the United States, the destabilizing potential of Iran's reaction to such an attack has loomed large in official statements on the subject,¹ while many independent analysts offer what can only be described as worst-case assessments.² These analysts frequently

assert that Tehran would use all means at its disposal to retaliate, including missile attacks, terrorism in the region and beyond, and closure of the Strait of Hormuz. For good measure, they add every conceivable unintended consequence to the mix, such as disaffected Iranians becoming radicalized and rallying to the side of a reviled regime, the Arab street rising up in support of Tehran, and Iran's leaders initiating a clandestine crash program to build a nuclear bomb.

Prudence dictates modesty when attempting to predict the behavior of states embroiled in armed conflict, where uncertainty and the law of unintended consequences rule. Yet more than thirty years' experience observing the current regime in Tehran, combined with insights derived from the Islamic Republic's history and strategic culture, provide reason to support a more measured and less apocalyptic—if still sobering—assessment of the likely aftermath of a preventive strike.³

1. See, for instance, U.S. Defense Department, "Remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at the Saban Center," news transcript, December 2, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/utility/print-item.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>; "Interview with Gen. Martin Dempsey," Fareed Zakaria GPS, CNN, February 19, 2012, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/120219/fzgps.01.html>.
2. At the same time, these analysts almost invariably offer best-case assessments for a policy of deterrence and containment. See, for instance, comments by Bruce Riedel at an event sponsored by the Atlantic Council, "U.S.-Israel and Iran: Looming Military Confrontation?" January 17, 2012, <http://www.acus.org/event/us-israel-and-iran-looming-military-confrontation/transcript>; Bruce Riedel, Iran-U.S.: After the Iranian Bomb (Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, September 30, 2011), http://www.ndu.edu/inss/docUploaded/RIEDEL_IRAN_US_CSR_REPORT.pdf; Paul Pillar, "We Can Live with a Nuclear

Iran," *Washington Monthly*, March–April 2012, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/marchapril_2012/features/we_can_live_with_a_nuclear_ira035772.php.

3. For more on the operational implications of Iran's strategic

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Retaliatory Threats

Tehran has been preparing for the possibility of a preventive strike for years, and Iranian officials have often used fiery language to describe various possible responses: salvos of missiles against “all of Israel,” including the nuclear reactor at Dimona; attacks on neighboring countries that support such a strike (including the Gulf Arab states and Turkey); attacks on regional U.S. bases or U.S. personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan; kidnapping of American citizens in the region; closure of the Strait of Hormuz; and attacks on U.S. interests worldwide.⁴ This is an ambitious menu of options, and the regime is unlikely to implement all of them. Given Tehran’s mixed track record in following through on threats, its actions would be guided more by an assessment of interests than by any perceived need to keep its word. Even for Iran, discretion is often the better part of valor.

For example, when the aircraft carrier USS *John C. Stennis* left the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz on January 3, 2012, Maj. Gen. Ataollah Salehi, commander of Iran’s regular armed forces, cautioned: “We advise, warn, and recommend [to the U.S. Navy] not to return this carrier to...the Persian Gulf...We are not used to repeating our warnings, and we issue warnings only once.”⁵ When the U.S. Navy sent a carrier into the Gulf on

January 22, however, Tehran’s response was the rhetorical equivalent of a sheepish shrug, with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) deputy commander Hossein Salami stating, “U.S. warships and military forces have been in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East region for many years, and their decision in relation to the dispatch of a new warship is not a new issue and should be interpreted as part of their permanent presence.”⁶

Planning Considerations

Rhetoric aside, Iran’s response to an Israeli preventive strike would likely be guided by three main considerations:

1. Insistence on reciprocity in its relations with other nations (both symbolically and substantively).
2. A desire not to bite off more than it can chew by unnecessarily expanding the conflict.
3. A desire to respond in a way that deters additional Israeli strikes and subsequent U.S. intervention.

Reciprocity. Iran has long taken a tit-for-tat approach to relations with the outside world, often responding in kind to actions by its adversaries. During the Iran-Iraq War, it answered Saddam Hussein’s “tanker war” and air raids on Tehran with attacks on shipping and rocket/missile strikes on Baghdad and other cities. Since then, it has repeatedly insisted that if Iran cannot export oil from the Gulf as a result of a blockade or sanctions, then none of its neighbors will either. More recently, the regime has responded to “sticky bomb” attacks on its nuclear scientists with similar attacks on Israeli diplomats in Georgia, India, and Thailand.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei emphasized this principle in a speech during this year’s Nowruz holiday, declaring, “We do not have atomic weapons and we will not build one. But against an attack by enemies—to defend ourselves against either the

culture, see Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications*, Middle East Studies Monographs no. 1 (Marine Corps University, August 2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-strategic-culture-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-operational-and-politic>.

4. “Senior Commander: Israel’s Dimona N. Center within Iran’s Missile Range,” FARS News Agency, November 9, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007272751>; “150,000 Iran Missiles Awaiting Israel,” Press TV, November 27, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/212486.html>; IRGC Vows to Hit Source of Threats against Iran,” FARS News Agency, February 6, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010173769>; IRGC Commander: Iran to Target NATO Missile Shield if Attacked,” FARS News Agency, November 26, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007274969>; “Senior Iranian MP Warns of Targeting All US Forces in Region,” FARS News Agency, November 12, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007273005>; “Senior Lawmaker: Iran to Make Whole World Insecure for US if Attacked,” FARS News Agency, January 23, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172197>.
5. “Iran Warns US Against Sending Back Aircraft Carrier to Persian Gulf,” FARS News Agency, January 3, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007270208>.

6. Robin Pomeroy and Hashem Kalantari, “Iran Backs Off Warnings About U.S. Ships,” Reuters, January 21, 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/01/21/uk-iran-usa-idUKTRE80K0DG20120121>.

U.S. or Zionist regime—we will attack them on the same level that they attack us.”⁷ His remarks underscored the importance of reciprocity while signaling a desire to avoid escalation in the event of a conflict. This raises the possibility that Iran might respond to a limited strike that exclusively targets its nuclear infrastructure with a limited strike against the attacking country, allowing Tehran to preserve its status as victim and minimize the potential for escalation.

Avoiding expanded conflict. Iran would try to avoid transforming a conflict with Israel (in which it could play the victim) into a wider conflict with large parts of the international community (for which it would likely be blamed). Yet Tehran has repeatedly miscalculated and overplayed its hand in similar circumstances, so the potential for unintended escalation is significant. In 1982, for example, it rejected Iraqi offers of a ceasefire when the tide of war seemed to be turning in its favor, thereby prolonging the Iran-Iraq War by six years. In 1988, it expanded the tanker war—in which both Iraqi and Iranian forces were attacking Gulf oil vessels—in a way that eventually prompted U.S. military intervention. And in November 2011, possibly in response to British sanctions on Iran’s Central Bank, Basij militiamen ransacked the British embassy in Tehran, further escalating tensions with the entire European Union. Likewise, should Israel strike Iran, the regime would be sorely tempted to deliver a “kick in the shins” to the United States to punish it for supporting Israel.

Washington may be able to deter Tehran from such action, however. After fifteen American soldiers were killed in Iraq by pro-Iranian militias in June 2011, the United States responded with public and private warnings to Tehran, spurring the regime to dramatically ramp down its support for such operations. And the previously mentioned January 2012 Gulf carrier incident further underscores Tehran’s tendency to de-escalate when faced with a firm response and a show of force.

A harsh riposte. Although the possibility of a limited Iranian response to a limited Israeli attack cannot be ruled out, Tehran would probably want to make retaliation as painful as possible for Israel in order to deter follow-on strikes and U.S. intervention. To this end, it would likely employ both direct and indirect measures.

Tehran has a record of responding to attacks via proxies or other indirect means, and at a time and place of its choosing. For example, one month after scores of Hizballah recruits and IRGC trainers were killed by a May 1994 Israeli air raid in Lebanon, Iran helped Hizballah bomb a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Similarly, in response to the August 1988 massacre of eight Iranian diplomats and thousands of Afghan Shiite Hazaras by the Taliban, Tehran sent arms to the movement’s sworn enemies, the Northern Alliance. And months after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened in Bahrain to support a March 2011 government crackdown on the island’s largely Shiite opposition, Tehran apparently attempted to recruit a Mexican narco-terrorist to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Iran and Hizballah have been trying for years to avenge the February 2008 assassination (presumably by Israel) of Imad Mughniyah, the group’s security chief; indeed, attempted retaliatory attacks on Israeli targets in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Thailand have already been thwarted.

In the wake of an Israeli attack, Tehran might be tempted to use proxies for small-scale sabotage against petrochemical infrastructure in the Gulf, as well as deniable attacks against commercial ships or elements of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in the area. Such acts would be aimed at demonstrating Iran’s ability to inflict grave harm on U.S. interests if Washington intervenes in a conflict with Israel. Yet, even limited attacks against elements of the Fifth Fleet could have the opposite of Tehran’s intended effect, eliciting a harsh U.S. response.

Iran’s Possible Responses

In Tehran’s view, the nuclear program is key to transforming the Islamic Republic into a regional power, so an Israeli preventive strike would most

7. “Khamenei: Iran Will Strike Back if Attacked,” CBS News, March 20, 2012, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57400874/khamenei-iran-will-strike-back-if-attacked.

likely elicit a sharp response. What form might this retaliatory action take?

Missile strikes against Dimona and Israeli population centers. Iran would likely respond almost immediately with missile strikes on Israel, to punish it and deter follow-on strikes. Whether or not the regime's missiles are sufficiently accurate to threaten the Israeli reactor at Dimona, the nuclear site will remain an attractive—albeit symbolic—target (as it was for Iraq in 1991).⁸

Iran is also likely to launch some of its hundreds of longer-range Shahab-type conventional missiles against claimed military targets located in Israeli population centers, such as the Defense Ministry in downtown Tel Aviv. Given the poor accuracy of these missiles, such a move would effectively allow Iran to hit the population centers themselves. In this scenario, many of the missiles would likely be intercepted by Israel's defenses; those that get through would probably cause some casualties, but not an inordinately large number. (For comparison, an average of ten to thirteen Iranian civilians were killed by each Iraqi Scud-type missile that landed during the Iran-Iraq War, while only two Israelis were killed by the forty-one missiles that struck their country during the 1991 Gulf War.⁹) Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak effectively made this point on January 12, stating, "There is no scenario for 50,000 dead, or 5,000 killed—and if everyone stays in their homes, maybe not even 500 dead."¹⁰

Although Israel could probably intercept or absorb scores of Iranian long-range missile strikes, an intense, extended barrage involving thousands of Hizballah rockets from Lebanon would be far more disruptive. Consequently, a big question is what role outside actors might play in an Iranian

retaliatory campaign—not only Hizballah, but also Hamas, other Gaza-based groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Syria.

With more than fifty thousand rockets, Hizballah could inflict considerable damage on Israel. The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, recently stated that the decision on whether to retaliate for a strike on Iran was Hizballah's alone to make.¹¹ In that event, the group would be torn between its duty to assist its Iranian patron and partner in "resistance" and its desire to preserve its popular base of support in Lebanon. To manage this tension, Hizballah might try to split the difference, launching small numbers of rockets against Israel—enough to symbolically retaliate on Iran's behalf, but not enough to unleash Israel's full force on Lebanon and harm its domestic base—while facilitating or partaking in terrorist attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets overseas.

As for Hamas, during a February 2006 visit to Tehran University, leader Khaled Mashal was asked how the organization would react to an Israeli strike on Iran. His response—"Have no fear, we will pray for you"—was probably far from the kind of unstinting commitment to military retaliation on behalf of its Iranian patron that Tehran would have preferred.¹² And in response to the same question in May 2012, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, stated, "Iran did not ask anything from us and we think Iran is not in need of us."¹³ Such remarks—along with the group's recent split from longtime ally Bashar al-Assad in Syria—raise questions about Hamas's reliability in a crisis. The group could decide to permit Islamic Jihad and other Gaza factions to launch rocket salvos against Israel as a way of symbolically standing with Tehran while avoiding escalation. Hamas may believe that Israeli retaliation would be directed mainly against these other groups, as occurred during the March 2012 hostilities in Gaza.

8. Symbolic because the reactor may no longer be producing plutonium for Israel's nuclear weapons program.

9. Aharon Levran and Zeev Eytan, *The Middle East Military Balance 1987–1988* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Post/Westview, 1988), p. 214; Shlomo Gazit and Zeev Eytan, *The Middle East Military Balance 1990–1991* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Post/Westview, 1992), p. 105.

10. Jeffrey Heller, "Israel's Barak Plays Down Talk of War with Iran," Reuters, November 8, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/08/us-iran-nuclear-israel-idUSTRE7A724I20111108>.

11. Ali Alfoneh, Ahmad Majidiyar, and Michael Rubin (eds.), *Iran News Round-Up*, February 8, 2012, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-february-8-2012>.

12. Bill Samii, "Iran: Intifada Conference in Tehran has Multiple Objectives," RFE/RL, April 14, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067669.html>.

13. Samia Nakhoul and Michael Stott, "Hamas Says it Will Not Go to War for Iran," Reuters, May 10, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/10/us-palestinians-hamas-idUSBRE84917H20120510>.

In light of these considerations, Hamas and Hizballah's involvement in Iranian retaliation is hardly a foregone conclusion. As for Syria, it seems implausible that the Assad regime would open up an additional front by launching rocket or missile strikes against Israel at a time when its forces are dealing with a domestic uprising that is stretching their capabilities to the limit. Yet Damascus would probably help facilitate retaliatory actions by Hizballah or Hamas if those groups opted to support Tehran.

Terrorism overseas. Iran would likely respond to a strike with terrorist attacks on Israeli, Jewish, and possibly U.S. targets on several continents, perhaps in conjunction with Hizballah. Both Tehran and Hizballah have undertaken such operations in the past, though several attempts have been thwarted in recent years, whether due to enhanced post-9/11 U.S. and Israeli surveillance of terrorist groups or the ineptitude of the operatives in question. It would be prudent to assume, however, that at least some of these attacks would succeed.

Proxy attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the least risky ways that Iran could retaliate against the United States for presumed support of an Israeli strike, would be by ramping up assistance to proxy groups engaged in attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. This would enable Tehran to punish Washington with less risk of a broader conflict or direct confrontation with the United States. In Afghanistan, an uptick in attacks would be difficult to trace to Iran (unless they involved signature Iranian weapons, such as explosively formed penetrators) given the Taliban's own efforts to exploit popular outrage at recent U.S. missteps—including the March 2012 murder of Afghan civilians by a U.S. soldier¹⁴ The IRGC Qods Force has a range of proxy options in both countries, including rocket strikes on U.S.

facilities or embassies, attacks on U.S. convoys and transport aircraft, and even sponsorship of suicide attacks using Salafists.

Kidnapping U.S. personnel. Tehran could detain more U.S. citizens or dual U.S.-Iranian nationals on espionage charges—as it has done on several occasions in recent years. It might also encourage its proxies to kidnap U.S. citizens, as occurred during the 1980s in Lebanon. Since summer 2008, Washington has issued a number of warnings concerning plots by Iranian-backed cells to kidnap U.S. government personnel in Iraq. Iranian proxies could also kidnap American businessmen or contractors in Iraq, a fairly simple matter in a country whose security forces include corrupt and pro-Iranian elements. Given that hostages might be useful as a deterrent, Iran could try to kidnap U.S. or Israeli personnel even prior to a preventive strike—perhaps in line with its recent warning that it reserves the right to strike first if it feels threatened.¹⁵

Clashes with the U.S. Navy. Although Iran would likely lose any force-on-force encounter with the U.S. Navy, one cannot rule out a one-off attack on a U.S. warship in the Gulf to create an “image of victory.” Iran arguably has little to lose from initiating such a clash: at worst, its leaders may calculate, the military would lose a few patrol boats or missile launchers, and these losses would be offset by the propaganda benefits of bloodying the U.S. Navy. They might also believe that they can limit the potential for escalation by picking off a single warship in a single attack, hoping to exploit the American propensity toward restraint in this strategically sensitive region and to explain away provocative Iranian actions as the work of rogue Iranian elements (perhaps a wayward IRGC naval commander).

Missile or terrorist attacks on neighboring states. Iran has threatened to attack any neighbors that assist in a preventive strike, but it might be difficult for the regime to prove such complicity in

14. Thom Shanker, Eric Schmitt, Alissa J. Rubin, “U.S. Sees Iran in Bids to Stir Unrest in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/world/asia/irans-efforts-to-stir-afghan-violence-provoke-concern.html?pagewanted=all>.

15. “Commander: Iran to Respond to Enemy Aggressions by All Possible Means,” FARS News Agency, February 21, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010175592>.

the court of world opinion. Furthermore, it seems improbable that Tehran would want to pick a fight with the entire neighborhood (thereby drawing in the United States) at a time when it is taking on Israel. Thus, Tehran is unlikely to launch missile strikes against its neighbors. Yet it might encourage proxy groups to engage in political subversion in these countries, or to undertake terrorist attacks against oil and gas facilities, desalination plants, pipelines, power stations, or air and sea ports. Such steps would show Washington the damage Iran could inflict if the United States intervenes on Israel's side.

Closing the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran is unlikely to try closing the strait through overt anti-shiping strikes using land-based missiles, aircraft, or fast-attack craft. For one thing, Iran exports nearly all of its oil through this waterway. And while it could live without oil exports for some time (the regime reportedly is sitting on \$80–100 billion in hard currency reserves and gold), it could not live without the imports that arrive via its four major Gulf ports—namely, 90 percent of its food, medicine, and raw materials. Moreover, attempts to close the strait would alienate Tehran's few remaining allies due to the impact on oil prices.

Iran is more likely to engage in periodic covert mining to force the United States into a costly, open-ended demining and convoy operation, and to keep insurance rates and oil prices up. This would enable the regime to squeeze maximum profit from its sanctions-diminished oil sales while inflicting economic hardship on its enemies. It would also increase opportunities for targeting U.S. vessels—though raising the risk of a clash with the U.S. Navy. (The biggest U.S.-Iranian naval clash during the Iran-Iraq War—Operation Praying Mantis in April 1988—followed a mine strike on a U.S. Navy vessel escorting Gulf Arab tankers through the strait.) Such a long-running harassment campaign would be consistent with Iran's preference for tactics that permit deniability, reciprocity (i.e., impeding oil tankers in response to international sanctions), and strategic patience.¹⁶

16. Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic*

Unintended Consequences

An Israeli preventive strike could also yield a number of unintended consequences whose impact on the final outcome might be significant—though the plausibility of some of these scenarios has been overstated.

Rally round the flag. A strike on Iran might produce a short-term nationalist backlash among the population that could benefit the regime, especially if large numbers of civilians are killed. It is difficult to imagine, however, that a strike would radicalize the majority of Iranians who have become apolitical in the face of regime repression, who remain highly averse to war, and who are trying desperately to cope with the economic costs of sanctions. In fact, once the dust settled after a conflict, the government could be criticized for handling the nuclear dossier in a way that led to military confrontation, just as Tehran's 1988 decision to end the Iran-Iraq War without much to show for eight years of bloodletting remains a source of political recriminations to this day.

Moreover, attempts to draw parallels between the 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran—which rallied the population behind the new Islamist regime and helped consolidate its rule—and the potential impact of a future Israeli or U.S. preventive strike are clearly misplaced.¹⁷ In 1980, Iran was in the throes of a revolution that enjoyed widespread popular support, while today, the regime is extremely unpopular among large segments of the population and is liable to be held responsible for what many Iranians may believe is an avoidable conflict.

The Arab street rises up. Over the past two decades, every Middle Eastern war involving the United States or Israel has been preceded by predictions that Arabs would rise up in protest and shake

Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications, Middle East Studies Monographs no. 1 (Marine Corps University, August 2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-strategic-culture-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-operational-and-politic>.

17. See, for instance, Bruce Riedel, "Has US Forgotten Lessons of its First War with Iran?" *Al-Monitor*, April 10, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/contents/articles/opinion/2012/bruce-riedel/has-us-forgotten-lessons-of-its.html>.

the established order. And after each war, these concerns have been exposed as unfounded. Thus, current predictions that Arabs would be actively hostile toward an Israeli attack on Iran should be taken with a grain of salt, even at a time when regional uprisings have empowered Arab publics as never before. Tehran's handling of the Arab Spring (particularly its inconsistent, opportunistic stance toward regime repression in Syria and Bahrain) has profoundly alienated Arabs, and many would quietly applaud an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure as long as civilian casualties were minimal.¹⁸ Such an attack could spark short-lived political unrest, however, among Shiites in Iraq and, perhaps, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

A clandestine crash nuclear program. A preventive strike could prompt Iran to expel International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (in line with its reading of NPT Article 10), and initiate a clandestine crash weapons program, assuming it does not already have a clandestine program underway. This is a very real possibility that undoubtedly weighs heavily on the minds of Israeli policymakers. Yet Tehran's success in this effort could depend on its ability to obtain the special materials and equipment needed to repair damaged centrifuges or build new ones, and it may not be able to do so in the aftermath of a strike—particularly if it lashed out with retaliatory moves that further alienated its few remaining friends. This scenario could make things much more difficult for Iranian procurement agents operating abroad. Tehran may therefore face a dilemma: the harder it hits back in order to deter follow-on strikes and assuage militant domestic constituencies, the greater the chance it would anger the international community and further isolate itself, greatly complicating efforts to obtain the materials needed to rebuild its program. Whether such constraints would prove sufficient to deter an Iranian nuclear breakout is one of the major uncertainties surrounding preventive action.

18. For more on Iran's diminished standing in Arab states since the start of the Arab Spring, see James Zoghby, "Iran's Freefall," *Huffington Post*, July 30, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-zoghby/irans-freefall_b_913963.html.

Scope and Duration of a Conflict

After an initially violent, overt response against Israeli (and, perhaps, U.S.) interests, Iran would likely come under great pressure by most countries (including erstwhile friends such as Russia, China, and India) to limit the scope and intensity of conflict in the Gulf so as to avoid disrupting oil exports, harming their economies, or fomenting additional regional instability. Should Iran continue with major, disruptive activities despite such pressure, it would likely find itself in much the same place it found itself during the Iran-Iraq War, when it was isolated and ultimately unable to continue the conflict from such a disadvantageous position. Tehran would probably do what it could to avoid repeating that experience. Thus, international pressure would probably spur the regime to transition from overt violence to periodic covert and proxy activities against Israeli, Jewish, and U.S. interests. The challenge for Washington would be to convince Tehran to halt such activities or, failing that, to thwart them, disrupt them, or mitigate their impact.

Although one should not be too sanguine about America's ability to contain such a conflict and avoid escalation, the high-intensity phase would likely be short-lived, soon morphing into a protracted low-intensity conflict that could last for months or even years—particularly if Tehran attempted to rebuild its nuclear program. But this state of affairs already obtains between Israel and Iran, and it could continue for years to come even if Israel opts not to strike Tehran's nuclear infrastructure.

Response to a U.S. Strike

A U.S. strike on Iran would almost certainly prompt a more expansive response. Tehran would likely target not only U.S. interests, but also Israel and Washington's Gulf Arab allies, punishing them for their presumed encouragement of the attack and attempting to deter them from further assistance to the U.S. military effort.

At the same time, Iran's actions would likely be shaped by many of the same considerations guiding retaliation against an Israeli strike. In particular, the regime would want to hit back sufficiently hard to deter future U.S. strikes against its nuclear

infrastructure, but not so hard that it spurs the United States to destroy its conventional military forces and oil infrastructure in follow-on strikes. Achieving this balance could prove difficult.

As for preventing Iran from rebuilding its nuclear program, a U.S. strike could well be more disruptive to that goal than an Israeli attack. American military action is more likely to cause tension within the P5+1 (i.e., the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), thereby complicating poststrike diplomacy with Iran and, perhaps, undermining international will to prevent it from acquiring the materials needed to rebuild its nuclear program.

Conclusions

An Israeli preventive strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure would likely prompt a harsh riposte against Israeli and Jewish targets overseas. Tehran might also launch limited attacks against U.S. interests in order to deter intervention on Israel's behalf—and therein lies the potential for unintended escalation. Moreover, Hizballah could cause grievous harm to Israeli civilian targets with its reported inventory of fifty thousand rockets, and the group's assistance could greatly enhance Tehran's ability to launch terrorist attacks on Israeli and U.S. targets around the world (though Israel has thwarted several such efforts in recent years).¹⁹

Thus, the key policy challenges for the United States would be threefold:

1. Deterring Iranian retaliation against U.S. interests.
2. Limiting the scope and duration of the conflict by keeping Hizballah out of the fight and mobilizing international pressure on Iran.
3. Ensuring that Iran is unable to rebuild its nuclear program in the conflict's aftermath, and that Hizballah is unable to rearm.

Several of the steps Washington could take to deter and constrain Iran and its allies would need to be

implemented before an Israeli strike. Thus, the Obama administration would have to balance its desire not to appear complicit in such a strike with the need for prudent steps to limit possible fallout if one does occur. And although these measures could be used to enhance the credibility of military threats in order to bolster nuclear diplomacy with Tehran (i.e., by convincing the regime that an Israeli strike is coming if diplomacy fails), they could undermine negotiations instead. Accordingly, some of the more provocative steps should be implemented only if negotiations appear to be fruitless or faltering.

Deterrence. Washington should quietly indicate to Iran and Hizballah, through words and deeds, that it has their agents under observation, and that it would be very difficult for either to act in a deniable fashion.²⁰ It should also quietly indicate that

- the United States will respond forcefully if its personnel or interests are harmed by actions taken or facilitated by either;
- its response will not be symmetric—and thus not predictable—thereby complicating Iranian efforts to manage risk; and
- strikes against U.S. interests could result in the destruction of Iran's conventional military forces, its oil and gas infrastructure, and whatever parts of its nuclear infrastructure survive an Israeli strike.

These considerations also argue against a comprehensive embargo of Iranian oil. Such a move would only increase Tehran's motivations to disrupt Gulf shipping or break out of the NPT in order to gain diplomatic leverage (in much the same way that nuclear tests by Pakistan and North Korea pre-saged greater engagement and diplomacy with the United States). Perhaps more important, it would also limit U.S. escalatory options in the event of a conflict. Washington's strategy should be to hold

19. Yaakov Katz, "Timeline: Recent Hezbollah Plots Against Israel," Jerusalem Post, February 13, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=257637>.

20. The degree to which Tehran seeks to obscure its involvement in anti-American violence is sometimes exaggerated. For example, the IRGC's Qods Force did not remove serial numbers or manufacturer data plates from arms it sent to Iraq-based proxies engaged in such violence, indicating that it was not overly concerned about U.S. retaliation for these actions.

Iranian equities at risk, not put Tehran in a position where it has nothing more to lose. This approach also dovetails with America's interest in preserving at least some Iranian oil exports at a time when supplies are tight and the global economy is—at best—experiencing a slow, fragile recovery from recession.²¹

Conflict limitation. The United States should also work with allies to roll up Iranian intelligence personnel and cells located abroad, and consider outing Iranian agents serving overseas under official and nonofficial cover (as it did following the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia).²² In light of recent Iranian terrorist plots in Washington, the Middle East, and Asia, the United States and the international community have a compelling interest in—and justification for—constraining the Islamic Republic's ability to engage in poststrike terrorism or military action, or from launching a new wave of terror if nuclear negotiations fail.

Washington should also indicate to Hizballah that if it assists Iran in a conflict, the United States will seek more vigorous implementation of both the Proliferation Security Initiative and the arms embargo called for by UN Security Council Resolution 1701, effectively disrupting the group's efforts to resupply its weapons stocks. Faced with the possibility that postwar rearmament might not be an option, Hizballah may decide to ration its use of rockets and missiles in a war with Israel.

Similarly, Washington should make clear to Syria that participation in such a war (including efforts to facilitate retaliatory attacks by Iran, Hizballah, Hamas, or other entities) could cause the United States to vigorously pursue regime change in Damascus. This threat might also diminish the incentive of Hizballah and Iran to drag Syria into the fighting.

In addition, Washington has several options for limiting the impact of a potential covert mining

campaign in the Persian Gulf or other Iranian attempts to disrupt oil shipments. These range from temporarily assuming financial responsibility for tankers to sending retired, foam-filled vessels ahead of oil convoys to absorb mine strikes. The key to deterring disruptive Iranian tactics is to convince Tehran that Washington would expose its role in such activities and strike back asymmetrically in response, perhaps by destroying components of its armed forces or oil infrastructure.

Finally, to reduce Iran's temptation to seek a quick win over the U.S. Navy (even if, in the end, it proves to be a Pyrrhic victory), Washington should consider redeploying to the Gulf of Oman the aircraft carrier that it currently keeps on station in the Persian Gulf. There, it would be much less vulnerable to a surprise attack and much better positioned to wage an "outside-in" campaign to ensure freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf.²³ To deny Tehran a propaganda victory and to prevent it from claiming that it expelled the U.S. military from the Persian Gulf, Washington should maintain a small naval force in the Gulf and deploy additional strike aircraft and bombers to the southern Gulf states and the region.

Preventing reconstitution. In the aftermath of a potential Israeli strike, Washington should make it as difficult as possible for Tehran to reconstitute its nuclear program. The regime's ability to rebuild will likely depend on several factors, whether

1. members of the international community blame Iran for the failure of diplomacy that presumably led to the strike;
2. large numbers of Iranian civilians are killed in the strike;
3. Iran alienates international opinion by the way it responds to the attack; and
4. the international community believes that Israel might strike again if Iran tries to rebuild.

21. Mark Dubowitz, "Hit Iran with Unity," *International Herald Tribune*, March 23, 2012, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/to-stop-iran-the-gop-should-back-obama>.

22. Barbara Slavin, "Officials: U.S. 'Outed' Iran's Spies in 1997," *USA Today*, March 29, 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2004-03-29-sapphire-usat_x.htm.

23. Mark Gunzinger with Chris Dougherty, *Outside-In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran's Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011), http://www.csbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/CSBA_outsideIn_ebook.pdf.

The United States could make it more difficult for Iran to rebuild its nuclear program after a strike by

- bolstering information activities that highlight the P5+1's offers of a diplomatic solution that met Tehran's demands for peaceful nuclear technology, so that it is clear that Iran was to blame for the failure of diplomacy;
- intensifying efforts to disrupt Tehran's overseas procurement networks and denying it the materials, technologies, and equipment necessary to rebuild any nuclear facilities destroyed in a strike; and
- renewing efforts to offer Iran an option for a peaceful nuclear program in return for pledges to forswear rebuilding its centrifuge enrichment facilities and heavy water reactor.

In short, although an Israeli preventive strike would be a high-risk endeavor carrying a potential for escalation in the Levant or the Gulf, it would not be the apocalyptic event some foresee. And the United States could take several steps to mitigate these risks without appearing complicit in Israel's decision to attack. The very act of taking precautionary measures to lessen the impact of a strike, moreover, would enhance the credibility of Israeli military threats and bolster the P5+1's ongoing nuclear diplomacy. Less clear, however, is whether a strike would prompt Tehran to expel inspectors, withdraw from the NPT, and pursue a crash program—overt or clandestine. And whether enhanced international efforts to disrupt Iran's procurement of special materials and technologies would succeed in preventing the rebuilding of its nuclear infrastructure remains an unknown.

