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Heritage Set to Bomb Iran?

January 19, 2010 [Kevin Dean](#) [Leave a comment](#) [Go to comments](#)

Justin Logan at the Cato Institute [notes](#) that the Heritage Foundation seems “seems ready for war with Iran.” That is, Heritage [released a study](#) on Friday describing “An Israeli Preventive Attack on Iran’s Nuclear Sites: Implications for the U.S.”

The Heritage report says:

Iran’s repeated threats to annihilate the state of Israel while it develops the world’s most dangerous weapons have created an even more explosive situation. If diplomatic efforts to defuse the situation fail, Israel may see no other choice than to launch a preventive strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities [...]

The United States would almost certainly be drawn into an Israeli-Iranian conflict. The Obama Administration must start planning now to counter and minimize the destabilizing consequences of an expected Iranian backlash

To mitigate the threats posed by Iran to U.S. national security and to protect U.S. interests, the United States must:

Followed by the following items (among other actions) – note that these are what the United States should immediately do to prepare for a strike that might happen and which we should apparently not discourage:

- Recognize Israel’s right to take action in self-defense against Iran’s growing threat;
- Prepare for a violent Iranian response to an Israeli preventive strike, including preparations for a possible U.S. war with Iran;
- Deploy missile defenses to defend Israel and other U.S. allies from Iranian missile attacks
- Enhance deterrence against Iranian attacks by making it clear to Iran’s leadership that such attacks will make a bad situation worse for Iran

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The Heritage report reveals an astounding lack of understanding of the psychology of preparing for war – or, alternatively, its authors have such an understanding and would like to go to war with Iran. Here is the problem:

A policy of explicitly not discouraging an Israeli preventive strike, coupled with deploying “missile defenses to defend Israel and other U.S. allies from Iranian missile attacks” and holding “more frequent missile defense exercises with Israel and other allies” is problematic because from an Iranian perspective, it is likely to look a whole lot like preparation for war. Yes, Heritage uses “defense” and “defensive” when speaking of deploying missiles, but it is not always clear when a missile is deployed “defensively” from an opposition perspective.

If Iran sees Israel and the United States preparing for war, it has a greater incentive to quickly set about getting nuclear weapons, which it could then use as leverage to prevent a war it thinks it will lose – but of course that will have defeated the entire non-proliferation project of current U.S. policy toward Iran.

Additionally, of course, there are politics between the United States and Israel. A policy of keeping a neutral or encouraging stance toward an Israeli preventive strike and a subsequent war with Iran makes the possibility of exactly that scenario a whole lot more likely.

Preparing for war, in short, often leads to war. It is a security dilemma, in which bolstering one’s own security actual reduces it by provoking the opposition to build up his forces as well.

Iran should be prevented from obtaining nuclear weapons. But preparing for a war with them is unlikely to do the job. Instead, targeted “smart sanctions” on Iran’s leadership and a policy of discouraging violence between Israel and Iran (in either direction) is the best immediate approach.

[Think Progress’ Wonk Room](#) posted Sunday about a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran coming soon. The new NIE is likely to revise the 2007 NIE that suggested Iran was not pursuing nuclear weapons. A [Newsweek blog](#) writes:

The officials, who asked for anonymity to discuss sensitive information, say the revised report will bring U.S. intel agencies more in line with other countries’ spy agencies (such as Britain’s MI6, Germany’s BND, and Israel’s Mossad), which have maintained that Iran has been pursuing a nuclear weapon.

Yet two of the U.S. sources caution the new assessment will likely be “Talmudic” in its parsing. They say U.S. analysts now believe that Iran may well have resumed “research” on nuclear weapons—theoretical work on how to design and construct a bomb—but that Tehran is not engaged in “development”—actually trying to build a weapon. “The intelligence community is always reluctant to make a total retreat because it makes them look bad,” says the third American.

Matt Duss at the Wonk Room adds:

As MIT nonproliferation expert Jim Walsh has [pointed out](#), the decision to move forward with nuclear weaponization is a serious one for any government, fraught with numerous political implications. It’s not simply a matter of Ayatollah Khamenei waking up one morning and saying “I think I’ll build a nuke today.” Whether one terms them “Talmudic” or just “appropriately rigorous given the stakes,” these kinds of distinctions — research vs. development, design vs. build, nuclear weapon vs. weapons capability — will be really

important to the debate going forward.

Indeed, Heritage's premise, that Iran has been hard at work building nuclear weapons, remains in question, making the policies in their report that much more irresponsible.

[Matthew Yglesias](#) adds for us a timeline of recent attempts to guess about Iran's nuclear intentions, pointing out that unlike our knowledge of the Soviets' intentions during the Cold War to develop nuclear weapons as quickly as possible, we do not clearly know Iran's intentions, nor the internal politics in Iran over the decision to build nuclear weapons ("Iran" after all, by which we mean Iran's government, is not one person with a single set of intentions and political strategies):

Late 1991: In congressional reports and CIA assessments, the United States estimates that there is a 'high degree of certainty that the government of Iran has acquired all or virtually all of the components required for the construction of two to three nuclear weapons.' A February 1992 report by the U.S. House of Representatives suggests that these two or three nuclear weapons will be operational between February and April 1992." "**February 24, 1993:** CIA director James Woolsey says that Iran is still 8 to 10 years away from being able to produce its own nuclear weapon, but with assistance from abroad it could become a nuclear power earlier."

"**January 1995:** The director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, John Holum, testifies that Iran could have the bomb by 2003."

"**January 5, 1995:** U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry says that Iran may be less than five years from building an atomic bomb, although 'how soon...depends how they go about getting it.'"

"**April 29, 1996:** Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres says 'he believes that in four years, they [Iran] may reach nuclear weapons.'"

"**October 21, 1998:** General Anthony Zinni, head of U.S. Central Command, says Iran could have the capacity to deliver nuclear weapons within five years. 'If I were a betting man,' he said, 'I would say they are on track within five years, they would have the capability.'"

"**January 17, 2000:** A new CIA assessment on Iran's nuclear capabilities says that the CIA cannot rule out the possibility that Iran may possess nuclear weapons. The assessment is based on the CIA's admission that it cannot monitor Iran's nuclear activities with any precision and hence cannot exclude the prospect that Iran may have nuclear weapons.

We should not, of course, assume that Iran has no intentions of developing nuclear weapons. The current U.S. administration, like the last, operates on an assumption that Iran wants nuclear capabilities, if not weapons themselves. That is prudent. Preparing for an impending war started by our ally over the possibility of Iran's near-future nuclear capabilities? That is rash.

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