



Attacking Iran's Nuclear Program

The Complex Calculus of Preventive Action

Michael Eisenstadt



Iran's nuclear program is one of the foremost foreign policy challenges facing the Trump administration, and how it handles this slow-motion crisis will shape Middle East politics and America's global standing for years to come. Many Israelis believe that Iran's current weakness provides a unique opportunity to destroy, or at least set back, its nuclear program through a military strike. President Donald Trump, for his part, has declared that "Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon," and while he has made clear that he seeks a new nuclear deal and peaceful relations with Tehran, he might conceivably support an Israeli or even a joint Israeli-U.S. strike on Iran's nuclear program should a diplomatic solution prove unattainable.¹ Indeed, President Trump recently stated that "there's two ways of stopping [Iran and its nuclear program], with bombs or with a written piece of paper."²

The possibility of military action against Iran’s nuclear program raises a host of questions: What might such a strike accomplish and how should success be measured? Can a strike be fashioned to avoid escalation and a broader conflict? And what potential challenges, tensions, and contradictions inherent in a prevention strategy will policymakers need to consider in planning a strike, or designing a campaign to destroy or degrade Iran’s nuclear weapons program?

This paper will not assess how Israel or the United States might attack Iran’s nuclear program; attempting to do so is a fool’s errand. Israel—and the United States, should it participate in a strike—would likely use a broad range of capabilities for such an operation, including highly classified capabilities developed specifically for such a contingency. Just as Israel’s September 2024 pager/walkie-talkie attack on Hezbollah confounded all expectations of what a war with the Lebanese group would look like, an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure will likely involve no small number of surprises.

Nor does this paper advocate for or against the use of force; absent detailed knowledge of the full array of intelligence and military capabilities available to Israeli and U.S. policymakers, a proper net assessment of the pros and cons of prevention is not possible. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the various challenges that planners and policymakers will need to address in contemplating such a course of action.

Not a One-Off Event, but a Long Campaign

A preventive attack is unlikely to be a solitary event, but rather the opening round of a long campaign employing military strikes, covert action, as well as economic, informational, and other elements of national power. Such a campaign would build on covert efforts carried out over the past several decades, albeit at increased pace and intensity, and with a more prominent role for military action.

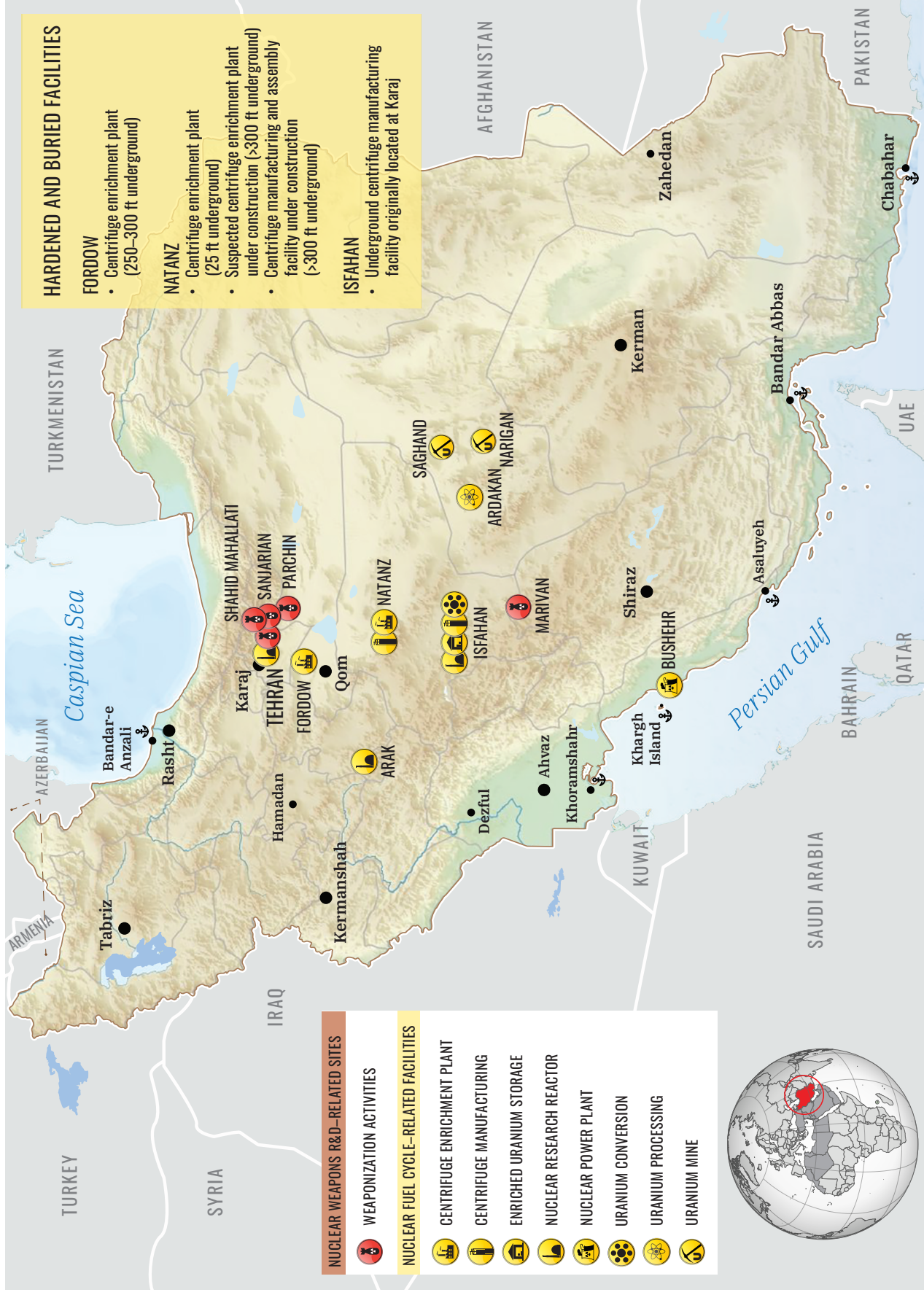
Moreover, the initial, preparatory phase of this campaign has effectively begun. Thus, Israel’s April 19, 2024, airstrike against Iran took out a radar associated with an S-300 surface-to-air missile battery that protects the nuclear facilities at Isfahan and Natanz.³ A subsequent airstrike on October 26 took out radars associated with five S-300 batteries—one near the Abadan oil refinery, and four around Tehran—which enabled further airstrikes on missile production facilities and the Taleghan 2 site at Parchin, where Iran is believed to be engaged in renewed nuclear weapons R&D work.⁴

A lengthy campaign would be required because key installations associated with Iran’s nuclear program are located at over a half-dozen sites (see figure 1). Some of these are hardened and buried, and it may not be possible to destroy them all; residual capability is therefore likely to survive an attack (see text box: “Can Bombing and Covert Action Get the Job Done?”). Moreover, Iran, as a matter of honor and interest, will almost certainly attempt to rebuild its nuclear program after an attack. For while the regime may not see nuclear weapons as essential to its survival (otherwise, it never would have agreed to temporarily cap the program as part of the 2015 nuclear deal), its nuclear program provides it with leverage over its enemies.⁵

Moreover, experience shows that once Iran commits to a particular policy, it is difficult to deflect it from its course—though it is possible to impose delays and cause it to temporarily back down. Iran has forgone hundreds of billions of dollars in income as a result of nuclear and other sanctions over the past forty years, and its nuclear weapons program embodies a hard power potential that it will not voluntarily relinquish.

Thus, in the aftermath of a strike, Iran will likely try to rebuild, perhaps hiding small clandestine centrifuge-enrichment and weaponization facilities in plain sight (e.g., in residential areas or civilian industrial parks), or more likely, in hardened, deeply buried facilities which it believes are beyond the reach of Israel or the United States. This is why follow-on covert action and military strikes to disrupt and delay efforts to rebuild may be necessary in the months and years following an initial attack.

Figure 1. Iran's Nuclear Infrastructure



Sources: International Atomic Energy Agency: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov-2015-68.pdf> and <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2011-65.pdf>; Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/weapon-program-background-report/table-iranian-nuclear-sites-related-facilities>; David Albright et al., *Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons* (Institute for Science and International Security), and other ISIS publications; Foundation for Defense of Democracies, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/10/08/possible-targets-in-iran-military-nuclear-and-regime-infrastructure/>.

Measuring Success

Just as Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu has sought “total victory” in Gaza, he will likely seek the total destruction of Iran’s nuclear program should he opt for military action. President Trump, having sought to end Iran’s nuclear program during his first term through a “maximum pressure” policy, will likely embrace this goal.⁶ Indeed, in reimposing maximum pressure at the outset of his second term, he stated that his intention was to “deny Iran all paths to a nuclear weapon” in order to “end its nuclear threat.”⁷

Yet experience during the 1991 Gulf War with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq shows how difficult it can be to destroy a large, dispersed, and hidden nuclear weapons program solely by military means. In that case, Iraq’s nuclear scientists retained the knowledge acquired in the years before the war, and much infrastructure survived the U.S.-led air campaign, potentially providing the means to jump-start future efforts to rebuild. The program was eventually destroyed by United Nations weapons inspectors who rooted out surviving infrastructure, and by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which overthrew the regime—putting an end to its nuclear aspirations.

By comparison, Israel’s apparently deep intelligence penetration of Iran’s nuclear program, its willingness to incur significant risk in the belief that an Iranian bomb poses an existential threat, and the potential for synergies between military and covert action suggest that a preventive strike on Iran could be much more successful than the U.S. counterproliferation strikes against Iraq in 1991. Such an effort, however, would be even more effective if the United States were to participate.

A preventive strike should therefore seek to:

- Set back Iran’s nuclear program to the greatest extent possible.
- Prevent a strike from morphing into a broader conflict.
- Facilitate follow-on efforts to prevent Iran from rebuilding its nuclear program.

The context of a strike will also affect how success is assessed. Should Israel preempt an attempted rapid breakout, it will need to act hastily, perhaps without laying the proper groundwork for action, while Iran will have almost certainly taken steps to enhance its own prospects. In this case, Israel’s bar for success will necessarily be lower. Conversely, if Israel were to launch a preventive strike on its own timeline to halt the slow-motion breakout in which Iran might now be engaged, the bar for success will be higher—as will the political price for a strike that falls short of its intended goals.

In the past, the often divergent strategic cultures of the United States and Israel have led to friction. Cautious Americans, smarting from costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, often say—in the words of Gen. David Petraeus—“Tell me how this ends.” Israelis, by contrast, accustomed to overcoming long odds, believe—according to David Ben-Gurion, the country’s first prime minister—that “in Israel, in order to be a realist, you need to believe in miracles.” Israelis are therefore much more comfortable taking risks and acting in the face of uncertainty. President Trump, for his part, likes to win big and may support, and perhaps even join, an Israeli strike that buys time and promises other short-term benefits. If, however, buying time is the objective, Washington and Jerusalem will need a plan to put the time gained to good use.

Buying Time

Israeli preventive strikes against the nuclear weapons programs of Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) imposed significant delays on both, and created conditions whereby unforeseeable subsequent events could intervene to preclude the production of nuclear weapons. These include the 1991 Gulf War, which sought to roll back Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and to dismantle, inter alia, its nuclear weapons program—and which led to the 2003 U.S. invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein. And they include the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011—which eventually led to the overthrow of the Assad regime in 2024.

Initially, the nuclear programs of Iraq and Syria each depended on solitary plutonium-production reactors—at al-Tuwaitha and al-Kibar, respectively. This was a critical vulnerability, as these programs could therefore be dispatched in a single strike. Replacing a destroyed plutonium-production reactor or developing alternative paths to the bomb using enrichment technology—as Iraq did—could take five to seven years at least. Iran, by contrast, has created a dispersed enrichment program based on gas centrifuges consisting of over a half-dozen principal sites, several of which host hardened, deeply buried facilities—with some of these possibly beyond the reach of existing conventional penetrator munitions.⁸ Because only a few hundred advanced gas centrifuges might be needed to build a small, clandestine enrichment plant, Tehran could reconstitute a significant enrichment capability within a year or two of a strike if it moved quickly—significantly longer if Iran moved more slowly to ensure that these efforts were not detected. Conversely, should sufficient quantities of centrifuges and enriched uranium survive a strike by chance, or because they had previously been diverted to clandestine hide sites, efforts to rebuild could take less time.

Likewise, Tehran could redesign its Arak research reactor, which was converted for peaceful uses under the 2015 nuclear deal, to produce plutonium. Or it could employ its nuclear power plant at Bushehr to produce weapons-grade plutonium by reprocessing low-enriched uranium reactor fuel at low burn-up (i.e., after having been in the reactor only briefly).⁹ Both are vulnerable targets that would be easily destroyed, although hitting the Bushehr reactor, an operating nuclear power plant, might result in a radioactive plume that could have regional humanitarian and environmental impacts.¹⁰ By contrast, the destruction of gas centrifuge enrichment facilities would likely have limited, localized health and environmental impacts due to the release of uranium hexafluoride gas, which is highly corrosive but only slightly radioactive. At any rate, much of the hazard would likely be contained because Iran's main gas centrifuge enrichment facilities are located deep underground.¹¹

Avoiding Escalation

Due in part to the trauma of fighting a long and bloody conventional war with Iraq (1980–88), the Islamic Republic has developed a distinctive *modus operandi* that relies on proxies, long-range standoff weapons (missiles and drones), and “gray zone” activities to advance its anti-status quo agenda while managing risk, avoiding escalation, and preventing a broader conflict.¹² It has likewise developed various repertoires to achieve these objectives, such as emphasizing reciprocity and proportionality when acting against its enemies in order to telegraph, through tit-for-tat actions, its desire to avoid escalation.¹³

Accordingly, a narrow attack that focuses mainly on Iran's nuclear infrastructure might prompt a calibrated, in-kind response against Israel's nuclear infrastructure, as well as military targets associated with Israel's nuclear arsenal. However, Iran's massively disproportionate responses in April and October 2024 to prior Israeli attacks marked a departure from this approach, and represented the fulfillment of longstanding threats to land “crushing” blows against its enemies.¹⁴ Thus, Tehran might feel a need to respond massively to a preventive strike, although recent setbacks inflicted by Israel on its proxy forces and missile production capability may limit its ability to do so. It could also respond by withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors.

A broad attack by Israel might target not only nuclear sites but also military assets that would be key to Tehran's ability to retaliate—such as missile and drone forces, naval forces, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force. Such an attack could, moreover, strike economic targets to constrain Tehran's ability to finance the rebuilding of its nuclear infrastructure, military forces, and regional proxy network. And Israel might indicate that it would hit leadership targets if Iran were to escalate further. (Israel's recent successes in targeting Hezbollah's senior leadership would make

such threats particularly credible.) U.S. participation, however, might be necessary to ensure the success of a broader strike due to the potential scope and complexity of such an operation.

In responding to a strike, Iran will want to deliver a blow so painful that Israel and the United States will never again consider attacking, though it will also seek to limit the potential for escalation, knowing the damage its enemies could inflict. Squaring this circle, however, may prove difficult. Most of Hezbollah's missile arsenal—created for just such a scenario—has been destroyed, while Iran has only a limited ability to replenish its own missile arsenal as a result of the October 2024 Israeli airstrike. Moreover, Israeli and coalition air and missile defenses greatly limit Iran's ability to harm Israel. An added complication for Iran—which has threatened to hit countries that assist with a preventive strike¹⁵—is that attacks on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates or attempts to close the Strait of Hormuz would likely further isolate it internationally. Closing the Strait would also cripple the Islamic Republic's already faltering economy, since nearly all its imports and oil exports pass through that waterway.

Iran, moreover, has many vulnerabilities that could be exploited if it were to escalate: in particular, much of its petrochemical infrastructure is located in the southwestern corner of the country, within range of Israeli aircraft. Its strategic air defenses located there were neutralized in Israel's October airstrike. And it is less likely to escalate dramatically if an Israeli strike is strongly backed by the United States, as Iran will almost certainly want to avoid taking on its two archenemies simultaneously. Tight coordination between the United States and Israel, then, is key to tempering Iran's response and containing the impact of a preventive strike.

Deterring or Disrupting Efforts to Rebuild

Tehran abandoned its crash nuclear weapons program and adopted a hedging strategy sometime

after 2003, in the wake of disclosures by an Iranian opposition group revealing its existence, and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq heightened fears that Iran would be next in America's crosshairs.¹⁶ Tehran subsequently concluded that the potential risks and costs of its crash program—diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, a military strike, and perhaps a regional nuclear proliferation cascade—were unacceptable.

In the more than two decades since, all evidence suggests that Iran's nuclear program has been thoroughly penetrated by foreign intelligence services—particularly Israel's.¹⁷ And due to Hezbollah's evisceration last September, as well as the neutralization of Tehran's strategic air defenses and the blows to its missile production capability inflicted by Israel's airstrike in October, Iran is now more vulnerable to attack than at any time in recent years. Likewise, its economy remains vulnerable, despite efforts to create a "resistance economy" impervious to foreign pressure, due to mismanagement that has led to acute gasoline, natural gas, and electricity shortages.¹⁸

Accordingly, Tehran's decision calculus regarding the rebuilding of its nuclear program after a strike will depend on whether it believes that:

- It can resume weapons R&D activities without getting caught.
- Israel or the United States will respond militarily if it does get caught.
- Future strikes could also focus on military, economic, and regime leadership targets.

An initial strike will need to be followed by further covert and military action as well as other measures to dissuade Iran from rebuilding or to disrupt such efforts. Accordingly, it should be carried out in such a way as to preserve future military freedom of action. Because nothing succeeds like success, a strike that inflicts significant damage on Iran's nuclear program, while avoiding significant escalation and harm to civilians, would make it easier to garner U.S. support for follow-on strikes. (Most of Iran's key nuclear facilities are tens of miles from the nearest major city, reducing the potential for civilian harm.)

Conversely, should an initial strike come up short, it could be harder to justify subsequent action.

The knowledge that Israel or the United States will likely detect and act to thwart renewed efforts to get the bomb might cause Iran to move more slowly and cautiously as it attempts to rebuild—providing time for diplomacy if it gets caught. Alternatively, it might attempt a headlong dash for the bomb before its enemies can act, increasing the odds of military action if detected. Warning Tehran that military, economic, and leadership targets could be hit if it attempts to rebuild might give it pause. In the end, which path the regime takes will depend in part on its assessment of the potential risks and costs of getting caught.

Superb Intelligence, Extraordinary Capabilities, Tactical Virtuosity

Timely and highly accurate intelligence will be essential if strikes are to do maximum damage to Tehran's fissile material stockpile and nuclear infrastructure, and to effectively target key personnel tied to the nuclear weapons program. Planners will need to answer a number of questions:

- Can they locate and destroy all Iran's stocks of enriched uranium and all its enrichment plants (including possible undeclared facilities)?
- Can they locate and target key personnel whose expertise will be crucial to the survival of the program?
- Can they locate and destroy stocks of fissile material and centrifuge components that may have been dispersed to hide sites before a strike, or that survived an initial strike?

Planners, moreover, will need to assess whether existing intelligence architectures for both collection and covert action are sufficiently robust and resilient to be sustained for years on end in the

face of persistent Iranian denial, deception, and counterintelligence efforts.

Israel or the United States will likely employ a range of capabilities developed specifically for this mission, although there is no silver bullet for this complex challenge. Beyond American bunker buster bombs, such as the 5,000-pound GBU-72 or the 30,000-pound GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator,¹⁹ Israel and the United States are also likely to employ the kind of innovative tailored capabilities used in covert attacks against Iran's nuclear program in recent years (see below). And they will need to deftly integrate overt military, covert intelligence, economic, informational, and other elements of national power in what could be an open-ended, multiyear campaign to degrade Iran's nuclear capabilities, influence its nuclear proliferation calculus, and shape its political and military responses.

Covert-Overt Synergies

Israel has long used covert action to disrupt efforts by enemies to develop strategic capabilities that could threaten its survival. Thus, it launched a campaign of targeted killings and sabotage to delay Iraq's nuclear program, but in 1981 it bombed the reactor being built at al-Tuwaitha to prevent the unit from going active.²⁰ Likewise, the "campaign between wars" that Israel has been waging since 2013 to prevent the transfer of advanced arms from Iran to Hezbollah via Syria has involved both covert and overt military components.²¹ While these efforts have succeeded in delaying Hezbollah's precision-force buildup, the group still acquired several hundred precision munitions, such as the Fateh-110 missile, before most were destroyed by Israel's air force in September 2024.²²

Covert action (cyberattacks, targeted killings, sabotage) likewise played a central role in decades-long Israeli efforts to disrupt and delay Iran's nuclear weapons program.²³ But in 2021, these efforts seem to have reached a point of diminishing returns—and

Can Bombing and Covert Action Get the Job Done?

Superb intelligence, precise munitions, and creative operational approaches may make it possible to inflict much greater damage on Iran's nuclear and associated military-industrial facilities—especially those reliant on foreign suppliers for critical equipment—than would have been possible just a few years ago.

Thus, former Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant claimed that Israel destroyed about 80 percent of Hezbollah's long-range missile array in an intense series of airstrikes on September 23, 2024, during their recent war—and that it could have destroyed more than 90 percent if it had struck earlier, before the missiles had been dispersed from their warehouses.²⁴ Likewise, Israel's October 26 strike on Iran's missile production facilities at Parchin targeted twelve “planetary mixers”—key pieces of equipment for producing solid-fuel rocket motors imported from China. This strike reduced Iran's missile production from two missiles per day to one per week—a more than 90 percent reduction. Israel believes that it will take Iran a year or more to restore this capability.²⁵ While such attrition rates are extraordinary by historical standards, similar results against Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium—currently around twenty bombs' worth—could leave sufficient fissile material for two or three bombs, enough to jump-start efforts to create a small nuclear arsenal.

Experience from previous conflicts, moreover, holds relevant lessons for future efforts to destroy Iran's nuclear program. After the 1991 Gulf War, IAEA inspectors visiting military-industrial facilities bombed by coalition aircraft observed that the performance of many machine tools—key to restoring Iraq's military-industrial infrastructure—had been “degraded by war damage, multiple movements [to prevent] further war damage and poor work conditions and maintenance.” However, they also noted that the performance of individual machines “can be improved through refurbishment and compensations for systematic errors.”²⁶

Likewise, a post-World War II study conducted by the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concerning the effect of Allied bombing on Germany's ball bearing industry noted that “it proved more difficult to put [ball bearing] plants out of operation than had been foreseen.” The report added that “even direct hits on vital processes did not put a plant out of operation” since “general purpose machinery” in one part of the factory was often “quickly adapted for use in another” to help restore production capacity, while “most of the stocks of raw materials and semifinished bearings were not harmed beyond salvage.” Similarly, in its study of attacks on the German oil industry, the survey noted that “plants that had been knocked out completely were brought back into production in relatively few weeks.” This “very rapid rate of recuperation” was “in part accomplished by cannibalizing equipment from badly bombed plants and from new plants under construction to keep other plants going and also in part resulted from taking manpower and materials from other industries of lesser importance.”²⁷

The survey's study of Germany's aviation industry likewise concluded that “machine tools and heavy manufacturing equipment of all kinds are very difficult to destroy or to damage beyond repair by bombing attacks. Buildings housing such equipment may be burned down and

destroyed but, after clearing away the wreckage, it has been found, more often than not, that heavy equipment, when buried under tons of debris[,] may be salvaged and put back into operation in a relatively short time and with comparatively little difficulty.”²⁸

That said, gas centrifuges are delicate pieces of equipment, and uranium hexafluoride can decompose when exposed to high temperatures or air (nearly 90 percent of Iran’s stockpile of enriched uranium is reportedly in the form of uranium hexafluoride).²⁹ So imaginative operational approaches that combine persistent covert action with intermittent military strikes to destroy surviving centrifuges and stocks of enriched uranium as well as critical equipment and key facilities could greatly hinder efforts to rebuild. Yet only Israeli and American planners intimately familiar with the means at their disposal can judge whether this is possible, and whether such an ambitious effort can be sustained for months or years on end, in the face of Iranian deception-and-denial activities, persistent efforts to rebuild, and a shifting geopolitical landscape. Due to the complex nature of this challenge, Israel and the United States will need to use all available levers of influence—including threats to hit military, economic, and leadership targets if Iran tries to rebuild—to persuade the Islamic Republic to continue hedging, and cease its efforts to get the bomb.³⁰

may have even become counterproductive. Israel appears to have ceased high-profile covert actions against Tehran’s nuclear program out of reluctance to use military force to backstop these efforts and deter or disrupt Iranian countermoves. Thus:

- After the killing of chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in November 2020, Iran boosted enrichment to 20 percent and subsequently started producing uranium metal, an essential step toward building a bomb.
- After a bomb blast cut electricity to the Natanz enrichment facility in April 2021, destroying or damaging thousands of centrifuges in the process, Iran boosted enrichment to 60 percent and replaced damaged centrifuges with more advanced models.
- After a drone attack on the Iran Centrifuge Technology Company (TESA) production plant in Karaj in June 2021, which reportedly caused significant damage, Iran refused to repair IAEA

monitoring cameras damaged in the operation, and moved its centrifuge production activities to more secure underground locations in Isfahan and Natanz.

While covert action has its limits, a willingness to use military force as a backstop may breathe new life into these efforts. Thus, a preventive strike might degrade Iran’s nuclear infrastructure to a point where Israel can lean more heavily on covert action—which is less disruptive geopolitically—to disrupt and delay attempts to rebuild until military action again becomes necessary. Policymakers will need to decide, however, whether “mowing the grass” using covert and overt means can contain Iran’s nuclear program for years to come, if need be. And they will need to compare the pros and cons of this approach with that of “keeping the hedger hedging” through diplomatic deals, economic inducements, and military threats,³¹ and to decide whether this will remain a viable approach if Iran can eventually break out at hardened, deeply buried facilities.

Timing

Iran's strategic air defenses, missile arsenal, and proxy network will need time to recover from the blows inflicted by Israel in April and October 2024. While Israel assesses that Iran's air defenses and missile production capabilities might recover in a year or two, rebuilding its proxy network could take much longer—creating a window of opportunity to strike.³² Moreover, Iran is progressively hardening and burying critical elements of its nuclear infrastructure, and the passage of time could make it more difficult to inflict significant damage on the program.

Political considerations will also come into play. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly shown that he is more risk averse than other key regime personalities when it comes to conventional and nuclear brinkmanship—even after green-lighting Iran's audacious April and October missile strikes on Israel—and he probably does not want to bequeath to his successor an active conflict with the United States. He will undoubtedly be pressured by IRGC hardliners to hit back hard in the event of a preventive strike, and one cannot know if he will yield to such pressure as he did in October,³³ apparently agreeing to strike Israel directly after at first suggesting Hezbollah would be responsible for avenging the killing of its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah.³⁴ (Tehran has thus far not responded to Israel's painful riposte to this strike, and with the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the regime may have reverted to its traditionally cautious approach, believing that the reimposition of America's maximum pressure policy heralds a period of maximum danger requiring Iran to act with prudence.³⁵)

Khamenei's successor, however, might see the acquisition of a nuclear weapon as a means of differentiating himself from his predecessor and consolidating his rule. As the United States and Israel may have to deal with an even more hardline leadership once Khamenei passes from the scene, it may be best to do so from a position of strength—which means striking sooner rather than later.

Shaping Activities

A preventive strike is more likely to succeed, and follow-on strikes are more likely to be possible, if the United States works beforehand to create an environment conducive to success—through nuclear talks, petro-diplomacy, consultations with Congress, and discussions with allies.

Nuclear Negotiations

President Trump has long expressed interest in a deal with Iran that addresses its nuclear program, its destabilizing regional activities, and other points of contention. If talks toward such an agreement ultimately falter due to Iran's intransigence, key segments of the international community might support an Israeli or U.S. strike on Iran's nuclear weapons program. Thus, pre- and post-strike diplomacy may be one of the most important factors contributing to the success of a strategy of prevention.

Petro-Diplomacy

While a preventive strike may not prompt Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz, the regime might try to limit oil exports through the waterway and encourage its Houthi allies to do the same in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. To deal with such an eventuality, the United States should encourage Saudi Arabia to increase oil production to create excess supply, while preparing to release oil from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, to compensate for possible shortfalls. An oil glut will also reduce Iran's oil income, limiting its ability to rebuild after a strike.

Consulting Congress

The threat of preventive action might be more credible and produce more diplomatic leverage if the president sought from Congress an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). This, however,

might preclude a surprise attack and spur a divisive war powers debate in the United States that could diminish the credibility of the threat. However, were Israel to act unilaterally and were Iran or its proxies to target U.S. interests in response, the United States would likely participate in follow-on strikes. At the very least, U.S. air and missile defenses would almost certainly be involved in helping Israel defend itself from a riposte by Iran, as they did in April and October last year. For Iran, then, even a unilateral Israeli strike entails the risk of U.S. involvement and further escalation—an outcome it will almost certainly want to avoid.

Informing Allies and Partners

The United States should discreetly consult with Middle East allies and partners, and quietly reinforce U.S. air and missile defenses in the region, to help prepare for the uncertain aftermath of an Israeli or U.S. strike. These steps could bolster nuclear diplomacy with Iran—though if done heedlessly, they could cause Tehran to disperse and hide its enriched uranium stocks, perhaps reducing the odds of a successful strike.

Bonus Points: Fomenting Regime Change?

Military defeat has often presaged political change in the modern Middle East. Thus, the Arab defeat in the 1948 war against the newborn state of Israel contributed to military coups in Syria (1949) and Egypt (1952). The defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War led to uprisings that shook the regime of Saddam Hussein, prompting it to respond with massive force. And the blows inflicted on Hezbollah in 2024 contributed to the overthrow of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. So it is possible that a military strike on Iran might spur widespread unrest or a popular uprising—especially if regime leadership targets are bombed. Given the uncertainty regarding such an outcome, however, the possibility that a

preventive strike might lead to regime change should be considered a potential bonus, but not something on which to base U.S. policy.

Wisely Using Time Gained

Hopefully, the threat of military action will lead to successful nuclear diplomacy that produces a deal to dismantle and place permanent limits on Iran's nuclear program. But should such an agreement prove unattainable and a preventive strike be deemed necessary, the most important question will be how best to use the time gained by a strike. Could a strike catalyze diplomacy to forge a better deal than was possible beforehand, or would a wounded, humiliated Iran refuse to negotiate? Could a strike shape Tehran's threat perceptions to induce greater caution, and reshape its proliferation calculus so that it reconciles itself to hedging at a much lower level than previously? And might Washington use the breathing space granted by a strike to create new regional political arrangements (in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq) and a more robust regional security architecture to contain Iran (by enhancing regional air and missile defenses, bolstering maritime security arrangements, and strengthening Israel-Saudi security cooperation)—while it works to ripen the internal contradictions that could eventually bring about the Islamic Republic's demise? Or might preventive action lead to a broader conflict with Tehran, prompt a domestic backlash in the United States while disquieting U.S. allies, and cause Iran to double down on efforts to get the bomb?

What Could Go Wrong?

Despite committing grievous errors that led to the attack of October 7, 2023, Israel's security establishment has since compiled an enviable record—the destruction of Hamas, the decapitation and evisceration of Hezbollah, and punishing strikes

against Iran—demonstrating tactical and operational virtuosity, even if Israeli strategy has often lacked coherence. Yet October 7 is a reminder that things could go very wrong:

- Faulty intelligence, flawed execution, or effective Iranian countermeasures could ensure that sufficient fissile material, centrifuges, and critical equipment survive a strike to permit the rapid reconstitution of Iran’s nuclear program. Additionally, an unsuccessful first strike could make it politically more difficult for Israel to conduct follow-on strikes.
- Because the preservation of freedom and the sanctity of human life are paramount values in Israel and the United States, both countries have expended great efforts to redeem captives. The capture of Israeli and perhaps U.S. military personnel during a preventive strike (whether due to hostile action or mechanical malfunctions), or the detention by Tehran of large numbers of Jewish Iranians or dual Iranian-American citizens, could lead to a new, difficult hostage crisis for the two countries.³⁶
- Iran could retaliate for a strike by intensifying efforts to assassinate Israeli, U.S., or other foreign officials, striking critical infrastructure in Israel and the Gulf states, conducting drone and missile strikes on American troops and bases in the region, and disrupting oil exports from the Gulf. While some of these efforts might be thwarted, others could result in further escalation, leading perhaps to a destructive “war of fires” involving sustained drone and missile attacks by Iran.³⁷
- Just as Israel’s preoccupation with judicial reform and domestic culture wars in the run-up to October 7 helped convince Hamas that the Jewish state was vulnerable to attack, Washington’s preoccupation with the Trump administration’s controversial efforts to shrink the federal workforce and reset its foreign alliances might help convince its adversaries that this is the time to attack across the Taiwan Strait, on the Korean Peninsula, or elsewhere.

If so, America’s ability to assist Israel in launching a strike, dealing with its aftermath, or conducting follow-on attacks could be greatly circumscribed.

Conclusions

If a negotiated deal to eliminate Iran’s nuclear weapons program proves elusive, policymakers will need to decide whether living with Iran as a nuclear-threshold state—with the ever-present threat of a nuclear breakout—is less risky than military action. For while the latter could, on the one hand, precipitate the very outcome it seeks to prevent, it might, on the other hand, facilitate the long-term containment of a diminished Iran.

Should Israel or the United States opt for preventive military action, success will depend on the ability to:

- Eliminate stocks of enriched uranium, destroy enrichment facilities, and target key personnel in order to prevent Iran from building a bomb.
- Inflict sufficient damage so that covert action might disrupt attempts to rebuild— although occasional follow-on strikes might still be necessary.
- Create a political environment conducive to follow-on strikes and covert action by maximizing damage, avoiding escalation, and minimizing harm to civilians.
- Preserve a united Israel-U.S. front, whether America participates in a strike or not, to deter Iran from escalating.
- Formulate a plan for using the time gained by preventive action to shape Iran’s proliferation calculus and dissuade it from rebuilding.
- Convince Tehran that even after a strike, its interests are better served by continued hedging rather than attempting a nuclear breakout.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges,

policymakers will need to manage the tensions and contradictions inherent in a strategy of prevention:

- While the threat of military action might bolster nuclear diplomacy, it could also spur Iran to disperse enriched uranium and centrifuge components to hide sites, hindering efforts to destroy them should prevention be deemed necessary.
- Although prevention might set back Tehran's nuclear program, it could also prompt the regime to finally abandon its hedging strategy and redouble efforts to get the bomb.
- A wounded, cornered Iran might fight back with less restraint. It could still do great damage to the Gulf Arab states' economies, even if this would be self-defeating—inviting retaliation in-kind and pushing the latter deeper into America's arms.
- Perhaps perceiving prevention as a prelude to regime change—a concern that quiet U.S.

assurances are unlikely to assuage—Iran might assume greater risk in retaliating and attempting to rebuild its nuclear program.

In light of Israel's recent military achievements vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies, opportunity may now outweigh risk when it comes to preventive action against Iran's nuclear program.³⁸ If prevention is to be a sustainable strategy, however, the cost-benefit calculus must continue to favor military and covert action in the months and years to come. Yet history shows that change is the only constant in human affairs, and that the fruits of military victories are often swept away by the social and political forces let loose by war. Much will depend, then, on whether the United States can help Israel translate its recent military achievements—as well as any gains achieved through preventive action—into a more stable, sustainable regional order, or whether such efforts will be thwarted, perhaps eventually heralding the nuclearization of the region and a new, more dangerous phase in one of its most volatile conflicts. ❖

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Sary Mumayiz for his research assistance and the following readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper: David Albright, Patrick Clawson, Michael Knights, Farzin Nadimi, Richard Nephew, Assaf Orion, Lt. Col. James Shepard (USAF), and Dana Stroul. He would also like to thank Jason Warshof for his masterful editing, Maria Radacsi for her graphic virtuosity, and both for their abundant patience.

Cover image: An F-35A Lightning II fighter jet during night-flying training (reverse image of a U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Jacob Wongwai). Israel has around forty F-35s—and has ordered a total of seventy-five. Its F-35s would likely play a central role in any attack on Iran's nuclear program.

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The Author



MICHAEL EISENSTADT is the Kahn Senior Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. His recent Institute publications include *If Iran Gets the Bomb: Weapons, Force Posture, Strategy* (2024) and *Iran's Nuclear Hedging Strategy: Shaping the Islamic Republic's Proliferation Calculus* (2022).



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