

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Iran, Restraint, and Grand Strategy

Brendan R. Green

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As a realist, an advocate of American restraint, and a general ideological cuss, I think attacking Iran's nuclear facilities is a bad idea. But the best argument for restraint rests on different grounds than have been recently offered. The problem with an American attack is not that it would be an unnecessary and costly failure, from a military perspective. The problem is that it would probably "work." And if it worked, our leaders would falsely conclude that regional hegemony can produce results. It would further entrench America in its poor grand strategy.

This assessment is not simply the product of biased analysis. Five years ago, Austin Long and Whitney Raas showed that the Israeli's had a very good chance to destroy the key Iranian nuclear facilities *by themselves*. Long believes that though the problem has gotten somewhat worse with the passage of time, the mission is still doable. The upshot is that if a successful attack is a

sporting proposition for the much smaller Israeli air force, it will be a *fait accompli* for the powerful American air force.

Moreover, the analysis implies that the delay of the Iranian nuclear program wrought by a successful attack could be quite considerable, if not permanent. Any follow on program would have to be buried incredibly deep. This could prove very difficult given the depth to which American munitions can penetrate—especially when successive laser guided bombs are bootstrapped through the holes made by their predecessors—and the large facility size needed to effectively house centrifuges. For instance, the much touted hardened facility at Fordow—which Long believes the Israelis could still reach—holds only 3,000 centrifuges, compared to Natanz’s 50,000.

In addition, the Iranians would need to procure a robust Integrated Air Defense System (IADS) to prevent attacking forces from operating at their leisure. Such an effort would require considerable Iranian investment in its rag-tag and poorly trained air forces, including the purchase of high tech fighters and radars. Furthermore, to rebuild their program, the Iranians would need to regenerate it from their own technological base, which remains opaque—we know that Iran required help from A.Q. Khan to get its program going in the first place, and that route has been closed.

In sum, Tehran would have to reconstruct a program that took decades to build, from technology it could have serious trouble reproducing locally, in expansive facilities buried deep underground, while simultaneously making a major conventional effort to produce an IADS, all out of an economically struggling and generally impoverished resource base. A revived program could meet long delays, and might never become viable.

On the cost side, Iran’s major strategic threat—to impede the flow of Persian Gulf oil—is also hollow. As Ben Friedman has noted in this space and Caitlin Talmadge has analyzed at length, American naval capabilities are more than sufficient to hold the Straits of Hormuz open and to reduce Iranian harassment

to a minimum. Miranda Priebe and Josh Shiffrinson have further shown that another commonly mooted threat—an Iranian missile attack on Saudi oil facilities—lacks the capacity to seriously harm Saudi oil production. Though the market will probably react negatively for a short duration, a real threat to Gulf oil is beyond Iran’s meager means.

None of these are particularly good reasons to attack Iran’s program, mind you. And, to be sure, there are other potential costs: Iran can use its proxies to stir up trouble for Israel and can launch attacks on American military targets in the Gulf and in Afghanistan. The potential death of American servicemen and women and a possible sequence of escalating military attacks with Iran are not costs policymakers should take lightly. But they are the type of costs that American decision-makers have been willing to bear in the past two decades. An attack will probably produce a rally around the flag effect in both countries, a series of tit for tat military exchanges, a temporary spike in the price of oil, and a destroyed Iranian nuclear program. And when the dust clears, it is likely that the American national security class will regard this outcome as a delicious strategic meal at a tasty price.

The perception of success could reinforce America’s worst strategic tendencies. American statesmen will have strong incentives to increase the American military presence in the region in order to keep the Iranians from re-building their program. What is worse, Washington will have a new case study in the efficacy of American military power, one that appears to vindicate the broader policy of regional hegemony. Though speculative, evidence from the recent past supports the possibility of this sort of reaction.

The difference in the votes to authorize the use of force in the two Gulf Wars demonstrates that politicians drew one prominent conclusion from Desert Storm: do not be on the wrong side of a victorious military. More recently, the political reaction to the 2007 “surge” in Iraq is instructive. Though the surge failed to deliver on its promises—a stable and democratic Iraq—the subsequent

reduction in violence made it a political winner. In Afghanistan, we have “surged” twice and are pursuing a nation-building effort even more difficult than our failed efforts in Iraq—while admitting that the terrorist presence purportedly justifying our efforts is minimal.

The American national security establishment has learned lessons from our hegemonic adventures, but not the right ones. I think that a strike on Iran will succeed, if viewed in terms of the narrow costs and benefits common to the current debate. But I fear it will cause our leaders to further embrace America’s role as hegemonic manager of Middle Eastern politics, and a new role as counter-proliferators of last—perhaps even first—resort.

This will continue an American grand strategy that has been off the rails in Southwest Asia since the aftermath of the first Gulf War, when statesmen declined to return America to its position as an offshore balancer and instead pursued a policy of regional hegemony. This strategy has been disastrous, both because it has been extremely costly and because it has substituted American power for local political equilibria, encouraging free-riding on American security guarantees and irresponsible behavior from many regional actors. Rather than focus narrowly on the costs and benefits of a strike itself, the Iranian nuclear question is best viewed within the framework of American grand strategy in the region as a whole.

Though a difficult task given the present domestic consensus on foreign policy, I would argue the case against attacking Iran on grand strategic grounds: the Middle East is a hornet’s nest we would do well to stay out of. There are certainly non-trivial dangers to Middle Eastern proliferation: military pathologies inimical to deterrence, the difficulties of N-player deterrence, and the danger of small numbers of weapons, to name a few. But these dangers are a threat only to regional actors and not to the security of the U.S. homeland. U.S. security guarantees and a military presence in the Middle East are not

necessary to ensure the stability of the region. If the United States stops underwriting regional security and the worst case scenario of Iran going nuclear transpires, the associated problems will help put an end to regional free-riding by incentivizing states to provide their own security. As importantly, it will serve as a source of discipline on our own interventionist proclivities.

We can, and should, continue to vouch for the marker we laid down in 1991: there shalt be no conquering of oil. Regional actors can be assured that the American Navy will ensure their oil gets to market. And tacit support for some sort of order in Saudi Arabia is reasonable, if any such helpful measures exist. But otherwise, our friends in the region should quietly be told that Iran is their problem, and that they would be wise to pool their efforts in figuring out how to deal with it. And the American public should loudly be told that the very real dangers of proliferation are not dangers to us.