

Military Action against Iran: The Iranian Perspective

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There is no doubt that Iran has grown anxious about the possibility of a military strike against its nuclear facilities. It has tried to demonstrate self-confidence and assert that military action in Iran is not expected because the United States and Israel understand very well that such a strike would fail when pitted against Iran's determination and response capability. However, the intensity of Tehran's preoccupation with this issue, the ongoing threats it voices against the US and Israel, and its preparatory measures to preempt military action all indicate that Iran is eyeing this scenario with great consternation.

Iran's Anxiety over a Military Strike

Since the early 1990s, Iran has considered the US threat as the most severe of the threats it faces, particularly once the threats presented by Iraq and Russia receded in those years. The Iranian leadership has steadily feared that the US is acting to overthrow the Islamic regime in Tehran, prevent it from strengthening itself strategically, weaken it economically, isolate it politically, and challenge the Islamic revolution. The regime fears that in order to achieve these goals, the US will not be deterred from undertaking a military action against Iran, especially against its nuclear facilities, given its clear inferiority in the balance of forces between the two countries.

The US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan had a major impact on Iran's perception of the American threat. On the one hand, these interventions brought about the deployment of large American forces on Iran's borders, and Iran saw the forceful overthrow of the

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regimes in these two countries as a message aimed also at itself. The Bush administration announced repeatedly that it did not rule out a military option against Iran if other options failed to halt its nuclear program. The administration also from time to time deliberately leaked reports regarding preparations and plans for military action against Iran. As a result of its anxiety about an American strike, Iran suspended the military component of its nuclear program in 2003. On the other hand, several factors have alleviated Iran's concern. The US entanglement in Iraq has restricted its freedom of military action against Iran and provided the Iranian regime with some response capability against American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Added to this are statements by senior officials in the American defense establishment objecting to a military strike against Iran.

Together with the American threat, the Israeli threat is also preoccupying the Iranian regime. Iran regards Israel as a regional power with major military strength, strategic capabilities, and a long arm (though with obvious weaknesses) supported by the US and liable to do the unexpected. In Tehran's view, Israel is determined to prevent Iran from achieving regional hegemony by cooperating with the US and encouraging the latter to confront Iran. At the core of the threat lies the Iranian fear of an Israeli military strike, coordinated or in cooperation with the US, against the nuclear facilities in Iran. The Iranian concern about a strike by Israel is fed regularly by explicit statements made by senior Israeli leaders concerning the necessity of halting the Iranian

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nuclear program, including through military action, if the diplomatic efforts to stop it prove unsuccessful.

Against this background, and in part as a function of mixed signals over whether such an action was being planned, the level of Iranian concern about military action by the US or Israel has fluctuated. In general, it appears that the concern about a US strike peaked in 2003 and thereafter gradually faded, mostly due to the effect of the Iraqi campaign on the American administration. It can be assumed, however, that recently Iranian fears of a military strike – perhaps more by Israel than the US – have increased again. There are several reasons for this:

- The many contacts over the past year between Washington and Jerusalem at the most senior levels reached an unprecedented extent (two visits to Israel by President Bush and two by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and visits by the Israeli prime minister, minister of defense, and chief of staff in Washington). It is clear that the Iranian issue was a major subject in these talks.
- The successful attack on the nuclear facility in northern Syria in September 2007 was likely regarded by the Iranian regime as a harbinger of a strike against Iran. Indeed, President Bush declared explicitly that this operation was also a message to Iran. In addition, the Iranians were apparently disturbed by the fact that very few countries – not even Arab and Muslim countries – condemned or objected to the strike.
- Additional signs indicated preparation for a military operation in Iran, such as the reports of a comprehensive exercise by the Israeli air force in the Eastern Mediterranean, assumed to be practice for an attack against Iran.

Iran's Deterrence Measures

Owing to these concerns, Iran has taken a number of steps in recent years, some practical and some rhetorical, in order to deter the US and Israel from attacking Iran militarily. The challenge is immense: how to deter a superpower like the US and an advanced military regional power like Israel from a military strike, should they decide on one, especially since the US has carried out extensive missions in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years. Iran's problem is compounded by the fact that the Iranian military, despite its size – the largest in the Middle East in terms of manpower and the number of divisions – has rather limited conventional military capabilities. Its Achilles' heel is the quality of its weapon systems, many of which date back to the shah's regime and are quite outdated. The US and European countries have not supplied Iran with significant quantities of arms since the Iranian revolution. Russia and China supplied relatively up-to-date weapon systems to Iran, but the weapons transactions contracted with them since the mid-1990s have been limited. The Iranian military industry is expanding impressively, but most of its products are not of high quality.

Due to its weakness, Iran lacks sufficient capacity, from a purely military standpoint, to rebuff an attack on its nuclear facilities. It can respond to such an attack, but its retaliatory capability is limited, and should it attempt to hit American targets, it is liable to suffer much more from the American response.

Given these problems, Iran is heavily stressing the deterrent aspect of its capabilities. The message it is trying to deliver through senior officials is double-edged. On the one hand, the probability of a military attack is very low: the US knows that it will pay a high price for an attack, for which it needs Israel, and Israel is highly vulnerable due to its small size and location within the range of Iranian missiles. On the other hand, if Iran is nevertheless attacked, it is possible that the attack might delay Iran's nuclear activities, but for a very short time, due to Iran's self reliance and the scattered nature of its nuclear facilities, as well as its indigenous scientific and technical capabilities. In any case, Iran's response will be comprehensive, rapid, and crushing, and will also include the use of hitherto unreported capabilities.¹

Iranian officials have spelled out what their response will comprise if attacked.² A key element will be the extensive use of missiles and rockets against both Israel and American bases and vessels in the Persian Gulf. Iran is also capable of attacking Israel with warplanes and plans to do so, but it will not limit its response geographically, and will attack the interests of its attacker all over the world. If the US is the

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attacker, Iran will hit American forces stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan; for that matter, all the American bases in the Middle East are within the range of Iranian missiles. If Israel is the attacker, the Muslim world (and specifically the Shiite world, through Hizbollah) will deliver a severe blow against it. Iran will take action, including suicide attacks, to close the Straits of Hormuz, disrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, and

send the price of oil soaring to \$250 a barrel. Iran will act against any country allowing the US to use its territory for an attack on Iran. If the US attacks Iran, Iran will also attack Israel.

A central element in creating the Iranian answer to an enemy's military operation is the "Passive Defense Organization." The regime

emphasizes that in recent years Iran has developed asymmetric capabilities in order to neutralize its enemies' technological capabilities, as well as their aerial, electronic, and intelligence superiority. Although Tehran assumes that the likelihood of an American ground incursion into Iran is low, it takes into consideration that the US will try to effect a change of regime in Tehran by attacking strategic infrastructures and installations, destroying essential facilities, disrupting routine life, and causing unrest among the population, thereby destabilizing the regime. For this purpose, the US will use long range smart weapons and precision guided munitions, mostly by air and sea, powered by its forces stationed in countries near Iran. In response, the regime formulated a comprehensive emergency plan under the umbrella of the Passive Defense Organization. The plan is considered a national project, for which the government has allocated hundreds of millions of dollars. The goal of the plan is to use non-military means in order to protect the stability of the regime, defend the sensitive strategic installations against attack, continue to administer on the civilian level and provide civilian services, and wage a propaganda campaign to prevent unrest among the public.³

In order to bolster its deterrence and response potential, Iran recently announced that it has taken a series of measures to improve its capabilities:⁴

- Iran is acting to improve its missile system, including extending the range of its missiles beyond the current 2,000 kilometer range, developing new missiles of various types, and reorganizing an independent missile unit under the command of the Revolutionary Guards. The commander of the Revolutionary Guards announced that Iran had tested a new naval missile, the only one of its type in the world, with a range of 300 kilometers.
- Iran is endeavoring to improve its air defense capability. It has obtained the Tor system from Russia, but it is not yet clear whether it will receive the more advanced and effective S-300 system and if so, when. The report from East European sources that Iran is testing the performance of its air defense system with the help of Russian advisors, following the failure of the Syrian system during the attack on the nuclear facility in northern Syria, is also noteworthy.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in more than a few cases, Iran exaggerates and falsifies its potential by attributing to itself capabilities that it does not have. The most recent examples of this are a doctored photograph of the firing of a missile in August 2008, the misleading information published by Iran concerning its test of a satellite launcher, and its claim that it has warplanes with a range of 3,000 kilometers without the need for air refueling.

How Iran is Liable to Respond

There is a vast difference between Iran's threats to respond to a military strike against it, which are designed primarily for purposes of deterrence and intimidation, and the actual realization of those threats. Some of the threats cannot be carried out – or cannot be carried out on a large scale – due to Iran's limited military capabilities. Other threats can be carried out, but it is doubtful whether Iran would do so on a significant scale because of counter-considerations. In any case, the following must be assumed:

- Iran will indeed respond to a military strike against it. It is hard to believe that the Iranian regime can afford not to respond to an attack on its nuclear facilities, as Saddam Hussein failed to respond in 1981.
- The response is expected to begin immediately, yet certain moves are liable to be spread over time.
- There would be a difference between an Iranian response to an attack by the US and an attack by Israel, because the Iranian regime would not want to become entangled in a large scale confrontation with the US.
- The Iranian regime would consider the US and Israel partners in an attack, even if only one of them attacks. For this reason, if the US attacks Iran, Iran will presumably respond against Israel as well. It is less clear whether Iran would respond strongly against American targets if attacked by Israel, because of its fear of becoming involved in a conflict with the US, unless the Iranians are convinced that the US was an active partner in the attack.

Iran has several possible ways of responding against Israel. The first is massive Iranian missile fire against Israeli territory, which would probably be the preferred and immediate action by Iran. Indeed,

Iran explicitly states that it will launch a large scale missile attack in response to an attack by Israel. Iran has a few hundred Shehab missiles in its arsenal, with a range that covers all of Israel's territory. This missile is inaccurate, but Iran is expected to use it against large targets, mostly cities, and perhaps also in an attempt to hit the nuclear reactor in Dimona. Israel has a reasonable response to missile fire in the form of the Arrow system, which is designed to intercept most Iranian missiles. Assuming that the Arrow works as expected, the Iranian missiles might cause painful damage and casualties, yet their strategic impact is expected to be relatively limited. Iran also has chemical and biological warfare capabilities, and if it has developed chemical or biological warheads for its missiles, their use against Israel cannot be ruled out.⁵ Whether the Iranians would dare to use weapons of mass destruction against a country that they believe possesses nuclear weapons is an open question. Saddam Hussein did not dare to do so in 1991.

A second measure is the use of Hizbollah's rocket system against Israel. The commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards spoke explicitly about putting southern Lebanon into action in response to a military operation by Israel, and it may do so. Iran's problem is to what degree Hizbollah would be willing to pull out all the stops in using its rockets, when it is clear that its interest since the Second Lebanon War has been to maintain the prevailing lull out of fear of a massive Israeli response against it.

Iran might opt to undertake showcase terrorist attacks against Israel through Palestinian organizations. It is reasonable to assume that Iran will try this, but it is already doing all it can to encourage terrorism against Israel, primarily through Islamic Jihad and Hamas. It is doubtful how far these organizations, which are not dependent on Iran and Hizbollah, will agree to do Iran's bidding, when it is currently in Hamas' interest to continue the lull. Alternatively, then, Iran might choose a wave of massive terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets outside Israel, such as the two attacks in Argentina in the 1990s, using an intelligence and terrorist infrastructure deployed in various Shiite communities and elsewhere around the world. This is liable to be one

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of Iran's chosen recourses. As always, the Iranians will make an effort to conceal any signs of a connection between them and a terrorist attack.

How is Iran liable to respond to a US attack against it, assuming that such an attack is limited to its nuclear facilities and perhaps a few other strategic targets? Iran has several possible choices for its response.

The first is an attempted missile strike against American forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf, including naval missiles against American ships. Iran is also expected to conduct terrorist attacks against American forces in Iraq through Iraqi Shiite militias that receive aid from Iran, or even by Iranian groups. Iran is liable to carry out terrorist attacks against American targets outside the Middle East, while concealing its involvement. It is reasonable to assume that Iran will respond in this way, but will be careful to limit its response out of concern about a sharp response by the US. It is also unclear how much the Shiite militias in Iraq are willing to accommodate Iran's preferences when their interests do not coincide with those of Iran.

The second option involves Iran's threat to close the Straits of Hormuz and disrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf in response to an attack by the US. This, however, is an extremely dubious option for Iran. American intelligence believes that Iran is capable of disrupting the flow of oil from the Gulf for only short periods, because it would lead to American and international action to open the Straits and renew the flow of oil, including through the use of military force.⁶ More importantly, Iran would be the main loser if the Straits are closed, because its own exports of oil and imports of refined oil products would be affected. Former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani already commented on these problems in 1983 during the Iran-Iraq War, when he said, "We will block the Straits of Hormuz when we cannot export oil. Even if they damage half of our oil, it would not be in our interest to block the Straits of Hormuz. When we don't have oil, when we are unable to export oil, the Persian Gulf will be of no use to us... This is the situation in which we would enter the scene and act as we wish, even if I am convinced that such a situation is very unlikely."⁷ While Rafsanjani's statement 25 years ago is not binding on the regime today, it at least shows Iran's considerations in this matter. In any case, even if Iran does not try to disrupt the flow of oil in the Persian Gulf, it

can be assumed that an attack on Iran will cause a rise in oil prices, at least in the short term.

The third option involves Iran's threat to attack American allies in the Persian Gulf theater that cooperate in the attack, particularly if they allow the US to use their territory for the attack. Again, such action is possible, but questionable. An attack against the oil infrastructure and tankers of the Persian Gulf countries is liable to lead to a similar response by the US against Iranian oil assets, and Iran is liable to prove more vulnerable. The US is also liable to strike against the Iranian fleet in the Persian Gulf and cause it severe damage.

The fourth option involves an Iranian response against Israel on the above-mentioned format in case of a US strike. The character and extent of Iran's response are liable to depend on the degree of Israel's involvement in the American action, as assessed by the Iranians.

Concluding Remarks

The bottom line is that Iran has a range of possible recourses in the event of a military strike against it. There is almost no doubt that it will respond, and will not follow the examples of Saddam Hussein in 1981 and Bashar Asad in 2007, who refrained from retaliating when their nuclear facilities were destroyed. However, due to Iran's limited military capabilities, the problems latent in the potential actions, and the constraints applying to the country, it can be assumed that Iran's responses, while painful, will not be strategically significant or extreme.

Although Iran's current ability to respond to a military strike against its nuclear installations is not far reaching, there is significant anxiety in the part of many governments concerning the severe consequences of such an action, and this anxiety has limited willingness to become entangled in Iran. Several factors contribute to this anxiety:

- There is concern in the Western world about a chain reaction of responses and counter-responses to a strike – in the military sphere and in terrorism – that are liable to harm stability in the region, particularly when it can be assumed that a military strike will open a long term account with Iran. The West is also worried that an attack will prompt anti-Western unrest in the Muslim and Arab worlds.

- Iran has the image of a country ready to undertake excessive responses. This reputation is fed by its blatant threats against those who would try to attack it.
- If the attack against the nuclear sites in Iran fails, the consequences will be graver than those of restraint.
- In any case, it can be assumed that an attack and the responses to it will spark a rise in oil prices of unforeseeable duration.

Other possible consequences have motivated many governments to object to a military strike against Iran, beyond the wish not to damage relations with it. Many assume that a military action will probably not halt Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons, but will only postpone this development, and even confer international legitimacy on its efforts after Iran is attacked. Such an attack is also liable to increase support of the Islamic regime among the Iranian public, at least in the period following the strike, and strengthen the radical trends in Iran and the Muslim world.

Notes

- 1 "IRGC Commander Warns of Very Quick Crushing Response," Dialog, Jam-e-Jam, Tehran, 2.7.2008.
- 2 Iranian News Agency, Tehran, August 28, 2008; AFP, Tehran, August 30, 2008; MEMRI, August 19, 2008, Special Dispatch 2029; MEMRI, November 25, 2007, July 21, 2007.
- 3 MEMRI, July 7, 2008; "IRGC Commander Warns of Very Quick Crushing Response," Dialog, Jam-e-Jam, Tehran, 2.7.2008.
- 4 Iranian New Agency, Tehran, February 28, 2008 and June 29, 2008, www.sigint.co.il.
- 5 See Danny Shoham, "How Iran Would Retaliate Against an Attack on its Nuclear Facilities," *Nativ*, January 2008, pp. 29-32.
- 6 "The Last Resort: Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran," Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus*, 84, June 2008, pp. 16-19.
- 7 FBIS-SAS-83-201, October 17, 1983.