

Preventive Military Action: The Worst Way to Deal With Iran's Nuclear Program

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By Greg Thielmann, Senior Fellow June 18, 2009

The Obama administration will need to explicitly remove the threat of a preventive military strike to successfully convince Tehran to forgo the option of developing nuclear weapons and to grant greater access by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The U.S. and Israeli governments privately understand that a military strike would be one of the worst possible ways to deal with the threat of Iranian proliferation. The threat of preventive war only reinforces the arguments of those factions in Iran who believe that Iran needs nuclear weapons. Therefore, U.S. policymakers should stop threatening or implying that they may authorize a preventive military strike and get down to productive negotiations to arrive at a solution.

Highlights

- Continuing reference to the "military option" is counter-productive for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.
- If Israel or the United States launched a preventive attack to try to destroy Iran's nuclear program, both countries would be drawn into the fight.
- With active U.S. participation in an attack, Iran's ability to pursue nuclear weapons would definitely be set back, perhaps even for years, but an attack would prompt Iran to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and undertake a crash program to develop nuclear weapons.
- Iran might be able to recover relatively quickly from an air attack and build nuclear weapons within a few years because of the progress it has already made in developing a full fuel cycle for uranium enrichment.
- A U.S. preventive attack on nuclear sites would have to be accompanied by a major air assault on Iran's military to blunt the impact of a likely response to the attack. The United States could not prevent missile launches against Israel, proxy attacks by Hezbollah, or disruption of oil shipments through the Persian Gulf leading to a spike in the global price of petroleum products.
- If Israel initiated the attack, the U.S.-Israeli relationship would sustain a serious setback. The U.S. public would eventually hold Israel as well as Iran responsible for the resulting pain and hardships.
- U.S. relations with other friends and allies would also suffer serious damage. President Barack Obama's major foreign and domestic initiatives would be derailed, and his presidency irrevocably defined by the ensuing conflict.
- With the likely continuation of concerns over Iranian nuclear proliferation and the inherent unpredictability of military undertakings, an air war with Iran would run the risk of becoming a land war as well.
- The U.S. and Israeli governments likely understand these realities. Israel's continuing talk of preventive strikes is mostly directed at influencing the United States. Washington's reference to Jerusalem's threats is mostly directed at influencing Iran.
- Ironically, these references only inhibit Washington and Jerusalem from achieving the principal objectives they each seek: keeping Iran in the NPT and out of the nuclear weapons club.

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Although the possibility of Iranian nuclear weapons is a major concern for Israel and the United States, leaving the "military option" on the table is counterproductive. Preventive military action by either country against Iran's nuclear facilities would only delay, rather than halt, Tehran's nuclear program, and it would cause Iran to retaliate against the United States as well as Israel. The aftermath of such an attack would be disastrous for the U.S. position in the region-particularly for relations with Israel and with Iraq-and its position in the wider world.

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