

# VII. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THE MILITARY OPTION

*“The failure of diplomacy and engagement does not make a military option a more credible and attractive default option. An examination of the unintended human and sociopolitical consequences of a military strike, leads us to conclude that proponents of a military solution to Iran’s nuclear program rest their argument on a fallacy. Such utopian fantasies about the efficacy of military solutions are simply catastrophic.”*

As far as strategic intent is concerned, far from being a tactical solution to the nuclear impasse, military strikes can fall short of their declared objective. Instead of eliminating or delaying Iran’s nuclear program, the United States and Israel can find themselves drawn into yet another strategic quagmire. Strikes can make the restoration of Iran’s nuclear program a symbol of Iranian nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Far from encouraging Iran to become more pacific, they can make Iran more insecure and belligerent—intent on developing a strategic deterrent. And the regime can become more, not less, popular.

The failure of diplomacy and engagement does not make the military option a more credible, attractive, or effective option. The military option has to be evaluated on its own merits. An examination of the unintended human, economic, and environmental consequences of military strikes leads us to conclude that proponents of a military solution to Iran’s nuclear program rest their argument on a fallacy. Such utopian fantasies can become dangerous. The ugly reality they seek to change through force is premised on ignoring the even uglier reality strikes can create. As U.S. Admiral Mike Mullen and other seasoned military men who have considered such Iran strikes have stated, “the consequences, known and unknown, are very serious.”<sup>175</sup>

Mohamed El-Baradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and other diplomats have argued that the military option is not an alternative to diplomacy. In an interview with the *Washington Post* in December 2009, El-Baradei said that strikes would be “absolutely the worst thing that could happen. There is no military solution.... If a country is bombed you give them every reason—with the support of everybody inside the country and outside the country—to go for nuclear weapons.”<sup>176</sup> The former director of the Shin Bet, Yuval Diskin, went further. He warned that strikes

could even speed up Iran’s nuclear program: “What the Iranians prefer to do today slowly and quietly, they will do... quickly and in much less time.”<sup>177</sup>

## OSIRAK: THE FALSE ANALOGY

Applying the Osirak “precedent” to Iran’s nuclear facilities can lead to gross underestimation of the scale and scope of damages to the Iranian people and the region. As with the Iraq war or the Arab-Israeli wars, it also underestimates the gravity and duration of the conflicts that would be unleashed.<sup>178</sup>

Without a realistic perspective and debate about “collateral damage,” the price of the Ayatollah’s gamble or US/Israeli miscalculation—namely, the costs and consequences of a conflict with Iran—will not become apparent until after the dice have been rolled. As with Iraq, a military option can exacerbate the intractable problem its advocates seek to solve.<sup>179</sup>

Proponents of the military option point to the Israeli bombing of Iraq’s Osirak reactor in 1981 (Figure 42), before it became operational, and the bombing of the incomplete Syrian reactor in 2007, as proof that destroying Iran’s nuclear reactor can be simple, quick, and easy. The

175 “Adm. Mike Mullen: I Support Diplomacy in Iran; Iraq Needs to Stand up a Government,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 October, 2010.

176 Joby Warrick, “A Nuclear Watchdog’s Parting Shots,” *The Washington Post*, 6 December 2009.

177 Yaakov Lappin, “Former Shin Bet Chief Slams ‘Messianic’ PM, Barak,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 April 2012

178 Note: As Cirincione and others have pointed out, the Osirak strikes did not arrest the development of Iraq’s nuclear program. They accelerated it.

179 Note: A great deal hinges on the definition and conception of a solution to Iran’s nuclear program. Proponents of the military option argue that it may be the only efficient and certain way of eliminating the existential threat an Iranian bomb would pose Israel. To them, the only difference between the Iraqi and Syrian case and the Iranian case is one of scale. There is a military solution. The problem is that Israel, alone, may lack the military capability to launch a successful pre-emptive strike that would guarantee the destruction of Iran’s nuclear capability. And so, as the guarantor of Israel’s security, the United States can eliminate the perceived threat from Iran’s weapons of mass destruction to defend Israel against imminent threat of annihilation by President Ahmadinejad.

Osirak option is seen as a possible solution.<sup>180</sup> The only difference, in this view, is the scale and complexity of such an operation. As Joseph Cirincione and others have pointed out, such an analogy is false.<sup>181</sup>



Figure 42: Osirak (Photo: Agence France-Presse)

The Osirak analogy is the fantasy that there will be no blowback from strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities. It discounts the complexity, severity, scale, consequences, and casualties such an operation would entail. Iran's nuclear program is not an empty shell, nor is it a single remote target. The facilities in Iran are fully operational, they contain thousands of personnel, they are located near major population centers, they are heavily constructed and fortified, and thus difficult to destroy. They contain tons of highly toxic chemical and radioactive material. To grasp the political and psychological impact of the strikes, what our estimates suggest is that the potential civilian casualties Iran would suffer as a result of a strike — in the first day — could exceed the 6,731 Palestinians and 1,083 Israeli's reported killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the past decade.<sup>182</sup> The total number of fatalities in the 1981 Osirak raid was 10 Iraqis and one French civilian, Damien Chaussepied. As Bob Woodward wrote in his book, *State of Denial*, far from ending Iraq's nuclear program, the Israeli raid acted as a spur. It led Saddam Hussein to initiate a covert program to develop a nuclear bomb.<sup>183</sup>

## MILITARY CONSEQUENCES

It is almost certain that the casualties from a conventional war would extend well beyond the death toll from strikes against Iran's nuclear sites. The Iranian military would have to be targeted to minimize Iran's capacity to launch a counterattack — and that would mean

pre-emptive strikes against hundreds of military targets scattered around Iran. As U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a senior member of the Committee on Armed Services, argued at the Halifax International Security Forum, strikes against Iran would have to entail the total destruction of the Iranian military:

“So my view of military force would be not to just neutralize their nuclear program, which are probably dispersed and hardened, but to sink their navy, destroy their air force, and deliver a decisive blow to the Revolutionary Guard. In other words, neuter that regime. Destroy their ability to fight back and hope that people.... inside Iran would have a chance to take back their government and be good neighbors to the world in the future.”<sup>184</sup>

In March 2012, *The New York Times* reported that a simulation of an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure had predicted that an attack would lead to a wider regional war that could draw the United States in and leave hundreds of American soldiers dead.<sup>185</sup> Earlier that same month, Meir Dagan, former head of the Mossad, warned that an Israel attack on Iran would “ignite a regional war,” which he predicted would end in the death of Israeli citizens.<sup>186</sup> Dagan called the idea of attacking Iran the “stupidest thing ever.” Similar predictions have come from the Persian Gulf states. In his 2007 study “The Implications on Gulf States of Any American Military Operation against Iran,” Colonel Salem al Jaber warned that Iran would respond to military strikes attacking “all U.S. allies in the region, especially the Gulf states.”<sup>187</sup> Jaber also cautioned that Iran would also likely launch missile strikes on American bases in the Gulf, which include locations in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and The United Arab Emirates.

Should military strikes trigger a short or prolonged regional war, we can expect the damages to go well beyond the nuclear sites. Iraqi civilian casualties from the violence unleashed by the Iraq war, according to the Iraq body count, are more than 100,000.<sup>188</sup> A heavily criticized Lancet survey estimated in excess of 600,000 violent deaths.<sup>189</sup> UNHCR estimates put the total number of Iraqi refugees outside Iraq at 1,683,570, with another 1,343,568 internally displaced persons inside Iraq.<sup>190</sup> In terms of economic damage, the costs of the Iraq war to the United States alone was placed in \$3 trillion range.<sup>191</sup> Should strikes result in a war, the Iran body count can certainly

184 Tod Lindberg, “Speaking Truth to Mullah Power,” *The Weekly Standard*, 22 November 2010, <[http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/speaking-truth-mullah-power\\_516688.html?page=2](http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/speaking-truth-mullah-power_516688.html?page=2)>, accessed 23 November 2010.

185 Marl Mazzette, “U.S. War Games Sees Perils of Israeli Strike,” *New York Times*, 19 March 2012.

186 Lesley Stahl, “The Spymaster: Meir Dagan on Iran's Threat,” *60 Minutes*, 11 March 2012, <[http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560\\_162-57394904/the-spy-master-meir-dagan-on-irans-threat/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-57394904/the-spy-master-meir-dagan-on-irans-threat/)>.

187 Col. Salem Al Jaber, “The Implications on the Gulf States of any American Military Operation against Iran,” *U.S. War College*, 30 March 2007.

188 “Iraq body count” accessed 8 July 2011, <[www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org)>.

189 Gilbert Burnham, et al., “Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey,” *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*, 11 October, 2006, <<http://www.brussellstribunal.org/pdf/lancet111006.pdf>>.

190 “2011 UNHCR country operations profile—Iraq: Statistical Snapshot,” accessed on 8 July 2011, <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486426>>.

191 Linda J. Birmes and Joseph E. Stiglitz, “The Iraq war will cost us \$3 trillion, and much more,” *Washington Post*, 9 March 2008.

180 Jeffrey Goldberg, “Point of No Return,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2010.

181 Joseph Cirincione, “Bombs Won't Solve Iran,” *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2005. Note: As Cirincione and others have pointed out, Osirak did not put an end to Iraq's nuclear program. It encouraged Saddam to revive his nuclear program and set the stage for the Iraq war.

182 “B'Tselem: Since 2000, 7,454 Israelis, Palestinians killed,” *Jerusalem Post*, 27 September 2010. See also: “27 September '10: 10 years to the second Intifada — summary of data,” *The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem)*, <[http://www.btselem.org/english/press\\_releases/20100927.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/press_releases/20100927.asp)>.

183 Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006): 215.

reach the levels in Iraq, with more than 100,000 dead and millions displaced. The economic costs could also exceed a trillion dollars, many times more than the cost of Iran's nuclear program. Given that the number of American soldiers killed or injured in the Iraq and Afghan wars exceeds 50,000, one can expect the toll from an Iran war to be much higher—a price advocates of military strikes and solutions fail to recognize.

## **REGIONAL AND STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES**

Although we have restricted the scope of this study to examining the consequences of conventional strikes against four nuclear sites, our estimates of the costs and consequences of military strikes provide only a snapshot into what can become a larger, longer, and deadlier regional war with dangerous religious and apocalyptic overtones. The casualties and costs of such a clash of civilizations would have to be measured in terms of millions of people across entire provinces, regions, and continents. As with the shadow cast by the Iran-Iraq war, the Arab-Israeli wars, as well as the Iraq and Afghan conflicts, such a blood feud would feed what one prominent Middle East analyst has called a cycle of "crisis and carnage."<sup>192</sup> Strikes would act as a curse that would stain the memory, scar the face, and blacken the future of generations of civilians and soldiers throughout the Middle East and beyond.

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<sup>192</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, "Wikileaks Should Prompt a Rethink on Iran," *The Financial Times*, 30 November 2010.