

Halting Iran's Nuclear Programme: The Military Option

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Conventional wisdom says preventive action against Iran's nuclear programme would entail significant risks and uncertain prospects of success. But that wisdom focuses too narrowly on military-technical considerations, does not ask the right questions regarding the preconditions for successful prevention, ignores historical experience and fails to adequately consider the risks associated with the alternative: deterrence.

The measure of success for a policy of prevention would be whether it leads to a decision by Tehran to halt at least those elements of its nuclear programme, such as enrichment or reprocessing, that could contribute to development of nuclear weapons. Thus, while preventive action should aim to maximise damage to Iran's nuclear infrastructure, it should be done so as to pave the way for multilateral post-strike diplomacy to pressure Iran not to rebuild, or for subsequent military strikes if Iran were to do so.

Military action that succeeded in destroying key nodes in Iran's nuclear infrastructure would risk failure if it led to widespread condemnation of Washington, emboldened Tehran to rebuild, loosened international constraints on Iran's nuclear programme by making Iran a 'victim', and deterred the United States from undertaking further action against Iran's nuclear programme. Conversely, military action that, regardless of damage inflicted, convinced Tehran not to rebuild would have to be deemed a success. ... ❖

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