

THE END OF THE “SUMMER OF DIPLOMACY”:
ASSESSING U.S. MILITARY OPTIONS ON IRAN

SAM GARDINER, COLONEL, USAF (RET.)

A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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The doctrine of preemption remains sound and must remain an integral part of our national security strategy. We do not rule out the use of force before the enemy strikes.

—Stephen Hadley
March 16, 2006

INTRODUCTION

The summer of diplomacy began with a dramatic announcement: on May 31, 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that if the Ahmadinejad government agreed to halt Iran’s nuclear enrichment program, the United States would talk directly with Tehran. Secretary Rice crafted the statement working alone at home. She called President Bush and received his approval. The Bush administration announced it as a significant initiative; it appeared to reflect a major change in policy.

This shift was not uncontroversial within the administration; Vice President Dick Cheney had opposed the announcement. But the rationale that prevailed seems to have been that if the United States were going to confront Iran, the diplomacy box had to be checked. The secretary of state was given the summer to try it.

Well, the summer is over. Diplomacy was given a chance, and it now seems that the diplomatic activity of the past several months was just a pretext for the military option.

Unfortunately, the military option does not make sense. When I discuss the possibility of an American military strike on Iran with my European friends, they invariably point out that an armed confrontation does not make sense—that it would be unlikely to yield any of the results that American policymakers *do* want, and that it would be highly likely to yield results that they *do not*. I tell them they cannot understand U.S. policy if they insist on passing options through that filter. The “making sense” filter was not applied over the past four

years for Iraq, and it is unlikely to be applied in evaluating whether to attack Iran.

In order to understand the position of those within the U.S. government who will make the final decision to execute a military option against Iran, you must first consider the seven key truths that they believe:

- Iran is developing weapons of mass destruction—that is most likely true.
- Iran is ignoring the international community—true.
- Iran supports Hezbollah and terrorism—true.
- Iran is increasingly inserting itself in Iraq and beginning to be involved in Afghanistan—true.
- The people of Iran want a regime change—most likely an exaggeration.
- Sanctions are not going to work—most likely true.
- You cannot negotiate with these people—not proven.

If you understand these seven points as truth, you can see why the administration is very close to being left with only the military option. Administration officials say that they want to give diplomacy a chance. But when they say that, we need to remind ourselves that they do not mean a negotiated settlement. They mean that Iran must do what we want as a result of our nonmilitary leverage: suspend enrichment, and we will talk. But enrichment appears to continue, and there are no direct discussions between the two main parties. Satisfied that nonmilitary leverage is not going to work, those who believe the seven “truths” argue that the only viable option remaining is a military one. The story, however, is more complicated.

This report draws on my long experience of running military war games to examine some of the complications of the current situation: the various pressures and rationales for an attack on Iran; the probable direct and indirect consequences of air strikes; the significant gap between what proponents of the military option *want* to achieve and what in fact such attacks *will* achieve; and the likelihood that policymakers will ignore those gaps and proceed to war despite them.

TIMING AND UNCERTAINTY

Waiting makes it harder. The history of warfare is dominated by attackers who concluded that it was better to attack early than to wait. One source of the momentum in Washington for a strike on Iran's nuclear program is the strategic observation that if such an attack is in fact inevitable, then it is better done sooner than later.

I conducted a war game for the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine two years ago. On a chart prepared for a mock meeting of the National Security Council, I identified thirteen nuclear-related targets in Iran.¹ I still do this kind of gaming. My most recent chart reflects twenty-four potential nuclear-related facilities. In the past few years we have seen Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment facility buried under more than fifteen meters of reinforced concrete and soil. There is evidence that similar hardening is taking place at other facilities, and there is some evidence of facilities being placed inside populated areas.² The longer the United States waits, the harder the targets—and the harder the targeting.

Another major issue that affects timing is the conspicuous absence of reliable intelligence about Iran. A report by the House Intelligence Committee found that we have serious gaps in our knowledge of the Iranian nuclear program. Paradoxically, those gaps in intelligence produce not caution, but further pressure to attack. U.S. intelligence agencies do not know the locations of all of Iran's facilities; they are not certain how far Iran has gone with enrichment. They know that Iran's nuclear program bears a striking resemblance to the Pakistani program, but they do not know whether Iran has acquired technology that might put it ahead of current estimates.

Some U.S. officials say that Iran is ten years from a weapon. The Pentagon, we are told, is operating under the assumption that Iran could have a weapon in five years. Some Israeli estimates say that Iran could have a weapon in three years. John Negroponte, the U.S. director of national intelligence, recently said that Iran could not develop a nuclear weapon until some time in the next decade. But the next day, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said he did not trust estimates of the Iranian program.

The very ambiguity of the intelligence picture has become another argument for military options, because even if U.S. policymakers could agree on a firm policy red line, there would be no way of determining if and when Iran crossed that line. Vice President Cheney's espoused calculation for dealing with global threats is that if there is even a 1 percent chance of a country passing WMD to a terrorist, the United States must act.³ Because there is a 1 percent chance Iran could pass WMD to a terrorist, the Bush administration finds itself obliged to reject nonmilitary options.

REGIONAL PRESSURES

Adding to the political momentum toward war with Iran is significant pressure from the Israeli security establishment. Israel says that it has a plan for attacking Iranian nuclear facilities. Israel recently appointed an airman to be in charge of the Iranian theater of operations. It was announced that this major general would coordinate Israeli planning for Iran.⁴ Israeli military planners have U.S. penetrating weapons and a replica of the Natanz facility. They say that the attack would resemble the kind of operation they used against Egypt in 1967. They say that the plan involves more than just air strikes from the "Hammers" of the Israeli Air Force's 69 Squadron. It would include Shaldag commando teams, possibly some version of sea-launched missiles, and even explosive-carrying dogs that would penetrate the underground facilities.⁵

Israel probably could hit most of the known nuclear targets. But such an attack would leave Iran with significant retaliatory options. That is a serious problem. U.S. forces and interests in the region would be likely targets of Iranian retaliation, so even an independent Israeli military operation would have critical consequences for the United States.

Part of the problem is that the two countries' red lines for Iran are not the same. Israel's red line is enrichment. The U.S. red line used to be the development of an Iranian nuclear weapon. But over the past six months, America's red line has drifted closer to Israel's. On March 21, the president said that the United States could not allow Iran to have the knowledge to make a weapon. He repeated the phrase in August.

By redrawing the red line in this manner, U.S. policymakers are creating pressure to go to war with Iran. In saying that Iran could not be permitted to have the knowledge to develop nuclear weapons, the president used almost the exact words the Israeli Foreign Minister had used a year earlier. More recently, a senior State Department official said that Iran was near "the point of no return" on its nuclear program.⁶ Again, this was an exact echo of the words of Israeli officials. The Israeli pressure has worked.

MARKETING THE MILITARY OPTION

I often hear from those who were strongly supportive of the Iraq invasion that the targeting of the Iranian facilities would be simple. If you understand the elements of the nuclear process, all you have to do is go after a small number of targets. The argument continues that Iran's nuclear facilities could be devastated on a single night, in a single strike, by a small number of U.S. B-2 bombers.⁷ The apparent ease of the operation is another element of this pressure to go now: If the Iranian nuclear program can be stopped in one night by a simple strike, why should the United States wait?

But the elimination of Iran's nuclear capability, while it might be the stated aim for the United States, is only part of the objective. While the Iranian regime's weapons program is a genuine source of concern, American policymakers are also troubled by Iran's interference in Iraq. Despite U.S. warnings, the Revolutionary Guard continues to supply weapons, money, and training to insurgents inside Iraq. Some proponents of attacking Iran feel that Tehran should be punished for supporting militias and extremists in Iraq.

In addition to Iran's role as an aspiring nuclear rogue and a supporter of the insurgency in Iraq, the country has been repeatedly portrayed as a key adversary in the war on terrorism. The United States has put Iran into a separate and new terrorism category, dubbing it the "Central Banker of Terrorism." The new National Security Strategy says, "Any government that chooses to be an ally of terror, such as Syria or Iran, has chosen to be an enemy of freedom, justice, and peace. The world must hold those regimes to account." "Unnamed intelligence officials," citing evidence from satellite coverage and electronic eavesdropping, have told the press that Iran is hosting al Qaeda, granting senior operatives freedom to communicate and plan terrorist operations.

Indeed, the case against the regime is so forceful, and so multifaceted, that it becomes clear that the goal is not simply to do away with the regime's enrichment program. The goal is to do away with the regime itself.

And on top of all of those pressures—pressure from Israel, pressure from those worried about a nuclear Iran, Iran in Iraq, and Iran in the war on terrorism—is another, decisive piece of the puzzle: President George W. Bush. The argument takes several forms: the president is said to see himself as being like Winston Churchill, and to believe that the world will only appreciate him after he leaves office; he talks about the Middle East in messianic terms; he is said to have told those close to him that he has got to attack Iran because even if a Republican succeeds him in the White House, he will not have the same freedom of action that Bush enjoys. Most recently, someone high in the administration told a reporter that the president believes that he is the only one who can “do the right thing” with respect to Iran. One thing is clear: a major source of the pressure for a military strike emanates from the very man who will ultimately make the decision over whether to authorize such a strike—the president. And these various accounts of his motivations and rationales have in common that the president will not allow does-not-make-sense arguments to stand in the way of a good idea.

BELOW THE CNN LINE

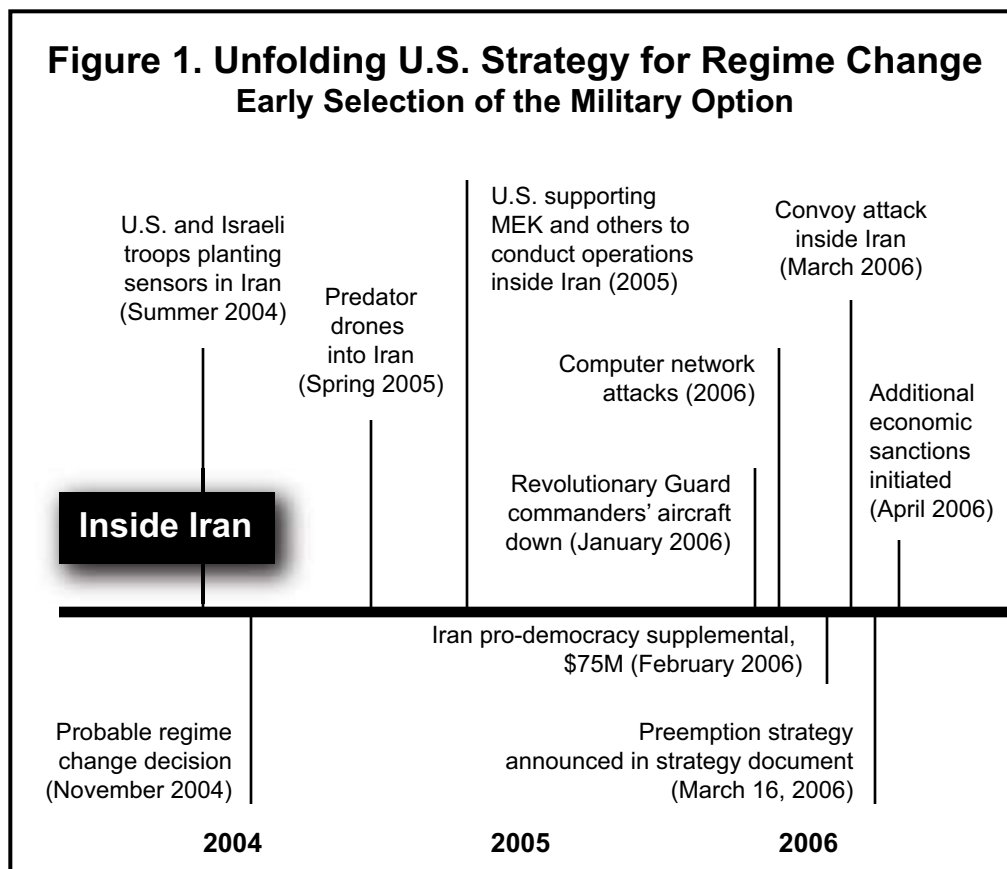
Stay below the “CNN line.” That was the guidance given to the Air Component Commander, General Mike Mosley, as the secret air strikes began against Iraq in operation SOUTHERN FOCUS. It was July 2002. This classified bombing campaign would involve strikes on almost 400 targets. It was initiated just after the president visited Europe where he announced numerous times, “I have no war plans on my desk.”

There was no UN resolution. The congressional authorization was not to come for four months. But the United States was starting the war.

All of the pressures described above are pushing for war with Iran, and increasingly, a public case for such a war is being made. But behind the scenes, military operations are already under way. (See Figure 1.) Most likely, the same guidance has been given to military commanders. The pattern is repeating.

When U.S. commandos began entering Iran—probably in the summer of 2004—their mission appears to have been limited. The objective was to find and characterize the Iranian nuclear program. From press reports, we know that the task force doing these operations was implanting sensors to detect radioactivity. Intelligence for these early operations inside Iran was coming from information provided by A. Q. Khan, the Pakistani dealer in black market nuclear material. The incursions were focused in the northeast, where the Iranian nuclear facilities are concentrated. The base of these incursions was most likely Camp War Horse in Iraq.

Israel also was conducting operations inside Iran in late 2003 or early 2004. The Israeli commandos reportedly were operating from a base in Iraq. These commandos also were implanting sensors. I would expect the U.S. and Israeli operations to have been coordinated. At about this time the United States began operating remotely piloted vehicles inside Iran over nuclear facilities. (Although this was certainly an embarrassment to the Iranians, they mentioned the flights numerous times in their press.⁸)



In 2005, the balance within the U.S. government shifted in favor of those who were pushing for regime change in Iran. This was to result in the eventual creation of the Iran/Syria Operations Group inside the State Department, a request to Congress for \$75 million, and the creation of a robust “democracy promotion” program. Meanwhile the United States moved from intelligence collection inside Iran, to establishing contact with ethnic minorities, to being involved in—and most likely conducting—direct action missions. Reports suggest that the United States is supporting militant groups in the Baluchistan region of Iran. There have been killings and kidnappings in this region. Iran Revolutionary Guard convoys have been attacked. In a *New Yorker* article, Seymour Hersh confirmed that this region was one of the areas where U.S. forces were operating. The Iranian press also has accused the United States of operating there. In addition, press reports suggest that the United States may be sponsoring former members of the Iraq-based MEK (Mojahedin-e Khalq) in Baluchistan.

I recently attended a Middle East security conference in Berlin. At dinner one night, I sat next to the Iranian ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali-Asghar Soltanieh. I told him I had read that the Iranians were accusing the United States of supporting elements in Baluchistan. I asked him how they knew that. Without any hesitation, Soltanieh told me that they have captured militants who confessed that they were working with the Americans.⁹

The United States is also directly involved in supporting groups inside the Kurdish area of Iran. According to both western and Iranian press reports, the Iranian Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) has been allowed to operate from Iraq into Iran and has killed Revolutionary Guard soldiers. The Iranians have also accused the United States of being involved in shooting down two of their aircraft, an old C-130 and a Falcon jet, carrying Revolutionary Guard leaders.

NEXT STEPS: ABOVE THE CNN LINE

How do we get from being below the CNN line to the next step? The path is fairly clear. The United Nations Security Council will fall short of imposing serious sanctions on Iran. The United States, then, will look for a coalition

of the willing to implement smart sanctions, focused on the Iranian leadership.

But the sanctions will be designed less to ensure compliance from the Iranians than to generate domestic and international support for the American position. I do not know an Iranian specialist I trust who believes that the sanctions would cause the Iranians to abandon their nuclear program, any more than did the sanctions on India and Pakistan after their nuclear tests in 1998. The sanctions will be used to raise the collective conscience that Iran is a threat, and to convince the world that the United States has tried diplomatic solutions.

If the experience of 1979 and other sanctions scenarios is a guide, sanctions will actually empower the conservative leadership in Iran.¹⁰ There is an irony here. It is a pattern that seems to be playing out in the selection of the military option. From diplomacy to sanctions, the administration is not making good-faith efforts to avert a war so much as going through the motions, eliminating other possible strategies of engagement, until the only option left on the table is the military one.

When imposing the sanctions fails to alter Tehran's position, policymakers will revert to a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. One can imagine the words of a planner in the meeting: "If we are going to do this, let's make certain we get everything they have." I have done some rough "targeting" of nuclear facilities for which I can find satellite photos on the Web. By my calculation, an attack of relatively high certainty on nuclear targets would require 400 aim points.¹¹ (An aim point is the specific location where an individual weapon is directed. Most targets would have multiple aim points.) I estimate seventy-five of these aim points would require penetrating weapons. (See Table 1, page 12.)

But it is unlikely that a U.S. military planner would want to stop there. Iran probably has two chemical weapons production plants. He would want to hit those. He would want to hit Iran's medium-range ballistic missiles that have just recently been moved closer to Iraq. There are fourteen airfields with sheltered aircraft. Although the Iranian Air Force is not much of a threat, some of these airfields are less than fifteen minutes flying time from Baghdad. Military planners would want to eliminate that potential threat. The Pentagon would want to hit the assets that could be used to threaten Gulf shipping. That would mean targeting cruise missile sites, Iranian diesel submarines, and Iranian naval assets.

Table 1. Targets in Iran	
Initial Strikes	Follow-on Strikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear facilities • Military air bases • Air defense command and control • Terrorist training camps • Chemical facilities • Medium-range ballistic missiles • 23rd Commando Division • Gulf-threatening assets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Submarines ◦ Anti-ship missiles ◦ Naval ships ◦ Small boats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revolutionary Guard bases • Command and governance assets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Intelligence ◦ Military command ◦ Radio and television ◦ Communications • Security forces in Tehran • Leadership: targeted killing

After going through the analysis, I believe that the United States can and will conduct the operation by itself. There may be low-visibility support from Israel and the U.K., and France may be consulted. But it will be an American operation.

What about casualties? Although the United States would suffer casualties in the Iranian *retaliation*, the honest answer to the president if he asks about losses during the strike itself is that there probably will not be any. The only aircraft penetrating deep into Iranian airspace will be the B-2s at night. B-52s will stand off, firing cruise missiles. Other missile attacks will come from Navy ships firing at a safe distance.

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, page 16.)

- 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.

WHEN IS THE STRIKE?

When does it all come together? When could the United States pull the trigger on the military option? The most important point in understanding the window for an attack is that the military preparations will not be the determining factor. This operation will not resemble the six months of preparations for Operation Desert Shield in 1990. The preparations will be much less visible than the movements to the region in early 2003. We will not read about discussions with Turkey for basing permission. It will not be a major CNN event.

Instead, preparations will involve the quiet deployment of Air Force tankers to staging bases. We will see additional Navy assets moved to the region. The more significant indications will come from strategic influence efforts to establish domestic political support. The round of presidential speeches on terrorism is a beginning, but I expect more. An emerging theme for the final marketing push seems to be that Iran threatens Israel's existence. We can expect the number of administration references to Iran to significantly increase, and will see three themes—the nuclear program, terrorism, and the threat to Israel's existence.

The issue of congressional approval plays into the timing question. Administration officials have been asked numerous times if the president would require authorization by Congress for a strike on Iran. Secretary Rice responded to that question before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in October 2005 by saying, "I will not say anything that constrains his authority as command-in-chief." Congressmen Peter DeFazio and Maurice Hinchey offered an amendment to the Defense Appropriations Bill in June that would have required the president to get authorization from Congress before taking military action against Iran. The amendment failed.

Over the past few months, we have seen numerous leaks and administration documents that raise an Iran–al Qaeda connection. In addition, the House Permanent Select Committee report on the threat of Iran implied an al Qaeda connection. This linkage of Iran and al Qaeda fits neatly into the broader effort to sell a strike to the American people. But more importantly, it opens the way for an argument that a strike on Iran was part of the global war on terrorism already authorized by Congress.

In other words, approval by Congress does not necessarily have to be part of the calculation of when an attack could take place.¹³ If the determining factor of timing is neither the preparation of military forces nor congressional approval, one question remains: How much public support do decisionmakers believe they need before pulling the trigger?¹⁴ And that question brings us back to the beginning of the summer of diplomacy. Vice President Cheney had to be convinced that it was necessary to give some lip service to diplomacy, checking that box in order to secure public support. President Bush seems to be convinced of the rightness of his cause and vision. He repeats often that he does not care about public opinion

The window for a strike on Iran stands open.

FINALLY

Policymakers who begin with the seven “truths” of the situation can easily proceed down a path that leaves the military option as the only one on the table. There is a certain inevitability to this path, a certain inexorability to the momentum toward war. The policymakers will say that the Iranians have forced us to go in this direction. But the painful irony is that these policymakers are forcing the direction on themselves.

At the end of the path that the administration seems to have chosen, will the issues with Iran be resolved? No. Will the region be better off? No. Is it clear Iran will abandon its nuclear program? No. On the other hand, can Iran defeat the United States militarily? No.

Will the United States force a regime change in Iran? In all probability it will not. Will the economy of the United States suffer? In all probability it will.

Will the United States have weakened its position in the Middle East? Yes. Will the United States have reduced its influence in the world? Yes.

When I finished the 2004 Iran war game exercise, I summarized what I had learned in the process. After all the effort, I am left with two simple sentences for policymakers. "You have no military solution for the issues of Iran. You have to make diplomacy work." I have not changed my mind. That conclusion made sense then. It still makes sense today.

NOTES

1. The war game is described in James Fallows, “Will Iran Be Next?” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2004.
2. This is from my own interpretation of satellite photos of the heavy water facility at Arak and the areas around Esfahan and Parchin.
3. Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).
4. This appointment fits well with a conclusion that the United States will lead the strike against Iran and that Israel will be in a supporting position. U.S. doctrine would cause the creation of a Combined Joint Task Force. The Israeli two-star would be the Israeli representative to this CJTF.
5. Israel periodically and uncharacteristically has released elements of a plan. See, for instance, “Taking Aim at Iran,” *Sunday Times* (London), March 13, 2005. When Israel leaks information like this, is Iran meant to be the audience, or is the United States the target? A contact in Israel close to the government tells me it does not qualify as a leak: “The alleged Israeli ‘leak’ in the *Sunday Times* is pure nonsense, it is not a leak or a son of a leak. It is simply hogwash, let me assure you of that.”
6. The remark was made by Robert Joseph, under secretary of state for arms control and international security, at a State Department briefing on April 26, 2006.
7. Richard Perle made this argument at an American Israeli Public Affairs Committee conference in Washington, D.C., on March 5, 2006.
8. My summary of the 2004 operations in Iran comes from a wide range of press sources—U.S., Middle East, and European.
9. I asked him quite a few questions that night and sensed he was giving good answers. Earlier I had asked him what they planned for Natanz, the centrifuge facility. Again, without flinching, he said, “We are going to have 164 centrifuges on the first floor and have 50,000 on the second floor.”
10. Robert Fisk, writing about the restrictions the Carter administration placed on Iran, said “Each new step reinforced the power of the theocracy governing Iran and reduced the influence of the leftists.” Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilization: Conquest of the Middle East* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 164.
11. A U.K.-based defense reporter told me the calculation of “certainty” in the current planning effort is 80 percent. That kind of criteria dictates how many weapons need to be placed on a target to be able to say to decisionmakers at the end of the operation, “I am 80 percent confident I destroyed the targets you selected.”
12. Senior military officers in the Pentagon told Seymour Hersh about the intelligence issues. He quoted one of them saying, “The target array in Iran is huge, but it’s amorphous.” Seymour Hersh, “Last Stand: The Military’s Problem with the President’s Iran Policy,” *The New Yorker*, July 10, 2006.
13. Although the argument can be made that congressional approval is not required, there might be a strategic communications benefit from seeking authority to strike Iran. The administration used this debate effectively before the 2002 elections. It could be used again with a high prob-

ability of getting authorization, particularly if the debate occurs before the November elections or in the lame duck session after the election.

14. In November 2004, National Security Advisor Rice held a meeting at the White House with leaders in the Jewish-American community. She told them the United States would begin applying pressure on Iran. Since then the pressure has been applied in varying degrees. At times this unfolding strategic communications effort has looked like preparations of U.S. and world opinion between September 2002 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

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SAM GARDINER is a retired U.S. Air Force colonel who has taught strategy and military operations at the National War College, Air War College, and Naval War College. He was recently a visiting scholar at the Swedish Defence College. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, he was a regular on CNN, the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, BBC radio and television, and National Public Radio. In 2004, he conducted a war game organized by the *Atlantic Monthly* to gauge how an American president might respond, militarily or otherwise, to Iran's rapid progress toward developing nuclear weapons. He also has conducted war games on North Korea.

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