

Viability and Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran's Nuclear Program

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In-Depth Reports

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On October 17, 2009, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Aharon Farkash, Hussain Abdul-Hussain, and Gen. (Ret.) Charles Wald took part in a keynote debate moderated by veteran journalist Bernard Kalb at The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference.

Aharon Farkash, a retired major general in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), is director of the Intelligence and National Defense Program at Israel's Institute of National Security Studies. Hussain Abdul-Hussain is a visiting fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London and a Washington-based correspondent for the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Rai. Charles Wald, a retired general in the U.S. Air Force, served until 2006 as deputy commander of the U.S. European Command, responsible for U.S. forces operating across Europe, Africa, Russia, and other parts of Asia, the Middle East, and the Atlantic Ocean.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Aharon Farkash

The Iranian determination to achieve a nuclear capability is clear. By the end of 2009, the Iranians will have enough low-enriched fissile material to produce a nuclear bomb within four to six months' time. This means they could have a weapon in hand as soon as summer 2010 if they chose to take that route.

Tehran's nuclear ambitions are part of an internal strategic decision to become a superpower in the region, not an effort to develop a new means of attacking Israel. After all, the Iranians do not want to be the second state in the region to be attacked by a superpower. They are a very proud, sophisticated nation. They can launch satellites into space, and they have handled the complexities of operating thousands of centrifuges quite successfully. In their view, a nuclear capability will help them achieve superiority in the region.

The Sunni Arab states greatly fear the prospect of a Middle East under the umbrella of Iranian nuclear weapons. This has already created the underpinnings of a nuclear arms race in the region. For example, Saudi Arabia purchased its first nuclear-capable surface-to-surface ballistic missiles in 1988, and the kingdom is known to have invested in Pakistan's nuclear program. A nuclear Iran would surely trigger an all-out race with not only the Saudis, but also Egypt and Turkey. It would also threaten the stability of Arab regimes throughout the region.

Regarding the viability of military action against Iran, the U.S. military could carry out such a campaign more readily than Israel. As for a decisive strike similar to past Israeli actions in Syria and Iraq, it would be very difficult to determine everything needed to conduct that sort of attack successfully. Israel would take such a step only in an emergency, after carefully weighing the positive and negative factors.

Israel alone cannot stop Iran from achieving its nuclear ambitions -- the only approach with a chance of succeeding would be a combined effort that sends a strong message to the regime. For example, when the EU-3 (Britain, France,

and Germany) opened the Iran file and the United States carried out its campaign of shock and awe in Iraq, Tehran halted its nuclear activities for more than a year, from late 2003 until January 2005.

The Iranian regime is not going to commit suicide -- there is ample evidence of its pragmatism and its unwillingness to lose power. Once the Iranians become convinced that Israel and the international community mean business, they will acquiesce. This happened with Hizballah, which has been quiet for three years, and with Hamas.

Regarding U.S. policy, the Obama administration would be wise to heed two pieces of advice. First, leave Iraq with the smell of victory -- this would serve as an important symbol against Iran's doctrine of muqawama (resistance). Second, deal with North Korea in a manner that demonstrates America's seriousness on nonproliferation.

Hussain Abdul-Hussain

The world should confront and contain Iran whether it has nuclear weapons or not, including via military action as a last resort. Estimating when the regime might go nuclear obscures a more pressing issue -- Iran is problematic even now, without a bomb.

The majority of Arabs understand that Iran wants nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes rather than for direct use. The regime is already bullying Lebanon, Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen. Arabs fear that if the Iranians go nuclear, nobody will be able to stop them.

Unlike past conflicts in which Arab countries faced a direct military threat, the current situation has been characterized by proxy wars with the Iranians. Arab regimes are privately crossing their fingers that a military strike will take out Iran's nuclear capabilities, but they will not say this publicly. They may even denounce such ideas in order to reduce the chances of Iranian retaliation, even while offering the United States low-key assistance on the matter. In light of this situation, the United States should be the one to carry out any military strike on Iran -- the Israelis need to practice self-restraint as they did in 1991 against Saddam Hussein.

The world cannot wait forever for a "Green Revolution" in Iran. It is unclear whether the regime's nuclear activities are acceptable to the Iranian people, who can be very nationalistic and chauvinistic. Therefore, the international community should act sooner rather than later. Time is running out, and diplomacy will not work, especially the kind currently being used by the West. Although a military strike may generate more Iranian public support for the regime, such a step may be necessary.

Charles Wald

Iran could have a nuclear weapon as early as summer 2010. A military strike -- however unpalatable and undesirable that option may be -- could set the regime's progress back a few years. Such a solution would be very difficult to carry out, and the consequences would be problematic. A serious campaign would be required, including hundreds of sorties per day for weeks, possibly months, targeting not only Iran's fuel cycle but also military assets such as missiles and aircraft. And those carrying out the attacks would need to be prepared for follow-up strikes in the event Iran began to rebuild its program.

Israel would not be able to conduct this sort of campaign on its own. Past Israeli air force operations against the Osirak reactor in Iraq and nuclear facilities in Syria were simple compared to attacking the Iranian program. Israel would be able to carry out initial strikes, but it could not sustain them over several weeks or months. This fact should be cause for concern in Washington: the Israelis seem to believe that if hostilities with Iran break out, the United States will join in. Israel views Iranian nuclear activities as an existential threat, and there is domestic pressure on Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to do something -- as a result, the United States may be strategically forced into participating at a point when the circumstances are not advantageous. This pressure will mount over the next year.

In light of these and other factors, the United States must pursue multiple tracks against Iran simultaneously, from

diplomacy to preparing for a military strike. The Iranians believe that America has war fatigue, so making Iran understand that its actions have consequences will be critical to establishing credibility. At the same time, going through the process of diplomacy is necessary in order to open up options such as military action. The Obama administration deserves credit in this regard, as it has made positive steps on diplomacy while making clear in repeated statements that all options remain on the table. But the administration must remember that other tools are available, including punitive measures such as sanctions, embargoes, and blockades. The United States should also be preparing its friends in the region. The United Arab Emirates has already begun equipping itself with the best U.S.-made air defense systems, including Patriot surface-to-air missiles and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system.

It is crucial that Washington compare the consequences of permitting Iran to go nuclear versus launching military strikes, however uncomfortable such analysis may be. The regime's support for Hizballah and Hamas means that the aftermath of military action would be problematic for Israel and the rest of the Middle East. Yet the strength of those two groups is often overstated. Moreover, if Washington chooses to live with a nuclear Iran, it would have to accept a dramatically changed Middle East with some second-or third-order consequences, including a nuclear arms race. America's Arab allies in the region share Israel's deep concerns about this issue. ❖

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