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09/30/06 INN World Report - Runtime 17 Minutes

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The End of the “Summer of Diplomacy”

Sam Gardiner, Colonel, USAF (Ret.) The Century Foundation, 9/19/2006

Targeting the Nuclear Program? Or the Regime?

Air-target planners orchestrate strikes on the basis of desired target destruction criteria. In the case of an attack on Iran, after five nights of bombing, we can be relatively certain of target destruction. It is even possible to project the degree to which parts of the Iranian nuclear program would be set back. For example, using Web pictures of the Natanz enrichment facility, it is possible to see three years worth of construction. An attack on that construction might appear to set the program back three years. But it is hard to judge. David Kay, the former top U.S. weapons inspector, observed during our discussions that there is the program we see, but there is also the program we do not see. Because of the gaps in U.S. intelligence on Iran, and specifically on Iran’s nuclear program, American military leaders are growing increasingly uneasy about the reliability and comprehensiveness of target selection.¹² In other words, after the five-night military attack we would not be able with any degree of certainty to say how we had impacted the Iranian nuclear program.

If this uncertainty does not appear to worry the proponents of air strikes in Iran it is in no small part because the real U.S. policy objective is not merely to eliminate the nuclear program, but to overthrow the regime. It is hard to believe, after the misguided talk prior to Iraq of how American troops would be greeted with flowers and welcomed as liberators, but those inside and close to the administration who are arguing for an air strike against Iran actually sound as if they believe the regime in Tehran can be eliminated by air attacks.

In this case, the concept is not a ground force Thunder Run into Tehran of the sort used in Baghdad. It is a decapitation-based concept. Kill the leadership and enable the people of Iran to take over their government. More reasonable leadership will emerge.

Under this concept, the air operation would take longer than the five nights. The targets would be expanded. The Revolutionary Guard units would be attacked since according to the argument they are the primary force that keeps the current regime in power. There are other regime protection units in Tehran. Most important, the U.S. operation would move into targeted killing, seeking to eliminate the leadership of Iran.

It sounds simple. Air planners always tell a good story. By the same token, they almost always fall short of their promises, even in strictly military terms. That was true in World War II. It was true in Korea. It was true in Vietnam. It has just proved true with the Israeli attacks on Hezbollah. No serious expert on Iran believes the argument about enabling a regime change. On the contrary, whereas the presumed goal is to weaken or disable the leadership and then replace it with others who would improve relations between Iran and the United States, it is far more likely that such strikes would strengthen the clerical leadership and turn the United States into Iran’s permanent enemy.

Iran's Response

Having demonstrated that air strikes are unlikely either to eliminate the nuclear program or to bring about the overthrow of the Islamic regime in Iran, we must now turn to what, precisely, they would achieve. It is important to remember that some of Iran's threats, demonstrations of new weapons, and military exercises are designed to have a deterrent effect. As such we should not deduce too much about what Iran would do in the event of an attack on the basis of what it might say and do in advance of an attack. A former CIA Middle East Station Chief told me once that predicting the consequences of a strategic event in the Middle East was as difficult as predicting how an Alexander Calder mobile would come to rest after you flicked one of its hanging pieces.

It is possible, however, to identify some high probability immediate consequences.

The Iranians would likely look to target Israel as a response to a U.S. strike, using Hezbollah as the primary vehicle for retaliation. For Tehran, there is the added benefit that blaming Israel (even for a U.S. strike) would play well at home, and probably throughout the region.

Moqtada al-Sadr has said publicly that if the United States were to attack Iran, he would target U.S. forces in Iraq.

Iran could channel more individuals and weapons into Iraq. Specifically, Iran could upgrade technology among Shiite militias, with weapons like the laser-guided anti-tank missiles Hezbollah had in Lebanon. We might even see more direct operations like missile attacks against U.S. forces.

Moqtada al-Sadr controls the large Facilities Protection Service forces in Iraq. Some estimates put this force as large as 140,000. Among other missions, they guard the oil pipelines. If Iran wants to cut the flow of oil, Iraq is the best place to begin, and the means are in place to take on the mission. The impact of severing Iraq's oil supplies would be an immediate increase in its own oil revenue.

Iran is not going to wipe Israel from the map or force the United States to leave Iraq with these operations. But in causing these various complications, Iran can still achieve a degree of success. As we recently witnessed in the clash between Hezbollah and Israel, Iran can seem stronger just by virtue of making the United States and Israel seem weaker.

Round Two

Once the nature of the Iranian retaliation becomes apparent, the United States will not likely declare success and walk away from the problem. Clearly, the pressure will be to expand the targets and punish Iran even more. The government of Iran is fragile, the thinking goes; it could even be on the verge of falling; it is time to "enable" the Iranian people. The Iranians will react with their own horizontal escalation. (See Table 2.)

Iran has been sending mixed signals about whether or not it would cut its own oil production or attempt to restrict the flow of oil from the Gulf. A strike of five nights might not push them to cut the flow of oil. But continued operations probably would. Iran does have some flexibility to do without oil revenues for a period because of surpluses from currently high oil prices. In addition, it has plans for rationing refined petroleum products that it must import.

Executing the oil option might not be limited to operations against tankers moving in and out of the Gulf. Iran has the capability, and we have seen some indications of the intent, to attack facilities of other oil providers in the region.

It would be tougher for Iran and Hezbollah to attack UN forces in Lebanon. If the UN forces were to become too aggressive in response to Hezbollah attacks against Israel, they would most likely become targets. In addition, at some point in the expanding conflict, Iran might see a value to making the war about attempts at Western domination of the region and not just about the United States and Israel. In that case, a focused attack on something like the Italian headquarters would resonate in the region.

It took a while for the nations of the region to react to the Israeli attack into Lebanon. That most likely would be the case in the event of a U.S. strike against Iran. As attacks continued and as the television coverage intensified, however, we could see something similar to the reactions to the Danish cartoons. We could see the “Arab Street” asserting itself.

Syria and Iran signed a defense agreement on June 15. Under this agreement Syrian forces would be brought into a fight if Iran were attacked. Syrian President Bashar Assad might be a reluctant participant, but as the conflict expands, he might not have a choice.

The Iranians could conduct targeted killing outside the region. They have used this tactic in the past: in 1991, Shapour Bakhtiar, the Shah’s last prime minister, was decapitated in his apartment in Paris.

Continued air strikes and demonstrations could have a compounding effect. Weak governments in the Muslim world could be threatened. The governments of Pakistan, Jordan, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia are vulnerable.

	Table 2. Consequences of an Attack	
	Type of Operation	
	Short Strike	Regime Change
Hezbollah attacks on Israel	High probability	High probability
Attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq	High probability	High probability
Sabotage pipelines in Iraq	High probability	High probability
Street demonstrations on a wide scale	Possible	High probability
Hezbollah attacks outside the region	Possible	High probability
Iran stopping its own oil exports	Possible	High probability
Iran blocking Gulf oil flow	High probability	High probability
Iran attacking other regional oil facilities	Possible	Possible
Iran suicide attacks	Not likely	Possible
Syria involved	Not likely	Possible
Threats to regional governments	Not likely	Possible

As an obvious consequence of the instability resulting from a U.S. strike, the price of oil almost certainly will spike. The impact

will depend on how high and how long. The longer the conflict goes, the higher the price. A former Kuwaiti oil minister privately suggested a plateau of \$125 per barrel. Confidential analysis by a major European bank suggests it would level off at \$130, and a very conservative estimate would be over \$200.

With prices surging to this level, third order consequences become apparent. The most obvious would be a global, synchronized recession, intensified by the existing U.S. trade and fiscal imbalances. Another political consequence would be that oil exporting countries outside the region would enjoy significant surges in revenue from higher prices. As a result, countries such as Venezuela and Russia would enjoy expanded influence while the West would be reeling from recession.

I should note that in the preceding discussion of the cycle of action and reaction, I have not mentioned large U.S. ground unit formations. That is because I do not believe we will come to a point where that option will make sense to policymakers. This is the one lesson the administration seems to have learned from Iraq—occupation does not work. And that realization brings us back to why the air strike option has been so attractive to the administration from the beginning.

Excerpted from The End of the “Summer of Diplomacy”: Assessing U.S. Military Options on Iran, a new report for The Century Foundation by Retired Air Force Colonel Sam Gardiner. Download the full report as a PDF [here](#). Read the press release [here](#).

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