

Response Essay

If it Comes to Force: A Credible Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Military Option against Iran

Amos Yadlin, Emily B. Landau, and Avner Golov

Introduction

A study published in 2012 by the Iran Project¹ seeks to create the basis for an informed discussion regarding the option of a military strike against Iran. In the prefatory remarks and the introduction to the study, the authors emphasize that they intend to provide figures and assessments as a basis for their balanced cost-benefit evaluation of a US military attack, but will refrain from presenting their own positions on the issue. The document is signed by some thirty former US government officials, Democrats and Republicans alike, including the current US Secretary of Defense, former senator Chuck Hagel.

The authors of the report assume that the United States will succeed in identifying an Iranian decision to cross the nuclear threshold and break out to nuclear weapons, and that the administration will have a month to respond before Iran is in possession of at least one nuclear weapon. Although it is problematic and highly risky to rely on such assumptions – something the writers themselves caution against² – the report proposes three main models for the implementation of a military option in Iran: an attack that is relatively limited in scope, intended to delay the Iranian military nuclear program for up to four years; a medium scale attack,

Major General (ret.) Amos Yadlin is the Director of INSS. Dr. Emily B. Landau is a senior research fellow at INSS. Avner Golov is a research assistant to the Director of INSS.

intended to completely deny the possibility that Iran will develop nuclear weapons; and a broader scale attack in order to promote more ambitious goals, such as toppling the Iranian regime, causing serious damage to Iran’s military and economy, and/or forcibly promoting US interests in the region.³ The authors then skim over the benefits of the limited scale military option very briefly, while presenting at length both the direct and indirect costs of this option. The two other models are not dealt with.

References to the report in the global media following its publication tended to focus on two ominous messages: one, an American attack on Iran could lead to an all-out war in the Middle East, and two, the military option for Iran would cost more than the combined cost of ten years of American fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴ True, these are not the main conclusions of the report, and in any case the authors purport to enhance “dispassionate policymaking,” while avoiding “an advocacy document.”⁵ However, the tenor of the report, its structure, and its analytical lapses do stress in the main the risks of the military option and present it as damaging to American interests, and as such it is not surprising that these are the messages that were picked up by the media. Significantly, the Iran Project has recently issued another report where they clearly and directly object to the threat of military force in the context of pressure on Iran.⁶

We agree with the report that a military attack on Iran must be the last option in an attempt to prevent Iran from going nuclear. A resolution through negotiations is the preferred solution. Nevertheless, there are several major flaws in the report – both in how the subject is presented and in the analysis – that undermine the authors’ stated goal: namely, to present the basis for an informed discussion of the issue.

A credible threat to employ military force and diplomatic efforts do not contradict each other; rather, they complement and reinforce one another.

The first flaw is that the authors ignore the fact that a credible military threat is of decisive importance, first and foremost in the context of negotiations. A credible threat of military consequences (if Iran does not cooperate) plays an

important deterrent role that is intended to help convince Iran to come to the negotiating table for the purpose of actually negotiating a deal.

A second flaw is that the analysis is biased in its description of the costs of an attack on Iran. This bias is due to the choice of incorrect

military models for stopping Iran from acquiring a military nuclear capability, rather than what would be a correct focus on a pinpoint, surgical strike if the diplomatic options do not succeed. In addition, the analysis exaggerates the negative consequences of an attack on Iran and includes grave statements regarding some ramifications of a limited strike that lack sufficient foundation.

The third flaw is that the authors miss the essential comparison that needs to be drawn when assessing the costs of a military strike, after non-violent options have failed. The correct comparison is not between the cost and benefit of an attack in the context of current international efforts to stop Iran, rather, between the cost of a military option and the cost of Iran's acquisition of a military nuclear capability, and the threat that it would then pose to the Middle East and world order.

These flaws undermine the value and validity of the report. Had the authors considered these issues, their analysis might well have pointed to the option of a surgical strike as preferable to an Iran in possession of a nuclear bomb. This in turn would have changed the tone of the report, which presents a strike as having a predominantly negative impact.

In choosing among the available options for stopping Iran from acquiring a military nuclear capability, the United States is acting, as President Obama has made clear, first and foremost out of concern for its own interests – and not in order to help Israel or other allies in the region. As such, our analysis – which fleshes out each of the three flaws we have identified in the Iran Project report – also focuses on the US angle and American interests.

A Credible Military Threat in the Context of Negotiations Strategy

In its discussion of the military option, the report, curiously enough, ignores the need to distinguish between a credible threat to use military power and an actual attack. Indeed, both the *threat* and the *attack itself* focus on the question of the use of military force, but they play totally different roles in the framework of the overall dynamic of confronting Iran on the nuclear issue. A credible threat is essential as a means of exerting pressure during negotiations, while an actual attack would enter the picture only when the (current) negotiations are deemed to have failed.

As such, a credible threat to employ military force and diplomatic efforts do not contradict each other; rather, they complement and reinforce one another. A credible military threat is a necessary means of exerting pressure on Iran precisely in the context of a strategy that seeks to resolve the crisis through negotiations. Iran has not yet shown any willingness to compromise on the nuclear issue, despite international sanctions that are causing significant damage to its economy and its international stature. In this situation, a credible threat to use the military option, beyond tightening the sanctions, is a necessary additional lever for pressure in order to change the cost-benefit calculations of the regime in Tehran and persuade it to become a more serious partner for negotiations on its military nuclear program, especially after Iran has invested considerable national resources in developing its nuclear program, and successful negotiations would ultimately require it to give up its military nuclear aspirations. But when the heavy costs involved in the military option are emphasized in the public debate, this serves to weaken the effectiveness of the threat and this potential lever of pressure on Iran, and inadvertently even strengthens Iran's deterrence. As such, the authors, by underscoring severe dangers of an attack, even if this was not their intention, actually undermine the chances of success in the negotiations.

It has already been proven in connection with the sanctions on Iran that levers of pressure can be used without generating a rise in the price of oil and harming the economies of states participating in sanctions. The effects of the "biting" sanctions imposed during 2012 on the oil industry and the financial system in Iran have proven that the threats and the fears before they took effect – about a rise in the price of oil and the possibility of escalation in the conflict between Iran and the West, even up to a military confrontation – were unfounded.⁷ Rather, the Iranian leadership responded cautiously, and actually sought to avoid escalation in relations with the West in general, and with the United States in particular. Moreover, Iran moderated its position, albeit insufficiently, in the talks with the P5+1, and there were also moderates in Tehran who sought to be more flexible and, in contrast with the blanket opposition of the past, hold direct talks with the United States. The Obama administration prepared the sanctions effort well, and in coordination with the Saudi regime, provided a response to the global demand for oil that resulted from the reduction in output of Iranian oil. Clearly, correct planning can

significantly reduce the cost of escalation in the diplomatic campaign against Iran.

This observation indicates that American coordination with allies who share both its concern about the Iranian nuclear program and the aspiration to resolve the issue by diplomatic means is a central part of the solution to the concerns in the report about the threat of a military strike. As part of this careful planning, the question of which military threat strengthens the diplomatic efforts and deals with these concerns in the most effective manner should be examined.

Exaggerated Costs of the Military Option

The report presents a biased analysis of the costs of attacking Iran – the result of a mistaken choice of model for an attack on Iran’s military nuclear facilities and an overestimate of the cost to the United States. The methodological flaw underlying the bias is the authors’ assumption that the United States must choose among three options: first, a military option of limited scope that would delay the program by two to four years. This would include deployment of air power, unmanned aerial vehicles, and sea-launched missiles, and the possible use of special forces and cyber attacks over several weeks in order to damage “hundreds of targets.”⁸ The second is a medium scale option, designed to ensure that Iran will not have nuclear weapons. It would require a wider deployment of US air and naval power over years. The third is a large scale military option (the Iraqi model), which would involve a ground invasion of Iran, occupation of the country, and a change in government.

We agree with the report that the model of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, whose purpose was regime change, is not the correct model for handling the Iranian nuclear issue. However, this incorrect model must not dictate dogmatic thinking about the other options for Iran. What is required is military thinking that examines effective alternatives for achieving the limited goal of causing serious harm to Iran’s ability to produce a nuclear weapon. Therefore, even the limited model suggested by the report is too broad, and consequently, misguided and too costly. The US air force has sufficient capabilities to carry out a surgical strike,

A balanced analysis of the consequences of a surgical strike, which is focused on achieving American goals and which limits the cost of an attack, indicates that the price of this option is not high.

over several days, on Iranian nuclear facilities and sites that support this industry. This limited strike could set back the Iranian nuclear program by several years, depending on how successful it is.⁹ The option of a surgical aerial strike makes it possible to carry out an additional attack several years later if Iran seeks to rehabilitate its military nuclear capabilities. Consequently, this model preempts the authors' claim that it will be necessary to station additional air and naval forces for a prolonged period in order to ensure that the achievements of an attack are maintained. It also renders irrelevant the high cost of the options proposed.

A surgical strike by the United States would demonstrate the seriousness of its intention to stop Iran's military nuclear program if Iran fails to adopt a serious approach to the diplomatic track. Interestingly, a surgical strike that does not harm widespread Iranian military and economic assets could encourage a positive Iranian response to negotiations, and the fact that many assets remain in Iran's possession that stand to be harmed in the event of escalation could moderate Iran's response and keep it measured and limited.¹⁰ A surgical strike on Iranian nuclear facilities could thus reduce the risks of becoming engulfed in a regional war, and ultimately even enable a return to the negotiations table.

Since the authors indicate their concern about the consequences of a regional war, it is not clear why they even consider scenarios of a broad attack that increase the risks that this threat will be realized, compared to the limited scenario of a surgical strike.

The authors of the report describe in cursory fashion the direct, short term benefit of a limited American attack but detail at length the medium term and long term costs. Thus the cost-benefit analysis is in itself imbalanced, even as the authors warn that it is difficult to assess these said costs and that the costs they are suggesting are actually based on "speculation."¹¹ They skew the assessment with speculation that exceeds the direct cost of the limited model and is more relevant to an expansion of the crisis, and as a consequence, an expanded US response, without making this clear. Accordingly, they fail to remain faithful to the outline of an attack that they themselves have chosen and instead present the costs of more extensive fighting, including an escalated crisis to the point where Iran closes the Strait of Hormuz and the region is mired in an all-out war.

Yet even if the gravest assessments are realized, namely, that the Iranian response will be powerful and will require an American response, the aerial model of Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011 offers a more effective option than a large scale ground attack that includes an invasion and occupation of Iranian territory. Indeed, we agree that the model of a ground invasion is neither appropriate nor correct as a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. Nevertheless, an air strike by NATO forces in Serbia led to the Serbian army withdrawing from Kosovo, an end to the bloodshed, and a change in government one year later. NATO's air strikes in Libya aided the rebel forces and led to the fall of the Qaddafi regime within seven months. The cost of these two operations was limited, both from a monetary point of view and from the perspective of harm to NATO forces.¹²

Therefore, even if the United States were forced to increase the intensity of its operations in Iran, it would not have to choose the model of a broad attack proposed by the report, and it would not necessarily be forced to pay an economic price that is higher than the price of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined, as warned.¹³ In other words, a change in the model of attack could significantly reduce the cost of an attack on Iran without impeding the ability of the United States to damage Iran's military nuclear program or provide a response to dramatic escalation – even if according to the authors the probability of this scenario is slim.

In addition to flaws connected to the choice of attack model, the authors also overestimate the costs of an attack on Iran. This distortion is expressed on five principal levels:

- a. *The economic cost:* The report warns that an attack on Iran is liable to lead to an increase in global oil prices and to a price spike in the event of escalation into regional war.¹⁴ But the United States could moderate the rise in oil prices with the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which could supply American oil demand for more than a month and maintain the stability of world oil prices for a short period of time.¹⁵ Even analyses that anticipate an increase do not necessarily expect a dramatic rise such as that suggested in the report, and certainly not as a result of a surgical strike on Iran.¹⁶ Furthermore, the surgical strike model reduces the risk of deterioration into regional conflict and an increase in oil prices over time as a result of a decision by Iran to exert pressure on its adversaries.

- b. *The political cost.* The authors claim that an American attack on Iran would strengthen the perception that the United States tends to solve its problems through the use of force, thus enabling terrorist organizations and radicals in Muslim countries who oppose the United States to grow stronger at the expense of the forces of moderation.¹⁷ However, an attack on Iran would not necessarily weaken US allies in the region and would perhaps even strengthen them. Indeed, Iran is not very popular in the Arab world in general, and in the Sunni Muslim world in particular.¹⁸ Certainly those who oppose the United States will make themselves heard after the attack, but why would they be able to convert moderates who do not support Iran's radical ideology and provocative policy, precisely when Iran has suffered a severe blow?

An American attack on Iran would not necessarily cause serious harm to the position of the United States in the Arab world and/or weaken the moderate elements. Perhaps it would have the opposite effect: the Sunnis who fear Iran would see that the United States acts decisively in the face of the threat of the "Shiite bomb," and would feel that they have an opportunity to promote their interests in the region at the expense of Iranian hegemony. Such a response could reduce Iranian influence in the region. Iran is the main supporter of the Assad regime, which is slaughtering its own people; of Shiite groups that are working against the regimes in Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain; of terrorist organizations in Iraq working against US forces and continuing to do so following the US withdrawal; and of Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip that oppose Israel. The weakening of Tehran's allies would serve American interests and increase stability in the region, and thus the argument that an attack on Iran would necessarily harm US interests in the region is without foundation. In fact, an attack would be more likely to serve American interests.

- c. *The regional cost.* The report warns that a regional war resulting from an American attack¹⁹ could elicit an Iranian response against US bases in the region and strategic targets in the Gulf, along with pressure by Iran on its regional allies to attack US allies and make them pay for the attack. Such a response could lead to escalation and to regional war between Iran and its adversaries in the region, and in particular, Israel.

Yet given this scenario of all-out war, it is not at all clear that the Iranian regime would wish for regional escalation against the United States, or even against Israel. With Iran's standing and economy already hurt, it would certainly not seek to respond in a manner that requires the US military to act forcefully against Iranian strategic assets. Iran's fear of increased tensions with the Sunni Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, and with Turkey, which seek to limit Iranian influence in the region, is likewise a factor. Indeed, the Iranian regime would probably be prepared to pay a certain price by responding in order to save face, as long as it estimated that the cost of its response would be tolerable and not too high. But when considering a third step in the crisis (after it was attacked and it responded), it would most likely have little motivation to risk escalation and further harm to Iranian interests; its motivation would remain low as long as the regime itself was not threatened. Therefore, it can be expected that the Iranian response will be measured and cautious, rather than comprehensive.

The regime's limited motivation to act against Israel is matched by its limited capabilities.²⁰ Iran has very limited weapon systems, especially surface-to-surface missiles that can hit targets in Israel. Iranian missiles would have to contend with Israeli anti-missile defense systems: the Arrow, the Patriot, and in the future, other systems as well. Therefore, Iran would likely turn to its proxies in the region and have them act on its behalf. However, the Iranian regime's allies in the region are in a sensitive position. The Assad regime, which is fighting for its survival and allocating all its resources to the domestic arena, lacks genuine motivation and ability to act against Israel today. The rifts in Syria increase the sectarian tension in Lebanon and threaten Hizbollah's goal to become a Lebanese organization that enjoys broad support from the local populace. Hizbollah is contending with increasing criticism from Sunnis and Christians, who accuse it of promoting Shiite and Iranian objectives at the expense of Lebanon's national interests. Opening a front against Israel in order to preserve the alliance with its Iranian patron could aggravate the organization's already shaky domestic standing in Lebanon. The Palestinian organizations in the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip will also face a far from simple dilemma after suffering heavy

casualties in the last round of fighting and in light of their change in orientation from Iran and Syria to Egypt and Qatar.

Iran's sense of honor will probably not allow the regime to refrain entirely from responding, but it is not at all clear that Iran would prefer a broad response and the risk that the entire region "go up in flames" with its interests jeopardized, as suggested by the report. In our assessment, there would be an Iranian response, but it would be moderate, measured, and calculated.

- d. *The nuclear cost.* The report warns that an attack on the nuclear facilities would increase motivation to produce a nuclear bomb, and therefore would miss its target.²¹ However, the regime in Tehran has already made a strategic decision to achieve military nuclear capabilities. A tactical decision to break out will be made at the time that is most appropriate and prudent from the regime's point of view – and when the chances of stopping it are slim. Indeed, already today Iran has evinced much determination to develop nuclear weapons. The Iranian regime, which during 2012 confronted "biting" sanctions for the first time, has not ceased its progress toward a military nuclear capability. Its adherence to the goal, particularly in the face of unprecedented international sanctions and regional and international isolation, indicates that Iran's motivation to produce a bomb is already very strong, and therefore it will not significantly increase as a result of an American attack.

Furthermore, motivation is not a sufficient condition for developing nuclear weapons; it is also necessary to have actual implementation capability. It appears that for Iran, the capability component is the most vulnerable to an attack at this time, which explains why the argument about increased Iranian motivation is problematic and why instead there is a need for an international campaign to prevent Iran from developing the ability to break out to a bomb. The Iraqi test case, which started in 1981 with a pinpoint Israeli strike and continued with a system of international sanctions and a US attack on Iraqi nuclear facilities in 1991, is an excellent model for stopping the Iranian military nuclear program.²²

- e. *The internal Iranian cost.* The report's assertion that the Iranian populace will unite around the regime in the event of an attack²³ is far from self-evident and lacks empirical proof. Eli Jacobs of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, for example, argues that the "rally

round the flag effect” was not proven to result in “across-the-board support” in Iraq in 1991 and in Libya in 2012.²⁴ According to Jacobs, the theory is not suited to the dynamic that exists within Iran and to the relationship between the people and their government. Former State Department official Aaron David Miller even claims that a successful American attack could challenge the stability of the regime because pragmatic elements in the regime and secular elements in Iranian society aspire to bring about a change in government in Iran.²⁵

The claim that the people will fall into line behind the government was also made before economic sanctions were imposed on Iran, and this prediction was not borne out. The serious damage to the Iranian economy has actually increased the pressure on the regime, which fears anti-government protests, and has increased the tension between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his supporters and followers of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. A limited, surgical strike further reduces the chances that the authors’ prediction – that an attack would necessarily lead to broad public support for the regime – would be proven correct.

The report’s flawed estimate of the cost of an attack on Iran, along with a flawed choice of a desirable model for an attack, generates a skewed analysis that exaggerates the cost of the military option. The choice of the surgical strike model, which is focused on achieving American goals and which limits the cost of an attack, along with a balanced analysis of the consequences of an attack, indicates that the price of this option is not high. This is particularly the case when considering that even this cost should not be examined on its own, but should be compared with the relevant alternatives, as will be explained below.

The Correct Price Comparison: Military Force vs. Nuclear Iran

The authors of the report argue that they have chosen to focus on the costs and benefits of the military option and have intentionally refrained from addressing the possibility that Iran will reach military nuclear capability.²⁶ They have thus consciously decided to address only the cost of a military strike and to avoid the necessary analysis, namely, a comparison of this cost with the cost of accepting a nuclear Iran if all other options fail. In our opinion, this choice is misguided and unacceptable. If the diplomatic option fails, the United States president will need to choose between

two difficult, risk-filled options – and therefore, the cost of each option should be studied against the price that the United States will be required to pay for the other option, and not against the situation today, when Iran does not yet have a military nuclear capability. The situation today is temporary and far less complicated than the two options that will be relevant in the future.

This narrow analysis in the Iran Project’s report ignores three points that are critical to American interests. The first is that a nuclear Iran will undermine the nuclear nonproliferation regime and encourage a regional arms race. As part of a concise presentation of the benefits of the military option, the report acknowledges in cursory fashion that an attack on Iran would help maintain the nuclear nonproliferation regime.²⁷ However, the threat of an arms race in the Middle East is tangible and dangerous, and therefore should be part of a comparison of the option of a strike against the option of containment (accepting the inevitability of a nuclear Iran). In recent years, the Saudi regime has warned the US administration in closed talks that if Shiite Iran, the largest adversary of Sunni Saudi Arabia, attains nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will need to acquire similar capability. The Turks and the Egyptians have also expressed opposition to the Iranian military nuclear plan, and their rivalry with Tehran could pose a difficult dilemma for them: should they respond by entering the nuclear arms race if Iran obtains nuclear weapons? The Obama administration, which seeks to reduce its involvement in the

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Middle East and hopes to focus more on Asia, would increase the pressure on these Sunni states to find a solution in which they are not dependent on US policy. Thus countries in the region that feel threatened by the regime in Tehran, such as the Gulf states, Turkey, Egypt, and even Iraq, could decide to enter a regional arms race if Iran passes the military nuclear threshold. Therefore, it is clear that acceptance of a nuclear Iran would constitute a difficult challenge to the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

An attack on Iran could prevent this scenario, and further strengthen the nonproliferation regime by demonstrating American willingness to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons to other states in the region. Since the nonproliferation regime helps ease

the charged atmosphere in this tense region and avert catastrophic escalation in the event of conflict between states in possession of weapons of mass destruction, nonproliferation is defined as a vital US interest. In light of President Obama's vision of a global effort to reduce nuclear stockpiles, this interest has become even more crucial for the current US administration. In order to understand the price that the United States would have to pay if it accepted an Iranian nuclear bomb, the authors should have compared the price of the containment option to the benefit of the option of a strike against Iran. Such an analysis clearly reveals that the military option serves American interests, while the containment option significantly harms them.

The second point absent from the report is that Iranian hegemony and the power of the radicals in the region will increase if Iran goes nuclear. The report warns that American military intervention in Iran would strengthen the forces that oppose the United States and American intervention in the region and would empower the radicals, particularly Iran, at the expense of the moderates that are US allies.²⁸ This argument ignores the fact that those same moderates would be even more threatened by a boost to Iranian hegemony. For this reason, the Saudi regime is working to stop the Iranian nuclear program, and in the past year, it has increased its output of oil in order to allow harsh sanctions to be imposed on the Iranian oil industry.²⁹ The Sunni regimes in Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, and Turkey also fear the expansion of Iranian influence in the region, which threatens their interests, and especially the possibility that Iran will acquire a military nuclear capability. This capability would turn Iran into a regional power, bolstering its ability to undermine the stability of the Sunni regimes in the Gulf and enabling it to expand its Shiite revolutionary ideological influence in the region as well as its support for terrorist activity against US targets. In other words, if Iran possessed a nuclear weapon, it would have much greater power against its regional rivals, which are allies of the United States, than if the United States bombed Iran.

Relations between the United States and its regional allies are based on US willingness and ability to help promote the interests of the Arab regimes. With the Iranian threat, it is America's deterrent capability and credibility in the eyes of the moderate regimes that will determine its ability to prevent a regional war and ensure that the power of moderate forces in the region is maintained. The credibility of the United States

as an ally has been damaged in the past two years because of both the Obama administration's abandonment of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Iran's ability to progress toward nuclear weapons despite the international campaign against it. Acceptance of a nuclear Iran could result in the collapse of American deterrence in the region and an almost total reduction in the ability of the United States to maintain the strength of the moderates against the Iranian superpower and prevent deterioration into regional war. We agree with the report that these two consequences would be devastating for US policy in the region, but we differ in contending that these risks would be more tangible if the Iranian regime were in possession of a bomb than if the United States attacked Iran.

Accepting a nuclear Iran after President Obama has stated that he would prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons³⁰ would damage the credibility of American deterrence. This damage could spill over beyond the boundaries of the Middle East and also harm American deterrence in Asia and other regions. A credible threat of a strike against Iran and its execution when all other options have been exhausted could be an opportunity to strengthen the position of the United States as a superpower and increase the credibility of American deterrence in the region and support for US allies, including Israel and the Gulf states.

The third point is the faulty assessment that global oil prices will increase further if Iran goes nuclear. The report warns that a strike against Iran is liable to lead to an increase in oil prices if Iran attempts to interfere with the supply of oil or harm oil facilities in the Gulf in order to hurt its rivals.³¹ Although this is an extreme and unlikely scenario, the logic behind it illustrates that the cost of an Iran with a nuclear bomb would actually be higher than the cost of striking Iran. An Iranian bomb would curtail the ability of the West to prevent Iran from raising the price of oil and would allow the regime in Tehran to increase prices permanently. The Bipartisan Policy Center estimates that a nuclear Iran would lead to an increase of 10 to 20 percent in the price of oil in the first year (an additional \$11-27 per barrel), and between 30 and 50 percent by the third year (\$30-55 per barrel).³² Other analyses of the economic consequences expected to undermine stability in the Middle East as a result of Iran's acquisition of a nuclear bomb present even higher figures, depending on the scope of the conflict.³³ These studies indicate unequivocally that an Iran with a nuclear bomb will hurt American interests over time much

more than a temporary price increase suggested in the report. Therefore, even the most extreme scenario could be preferable in the long term to Iran's possessing a nuclear bomb.

These three points illustrate how critical it is to draw the comparison between the anticipated results of a strike against Iran and the expected consequences of Iran going nuclear and a policy of containment. Since both are bad options, we do not recommend an attack at this point. However, if negotiations fail, no agreement is reached, the covert campaign does not achieve its goal, and a time of decision is reached, analysis indicates that the option of bombing Iran as a last resort is preferable to the option of living with an Iranian bomb.

Conclusion

The Iranian Project report on the costs and benefits of the military option on the Iranian issue claims to focus on facts and shun specific policy recommendations. However, the spirit of the report, its structure, and its methodological lapses highlight the negative consequences of the military option for American interests. This was the sentiment reflected in the discussion of the report in the global media. It appears that in the guise of an objective report that "draws no final conclusions and offers no recommendations,"³⁴ the authors have in fact produced a subjective report with clear recommendations, even if they are not written as such. The current article has aimed to balance the picture.

We agree with the report that escalation in the conflict with Iran, a rise in the price of oil, and the weakening of pragmatic elements in the Middle East harm American interests. We also agree that if the negotiations between Iran and the West fail, the United States will need to choose between a policy that makes its peace with a nuclear bomb and a strike against Iran, and that only in this situation should the use of military force be considered. Nonetheless, methodologically the report is flawed. The threat of military force and the diplomatic campaign complement rather than contradict one another, and when it comes to an effort to persuade a regime to give up its nuclear ambitions after it has invested enormous resources in its military nuclear program, the importance of the military threat grows stronger. Ironically, damaging the credibility of the military option could lead to its being the only option to prevent the regime of the ayatollahs in Tehran from possessing a nuclear bomb.

The report also errs in its mistaken choice of a model for a military option, and hence its overestimation of the ensuing military costs, and its failure to consider the cost of failed negotiations and a policy of containment that reconciles itself to a nuclear Iran. We contend that the option of bombing Iran to prevent its military nuclearization is preferable to the option of an Iranian nuclear bomb, and the surgical strike model is preferable to the three models presented in the report. In our opinion, these insights balance – if not offset – the risks presented by the report.

Our analysis seeks to broaden the perspective to an examination of the best option for American interests. It stresses that even if it is desirable to conduct a discussion on this subject, the credibility of the military threat must be maintained in order for this discussion to remain relevant.

Notes

- 1 The Iran Project, *Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action against Iran*, 2012 (hereafter Iran Project report), http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/IranReport_091112_FINAL.pdf. The purpose of the Iran Project is made clear on the project's official website, which states that it is "dedicated to improving the relationship between the U.S. and Iranian governments." In other words, the goal of the project is not to stop Iran from military nuclearization. The goal of the Project, which underlies the report, is not mentioned in the report itself.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 21-22. In spite of their assessment, the report warns that "no monitoring and detection system is failure-proof." It fails to take into account the use of modern centrifuges that could allow Iran in the future to produce a bomb in less than a month after a decision is made by the regime.
- 3 Ibid., p. 24.
- 4 For example, see the AP report published in the United States, Britain, and Israel, which also stresses the cost of the broad attack model without noting that there are intermediate models: Associated Press, "U.S. Strikes on Iran Would Risk All-Out Middle East War: Experts," *CBS News*, September 13, 2012; Associated Press, "U.S. Strikes on Iran Would Risk Major War: Report," *The Daily Star*, September 13, 2012; Associated Press, "U.S. Strikes on Iran Could Lead to All-Out Mideast War, Experts Say," *Haaretz*, September 13, 2012. This is in the spirit of comments by Thomas Pickering, one of the authors of the report, at a panel discussion at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on February 12, 2013. See James F. Jeffrey and Thomas Pickering, "Year of Decision: U.S. Policy toward Iran in 2013," *PolicyWatch 2036*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/year-of-decision-u.s.-policy-toward-iran-in-2013>.
- 5 See the Introduction to the report.

- 6 The Iran Project, *Strategic Options for Iran: Balancing Pressure with Diplomacy*, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-project-strategic-options-iran-balancing-pressure-diplomacy/p30487>.
- 7 See, for example, John R. Bolton, "Don't Let Iran Benefit from EU Financial Crisis," *Bloomberg*, January 26, 2012; Fareed Zakaria, "To Deal with Iran's Nuclear Future, Go Back to 2008," *Washington Post*, January 26, 2012.
- 8 Iran Project report, p. 10. The report is not consistent in addressing the limited scenario. For example, on p. 23, a broader attack is described that is intended to achieve the same goal, delaying Iran's military nuclear plan by up to four years: "We believe that extended military strikes by the U.S. alone or in concert with Israel could delay Iran's ability to build a bomb by up to four years—if the military operation is carried out to near perfection, with all aircraft, missiles, and bombs working to maximum effect." On p. 24, the authors describe the attack again in a different manner: "We are assuming that the U.S. would deploy a full array of aircraft and conventional weapons against Iran, in standoff strikes that could last for several days or weeks, or longer."
- 9 In our assessment, in a successful operation the United States could set the Iranian military nuclear program back by up to four years, as the writers of the report suggest. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 10 In the assessment of the authors themselves, the Iranian response would be cautious and would seek to avoid an all-out conflict with the United States. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 12 In Kosovo, two NATO soldiers were killed as the result of the crash of an American Apache helicopter during training carried out in Albania, and during fighting by NATO in Libya, one British soldier was killed as a result of an accident connected to a logistical operation. BBC, "Two Die in Apache Crash," May 5, 1999; "UK Airman Dies in Italy Road Accident," *Time*, Associated Press, July 21, 2011.
- 13 Iran Project report, p. 24.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 35. This analysis, like similar analyses that reach the same conclusion, is based on the model of a broad and prolonged attack, such as the 1991 Gulf War. The relevance of these broad and prolonged crises is limited in a discussion of the surgical strike model and an operation lasting several days. See Bob McNally, "Unconventional Gas/LNP," Presentation of the Rapidan Group, March 2012.
- 15 Greg E. Sharenow, "Playing 'What If?' with Oil Prices and a Potential Strike on Iranian Nuclear Facilities," PIMCO, November 2011, <http://www.pimco.com/EN/Insights/Pages/Playing-What-If-with-Oil-Prices-and-a-Potential-Strike-on-Iranian-Nuclear-Facilities-.aspx>; Jay Maroo, "The Uncertain Impact of an SPR Release," *Energy Risk*, November 13, 2012, <http://www.risk.net/energy-risk/feature/2221778/the-uncertain-impact-of-an-spr-release>; Securing America's Future Energy, "Decision Point: A Well-Supplied Global

- Oil Market Will Make 2013 the Year to Deal with Iran," *Issue Brief*, March 13, 2013, http://secureenergy.org/sites/default/files/SAFE_Decision_Point_Iran_Issue_Brief_March_2013.pdf.
- 16 Matthew Kroenig and Robert McNally, "Iranian Nukes and Global Oil," *American Interest* 8, no. 4 (March/April 2013), <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1386>.
- 17 Iran Project report, pp. 40-41.
- 18 James Zogby, "Looking at Iran: How 20 Arab & Muslim Nations View Iran & Its Policies," March 2013, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iranpollfindingspresentation.pdf>.
- 19 Iran Project report, pp. 35-37.
- 20 For more information on Iran's missile capabilities, see Michael Elleman, "Everything You Wanted to Know About Iran's Air Force," *RCP*, March 12, 2013.
- 21 Iran Project report, pp. 38-39.
- 22 This example should not be understood as a recommendation for an initial Israeli attack, rather as an illustration of the utility of the surgical strike option, backed by international sanctions, as a means of delaying a military nuclear option over time.
- 23 Iran Project report, p. 41.
- 24 Eli Jacobs, "Considering the 'Rally Round the Flag Effect' in Iran," CSIS, January 20, 2012, <http://csis.org/blog/considering-rally-round-flag-effect-iran>.
- 25 Aaron David Miller, "Everyone Calm Down: Israel is Not Going to Bomb Iran. Well, At Least Not in 2012," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2012.
- 26 The report's authors claim that they will publish a paper on the subject in the future, without noting which options they are referring to. Iran Project report, *Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran*, p. 16. Up to the time of writing, the Iran Project had not published a paper examining the cost of the option of containment and accepting a nuclear Iran.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.
- 29 Ran Dagony, "Saudi Arabia vs. Iran: We'll Use the Oil Weapon because of the Nuclear Program," *Globes*, June 22, 2012.
- 30 Since the speech by President Obama at the AIPAC conference in March 2012, he has stated on a number of occasions that his policy toward Iran is prevention, not containment of a nuclear Iran.
- 31 Iran Project report, p. 35.
- 32 Charles S. Robb and Charles Wald, "The Price of Inaction: Analysis of Energy and Economic Effects of a Nuclear Iran," National Security Program, Bipartisan Policy Center, October 2012.
- 33 Kroenig and McNally, "Iranian Nukes and Global Oil."
- 34 See the report's prefatory remarks.