

Regional and Global Consequences of U.S. Military Action in Iran

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Paul R. Pillar
Georgetown University

No one can accurately predict the exact consequences of any U.S. military strike or offensive against Iran. But there are good grounds for assessing the risks of any such action. Based on what we know about Iran, the Middle East, and perceptions of the United States in that region and around the world, the risks of major damage to U.S. interests from such action are substantial, and the probability that such damage would occur is high. Any contemplation of military action must fully weigh all of these risks, not just a postulated risk of what Iran conceivably might do in the absence of U.S. military action.

Iranian Responses

I will leave to other witnesses the issue of what physical impact a U.S. military strike could have on the Iranian nuclear program. As for the impact on Iranian decision-making on nuclear matters, a U.S. attack likely would make acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability appear all the more attractive and necessary to Iranian leaders, and would motivate them to work even more assiduously to acquire such a capability sooner rather than later. Current views within the Iranian regime about nuclear weapons probably are not uniform, and many decisions—which still could go in different directions—have yet to be taken in Tehran before Iran came to possess a nuclear weapon. A likely principal reason for any Iranian interest in nuclear weapons, however, is as a deterrent against external threats, which in Iranian eyes includes primarily the United States. A U.S. military attack would be, for Iranians, the most dramatic possible demonstration of the need for such a deterrent.

An instructive lesson is Iraq's response to the Israeli airstrike in 1981 that destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak. Far from giving up its nuclear activities, Saddam Hussein's regime redoubled them, as well as switching from a plutonium-based to a uranium-based program for producing fissile material. The world saw after Operation Desert Storm how much progress Iraq had made in developing a nuclear weapon in the ensuing decade. Iranian leaders, seeing the difficulties that western powers have had in fully discerning the Iraqi nuclear efforts as well as their own program, would have good reason for believing that they could continue such a program clandestinely.

Some discussion in the United States of possible military action against the Iranian nuclear program describes such action as an airstrike rather than the initiation of a

war. In gauging likely Iranian responses, however, what matters is not American labeling but instead Iranian perceptions. Iranians would consider any action aimed at crippling Iranian nuclear capabilities as an act of war—just as Americans considered the Japanese action aimed at crippling U.S. naval capabilities in the Pacific in 1941 as an act of war and not just an “airstrike.” As an act of war, Tehran could be expected to respond appropriately, in ways of its own choosing, and at times and places of its own choosing.

In selecting their responses, Iranian leaders would be acutely aware of Iran’s military inferiority to the United States, even while taking into account geographic advantages it may have in the Persian Gulf region. The most likely Iranian responses would be unconventional actions that often come under the heading of “asymmetric warfare.” Iraq would be an especially attractive theater for responding. Since Saddam’s overthrow, Iran has assiduously sought to expand its influence throughout Iraq by cultivating relations with, and providing material support to, a variety of Iraqi groups. So far, Iran has not exploited its position in Iraq to make maximum trouble for the United States; despite Iran’s heavy involvement in Iraq, it is hard to attribute any one act of violence to Iranian instigation or direction. Following a U.S. military attack on Iran, Tehran would have far less reason to exercise restraint. Even though Iran does not have an interest in escalating and unending disorder in Iraq, if already attacked it would have much more reason to use the position it has built in Iraq to make life more miserable for U.S. forces than it is now.

The other principal form of asymmetric Iranian response would be international terrorism, including possibly attacks within the U.S. homeland as well as against U.S. targets overseas. Iran retains a formidable terrorist capability, including its own state agents and clients such as Lebanese Hizballah. In recent years it has held that capability mostly in reserve; the last terrorist attack against Americans in which an Iranian hand has been clearly established was the bombing of the military barracks at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996. A U.S. military strike against Iran would be just the sort of contingency for which this reserve capability has been retained. The Khobar episode—in which it took years for investigators to establish the Iranian connection, and for which Iran escaped any forceful retaliation—would encourage Iranian decision-makers to believe that they could use terrorism to punish the United States without their hand being apparent. They might even support or instigate attacks by Sunni jihadists, despite the ideological divide that separates them from the Iranian regime and despite the region-wide intensification of sectarian sentiment that the civil war in Iraq has fostered. Confrontation with the United States has been the principal stimulus for whatever dealings Tehran has had with the jihadists; an open U.S.-Iranian military clash would make this stimulus even stronger.

Other Effects in Iran

Any U.S. military strike would be a political boon to Iranian hardliners such as President Ahmadinejad, whose political strength rests in large part on a message of threat from, and confrontation with, the United States. The confirmation of that message that an attack would provide, in addition to a more general rally-around-the-flag effect, would distract attention from the hardliners’ poor economic performance and reduce the chance of favorable political change in Tehran. A U.S. attack also would make it substantially more difficult for Iranian leaders of any political stripe to do anything that could be

interpreted as a concession, or a positive gesture, toward the United States. This would be little different from how politics would work here in the United States if Iran attacked us, which would make it extremely difficult for any American political leader to do or say anything that could be interpreted as a favorable gesture toward Iran.

An attack also could be expected to affect long-term attitudes of almost all Iranians. An instructive example is how the events in Iran of 1953, in which a U.S.-instigated coup removed the populist prime minister Mossadegh, still rankle many Iranians more than half a century later. This resentment persists regardless of how any Iranians feel about Mossadegh himself, or how much they understand the issues that were in play in 1953. A military attack, being an open and violent act of hostility that would be even more salient than a clandestinely supported coup, would have even greater potential for creating this kind of long-term resentment. It would become, for generations to come, the first thing many Iranians think of when thinking of the United States. As such, it would help to poison relations between Tehran and Washington for generations, even if there were substantial change from the current distribution of power inside Iran.

Iran's oil resources and role in the oil market must be considered in any assessment of the risks of military operations against Iran. Iran's dependence on oil revenues and the global nature of the oil market would make it difficult for Tehran to try to use oil as a political weapon in direct retaliation against the United States. The greater risk involves possible disruptions in export of oil from the Persian Gulf as a byproduct of a U.S.-Iranian military clash, especially a clash that escalates beyond the initial U.S. attack because of Iranian military responses against U.S. forces in the Gulf or the more general reasons that many wars escalate well beyond initial intentions. If military operations interrupted Iran's own exports of oil, Tehran would feel less restrained in taking advantage of its geographic position next to the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz to disrupt, at least temporarily, the exports of Arab oil producers. There thus is substantial risk—against the backdrop of the recent demand-driven surge in oil prices—for an even greater additional surge driven by disruption of supplies. Even without direct physical disruption of oil exports, the market's anxiety about possible consequences of U.S.-Iranian combat probably would cause at least a short-term spike in prices.

Middle Eastern Perspectives

Most governments in the Middle East would oppose U.S. military action against Iran, in both their public rhetoric and their privately expressed sentiments. For the oil producers on the south side of the Persian Gulf, concern about disruption of their own oil exports would be only part of the reason. Even though the Gulf Arabs have their own causes for concern about their more populous and more powerful neighbor Iran, they have sought to manage the associated security challenges through means other than military force or the threat of it. Saudi Arabia has used rapprochement with Tehran as its principal tool for dealing with its Iran-related concerns over the last couple of decades. Saudi Arabia's foot-dragging in cooperating with the investigation into the Khobar Towers bombing probably was motivated in part by a desire to keep its relationship with Tehran on an even keel and not give the United States a reason to attack Iran.

The Gulf Arabs' security concerns are not focused on the distant possibility of a nuclear weapon in the hands of Iran, which already is militarily superior to them on a

conventional level anyway. The Sunni rulers of the Gulf states worry more about possible restiveness among their own Shia minorities (a majority in Bahrain) and how a clash with predominantly Shia Iran might stir up these populations. The Gulf states also have to worry about how their conspicuous ties with the United States (especially the highly visible military presence in Qatar and Bahrain) would work to their disadvantage in the event of another intensely unpopular U.S. military operation in the region.

Intensely unpopular it would be, not only in the Persian Gulf region but throughout the Middle East. On this and several other counts, the best basis for estimating the broader consequences of a U.S. attack on Iran is to look at the consequences of the U.S. attack on Iraq. That operation too was deeply disliked through most of the region, even before the Iraqi insurgency developed and the occupation grew sour. The motives of the United States were, and still are, mistrusted. Most Middle Easterners do not believe that the operation was about democracy (which the United States has supported at best inconsistently in the region) or weapons of mass destruction (which were not found) or terrorism (which the war in Iraq has increased, not decreased). Instead, they tend to view the U.S. operation as anti-Muslim. This perspective toward the Iraq war increases the likelihood that most people in the region would view an attack on Iran in similar terms. They would interpret it not primarily in terms of Arabs versus Persians, or Sunni versus Shia, much less in the U.S.-preferred terms of moderates versus extremists. They would view it as one more assault by the United States—the leader of the Judeo-Christian West—against Muslims.

Governments in the Middle East would have to shape their policies against the backdrop of this popular sentiment and the more specific security concerns mentioned above. Although it is impossible to project specific decisions and thus specific consequences for U.S. interests, it is likely that visible cooperation with the United States would become politically costlier or riskier than before, and that the net U.S. influence in the region would thus be less than before. Specific, admittedly immeasurable, forms this might take would be greater reluctance to cooperate on counterterrorism or to provide military access rights.

Global Repercussions

Looking again at some of the broad political and diplomatic effects of the Iraq war provides clues regarding likely global consequences of an attack on Iran. Despite any differences between the two military operations (especially if an attack on Iran did not include sustained ground operations), the new attack would be widely viewed—as much of the world has viewed the operation in Iraq—as an unprovoked and unjustified exertion of raw power by the world's only superpower. Given the experience with alleged weapons programs in Iraq, there would be broad skepticism about American claims concerning dangers from Iran's nuclear program. Given U.S. tolerance of nuclear weapons in the hands of itself and its allies, many would see the U.S. action as a blow not against proliferation of weapons but against a Muslim country with a regime that Washington does not happen to like.

European allies would be no more inclined than now to work in close cooperation with the United States on matters related to Iran. They might become less inclined to do so, given how unilateral U.S. military action would disrupt and probably destroy the diplomatic process on which the Europeans had worked for so long. Russia and China,

which have economic and other reasons not to forfeit relations with Tehran, would very likely become less inclined to cooperate even to the modest degree that they have to date and that has made possible two United Nations Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran over the nuclear issue.

Beyond the allies and the major powers, and especially in the broader Muslim world, the dominant consequence would be an increase in anti-Americanism. Numerous opinion polls over the past five years have documented a substantial increase in antipathy toward the United States. The Iraq war, as the dominant U.S. action during this period, clearly has much to do with this trend in sentiment. Another U.S. military offensive in the Middle East would strengthen and extend this unfortunate trend.

The further consequences of increased anti-Americanism would be twofold. First, as in the Middle East, many governments would find it politically more difficult to cooperate with Washington, especially in publicly visible ways. In some instances other motivations would be sufficient to sustain cooperation despite this political cost, but in others the United States would find it more difficult to get what it wants from foreign partners.

The other follow-on consequence, and potentially the more costly one, would be an increase in extremist sentiment and support for anti-U.S. terrorism, including terrorism having no connection whatever to the Iranian regime. The boost that the Iraq war has given to Islamist terrorism is only partly because the disorder and insurgency in Iraq have made it a training ground and operating base for international terrorism. It also is because outside Iraq, the war has become a propaganda point and recruiting poster for al-Qa'ida and other extremist groups. A U.S. attack on Iran would have the latter effects, even without an occupation and insurgency.

One might ask whether the U.S. standing in much of the Muslim world already has sunk so low that a new military action would not make an appreciable difference. Even small increments in anti-Americanism, however, can have major effects, particularly with regard to boosting extremism and terrorism. Consider, for example, how an attack on Iran might play in Pakistan, Iran's currently volatile neighbor to the east and like it, a large non-Arab Muslim country. Even if the new attack were to add only one percentage point to existing anti-American sentiment, in a country of 165 million that would represent more than a million and a half people. Suppose that of those, only a tenth were sufficiently angry to become favorably inclined toward extremist groups. Suppose further that of those favorably inclined toward extremist groups only a tenth would actually work on the groups' behalf, and that of those willing to work on their behalf only a tenth would become terrorists themselves. All of these suppositions may be conservative, but they still would yield about 1,600 new terrorists, with easy access to a terrorist career via al-Qa'ida and other elements ensconced in the frontier areas of northwest Pakistan.

All of this is speculative and hypothetical, of course. But in weighing the risks of an action as drastic as a military attack on another state, we cannot afford to limit ourselves only to what is readily measurable. Some of the consequences of such an action would be no less serious and no less detrimental to U.S. interests even if they can only be inferred and not forecast with certainty and precision. Any hoped-for benefits of such action cannot be forecast with certainty and precision either.

