

Attacking Iran's Nuclear Program: The Complex Calculus of Preventive Action

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Should a negotiated deal prove elusive, policymakers will need to consider how to define a successful strike, Iran's potential responses, and whether a strategy of prevention can be sustained.

Iran's nuclear program is one of the most pressing foreign policy challenges facing the Trump administration. While the president has expressed his preference for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, many Israeli officials believe that Iran's current weakness provides a unique opportunity to destroy or at least set back its nuclear program through a military strike. Should a negotiated deal prove elusive, policymakers will need to weigh the pros and cons of military action and answer several questions, including: How does one define a successful strike? What challenges need to be addressed in planning a campaign to destroy or degrade Iran's nuclear weapons program? How sustainable is a strategy of prevention? And how might Iran respond to such a campaign?

In this Policy Note, military expert Michael Eisenstadt explains that a preventive attack likely won't be a one-off but rather the opening round of a lengthy campaign employing military strikes, covert action, and other elements of national power. Such a campaign, he writes, could presage either a more stable order for the region or a new, dangerous phase in one of its most volatile conflicts. ❖

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