



# America Should Say No To War Against Iran: U.S. Has No Right To Kill At Will

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America's Secretary of State is a lot like a carpenter who only has a hammer. To him, every problem looks like a nail to be struck. Only the military is Secretary Kerry's hammer, with war Washington's universal panacea for any international problem.

When should a country loose the dogs of war? Throughout much of human history the policy simply was rule by the strong. If you had a larger horde, you killed and enslaved everyone around you. "Civilized" powers behaved no differently. Democratic Athens and Rome were no less willing than autocratic Sparta and Carthage and a plethora of "barbarian" powers to conquer and exploit whoever they desired. The rules of war were minimal: losers were at the victors' mercy, which usually was absent.

Thankfully humanity has evolved a bit, growing more restrained about when people believe they are warranted in killing one another. True barbarians still exist, of course. The slaughter in Syria, depredations of the Islamic State, horrors of the Congo imbroglio a decade ago, and multi-atrocity-making in the Balkans join Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran, North Korea's attack on the South in 1950, Moscow's swallowing of Eastern Europe, Axis aggressions of World War II, and so many more.

But America is different, so its illustrious leaders consistently insist. For instance, no longer does the U.S. attack or threaten other nations over matters of honor, such as insults to the flag (which once was enough to justify killing disrespectful foreigners). Washington doesn't kill to expand economic markets or protect corporate profits, at least officially. American policymakers don't send in the troops to grab territory and resources, though ensuring access to oil is considered a separate category. Washington, it is claimed, acts only in the interests of humanity in an attempt to serve and uplift people everywhere.

Well, maybe not.

It's painful to admit, but the U.S. is the globe's most warlike nation. Since the end of the Cold War no other state has attacked as many countries or threatened as many countries as has America. That aggressive policy continues to this day. Backing Saudi Arabia against Yemeni rebels. Bombing Islamic State forces. Threatening to attack Syria. Overthrowing the Libyan government. Launching sustained drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen. Years of nation-building in Afghanistan. Overthrowing Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

All this since 2001. It is an extraordinary record.

The most persistent threat to use force has been against Iran. Members of the War Lobby routinely assert that Tehran endangers the U.S. Yet Iranians likely believe differently. In 1953 Washington supported a coup against the democratic Iranian government. Through 1979 every American administration backed the repressive Shah as he jailed and tortured his people. In the 1980s the U.S. supported Iraq's war of aggression against Iran. Especially after the neocon takeover of the Republican Party there's been abundant talk of bombing Iran. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama ostentatiously kept "all options on the table."

Military threats continue to rain down on Tehran despite—or, perhaps more accurately, because of—the Obama administration's negotiations with Iran. For instance, the Obama administration insists that war remains possible if the proposed agreement falters. But at least the president appears to have no enthusiasm for war, in contrast to neocons who prefer war to the negotiated settlement.

Bush administration official John Bolton forthrightly advocates military action. Since Iran will not negotiate away its bomb, in his view the U.S. must attack: "Time is terribly short, but a strike can still succeed." SAIS's Joshua Muravchik recently argued that America should not only bomb, but bomb repeatedly. He acknowledged that a single attack might merely delay Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons. No worries, however, since "we can strike as often as necessary."

Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) wouldn't quite say the U.S. should bomb if an acceptable deal—meaning an Iranian surrender—was not reached. But he explained: "I'm saying that we have to be willing and we have to make the leadership of Iran realize that we are willing to take military action." Not that Americans should worry about costs. War with Tehran would be easy, just "several days of air and naval bombing," in Cotton's words. No boots on the ground. No big deal.

The belief that war would be quick, simple, and sure reflects either simple-minded naiveté or criminal arrogance. Virtually every action Washington has taken in the Middle East has resulted in unintended consequences, most costly and violent.

The Iraqi invasion proved to be the disastrous gift that keeps on giving—the rise of the Islamic State merely is the latest outgrowth of the Bush policy. Iran's increased influence in the region was perhaps the most predictable consequence. Intervening in Libya created chaos that is leaking

out throughout North Africa. Attacking the Islamic State has drawn America into another bloodily complicated sectarian conflict. Yet past interventionist failures appear not to have tempered hawkish enthusiasm for war in the slightest.

Bombing Iran likely would have even worse effects.

The conflict would be no cakewalk. In a detailed report Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Abdullah Toukan of the Strategic Analysis and Global Risk Assessment Center noted that the operation would “require a large force allocation” and “could push the presently volatile Middle East region into a war with far reaching global political, military, and economic consequences.” Former Gen. Anthony Zinni warned: “I think anybody that believes that it would be a clear strike and it would be over and there would be no reaction is foolish.” And that was before Russia announced its plan to complete its deal with Iran for S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, which would make any air campaign more dangerous.

Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta predicted that “we could possibly be the target of retaliation from Iran, striking our ships, striking our military bases.” Another former Pentagon chief, Robert Gates, warned of possible “catastrophic” consequences, including making “a nuclear-armed Iran inevitable.” Uncertainty alone would adversely affect energy markets, and successful Iranian military action in the Gulf would impose a high economic price not only on the U.S. and allies which joined in the military action, but the rest of the world.

Moreover, Iran would not likely crumble at the first explosion. Enthusiastic hawks underestimate the willingness of other peoples to stand firm on behalf of what they perceive to be important principles and interests. Iran has a much larger economy and population, plus greater legitimacy in the eyes of many of its people, than did Iraq. In 1999 tiny Serbia faced the most powerful military alliance in history and withstood 78 days of bombing before making a deal—even then refusing to accept a U.S. diktat.

Treating one of the most important Middle Eastern states as a permanent enemy also would rally the Iranian public around the regime, set back the cause of democracy, encourage Tehran to proceed with nuclear weapons, and create another Islamic grievance. Indeed, an attack on Iran could spark a violent reaction among Arabs as well as Muslims elsewhere in the world. Baghdad’s reaction might be particularly hostile, since Iraqis have much greater affinity with Iran than America. Even America’s Sunni allies which have privately urged war, such as Saudi Arabia, might find themselves under attack from their peoples.

Foreign policy should advance U.S. interests and prudence should govern U.S. strategy. Attacking Iran would violate both standards. But American actions also should be constrained by morality.

War can be justified in self-defense, but it is obvious even to members of the War Lobby that Iran poses no meaningful threat to America. For instance, Sen. Cotton noted that Tehran “can’t challenge us” and that “we have the capability, along with our Gulf allies, who have increased their military spending by over 50 percent, to largely protect them from any kind of retaliatory

air or naval strikes.” That is, Tehran can’t even do much harm to its neighbors, let alone America.

When asked if President Obama might use force, Sen. Cotton didn’t even bring up the improbable case of aggression. Rather, all he could think of was “If that Iranian naval fleet mined or otherwise blocked traffic through the Strait, I hope that we would take prompt action to reopen it and punish them appropriately, But that’s about as severe as it gets in international relations.” Of course, that isn’t likely except as retaliation for a U.S. attack. Moreover, given the large amount of military hardware amassed at great expense by the other Middle Eastern states, they should be able to deal with that contingency as well.

Thus, the case for war really comes down to preventing Iran from joining Israel as a nuclear power in the Middle East. For instance, the *Wall Street Journal* opposed Russian delivery of the S-300 missiles not because they would threaten anyone, but because they “would render Iran’s nuclear installations far more difficult and costly to attack should Tehran seek to build a bomb.” It is taken as axiomatic by the *Journal* and most policymakers that preventing Iran from going nuclear warrants war.

There are lots of good reasons to want Tehran to remain nuclear-free, but absent a suicidal impulse, which so far has been absent from Iran’s leaders (who battle for power and acquire wealth like political elites in most any other nation), there is no chance that Tehran would launch an attack on either America or Israel (which possesses upwards of 200 nukes). The latter has particular reason to feel uncomfortable with an Islamic bomb, but one already exists in unstable Pakistan. Senior Israeli policymakers in Mossad and other security and military agencies routinely dismiss claims of Iranian irrationality.

The region’s Muslim leaders also oppose an Iranian bomb and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey all conceivably could join Tehran in a nuclear race. An undesirable outcome, no doubt, but one hardly warranting America to initiate war against a state which has not attacked or even threatened to attack the U.S. Policy preferences and uncomfortable outcomes do not a *casus belli* make.

One of the oddest arguments for bombing Iran is that if America doesn’t bomb Iran now, possession of a nuclear weapon would allow Tehran to deter America in the future, preventing America from bombing Iran then. War thus goes from means to end. The U.S. has been anointed by the war god Mars to be his representative on earth, entitled to kill and destroy whoever or whatever lies in America’s path. Thus, the U.S. should kill and destroy to protect its ability to kill and destroy.

Is there a greater perversion of power than going to war to ensure that one can go to war?

Sen. Cotton, who served in Iraq, asserted: “I think that Americans—and this is not true just now, but over the years—are not fundamentally opposed to war. They’re fundamentally opposed to losing wars.” What about stupid, immoral wars?

War is not just another policy option. It delivers death and destruction. It wrecks societies. It creates harms which cannot be undone. It is the most serious action that government can take. It should be a last resort, reserved for the most important interests and most moral causes.

None of these are at stake in Iran. Americans demanding that Washington attack Iran demonstrate that Lord Acton's axiom, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely," applies even to the United States. The mere fact that America is able to wage war against every nation on the planet does not justify it doing so. Washington should take the military option off of the table when dealing with Iran.

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