

The Day After: Responding to an Israeli Strike on Iran

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Brief Analysis

To mitigate adverse consequences, Washington would need to take a number of steps before and after an Israeli strike, some of which might run counter to its instincts and preferences.

Although an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear program is far from certain, the potential consequences for the United States are clear. Such a development would present major crisis-management challenges -- and, perhaps, opportunities to advance U.S. interests.

The immediate challenge would be to limit escalation by constraining Tehran's freedom to act, minimizing the damage caused by its retaliation, and keeping Hizballah and other Iranian proxies out of the fray. Moreover, by curbing Iran's escalatory options in the Persian Gulf, Washington might prevent a prolonged spike in oil prices. This could in turn help preserve international support for efforts to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

To accomplish these objectives, Washington would need to take a number of steps both prior to and immediately after a strike. It must also be prepared to respond quickly to miscalculations -- whether its own or those of friends and adversaries -- as well as other unintended consequences that could complicate poststrike diplomacy.

For the Obama administration, there is the additional challenge of preparing for an event that it is clearly trying to avoid without appearing either "complicit" in Israeli actions (in the words of Joint Chiefs chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey) or unwilling to support a close ally in its hour of need. And in the aftermath of a strike, Washington would need to subordinate its pique at the Israeli government to the task of managing the crisis in a way that furthers U.S. interests and enhances America's standing in the eyes of its regional partners.

WORKING WITH ISRAEL TO PREVENT ESCALATION

Minimizing Israeli casualties as a result of Iranian retaliation would be a key element of any effort to limit poststrike escalation. During some past conflicts (e.g., the 1991 Gulf War), Israel has absorbed rocket and missile barrages and terrorist attacks without retaliating, at least when the resulting casualties were limited.

Accordingly, the United States should be prepared to rapidly augment Israel's missile defenses with SM-3s, Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense systems (THAADs), and Patriot PAC-2s, with the aim of limiting casualties caused by Iranian missiles and, perhaps, Hizballah's long-range rockets.

Some administration officials may wish to maintain a studied distance from Israel poststrike in order to demonstrate their disapproval, but the imperative to prevent further escalation by rapidly dispatching missile defenses should trump all other considerations (except for the need to deploy such systems to defend U.S. facilities in the Gulf). Washington would also need to work with Israeli and other intelligence services around the world on thwarting retaliatory terrorist attacks against American interests (to limit potential U.S. involvement in the fray) as well as Israeli and Jewish targets (to limit further Israeli military action).

Although the main actions associated with an Israeli strike are unlikely to last much more than a day or two, the Israeli military might decide to conduct a follow-up strike several days later against targets inadequately damaged during the initial attack. This could pose further challenges to U.S.-Israeli relations, especially if Washington believed that it had averted major escalation after the first strike. Such scenarios underscore the need for close bilateral consultation throughout the crisis, with U.S. and Israeli decisionmakers comparing the benefits that a follow-on strike might confer versus its escalatory potential given the situation on the ground.

SIGNALING IRAN

Washington's ability to influence Tehran's calculus is limited, but it can do a number of things well before any strike to constrain the regime's freedom of military action and capacity to respond. These include:

- Quietly informing Tehran that in the wake of recent provocations -- namely, plots to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington last year and U.S. embassy personnel in Azerbaijan earlier this year, both linked to Tehran -- the United States will respond to future Iranian or proxy attacks on its interests in a forceful manner. This message should be reiterated now even if it has been delivered in the past.
- Intensifying surveillance of suspected and confirmed Iranian intelligence agents serving overseas, and making this enhanced scrutiny visible to Tehran. If the regime knows that its agents are being watched, it may be less willing to use them to conduct retaliatory actions. And in the immediate aftermath of an Israeli strike, Washington should take this approach a step further, pressing allied governments to declare Iranian agents *personae non grata*.
- Maintaining a strengthened air and naval presence in the Gulf to limit Iran's poststrike military options. In addition, the United States should relocate the two aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, where they will be less vulnerable to an Iranian surprise attack and better positioned to wage an "outside-in" campaign to restore freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. It should still maintain a naval presence in the Persian Gulf, however, both to reassure its allies and deny Tehran the ability to claim that it expelled U.S. forces.
- Persuading allies and partners -- especially those dependent on Gulf oil -- to warn Tehran against disrupting oil shipments. In doing so, they should remind Tehran that it lost the Iran-Iraq War in large part because it took a variety of actions (including the "tanker war") that alienated the international community. They should also be prepared to release large quantities of oil from their strategic reserves to dampen a possible oil price spike.

After a strike, Washington should emphasize that the proximate cause of the crisis was Tehran's refusal to dispel persistent doubts about the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. The United States and its partners should then reiterate their willingness to help Iran enjoy the benefits of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, provided that Tehran clarify outstanding issues about its program and agree to adequate safeguards. In addition, Washington should work to deter Tehran from breaking out or withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), reminding the regime that the international community has detected its previous efforts to build clandestine enrichment facilities, that it would face even stiffer sanctions were it to do so again, and that withdrawal from the

NPT is not a legal option given its likely violation of its treaty obligations.

SIDELINING HIZBALLAH

Iran has the ability to do a fair amount of harm on its own in response to a strike. First, some Iranian missiles would likely penetrate Israeli missile defenses (though it should be recalled that the forty-one Iraqi missiles that hit Israel in 1991 led to the death of only one citizen). Second, some Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks are likely to succeed, though the regime has recently shown a degree of incompetence in this area. Third, Tehran could roil world oil markets by threatening Gulf oil shipments, assuming it were willing to brook international censure for doing so.

Yet Iran's potential for harm would be greatly magnified if it convinced Hizballah to join the fight. For example, the organization could use its inventory of more than 50,000 rockets to bombard Israel from Lebanon, perhaps sparking a war in the Levant. It could also undertake terrorist attacks against U.S., Israeli, or Jewish targets overseas.

Hizballah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah recently stated that the group's response to an Israeli strike would depend on the circumstances. Although he subsequently stated (probably in response to Iranian prodding) that Hizballah would retaliate in some way, the group is still smarting from its 2006 war with Israel and is facing domestic pressure due to the travails of its cosponsor, the Assad regime in Syria. Therefore, it will probably try to avoid another war.

Washington should help Hizballah stay on the sidelines of a potential conflict by quietly indicating that any retaliation on Iran's behalf would likely increase regional and international support for strong countermeasures. These include robust Israeli military action aimed at causing long-term damage to the group, sanctions that greatly constrain its fundraising and organizational activities in Europe and elsewhere, U.S. efforts to hinder resupply from Iran (though Hizballah already has enough rockets for several major conflicts), and more robust support for opposition forces in Syria.

MAINTAINING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

One of the greatest sources of anxiety concerning an Israeli strike is that it could undermine international support for preventing a nuclear-armed Iran. Under such conditions, Tehran could rebuild its destroyed nuclear infrastructure with few if any constraints, including the export controls that have slowed its centrifuge and missile programs.

In this respect, an Israeli strike would be less disruptive than an American strike. Washington has made a very public effort to warn Israel against such a course, so a U.S. strike might alienate those countries that have cooperated with U.S. sanctions in the belief that they were aimed at averting military action. Moreover, a successful Israeli strike that sets Iran's nuclear program back by several years might increase the international community's motivation to prevent a vengeful Tehran from acquiring the bomb, since that development could precipitate an even more dangerous crisis later. Paradoxically, then, an Israeli attack might increase both Tehran's desire to obtain nuclear arms and the international community's resolve to prevent it from doing so. This resolve could take the form of more stringent application of existing export controls on sensitive materials and dual-use items critical to the nuclear program.

Finally, any Iranian threats or attempts to disrupt the global economy after a strike would be fraught with risk for the Islamic Republic. On one hand, if Washington succeeded in deterring Iranian retaliation in the Gulf or mitigating its consequences, then international support for export controls and sanctions designed to prevent Iran from acquiring the bomb might well continue unaffected. Conversely, should Tehran manage to destabilize the Gulf, it could alienate its supporters, strengthen the determination of those countries working to prevent it from getting the bomb (including Russia and China), and ensure that an Israeli strike has a greater impact on the regime's ability to rebuild than would have otherwise been the case.

CONCLUSION

Because an Israeli military strike on Iran would be a high-risk move with significant potential for escalation, resolving the nuclear impasse diplomatically is greatly preferred. Yet even as Washington continues to warn Israel against such a move, it would be well advised to prepare measures aimed at mitigating the adverse consequences of a strike, averting further escalation, and impeding Iran's efforts to rebuild its nuclear program.

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