

Will the Military Option on Iran Return to the Table?

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Military action to stop Iran's nuclear program by destroying its nuclear facilities was never an attractive option to governments. It was amply clear that it was a problematic and risky move with no guarantee of success. The common assumption was that even a successful strike would not stop Iran permanently, and that after a while, Iran would try to resume its military nuclear program. In fact, a strike would provide it with justification to break out toward the bomb. These concerns were compounded by the possibility that Iran would respond with counterattacks, which would drag more nations into the military fray.

Given these concerns, almost all governments involved have so far been opposed to military action and have made it clear they would not take part. Only two governments have considered – or at least not ruled out – the military option: the United States and Israel. Both have expressed themselves in similar terms: all options to keep nuclear weapons out of Iranian hands are on the table, including military action. Thus, the Obama administration said that the military option was under consideration, and in March 2012 President Obama himself said that both Iran and Israel must take seriously the possibility of a US military move against Iran's nuclear facilities.¹ Moreover, during the Obama years, the United States developed bombs capable of penetrating the defenses of Iran's nuclear facilities and severely damaging them.²

However, at the same time, the administration took pains to stress that the time for military action was not ripe. Its reluctance stemmed from the concern that an attack on the nuclear facilities would stop the nuclear program only for a short time and eventually would only accelerate it,

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because after being attacked Iran could be expected to cause widespread military chaos in the Middle East, which would force the United States to get involved and lead to a crisis in the oil market. By contrast, Israel felt that attacking Iranian nuclear facilities would lead to a long delay in Iran's nuclear program, because Iran's capacity to respond is limited and because Iran would be deterred by a confrontation with the United States, meaning that extensive regional escalation was not very likely.³

The Nuclear Agreement and the Military Option

The JCPOA's approval in July 2015 froze the military option. Beyond questions about the chances of a military strike's success, the Obama administration did not hide the fact that it viewed the nuclear agreement as an important achievement in its Middle East policy, generating hope of an expanded dialogue with Iran to cover regional issues and lead to a less confrontational Iranian policy. Clearly this approach undercut the credibility of the military threat: Iran apparently realized that the administration would not take military action, at least as long as Iran did not flagrantly violate the agreement.

At the same time, the JCPOA also undermined the likelihood that Israel would take military action. It was clear to Israel that its hands were tied and that it could not damage the agreement, because it would be accused of undercutting it and be held responsible for the ramifications. Israel would also need US aid after a military move to block Iran's reaction and curb Iran's attempts to reconstruct its nuclear program; it is doubtful it would have received that help from the Obama administration. Above all, and before the approval of the JCPOA, President Obama stated unequivocally that his administration had in no way given Israel the green light to attack Iran; senior administration officials explicitly told Israel it must not surprise the United States with an attack on Iran.⁴ Many in the United States and Israel feel that in the first years of the JCPOA, the benefits outweigh its drawbacks, given the restrictions imposed on the Iranian nuclear program; the agreement poses a substantive danger only later, once many restrictions are lifted and Iran is free to develop an advanced uranium enrichment program. As time went on, it became clear that Israel's top echelon had serious disagreements about the efficacy and feasibility of a military strike. It would have been difficult to reach a decision on a military strike against Iran when key defense establishment figures opposed it.

Hence, it was clear that from the approval of the JCPOA until at least the end of Obama's term in office, a military strike – by Israel and certainly by the United States – was off the table. The only condition that might have made such an action possible would have been a significant Iranian violation of the nuclear agreement. No such violation was proven and thus the Obama administration remained opposed to military action against Iran.

The Trump Administration: New Parameters

Once Trump entered the White House, circumstances changed fundamentally for three main reasons:

- a. The Trump administration's basic approach to Iran is profoundly different from that of the Obama administration. The President is surrounded by senior personnel who are hawks on Iran, first and foremost Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton.
- b. Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement and impose harsh sanctions on Iran has motivated Tehran to threaten to resume nuclear activities to the level of before the signing of the JCPOA and perhaps beyond.
- c. Iran's military involvement in the fighting in Syria, which began during the Obama administration, has expanded during the Trump administration and led to more extensive military confrontation between Iran and Israel in the Syrian arena than before.

The starting point for this fundamental change is the Trump administration's attitude to Iran. Trump views Iran as the primary source of all evil afflicting the Middle East and the root of threats against the United States and its regional allies, above all Israel. To him, the most problematic component of Iran's conduct is its efforts to attain nuclear weapons, and because the JCPOA does not halt these efforts, it is a very bad agreement. But in addition to the nuclear issue, the administration is perturbed by Iran's regional intervention, its growing attempts to expand its presence and influence in the sphere – also at the expense of US influence and interests in the region, its investments in long range missile development, and its support for terrorism. Unlike its predecessor, the Trump administration does not believe there is any chance for building trust or a mechanism of dialogue with the current Iranian regime in the hope of moderating Iran's radical positions.

Instead, the Trump administration seems to feel that only intense pressure on Iran in a range of fields can change the regime's nature and

policy, and perhaps strengthen the opposition that can topple the regime. There have been two waves of pressure on Iran: Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, accompanied by a resumption of the economic sanctions against Iran and the promise of future sanctions, and whose ramifications for the Iranian economy are already apparent; and the dozen extreme conditions Secretary of State Pompeo laid down to the regime in Tehran.⁵ Even if the additional pressure and Iran's worsening economic situation do not lead to regime change, the administration hopes that these will at least spur Iran to agree to revisit the nuclear agreement and change it to meet US and Israeli demands.

To date, the Trump administration has not threatened serious military steps against Iran, neither in the context of the nuclear program, nor in the context of Iran's presence in Syria. While the administration gives full verbal backing and justification to Israel's air force strikes on Iranian targets in Syria,⁶ and US planes have on a few isolated occasions attacked Iranian/Shiite weapons convoys, for now it seems that the administration does not view a military move against Iran's nuclear facilities as realistic, because Iran has yet to provide cause for an attack in the form of a flagrant violation of the nuclear agreement. An even more important reason to avoid such a strike is that the economic pressure on Iran has not yet been exhausted and may yield future results. Thus, there is no reason to make a military move, which has the potential for unforeseen complications. In late June 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo explained that should Iran try to attain nuclear weapons, it would face the wrath of the world, but he made it clear that he was not talking about a military strike against Iran.⁷

The Trump administration's approach also affects Israel's position. While President Obama was in office, Israel avoided taking military action against Iran, in part because that administration's attitude to the military options differed from its own. Now Israel avoids the military threat precisely because of the close congruence between its position and that of the current administration. Israel seems to share the Trump administration's position that today, the right way to handle the Iranian nuclear issue is to undermine the nuclear agreement and increase economic pressure on the Iranian regime. As long as this pressure is applied, Israel has no reason to consider taking military action and risk the subsequent fallout, and concludes it is therefore better to wait and see what the sanctions may produce.

Two Possible Military Option Scenarios

Even if the bottom line is that at this time both the Trump administration and the Israeli government are not considering military action, the option may be back on the table in at least two scenarios, neither of which existed when the JCPOA was reached, as they stem from the Trump administration's policy on Iran and the tension between Iran and Israel in the Syrian arena.

The first scenario relates to Iran's decision regarding its ultimate position on the nuclear question. Tehran clearly wants to maintain the nuclear agreement and sees the US withdrawal and the renewal of sanctions as negative developments, which is why it has not yet declared the JCPOA null and void. For now, it is trying to live with it in cooperation with the five parties that continue to support the JCPOA. But presumably this is only an interim position, for two reasons: Iran presents the other five governments with terms for upholding the agreement, such as avoiding any talks on Iran's ballistic missiles or its regional conduct, and compensation for the damages that the restored sanctions are causing; it is almost certain that the JCPOA's European members will reject these terms as they currently stand. More important, such joint support for upholding the agreement does not help Iran very much, because the renewed sanctions imposed by the Trump administration have already caused significant damage to the Iranian economy. Iran's remaining partners to the agreement lack the wherewithal to help Iran reduce the sanctions' impact.

Given this tough situation, and if the nuclear agreement collapses, Iran has two possible options: to soften its stance on the agreement and show willingness to reach a new accord that would comply with at least some of the US demands, both on the nuclear issue and on other topics, such as Iran's missile program and regional conduct. This is a very bitter pill for Iran to swallow, and it has thus far rejected out of hand every offer to reopen the nuclear agreement for further talks or any talks about its ballistic missiles. In any case, renewed talks, which would be conducted with the Trump administration, do not portend well for Iran.

The other option Iran seems to be considering is to defy all or some of the nuclear agreement's limitations. In recent months, Iran has signaled its intention to choose this route in response to the US withdrawal, in

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particular, the plan to resume uranium enrichment to the 20 percent level. Khamenei also warned that if the JCPOA does not serve Iran's interests, it will withdraw from it altogether.⁸ Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Khonsari advised that Iran might renew its nuclear activities at a much accelerated rate in response to US steps.⁹ Meanwhile, Ali Akbar Salehi, head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, announced that his country is working to manufacture advanced centrifuges for research purposes, stressing that the development of these centrifuges is not a violation of the JCPOA.¹⁰ However, if and when Iran does decide to violate the deal, this step will likely help accelerate the process of developing a large scale uranium enrichment program.

Nevertheless, this option is no less problematic than the previous one, because Iran must consider that steps that can be seen as aimed at attaining nuclear weapons might lead to military strikes – either by the United States or by Israel – against its nuclear facilities. Iran would also alienate the European governments, because withdrawing from the agreement would cancel out any of the deal's benefits. This is most probably why Iran has, to date, acted cautiously, and, though it has threatened to breach the limitations of the agreement, it has not done so.

Even if Iran violates the agreement, it is doubtful that the Trump administration would rush to resort to military means before it is clear if the violations are critical and Iran is approaching breakout status. So far, the administration has shown no inclination to take significant military action or even threaten its use. The United States may therefore prefer to apply even greater economic pressure and exhaust its potential for opening the agreement to renewed talks before deciding on a strike.

The second scenario is essentially different, and relates to the changes to Iran's status in Syria. Since 2014, Iran has moved combat troops to Syria, for the most part Hezbollah units from Lebanon, Shiite militias from Iraq, and Shiite fighters recruited in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Only some are Iranian – units of the Revolutionary Guards and its subordinate Quds Force leading Hezbollah and the other Shiite militias in the fighting in Syria. Their most important mission was to help the Assad regime, which was on the verge of collapse. However, early on it became clear that Iran intended to leave its forces in Syria indefinitely and exploit the military stronghold it is building there to strengthen Hezbollah and the threat it poses to Israel, including from the Syrian front. This situation has forced Israel repeatedly to strike Iranian and Shiite forces in Syria, especially from the air. The

strikes have targeted convoys bringing advanced weapons to Hezbollah, weapons factories Iran has built in Syria to manufacture advanced weapon systems, stockpiles of rockets Iran has accumulated for Hezbollah, and aerial defense systems Iran has installed in Syria.

Under current conditions, the probability of a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities as a result of an escalation in the Iran-Israel conflict in the Syrian arena is low, for several reasons. The Trump administration has neither cause nor interest to be involved in a military action in Iran consequent to the situation in Syria. Iran has so far been careful not to overdo its responses to Israel's strikes in Syria, apparently because it feels Israel has a significant military advantage in the Syrian arena. Iran may also be concerned that Israel will exploit the opportunity to attack its nuclear facilities. Russia too may be exerting its influence on both sides to prevent a more widespread confrontation. Israel may choose not to attack the nuclear facilities because of the complexity and possible repercussions of such a strike, i.e., an Iranian decision on aiming its own missiles and Hezbollah's missiles and rockets at Israeli targets.

But Israel's resolve to prevent Iran from building a stronghold in Syria, manifested in intensified attacks and the assumption that Iran will at the end of the day have to respond in greater scope to protect its forces, make it more likely that both sides will find themselves engaged in a wider confrontation. If that happens, one cannot preclude the possibility that Israel will see an opportunity and justification to attack Iran's nuclear facilities as well.

In that case, Israel will be in a very different situation than it was in the past, given the better chemistry with the Trump administration than with the Obama administration. It is likely that there is currently no agreement between the US administration and the Israeli government on the conditions for military action, for two reasons. One, the Trump administration is still focused on tightening the economic and political screws on Iran. Two, in general, the Trump administration seems leery of military action unless there is a serious threat to US security. Moreover, at this stage, Iran has not yet violated the nuclear agreement in any significant way, and the agreement still holds benefits because of the limits imposed on Iran's nuclear program. In this

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situation, all the other governments linked to the deal want to uphold it, even if changes to it would be an improvement; they are in any case opposed to military action against Iran, a scenario that would upset the current balance.

The considerations against military action are bolstered by Iran's strategic position. In recent years, Iran has seemed more vulnerable than it was when the JCPOA was reached. For now, the Trump administration is willing to take steps to stop the Iranian threat by economic means; the future of the JCPOA, which Iran wants to uphold, is uncertain because of the US withdrawal, and it is not clear if the other partners will be able to maintain it. Iran's military intervention in the Syrian arena provides it with an important asset, but also leaves it and its allied Shiite militias exposed to Israeli attacks from the air without Iran having an effective response. Israel currently has improved aerial attack capabilities, because of the integration of the F-35 fighters into its air force; and Iran's intervention in Syria has turned into an internal problem, as masses of Iranian citizens have taken to the street to demand that its leaders steer the massive resources invested in Syria and other foreign nations toward the welfare of the population.

In addition, Iran's close military ties and extensive cooperation with Russia, especially on the Syrian issue, are problematic for Tehran. In terms of Syria's future, Russia and Iran have fundamentally contradictory interests. Russia maintains a steady dialogue with Israel at the highest echelons, and on the ground, is not intervening on Iran's behalf to stop Israel's attacks. Russia does not seem to want Iranian and Shiite forces near Israel's border, as this might lead to repeated Israeli attacks jeopardizing a future arrangement in Syria, as well as the regime.

Implications

The conditions for a military attack on Iran have changed since the JCPOA was reached. The strong steps taken by the Trump administration against Iran, as well as the US singling Iran out as the key threat to the interests and status of the United States, the US support-in-principle for Israel's position on Iran, and the uncertainty of any future US steps against the Tehran regime all have a powerful deterrent effect on Iran. There is also the possibility of further escalation in the Iran-Israel confrontation over the military stronghold Iran is building in Syria.

The damage to Iran's situation does not necessarily increase only the chances for a military move against it. On the contrary, Iran's vulnerability

allows for the possibility of other steps against it, such as added economic pressure, greater chances of internal unrest in Iran, damage to its forces in Syria, pressure to open the JCPOA in the context of renewed talks, which could lead to a better agreement from the Israeli and US perspective, and increased cooperation among the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia that can weigh on Iran. If such steps prove effective, it will, at this stage, not be necessary to embark on military action over Iran's nuclear ambitions. This may be why both the United States under Trump and Israel are talking less about the military option than they did during the Obama administration.

However, although the alternate steps have a better chance of success than before, the military option still exists, especially if it becomes clear that the Trump administration's current moves are losing effectiveness because Iran, together with other governments, has found ways to reduce their impact. Such a process could unfold in at least two scenarios. First, Iran, in response to US pressure, would make bold moves in the nuclear field resulting in its becoming a breakout state in light of a collapse of the JCPOA and an Iranian refusal to make fundamental changes to it. In the second scenario, the military confrontation between Iran and Israel in the Syrian arena escalates, creating an opportunity for Israel to attack nuclear facilities in Iran. This does not refer to a limited confrontation that involves some increase of Israeli attacks in Syria and sporadic Iranian rocket and missile fire, which would not provide sufficient reason to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. The situation would have to escalate to a very significant degree, involving, for example, Hezbollah aiming massive rocket and missile fire at Israeli targets from Lebanon and Syria, and perhaps even Iran itself, giving Israel the justification to exploit the opportunity to damage Iran's nuclear facilities.

If military action becomes likely, given either of these scenarios, the question becomes: who will execute it? The United States has a strong advantage over Israel, operationally speaking. Its aerial forces are stationed much closer to the Iranian targets, and its operational capabilities are much greater. US deterrence vis-à-vis Iran is greater than Israel's and could keep Iran from taking significant retaliatory steps after the action. The United States also has greater ability than Israel to undertake a series of continuous strikes to prevent Iran from rebuilding damaged facilities to the point that Iran may cede the effort to resume its

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nuclear program for many years to come. Politically, too, the United States can withstand international censure far better than can Israel.

Nonetheless, if the administration concludes that a military strike is necessary to stop Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, it may prefer that Israel take action with the backing of the United States. It may not want to get bogged down in military activity in the Middle East beyond the war on terrorism, the assumption being that if Israel takes action the administration has greater freedom to take advantage of the outcomes. In any case, if a reexamination of the military option is linked to a major escalation in the Israel-Iran conflict in Syria, it is quite likely that Israel, possibly with US backing, would carry out the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities.

An important question here is the consensus and proposed schedule for action. In this sense, there may be a difference between the two scenarios. Even if Iran violates the prohibitions the JCPOA imposed on its nuclear program, not every violation would lead to a military move. Clearly, the two governments would not necessarily agree on the type of violation demanding military reaction. One can also expect that in addition to the United States, other JCPOA partners would continue to uphold their position, i.e., not opting for military action except in extreme situations. Moreover, even if it is possible to identify steps implicating Iran in suspect nuclear behavior, a considerable period of time would be needed to formulate a resolution in favor of a military strike. Much time would be needed to examine the nature of Iran's actions and agree on their degree of severity, at least between the United States and Israel. No less importantly, even if the US administration considers the military option favorably, it would be asked to exhaust all other options first, including Iran's willingness to concede and the attempt to build a coalition to support a show of force against Iran. By contrast, the scenario in which the Iran-Israel conflict escalates could be less complex and more rapid. The activities and stances of both sides would be clearer, the number of players smaller, and the decision making process faster. If the decision is made to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, it is reasonable to think that Israel would carry it out.

The bottom line: current conditions do not provide a sufficient foundation for an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, either on the part of the United States or on the part of Israel. When it comes to the nuclear question, there is a perfectly reasonable alternative to military action – in the form of US pressure – and the Iran-Israel conflict on the Syrian front is still limited. However, these conditions could change if Iran decides to accelerate its

nuclear activity in a significant and threatening manner or if the conflict between Iran and Israel escalates and assumes the form of a missile war.

Notes

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- 4 For more on this, see Gary Samore and Ephraim Kam, "What Happened to the Military Option against Iran?" *Iran Matters*, Belfer Center, Harvard University, September 29, 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/index.php/publication/what-happened-military-option-against-iran>.
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