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Getting Tough with Iran

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One would think that America's volatile and still inconclusive intrusions into Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and, most recently, Libya would give American pundits and policy makers pause when discussing Iran. No such luck. Rather than appreciate the highly detrimental consequences unleashed by the aforementioned conflicts—some of them more harmful than others—[many](#) ^[3] [prominent](#) ^[4] [observers](#) ^[5] seem to evince only [mild unease](#) ^[6] when arguing for either attacking Iran or implementing confrontational policies that put the West on the path of attacking Iran. Such accepted wisdom is dangerous.

Iran is [militarily inferior](#) ^[7] compared to the United States and Israel. Iran [spends](#) ^[8] a piddling \$10 billion per year on its military, compared with [America's nearly \\$700 billion](#) ^[9]. Ironically, American hawks are now [invoking](#) ^[10] [Iranian](#) ^[11] [weakness](#) ^[12] as reason to deploy a U.S. naval

carrier to the Persian Gulf. Though understandably intended to signal that Washington will not be intimidated, the double-edged sword of this “get-tough” approach is that it increases the likelihood of a murky, Gulf of Tonkin-like [13] scenario that can legitimate a unilateral strike. Even a minor, isolated incident could spiral out of control. If such a scenario were to unfold, even the most precise [14] and targeted [15] attacks on Iran could unleash a dangerously unpredictable chain of events, potentially triggering another war in the Gulf and possibly a short-term economic crisis.

Meir Dagan, the former head of Mossad, Israel’s intelligence service, has said [16] that a strike on Iran would be “stupid,” with more downside than upside. (Dagan has also said [17] that Iran will not get a bomb until at least 2015.) Ephraim Halevy, another former Mossad chief, has said [16] an attack could impact, “Israel and the entire region for 100 years” and that Iran is “far from posing an existential threat to Israel.” Former secretary of defense Robert Gates reportedly warned [18] that bombing Iran could trigger “generations of jihadists” and spawn other unpalatable consequences. And former CIA officer Bruce Riedel has argued [19] that “Iran’s capability to retaliate for an Israeli strike against the U.S. is enormous.”

In this respect, Iran is not as weak as, say, Afghanistan or Iraq. Afghanistan suffered more than two decades of continuous warfare before a small number of U.S. personnel teamed up with the Northern Alliance to punish al-Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban in autumn 2001. In the run up to the spring 2003 invasion of Baghdad, a great deal of Iraqi infrastructure and human capital had been destroyed during Desert Storm (1990– 91) and further impoverished, bombed and rocketed after a decade of continuous sanctions and no-fly zones.

To give context to the differences, laying out how a widened scope of potential conflict could play out may be helpful. If attacked—again, *if attacked*—Iran would have the *casus belli* to retaliate, and although Iran’s military is woefully substandard, it does possess certain asymmetric advantages that deserve consideration. A great deal [20] has already been written about the Strait of Hormuz—the shipping gateway for one-fifth of the world’s oil. But Tehran could also use Shehab-1 [21], -2, and -3 missiles [22] to target U.S. personnel, camps and regional bases [23] in Afghanistan (Herat, Kandahar and Shindand), Kuwait (Ali Al Salem, Ahmed Al Jaber, Buehring, Spearhead, Patriot and Arifjan), Qatar (Al Udeid), the United Arab Emirates (Al Dhafra), Bahrain (Naval Support Activity, Al Manamah) and Oman (Thumrait). In addition, Iran exerts influence in the Levant through proxies like Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, all of which can attack—and have attacked—Israel.

Another incalculable risk of provoking and potentially attacking Iran is that even proponents of attacks readily concede that it would only retard Iran’s nuclear program and thus may encourage Tehran to pursue a nuclear deterrent in the future. In December, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta—who has cautioned against [24], but has not effectively ruled out, a unilateral strike—has said [25] an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities would “at best” delay the nuclear program by one or two years. Robert Gates also said [26], “a military attack will only buy us time and send the program deeper and more covert.”

Hopefully, this author is wrong and none of these events will unfold. After all, previous American-Iranian naval stand-offs [27] have led nowhere, and as my colleague Ben Friedman notes [7], “the risk of escalation is mostly Iran’s. By attacking U.S. ships, they would risk annihilation or a disarming first strike.” But it is absolutely wrong for anyone to suggest that opponents of attacking Iran neither recognize nor appreciate the threat its nuclear program would pose. And to

readily dismiss the potential ramifications of provocative, “get-tough” approaches exemplifies the senselessness that lead to America’s eight-year, multi-trillion-dollar [28] debacle in Iraq. Do the risks of provoking or attacking Iran today outweigh the costs of dealing with a nuclear Iran tomorrow? Readers can draw their own conclusions. Certainly, Iran could develop a nuclear deterrent some day in the future, but rattling the saber in order to stop it may prove a horrible idea.

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