



Attacking Iran's Nuclear Facilities Would Likely Radicalize the Islamic Republic's Government and Politics

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As the international community pressures the government of Iran to forego the possibility of developing nuclear weapons, the United States and Israel are both considering air strikes to cripple Iran's nuclear infrastructure if a negotiated solution fails. All participants in the current debate recognize that there would be repercussions in Iranian domestic politics – but discussion has been conceptually hobbled by a narrow focus only on a popular “rally round the flag” effect. Iranian popular reactions would matter, of course, but in authoritarian regimes like Iran, the most important political fault lines are not between the regime and the masses but within the political elite itself. United elites can always crush popular rebellions, as the Iranian elite did in 2009. Furthermore, the course of the regime will be set by shifting balances within the elite.

The analysis I have done with my colleague Jacques Hymans suggests conservative elites in the Islamic Republic and their domestic political supporters would be galvanized and empowered by foreign military strikes against Iran's nuclear program. Supporters of military strikes hope that, after the brief rally around the flag effect in Iranian domestic politics, a more salutary democratic transition might occur. But on the contrary, the probable result would be a renewal of Islamic revolutionary radicalism – very harmful to the long-term interests of the United States and regional stability.

Understanding Iranian Elite Politics

The foremost proponent of a U.S. preventive attack on Iran, Matthew Kroenig, has argued that “even if a strike would strengthen Iran's hard-liners, the United States must not prioritize the outcomes of Iran's domestic political tussles over its vital national security interests in preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.” Although of course U.S. interests must come first, Kroenig's view is dangerously shortsighted and ignores Iran's recent history as a revolutionary regime. It was, after all, the 1979 Iranian Revolution that gave rise to the current U.S.-Iranian rivalry and shaped the domestic political elite with which the world must now cope.

Since 1997, the central Iranian political conflict has unfolded between reformist elites who want to lead the country into a post-revolutionary period and reactionary elites who want Iran to forever remain a revolutionary state. An attack by the United States – the “Great Satan” – would be a game changer for Iranian politics. It would reignite the revolutionary fervor of the clerical elite and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, doom the reform movement, and make Iran's leadership far less willing to risk any domestic political evolution.

In the aftermath of a U.S. strike on Iran, the Islamic Republic's senior leadership would face critical decisions – about international retaliations, reconstituting the nuclear program, and repressing internal opponents. Iran's leaders are widely expected to react to military strikes by pursuing all three options, but analysts disagree about the scope, intensity, and effectiveness of Iran's responses. Unfortunately, the history of the Iran-Iraq War of the early 1980s suggests that a revived and galvanized revolutionary leadership in Tehran would be quite willing to risk external strategic disaster in order to further consolidate internal power.

With unwarranted optimism, advocates of airstrikes view Iran's conservatives as a monolithic group, securely in control, and capable of carefully calibrating responses to airstrikes. Citing the lack of retaliation after earlier Israeli strikes against the nascent nuclear programs of Iraq and Syria, they suggest that Iran may similarly forego or minimize retaliation. But such analogies between contemporary Iran and other authoritarian Middle Eastern states are simplistic.

At the time they were struck from abroad, the Iraqi and Syrian nuclear programs were relatively marginal parts of their nations' military capabilities and remained secret. Further, Saddam Hussein personally dominated a relatively united Iraqi regime, as did Basher al-Assad in Syria. Both of these dictators had sharply curtailed the autonomy of their militaries and security forces to reduce the possibility of internal challenges to

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their own personal rule. In contrast, Iran's nuclear program is no secret; rather it is a fully politicized source of popular prestige and legitimacy for the regime. Moreover, the Iranian regime is riven with elite rivalries and not dominated by a single dictator. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard enjoys enormous institutional autonomy and could take provocative international retaliatory steps with the blessing of certain factions of the regime.

Overall, an attack on Iran would instantly boost the Revolutionary Guard and push Iranian politics and society toward militarization. The current Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, is now 74 and cannot live forever. An attack would guarantee that any future succession struggles would take place in a highly militarized environment, increasing the Revolutionary Guard's ability to play kingmaker. Constitutional changes might also happen, because Khamenei has previously hinted at abolishing the presidency. Although risky, such a move would eliminate one perennial source of elite political divisions of the kind that have given moderates a beachhead. Executive power could become more concentrated and radicalized in Iran, and a renewed revolutionary consensus could reinforce the power of hard-liners.

Military Actions are Not Always the Best Option

In short, the United States and the international community must recognize that the domestic political reverberations of military strikes against Iran would probably not play out in ways analogous to what happened after earlier strikes in Iraq and Syria. In Iran, military strikes could increase the determination of an emboldened revolutionary regime to suppress opposition at home and strike out abroad.

In a recent speech at West Point, President Barack Obama argued that "U.S. military action cannot be the only, or even primary, component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail." In the case of Iran, this philosophy is wise. Whether or not the Obama administration is able to resolve the Iranian nuclear conundrum, policymakers contemplating preventive war should be under no illusion that the consequences of an attack on Iran would be minimal or positive. Instead, an attack would likely spur a renewal for years to come of revolutionary politics with all of its terrible excesses.

Read more in Matthew Gratias and Jacques E. C. Hymans, "Iran and the Nuclear Threshold: Where is the Line?" *Nonproliferation Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13-38.