

BRITISH AMERICAN SECURITY INFORMATION COUNCIL

BASIC Project on Preventive Engagement with Iran
Discussion Paper Series
No.1 February 2007

*General, you have
the advantage of time:*

**Iran's Response to
the US Military
Option**

By Sam Gardiner, Colonel, US Air Force (Retired)





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Colonel, US Air
Force (Retired)**

Colonel Sam Gardiner is retired from the US Air Force. He has taught strategy and military operations at the National War College, Air War College and Naval War College. His decorations include the

Bronze Star Medal and the Legion of Merit. He designs and facilitates war games, having done games on Iran and North Korea for the Atlantic Monthly. In the fall 2006, he wrote a paper for the Century Foundation, *The End of the Summer of Diplomacy: Assessing U.S. Military Options on Iran*. In the upcoming edition of the Syracuse Law Review, his paper, *Et Maintenant En Avant: Preemption and the Planning for Iran* will appear. He is currently working on a project on Iran for CNN.



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General, you have the advantage of time: Iran's response to the US military option

***BASIC Project on Preventive
Engagement with Iran
Discussion Paper Series No.1,
February 2007***

These Discussion Papers are thought-provoking contributions to the public debate over Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context.

The views expressed in them are those of the authors and not necessarily those of BASIC, its staff, trustees or funders. We welcome feedback: please reply by email to: info@basicint.org

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About BASIC's project on preventive engagement with Iran

Many people believe that Iran is cultivating a threshold nuclear weapon status by developing the essential infrastructure to enrich uranium. Best estimates suggest that Iran is several years and possibly a decade away from any potential nuclear weapon. This allows the international community time to prevent any possible acquisition through targeted diplomacy. This project addresses the policy challenges arising from the path to a credible and sustainable solution to the crisis surrounding Iran's nuclear program. It is our belief that such a solution will require the underlying U.S.-Iranian hostility to be addressed; Iran's security needs to be met; and its desire to be treated as a responsible international player respected. This discussion paper series is part of our commitment to provide accurate and timely information and analysis on Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context.

The project also publishes Iran Update, a free weekly email news and comment digest on the diplomatic movements over Iran's nuclear program. Read current and back issues at <http://www.basicint.org/updates/iran.htm>

We are grateful to the Ford Foundation for supporting this project.

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General, you have the advantage of time:

Iran's response to the US military option

by Sam Gardiner, Colonel, US Air Force (Retired) ¹

This discussion paper is written from the imagined viewpoint of a senior military advisor to Iran's Supreme National Security Council. This is done to help the reader see the situation from a new perspective and is not intended to deceive or make light of a serious situation.

The Americans have many weaknesses. In fact, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they clearly displayed their strengths and weaknesses. We have planned our strategy precisely on the basis of their strengths and weaknesses.

General Yahya Rahim Safavi

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander,
November 12, 2006

You, the Members of the Supreme National Security Council, have asked for a presentation on our plans for responding to a U.S. military attack directed at the Islamic Republic. We have been preparing for this eventuality for some time, and I am pleased to brief you on our plans, but first, please allow me to give you some background.

Although the Americans have discussed various options for attacking the Islamic Republic, the operation that seems to be most likely is a strike on our nuclear facilities that would last three to five nights.²

As you know, this would not be an invasion. It's a limited objective attack, designed to disrupt our nuclear activities, and probably to kill as many of our technical personnel as possible. The Americans do not have available sufficient ground forces to mount a sustained attack on the Islamic Republic. Instead, the U.S. objective will be to set back our nuclear program two to five years. They will use lots of cruise missiles from B-52's and ships. Probably the only manned aircraft that will penetrate our air space will be the B-2's. These aircraft will deliver the deep penetrating munitions.

Although the Americans have discussed various options for attacking the Islamic Republic, the operation that seems to be most likely is a strike on our nuclear facilities that would last three to five nights.

The enrichment facility at Natanz will be a major target, but you can expect other facilities will be struck. Parchin will most likely be hit. The U.S. and Israel think our engineers have been working on nuclear triggers there. (I don't think they will hit the reactor at Bushehr. They don't see this facility as an important component of our nuclear weapons program unless we were to retain the fuel rods and reprocess them. Besides, why upset the Russians?

I have one more item of background. It's very important for you to understand the thinking behind the U.S. strike plan. You can find in the American press a description of a concept called intra-war deterrence. The concept goes back to the nuclear dimension of the Cold War. Basically, the idea is that even after a first strike it might be possible to prevent escalation.

In the case of the attack on Iran, they are probably thinking about intra-war deterrence. Some Americans believe that after the opening salvo they can warn Iran against retaliation. They will say something to the effect that if Iran retaliates, more and larger attacks will follow. As you know, there are some in the U.S. Administration who would find a reason for more attacks to be desirable. It might open the path to attempts at regime change. You will see in the suggestions I have for you ideas on preventing the second wave of attacks from the Americans while still achieving our objectives.

There has been talk of the use of nuclear weapons on Natanz in particular. While this is possible, it may not be necessary – the Americans are more likely to try several of their conventional bunker busting bombs first.

Dealing with the Strike

The name of our organization has significance. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is responsible for defending the revolution, and we take this responsibility very seriously. For this reason, I must be totally candid with you: we cannot stop or even make the operation difficult for the Americans. Although we have been improving defenses at nuclear facilities, the air defense guns around these locations will not threaten the U.S. attacking force. If we are lucky, we might be able to shoot down a few cruise missiles, but we most likely will not even be able to see the B-2's that are doing the real destruction. Our radars will not pick them up, and the

attacks will be at night. We have ordered some advanced air defense missiles and radars from the Russians, but even if these are delivered, they will be only be slightly more threatening to the United States.³ We are prepared to deal with commando raids, but not the kind of attack on the table.

Putting more facilities underground, as the North Koreans have done, has compounded their intelligence problem, but we can expect to suffer significant damage at any site they have identified. There has been talk of the use of nuclear weapons on Natanz in particular. While this is possible, it may not be necessary – the Americans are more likely to try several of their conventional bunker busting bombs first.

Horizontal Escalation

I want to explain how we will respond to these attacks. We have a sensitive fine-line to tread here. Lack of obvious retaliation will show us to be weak and will reduce our influence in the region. Too great a retaliation will give significant propaganda to the Americans at home and abroad and will enable them to label us warmongers.

I call our strategy "*horizontal escalation*." I know horizontal escalation is not an Iranian term, but it captures the essence of what we will be doing. The term comes from the Cold War. U.S. strategists used it when they were referring to attacks on the Soviet Union outside the Central Front in Europe. The essence of the strategy is: "*If you can't win in one place, take the fight to another.*"

Making Them Pay

First, we will use oil leverage against the United States.

This chart shows the full range of military potential for disrupting the oil. With our influence on Moktada al-Sadr and his Facilities Protection Service, we have the capability to keep Iraqi oil off the market.⁴ We have the capability to directly and indirectly attack other oil facilities in the Gulf. The resulting price increase in oil will not just be a war premium. Oil prices will rise to very high levels and remain there because supply will not meet demand.

We also have the capability to control the flow of oil from these facilities through the Gulf with a variety of more conventional means. We can use naval mines as we did during the Tanker War. We can use land-based anti-ship missiles. That includes relatively new versions such as the one we supplied to Hezbollah. We can use our diesel submarines, although they would be very vulnerable to US Naval patrols.

However, I would suggest a caution here. It is important that we keep the Iranian signature from being too obvious: the greater the Iranian signature on a reaction to the U.S. operation, the greater the chance of more strikes by them, and greater sympathy for them in the rest of the world, and we must react on our timetable, not theirs. Our goal is to use our forces in a concept of operations that will put increasing pressure on the United States. This is the essence of horizontal escalation: to make the cost so high for the U.S. that it won't attack in the first place, to use our conventional forces to implement a policy of deterrence. We want to deter an attack or punish the aggressors if there is one. We don't want to force the United States into escalation.

Oil leverage

Iraq's northern oil pipeline

Iraq's southern oil pipeline



Oil facilities of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states

Controlling the Gulf flow:

*Naval mines
Submarines
Anti-ship missiles
Naval ships
Small boats*

Attacking Their Vulnerability

From the recent Baker-Hamilton report, we know the Americans are growing weary of the fighting in Iraq. The wearier they become, the more leverage we have. Clearly, the Americans are most vulnerable in Iraq. That's because of the large numbers of military and civilian personnel they have there, and because we have many ways of attacking them. For example, we can increase support to Shia militias in Iraq. We can give them increased technology. We can directly attack U.S. units in Iraq with conventional weapons, although this might compromise our strategy of low signature responses.

As you will observe from this chart, U.S. bases in Iraq are within range of our medium range ballistic missiles. Baghdad is less than 30 minutes flying time for some of our fighter aircraft. But although we might successfully raid several U.S. bases, we cannot win an air battle against the Americans, and if we attack with missiles, the United States will retaliate. U.S. decision makers would not have a choice. Remember my caution about horizontal escalation. We must attack against their weakness, not their strengths. However, US attacks on Iran is likely to significantly strengthen the support for the Shia militia within Iraq, and we could seek to facilitate this. There are many possibilities for escalating the conflict there at great cost to the Americans, as we have until now largely held back from doing so in recognition of our interests in stability within our neighbor.

The Zion Option

Even if Israel is not involved in the attack on Iran, they must be blamed along with the Americans. Given the bellicose rhetoric from the Zionists and the widespread recognition of the power they wield over the US government, this will not be difficult. That will be important at home as well as in the region, and will help us maintain our strategy of low signature responses. I know that messaging is not my mission, but is important that message and action are coordinated.

With this in mind, our responses will be coordinated with Hezbollah and Hamas. They have to attack Israel. This will make the necessary link between the American attacks and the Zionist state, and ensure that our relationship with the two organizations, currently popular on the Arab street, is cemented. In preparation for this option we will reequip Hezbollah and send them more high technology weapons and material. We will continue to develop a tactical, working relationship with Hamas, and will attempt to supply them with new weaponry as well. In addition, we will seek to get Syria to reposition some forces to increase the pressure on Israel, although we cannot be certain of the Syrian response.⁵ One way or another we should be able to bring things to a head with the Zionists and show them their position is not as invulnerable as they thought prior to the war in Lebanon last year.

There is a potential positive secondary effect in the Zion Option. If Israel overreacts, our political position could be strengthened even more than after the recent invasion of Lebanon. The Council may wish to consider provoking an Israeli military response to be the objective of this option.

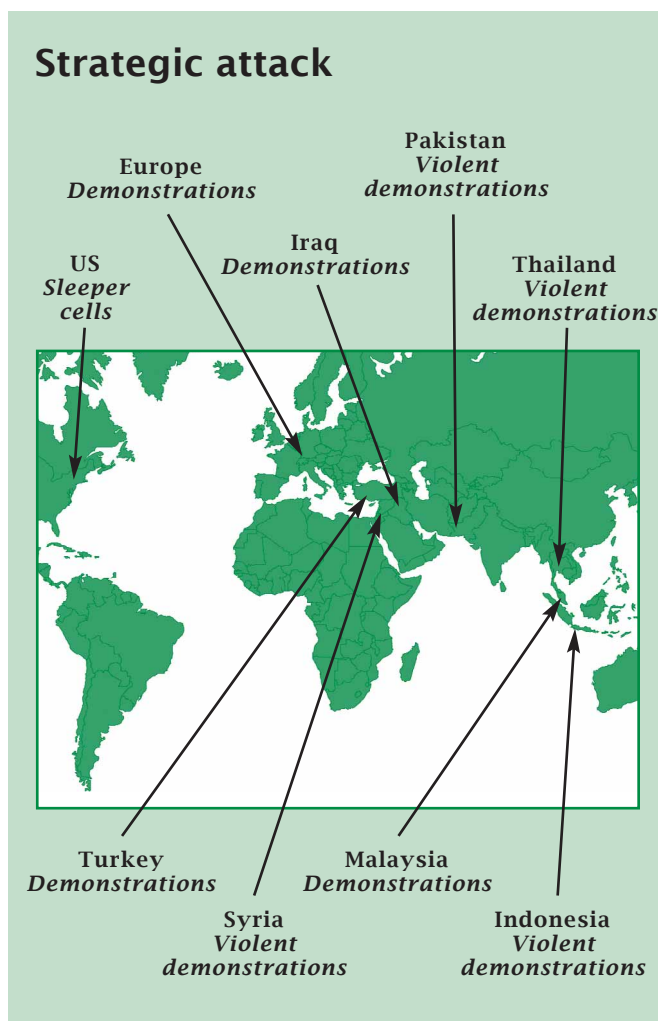
Strategic Attack

I now want to address the question of strategic attack.

Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar all host U.S. military bases. Their governments have been warned about possible retaliation in the event of U.S. aggression against the Islamic Republic.⁶ As in other places, there are elements in these countries that will react very strongly against Americans if Iran is attacked. In Bahrain, this might even be a path to changing the government.

I have previously mentioned the possibility of using martyr volunteers inside the United States. We have reports that the U.S. government has made contingency plans to detain thousands of Moslem citizens and residents in the event of a U.S. attack on Iran. We should find ways to encourage this, so as to further isolate the U.S. However, if the connection is made to Iran, this could be a costly option, so this needs to be done in a deniable way.⁷

If you follow my recommendation about keeping any response low signature, I expect spontaneous and significant reactions in the region and in some countries outside the region. As a very minor indication of the level of feeling, I'm thinking about the reactions to the Danish newspaper's cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. We saw demonstrations in Syria, Iraq, Indonesia, India, Kashmir, Thailand and even Europe. With a little effort, our own agents in the region can certainly magnify these reactions, which will undoubtedly be a great deal more violent.⁸



Finally

I want to conclude this briefing on a positive note. Time is on Iran's side. Even after a U.S. strike, some of our options will even improve if they unfold slowly. That's particularly true of using oil leverage. Low signature but significant cuts in oil flow raise the prices, benefit us, and force the U.S. to pay. Low signature, drawn-out responses reduce the likelihood of additional U.S. attacks.

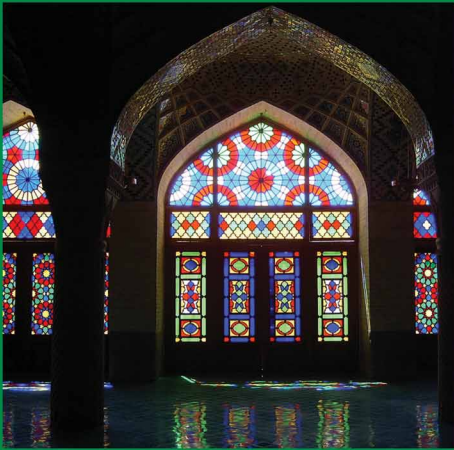
A slow and low-signature response is important beyond preventing U.S. retaliation. Iran has another important interest: preventing chaos. The strategy I have outlined offers the best chance for first, deterring a U.S. attack, and second, if deterrence fails, inflicting long, drawn out and ultimately unacceptable pain on them while minimizing the chances of a second attack on the Islamic Republic, and leaving the government in the best position to harness the national will and international outrage against the aggressors while controlling the popular reaction. It will show that while we have retaliatory capability, we are reasonable and moderate in the face of unprovoked and outrageous attacks by the imperialist forces. It could play a central role in changing the international balance of power away from the Americans.

In the end, Iran's influence in the region will be strengthened by a U.S. attack. The leadership can compound that impact by wisely picking from the options in this brief. We have the advantage of time.

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Endnotes

- 1 He can be reached at SamGard@aol.com.
- 2 I've written on how the United States is pushing toward the military option for Iran. I won't repeat that here. My description can be found at Sam Gardiner, Colonel, USAF (Ret.) The End of the "Summer of Diplomacy" Assessing U.S. Military Options on Iran, The Century Foundation, 9/18/2006. www.tcf.org/print.asp?type=PB&pubid=578
- 3 According to press reports, Iran's contract with Russia is for 29 mobile systems for \$700 million. See Hill Anderson, "Russian AA Missiles Said Delivered to Iran," UPI, November 27, 2006.
- 4 Moktada al-Sadr gave an extensive interview on Al-Jazeera on February 18, 2006 where he said he was "ready to attack the Americans if they attack Iran or Syria." The connections between Moktada al-Sadr and Iran have become more and more apparent. Hezbollah may even be training members of his Mahdi Army. See Michael R. Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "The Struggle for Iraq; Hezbollah Helps Iraq Shiite Army, U.S. Official Says," New York Times, November 28, 2006.
- 5 Israeli press is reporting some Syrian force adjustments are already underway. Air defense missiles have been moved closer to the border with Israel, and the production of long-range missiles has been increased. See Herb Kenori, "Syria Moves Missiles Closer to Israel," Jerusalem Post online edition, December 10, 2006.
- 6 Firooz Rajai-Far, Commander of the Martyrs Brigades, made this threat in November 2006.
- 7 The Iranians have never directly mentioned the possibility of targeting inside the United States. It seems, however, the U.S. Government may fear such attacks. Seymour Hersh, the investigative reporter for the New Yorker, and I were on a panel together at an international law conference at Syracuse University on October 27, 2006. He said that a part of the U.S. plan for striking Iran includes rounding up as many as 2500 Iranian-Americans when the plan is executed.
- 8 I asked a senior military official of Malaysia if there would be demonstrations in Malaysia if the United States were to conduct a strike against Iran. He responded that the violence could be so widespread the government might have difficulty controlling it.



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By Sam Gardiner,
Colonel, US Air Force (Retired)

This discussion paper is written from the imagined viewpoint of a senior military advisor briefing Iran's Supreme National Security Council on how to respond to a U.S. military attack. It argues that a "low-signature response" involving oil leverage, the exploitation of U.S. vulnerabilities in Iraq and the fermentation of unrest in the wider Middle East and in other Islamic states would strengthen Iran's influence in the region.

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