

The Last Resort: Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran

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Accepted wisdom suggests that preventive military action against Iran's nuclear program would entail significant risks and uncertain prospects of success. Much of the public debate surrounding these risks and uncertainties has focused on strictly military-technical considerations. Although important, these issues do not address the key political and contextual questions underlying any discussion of prevention and deterrence. For example, how would Iran -- and the international community -- respond to military strikes? Would such action convince the regime to permanently abandon its nuclear activities, or would Tehran simply rebuild? And what effect would such action have on subsequent diplomatic or military efforts?

In this paper -- the fifth entry in The Washington Institute's "Agenda: Iran" series -- Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt scrutinize these and other questions in an effort to understand exactly what preventive action would entail if the diplomatic road reaches a dead end. In doing so, they touch on the various scenarios under which such action might unfold, emphasizing the crucial role that context -- including the international political climate, Tehran's stance toward its nonproliferation commitments, public opinion in the United States and Iran, and similar factors -- would play in the success of any preventive strategy. Whether military force is viewed as a threat to gain diplomatic leverage or an actual "last resort," policymakers must come to a realistic understanding of its consequences if they hope to end the Iranian nuclear threat for the long term.

- **45 pages**

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