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Israeli or U.S. Action Against Iran
Who Will Do It If It Must Be Done?
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The case study presented below outlines one possible scenario for future U.S.-Israeli decisionmaking on Iran's nuclear program. Given the spectrum of other available options, military force should only be employed against the program as a last resort. Yet the military option must still be credible, and ready to use if necessary. This case study is intended solely to stimulate and inform further discussion on the potential repercussions of different strike options.

It is late 2013 and the prime minister of Israel has just received a phone call from the White House relaying the findings of a recent U.S. intelligence assessment: international sanctions and negotiations with Iran have yet to persuade the regime to halt its nuclear drive. Tehran previously rejected a generous U.S. offer that would have allowed it to enrich uranium in exchange for strong nuclear safeguards, and the program continues to advance unabated. After agreeing to convene in Washington in one week to discuss strategy going forward, the prime minister and president each call a meeting with their national security advisors.

The president's team acknowledges that the United States is war weary, debt laden, and politically gridlocked. With U.S. forces having just withdrawn from Iraq and on a path to

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end combat operations in Afghanistan by late 2014, many hope that the attendant diversion of resources will spring the country from its financial woes and accelerate its economic recovery.

Nevertheless, the president, the prime minister, and their advisers reaffirm that a nuclear Iran is an unacceptable threat to U.S. and Israeli national security, with the president reiterating his strong and repeated 2012 commitment to prevention. Each leader then reviews the redlines that the regime has already crossed since 2004 regarding enrichment of nuclear material, as well as the UN Security Council resolutions it has violated in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. They also consider the fact that five rounds of diplomatic negotiations (in Geneva, Istanbul, Baghdad, Moscow, and Kazakhstan) have failed.

In light of these concerns, both leaders agree that the time has come to ready their contingency options for a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. But if such action does indeed become necessary, they ask, which country should launch the attack—the United States or Israel? To address that and other key issues, the president and prime minister pose ten questions to their close advisers regarding military action. Below are the most probable answers.

1. Which approach would give the West more room to exhaust peaceful options: leaving the timing of a potential attack to Israel or the United States?

Israel's military capability to strike Iran's proliferating nuclear sites—especially those bunkered deep within a mountain, such as Fordow—is more limited than that of the United States. Israel's window for military action is therefore closing, while Washington's more advanced capabilities mean that it can wait, affording the West a final attempt to exhaust all other options.

2. Which attack option would have more international legitimacy?

The international community is unlikely to support military action if diplomacy or sanctions still have a chance of succeeding. Again, America's superior military capabilities provide more time to exhaust these options. From this perspective, a last-resort U.S. strike would enjoy greater legitimacy, while a unilateral Israeli strike amid Western efforts to find a diplomatic solution would not be received well internationally.

Yet the Iranian nuclear program does not pose an existential threat to the United States as it does to Israel, so only an Israeli attack could legitimately claim self-defense. Numerous U.S. officials, including President Obama, have therefore qualified their warnings against a unilateral attack by recognizing Israel's sovereign right to defend itself.

3. Which option would cause greater damage to Iran's nuclear facilities?

The U.S. military's superior capabilities—including B-2 stealth bombers, air refueling craft, advanced drones, and 30,000-pound massive ordnance penetrators—are more likely to severely damage Iranian targets. Yet the United States has no operational experience in strikes against such facilities, unlike Israel, which successfully conducted similar operations against the Osiraq nuclear reactor near Baghdad in 1981 and, according to foreign reports, against a Syrian reactor in 2007.

4. Which option would avoid violating the sovereign airspace of third countries?

Any Israeli operation would have to cross the airspace of at least one other country (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Syria). Yet a U.S. attack could be launched directly toward Iran from bases or aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

5. Which country could better carry out a focused military campaign that causes the least collateral damage or potential for escalation?

Without the advanced military capabilities to carry out a sustained bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear sites, any Israeli attack would necessarily be quick and surgical, with less collateral damage. This is a significant advantage. After such an attack, the Iranian regime would still have a lot to lose, and its retaliation would likely be much more measured, diminishing the potential for escalation.

The United States has one of the best air forces in the world, and its superior capabilities and massive ordnance penetrators leave it well poised to carry out an efficient surgical operation. Although there is no guarantee that these heavier bombs would be effective against all targets, they are nonetheless more powerful than their Israeli counterparts. If Washington wants to avoid getting bogged down in another war in a Muslim country, however, such a strike must be geared solely toward stopping Iran's nuclear efforts, not regime change or conquest. Toward this end, a surgical strike would be highly preferable to putting boots on the ground.

6. If poststrike escalation leads to war, which country has more efficient mechanisms in place to end the conflict?

Assessments of the day after an Israeli or U.S. strike range from limited Iranian retaliation that could be checked within days to full-scale regional war. If the United States attacked, however, it would have less moral authority than if Israel

attacked— as mentioned above, Israel could legitimately claim that it was acting in self-defense. Moreover, Washington’s ability to serve as an honest broker in negotiating a ceasefire would be diminished if it ordered the strike. For their part, China and Russia would be less incensed by an Israeli strike than a U.S. attack, and perhaps more willing to play a role in poststrike de-escalation.

7. Which option would have the least potential for producing an Iranian nationalist backlash that could strengthen the regime?

The more the Iranian people understand that the attack is targeting the regime’s nuclear program, not the country or its people, the less likely they are to rally behind Tehran out of indignation and fear. A short, surgical strike that minimizes civilian casualties is therefore preferable in this regard as well, since a prolonged attack might lead the public to fear for its safety and look to the regime for protection. A message to the people explaining the purpose and target of the attack could also help assuage their concerns, perhaps even turning public opinion against the regime. Yet such a message would necessarily stymie any attempt at a deniable, low-signature attack, which could also prove useful. If the origin of the attack were unclear, rumors would fly, making it more difficult for the regime to rally the public behind a single convincing narrative.

A quick, clandestine strike that results in fewer civilian casualties plays to the strengths of Israel’s military. As for the “hearts and minds” issue, neither country has proven adept at this sort of public messaging.

8. What effect would an Israeli strike have on public opinion in the Middle East compared to a U.S. strike?

An attack by either country is unlikely to provoke widespread anger or sympathy for the Iranian regime among Arabs in the region, especially given widespread Sunni hostility toward Tehran for its ongoing support of the embattled Syrian regime. Many analysts also believe that Gulf leaders would applaud an attack in private, however harshly they condemn it publicly. Yet given the historical tensions between Israel and the Arab world, an Israeli attack would probably draw greater criticism than a U.S.-led attack. In fact, a U.S. strike might even help America repair its tarnished image in the Sunni world (though it would likely incense the masses in Afghanistan and Pakistan given U.S. military involvement in those countries).

9. Politically speaking, which option would be more beneficial for the U.S. president, and which would be better for the Israeli prime minister?

The outbreak of another war with a Muslim state would not bode well politically for any U.S. administration, and Washington would therefore prefer that its ally take action. For Israel's part, no prime minister has ever asked another country to fight Israel's battles, and breaking this mold would be difficult. From that perspective, an Israeli strike would be preferable. Yet if Israel believes a U.S. strike is less likely to invite Iranian retaliation against Israeli civilians, then it would prefer that Washington take the lead.

10. In the event that repeated military attacks are required, which country is better poised to carry them out?

The United States is a global superpower with highly developed capabilities to project power from various locations and bases all over the world. If further military action became necessary, it would have the advantage of launching a second attack from a different location than the first. Israel's ability to repeat an attack while varying its approach is more limited.

Summary

After discussing these issues, the president and prime minister's advisers suggest that a U.S.-led strike is preferable from a military perspective, since it would produce affirmative answers to more of the above questions than would an Israeli attack. Yet determining which country should strike extends far beyond military capabilities. Attacking Iran's nuclear facilities is but a tactical step toward the strategic goal of permanently halting the regime's drive toward nuclear weapons. Mechanically damaging the program is not an end goal in itself, since no amount of bombs can destroy Iran's nuclear knowhow. Any strike must necessarily be followed by negotiations and a self-enforcing diplomatic deal that prevents Tehran from reconstituting the program or achieving breakout capability in the future.

Accordingly, the advisors point out that the operational benefits of a U.S.-led attack must be weighed against the poststrike political and military implications. In particular, a U.S. strike could limit Washington's ability to negotiate with Iran's leaders, who would not want to be seen as having been coerced by the "Great Satan." Preserving the U.S. negotiating role is crucial. An Israeli attack may have a better chance of meeting that goal, but it would almost certainly not enjoy the same international support as a U.S. strike. Israeli military action could therefore topple the international regime of export controls and sanctions that President Obama has so carefully cobbled together. And without strict sanctions in place to prevent Iran from reimporting nuclear material, it may be a matter of years before the regime reconstitutes the program—this time entirely bunkered underground to protect against future strikes.

Lastly, the advisors caution, Israel cannot and will not ask the United States to fight on its behalf, nor does Washington wish to be seen as having entered another costly and unpopular war in a Muslim country at Israel's behest.

In adjourning their respective security meetings, the prime minister and president call for future consultations with a mind toward reconciling their principal goals: (1) delaying the Iranian nuclear program as much as possible, (2) preserving the international export controls and sanctions regime, and (3) creating favorable diplomatic conditions for denying Iran a nuclear weapon.

