



Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran.



This paper offers a fact-based analysis that we hope will provide Americans sufficient understanding to weigh the balance between the benefits and costs of using military force against Iran—between the necessity and human folly of resorting to war.

From the signers of this document

This document is published by The Iran Project; the content is the collective view of the signers.

Dear Fellow Citizens,

As a group of interested former officials of the United States government and professionals in U.S. national security, we support the publication of the attached report, “Weighing the Benefits and Costs of Military Action against Iran.” We applaud the authors of this paper and their goal of contributing an objective, nonpartisan analysis to a critical national debate. While some of us made contributions to the text, we do not necessarily agree with every point in this detailed and professional report.

We do, however, believe that this report will contribute to informed public discussion of an important challenge to American interests in the world. We also believe the report is consistent with United States policy—maintaining pressure on Iran while holding open the possibility of reaching a political solution, without ruling out the use of military force.

The paper draws no final conclusions and offers no recommendations. It offers an objective description of some of the prerequisites for thinking about the use of military force against Iran: the need to establish clear objectives, evaluate the capacity of the U.S. military to achieve those objectives, plan an exit strategy, and then weigh the benefits and costs of the military options.

We commend this report to the American people as a basis for open and informed discussion of a matter of crucial importance to America’s national security. As Thomas Jefferson once noted, “In a republican nation whose citizens are to be led by reason and persuasion, and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of first importance.” This paper seeks to contribute to the democratic “art of reasoning,” as citizens across the nation debate the question of the use of force to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

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“ I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts. ”

Abraham Lincoln

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action against Iran

American Presidents have proclaimed for over a decade they would “take no option off the table” to stop Iran from building a nuclear bomb—leaving the door open for military action against Iran under certain circumstances.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

At a time when debate on this critical issue is often driven by politics and based on unexamined assumptions about the ability of military action to achieve U.S. objectives, this paper seeks to provide a foundation for clear thinking about the potential use of force against Iran. The paper’s authors and signers, a bipartisan group of senior national security experts, recognize that this debate is part of a broader conversation about U.S. policy toward Iran. But **we believe that it will be impossible to make a rational assessment of the role of military force in any overall Iran strategy, without first carefully assessing the likely benefits and costs of military action.**

This paper draws from a large reservoir of informed analysis and opinion, all of it publicly available (including unclassified intelligence reports). The paper is fact-based when possible and straightforward about areas of disagreement or uncertainty. Given the quantity and richness of research on many of the issues treated in this paper, we have had to summarize some important expert discussions in the endnotes; we encourage interested readers to consult those notes for further details. Our professional judgments, when offered, are clearly identified as such. This is not an advocacy document; we hope that our balanced consideration of this highly charged issue will help readers draw their own informed conclusions as to the wisdom of a military action against Iran.

SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS

The authors of this paper brought to their task some shared understandings that provided our diverse group with a common perspective.

- We recognize that military action against Iran is being contemplated because a nuclear-armed Iran would pose dangerous challenges to U.S. interests and security, as well as to the security of Israel.
- We are mindful that Iran has twice in the past attempted to expand its nuclear program secretly—efforts that were detected and halted—and that Iran is currently in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions requiring it to cease enrichment activities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which

monitors Iran's nuclear program, continues to call for clarification of Iran's evasive responses to questions about the past record of deception. Nor has the IAEA been able to gain full access to Iran's military facilities to confirm the current status of an Iranian nuclear weapons program that intelligence officials believe was halted in 2003. In addition, Iranian leaders have repeatedly made statements that have threatened Israel and that have been interpreted as challenging the right of the State of Israel to exist.

- We agreed not to address broad questions about the United States' commitment to nuclear nonproliferation that would be raised by a U.S. decision to use force against Iran to head off a nuclear weapon, including whether the United States would continue to use force against other nations that might decide to develop nuclear weapons. Rather, we focused on questions related to the particular case of Iran.
- We believe that the use of military force should be a last resort and must be accompanied by a rigorous analysis of likely benefits and costs.
- We chose not to address alternatives to the use of force in this paper, but will make that the focus of a future paper.
- We acknowledge that the potential benefits of military action against Iran are easier to describe concisely than the costs of such action—especially the long-term costs, which are more speculative, and the costs of possible unintended consequences.
- We recognize that there is disagreement on a number of the most important questions addressed in the paper. We agreed to explain those disagreements objectively and base our own judgments on careful review of expert analyses and opinion.
- Our aim is to provide facts and analyses that could inform discussion of an urgent security challenge in an election year.

OVERVIEW

The paper is organized around **questions that U.S. leaders and citizens should ask themselves when contemplating any military action:** At what point is the use of force justified? What would be the objectives of military action? Do we have the capacity to achieve those objectives? What is our exit strategy? What are the likely benefits of using military force in this situation? What are the costs, both immediate and long-term? A primer on Iran's nuclear program concludes the paper.

The assessments highlighted below are treated in greater detail and with ample source citations in the paper.

HIGHLIGHTS

I. Timing, Objectives, Capability, and Exit Strategy. The U.S. has signaled that it is prepared to implement “all options”—including the use of military force against Iran, should sanctions and diplomacy fail—if or when there is a clear indication that Iran has decided to build a nuclear weapon. After deciding to “dash” for a bomb, Iran would need from one to four months to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear device. Additional time—up to two years, according to conservative estimates—would be required for Iran to build a nuclear warhead that would be reliably deliverable by a missile. Given extensive monitoring and surveillance of Iranian activities, signs of an Iranian decision to build a nuclear weapon would likely be detected, and the U.S. would have at least a month to implement a course of action.

According to official statements, the objective of U.S. military action at that point would be to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. In our judgment, that objective is unlikely to be achieved through a military action that relies on aerial strikes supplemented by cyber attacks, covert operations, and perhaps special operations forces. After reviewing many studies on this controversial question, we have come to believe that **extended military strikes by the U.S. alone or in concert with Israel could destroy or severely damage the six most important known nuclear facilities in Iran, setting back Iran's nuclear program for up to four years.** Our informed estimate is that a military strike by Israel alone could delay Iran's ability to build a bomb for up to two years. In our view, Israel could not replicate the success of its earlier surgical strikes against single reactors in Iraq and Syria, since Iran's nuclear sites are numerous and widely dispersed, with one (Fordow) buried deep underground. If no lasting resolution of tensions over Iran's nuclear program can be achieved in the aftermath of U.S. and/or Israeli attacks (as discussed below, we believe military action is more likely to reduce than enhance the prospects for such a political resolution), attacks might need to be resumed at some future point.

We note that there is a marked lack of consensus and clarity in Washington about what the U.S. should aim to achieve through any military action against Iran. Privately, some national security experts and advisors may have embraced the more modest objective of delaying Iran's ability to build a nuclear weapon, as a step toward prevention; but some others may have embraced objectives that are far broader than official statements currently suggest. Even in order to fulfill the stated

objective of ensuring that Iran never acquires a nuclear bomb, the U.S. would need to conduct a significantly expanded air and sea war over a prolonged period of time, likely several years. **If the U.S. decided to seek a more ambitious objective, such as regime change in Iran or undermining Iran's influence in the region, then an even greater commitment of force would be required to occupy all or part of the country.** Given Iran's large size and population, and the strength of Iranian nationalism, we estimate that the occupation of Iran would require a commitment of resources and personnel greater than what the U.S. has expended over the past 10 years in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined.

The more ambitious the objectives of military action and the longer the conflict goes on, the more difficult it would be to design an effective exit strategy.

II. Benefits. We recognize that the objectives and targets of any military action against Iran could well range from very limited to quite broad. In estimating that preventive U.S. attacks could delay for up to four years Iran's ability to build a nuclear weapon, we are assuming the deployment of American air power, drones, sea-launched missiles, and perhaps special operations forces and cyber attacks for several weeks or more, seriously damaging hundreds of targets.

Such a military action could produce the following benefits:

- **Damage or destroy Iran's declared major enrichment facilities** at Natanz; the uranium conversion facilities at Tehran and Esfahan; the nuclear research complex in Tehran; the partially completed heavy water reactor and production plant (that could be used to develop plutonium) at Arak; and some centrifuge production installations. With more difficulty, a U.S. air campaign would also damage or destroy the Fordow enrichment facility (which is buried under 200-300 feet of rock).
- **Damage Iranian military capabilities**, including its air defenses, radar, air force elements, command and control facilities, and much of Iran's direct retaliatory capability, such as the main military bases and facilities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and of the Iranian Navy, Army, and Air Force. Strikes would also target non-nuclear facilities suspected of being used for weapons development, such as the Parchin site.
- **Demonstrate U.S. seriousness and credibility**, showing Iran that the U.S. is determined to prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapon and showing other Middle Eastern governments that are concerned about Iran's regional ambitions that the United States is committed to their security. U.S. military action could

also disrupt Iranian government control, deplete the Iranian treasury, and raise internal tensions—although we do not believe it would lead to regime change, regime collapse, or capitulation.

- **Help to deter nuclear weapons proliferation.** U.S. military action against Iran's nuclear program may also reduce the odds that other countries in the region will seek nuclear weapons. If Iran's nuclear program were set back, key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt would feel less pressure to pursue their own nuclear programs. U.S. military action might also deter others—inside and outside the region—from pursuing their nuclear ambitions, fearing that if they do, it might invite a similar U.S. response.

We estimate that unilateral Israeli military action could set back Iran's nuclear program for up to two years, given Israel's more limited military capability. Israeli strikes could damage or destroy the Natanz enrichment facility; the conversion facilities at Esfahan and Tehran; and the suspected nuclear weapons-development facility at Parchin. **Israel could not do great damage to the deeply buried Fordow enrichment facility, without resorting to riskier ground attacks.**

III. Costs. In addition to the financial costs of conducting military attacks against Iran, which would be significant (particularly if the U.S. had to carry out thousands of sorties and if it had to return to the use of force periodically for years to come), there would likely be near-term costs associated with Iranian **retaliation, through both direct and surrogate asymmetrical attacks.** Serious costs to U.S. interests would also be felt over the longer term, we believe, with **problematic consequences for global and regional stability, including economic stability.** A dynamic of escalation, action, and counteraction could produce serious unintended consequences that would significantly increase all of these costs and lead, potentially, to all-out regional war.

Among the potential costs discussed in this paper are the following:

- **Direct Iranian retaliation against the U.S.** While some argue that Iran might hold back using force in order to avoid provoking a larger scale conflict, we believe that Iran would retaliate, costing American lives; damaging U.S. facilities in the region; and affecting U.S. interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf, and elsewhere. Iran would draw on its extensive conventional rocket capability and IRGC anti-ship missiles, small submarines, fast attack boats, and mine warfare in the Gulf. Iran might attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz, which could rattle global markets and cause a significant spike in oil prices (as well as blocking the main artery for export of Iran's own oil).

- **Iranian strikes against Israel.** Iran would hold Israel partly responsible for any attacks, whether or not Israeli forces participated in military action. While Israel's anti-missile and civilian defense programs are strong, sustained air strikes by Iran would result in casualties and damage to facilities, perhaps including the Israeli nuclear complex at Dimona.

- **Indirect retaliation by Iran.** Attacks by well-armed proxies such as Hezbollah or Shiite militant groups in Iraq, as well as by Iran's covert forces and the IRGC Qods Force, could be even more damaging to U.S. and Israeli interests than direct Iranian retaliation. Such indirect retaliation could include the use of missiles and rockets by proxies as well as terrorist attacks and covert action, such as sabotage and assassination. If Hezbollah were to make heavy use of the missiles and rockets it has deployed in southern Lebanon, that could expand the conflict, possibly leading to a regional war in the Levant.

- **A potential breakdown of hard-won global solidarity against Iran's nuclear program.** We believe that if Iran's nuclear program is attacked by the U.S. or Israel in the absence of an international mandate or a multinational coalition, support for maintaining sanctions against Iran could be substantially weakened. Weapons sales to Iran that are now prohibited by sanctions could resume, as might the sale of materials that could be used for making a nuclear weapon.

- **Increased likelihood of Iran becoming a nuclear state.** While it is not impossible that aerial attacks could drive Iran to the negotiating table, we believe that military action probably would reduce the possibility of reaching a more permanent political resolution of concerns about Iran's nuclear program. In fact, we believe that a U.S. attack on Iran would increase Iran's motivation to build a bomb, because 1) the Iranian leadership would become more convinced than ever that regime change is the goal of U.S. policy, and 2) building a bomb would be seen as a way to inhibit future attacks and redress the humiliation of being attacked. Iran could also withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and end all cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), leaving the international community with greatly reduced knowledge of Iran's nuclear program.

- **Global political and economic instability, including disruptions in energy supply and security.** A U.S. and/or Israeli attack on Iran could introduce destabilizing political and economic forces in a region already experiencing major transformations. In addition to costing the U.S. economy hundreds of billions of dollars yearly, a sustained conflict would boost the price of oil and further disrupt an already fragile world economy.

- **Damage to the United States' global reputation and increased credibility for anti-American extremist groups.** U.S. military action, especially if unilateral, could further alienate Muslims and others worldwide, reinforcing the view that the United States resorts too often to military force. An attack on a Muslim nation could enhance the recruiting ability of radical Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda. Even though some Sunni Muslims might be pleased to see attacks on Shiite Iran, the likely impact on U.S. stature in the Muslim world would be negative.

On the contested issue of whether military action would weaken or strengthen Iranian public support for the current regime, we conclude that U.S. and/or Israeli strikes are **more likely to unify the population behind the government than to generate resistance.**

Some of these costs would be mitigated if a U.S. strike were to occur in response to Iranian actions that clearly revealed an intention to develop a nuclear weapon. Such actions might include the expulsion of IAEA inspectors and withdrawal from the NPT, or the launch of a crash program to raise existing supplies of low- and medium-enriched uranium to a weapons-grade level of enrichment. Given the time required for Iran to progress from the decision to weaponize to possession of a reliable, deliverable weapon, the United States would have an opportunity to develop international support for multilateral action against Iran, including further sanctions, additional negotiations, and the use of military force. **While the costs associated with Iranian retaliation would not significantly be altered if other nations approved or joined in a U.S. military strike, the longer-term costs to U.S. interests would be somewhat lessened.**



This Executive Summary cannot do justice to the extended debates and months of study that have gone into preparing the paper that follows, or to the rigor of the research and analysis that buttress its findings. Our aim throughout this effort has been to present the best possible assessments—based on a large body of expert analysis and opinion—of how the use of military force against Iran might contribute to or detract from resolving one of the most critical security challenges now facing the United States. We hope the facts and professional judgments we have assembled will stimulate informed debate and reflection among citizens and leaders alike.

This paper was drafted by Austin Long, of Columbia University and William Luers, Director of the Iran Project. They were advised by Colin Kahl of Georgetown University and received important contributions from Thomas R. Pickering, Jim Walsh of MIT, and Stephen Heintz of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The other core members of The Iran Project and a large number of the endorsers of the paper made valuable additions to the paper. Priscilla Lewis, the editor, has been an excellent partner and is largely responsible for the final version. Iris Bieri, The Iran Project Coordinator, has managed the complex process of bringing together the many different points of view and individuals involved, to get the paper to completion. Our copy editor, Trish Leader, and design team from On Design, Inc., led by Okey Nestor, contributed their invaluable talents and time to make this publication possible.

The Iran Project is a non-governmental organization that seeks to improve official contacts between the United States and Iranian governments. Founded in 2002 by the United Nations Association of the USA and Rockefeller Brother's Fund, The Iran Project became independent in 2009. The core members of The Iran Project for over a decade have been: Stephen Heintz, William Luers, William Miller, Thomas Pickering, Jim Walsh, and Frank Wisner.

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