

A plan to attack Iran swiftly and from above

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A bombing campaign has been in the works for months - a blistering air war that would last anywhere from one day to two weeks

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WASHINGTON — Massive, devastating air strikes, a full dose of "shock and awe" with hundreds of bunker-busting bombs slicing through concrete at more than a dozen nuclear sites across Iran is no longer just the idle musing of military planners and uber-hawks.

Although air strikes don't seem imminent as the U.S.-Iranian drama unfolds, planning for a bombing campaign and preparing for the geopolitical blowback has preoccupied military and political councils for months.

No one is predicting a full-blown ground war with Iran. The likeliest scenario, a blistering air war that could last as little as one night or as long as two weeks, would be designed to avoid the quagmire of invasion and regime change that now characterizes Iraq. But skepticism remains about whether any amount of bombing can substantially delay Iran's entry into the nuclear-weapons club.

Attacking Iran has gone far beyond the twilight musings of a lame-duck president. Almost all of those jockeying to succeed U.S. President George W. Bush are similarly bellicose. Both front-runners, Democrat Senator Hillary Clinton and Republican Rudy Giuliani, have said that Iran's ruling mullahs can't be allowed to go nuclear. "Iran would be very sure if I were president of the United States that I would not allow them to become nuclear," said Mr. Giuliani. Ms. Clinton is equally hard-line.

Nor does the threat come just from the United States. As hopes fade that sanctions and common sense might avert a military confrontation with Tehran - as they appear to have done with North Korea - other Western leaders are openly warning that bombing may be needed.

Unless Tehran scraps its clandestine and suspicious nuclear program and its quest for weapons-grade uranium (it already has the missiles capable of delivering an atomic warhead), the world will be "faced with an alternative that I call catastrophic: an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran," French President Nicolas Sarkozy has warned.

Bombing Iran would be relatively easy. Its antiquated air force and Russian air-defence missiles would be easy pickings for the U.S. warplanes.

But effectively destroying Iran's widely scattered and deeply buried nuclear facilities would be far harder, although achievable, according to air-power experts. But the fallout, especially the anger sown across much of the Muslim world by another U.S.-led attack in the Middle East, would be impossible to calculate.

Israel has twice launched pre-emptive air strikes ostensibly to cripple nuclear programs. In both instances, against Iraq in 1981 and Syria two months ago, the targeted regimes howled but did nothing.

The single-strike Israeli attacks would seem like pinpricks, compared with the rain of destruction U.S. warplanes would need to kneecap Iran's far larger nuclear network.

"American air strikes on Iran would vastly exceed the scope of the 1981 Israeli attack on the Osirak nuclear centre in Iraq, and would more resemble the opening days of the 2003 air campaign against Iraq," said John Pike, director at Globalsecurity.org, a leading defence and security group.

"Using the full force of operational B-2 stealth bombers, staging from Diego Garcia or flying direct from the United States," along with warplanes from land bases in the region and carriers at sea, at least two-dozen suspected nuclear sites would be targeted, he said.

Although U.S. ground forces are stretched thin with nearly 200,000 fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the firepower of the U.S. air force and the warplanes aboard aircraft carriers could easily overwhelm Iran's defences, leaving U.S. warplanes in complete command of the skies and free to pound targets at will.

With air bases close by in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan, including Kandahar, and naval-carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, hundreds of U.S. warplanes serviced by scores of airborne refuellers could deliver a near constant hail of high explosives.

Fighter-bombers and radar-jammers would spearhead any attack. B-2 bombers, each capable of delivering 20 four-tonne bunker-busting bombs, along with smaller stealth bombers and streams of F-18s from the carriers could maintain an open-ended bombing campaign.

"They could keep it up until the end of time, which might be hastened by the bombing," Mr. Pike said. "They could make the rubble jump; there's plenty of stuff to bomb," he added, a reference to the now famous line from former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld that Afghanistan was a "target-poor" country.

Mr. Pike believes it could all be over in a single night. Others predict days, or even weeks, of sustained bombing.

Unidentified Pentagon planners have been cited talking of "1,500 aim points." What is clear is that a score or more known nuclear sites would be destroyed. Some, in remote deserts, would present little risk of "collateral damage," military jargon for unintended civilian casualties. Others, like laboratories at the University of Tehran, in the heart of a teeming capital city, would be hard to destroy without killing innocent Iranians.

What would likely unfold would be weeks of escalating tension, following a breakdown of diplomatic efforts.

The next crisis point may come later this month if the UN Security Council becomes deadlocked over further sanctions.

"China and Russia are more concerned about the prospect of the U.S. bombing Iran than of Iran getting a nuclear bomb," says Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Tehran remains defiant. Our enemies "must know that Iran will not give the slightest concession ... to any power," Iran's fiery President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday. For his part, Mr. Bush has pointedly refused to rule out resorting to war. Last month, another U.S. naval battle group - including the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Harry S Truman with 100 warplanes on board and the Canadian frigate HMCS Charlottetown as one of its screen of smaller warships - left for the Persian Gulf. At least one, and often two, carrier battle groups are always in the region.

Whether even weeks of bombing would cripple Iran's nuclear program cannot be known. Mr. Pike believes it would set back, by a decade or more, the time Tehran needs to develop a nuclear warhead. But Iran's clandestine program - international inspectors were completely clueless as to the existence of several major sites until exiles ratted out the mullahs - may be so extensive that even the longest target list will miss some.

"It's not a question of whether we can do a strike or not and whether the strike could be effective," retired Marine general Anthony Zinni told Time magazine. "It certainly would be, to some degree. But are you prepared for all that follows?"

Attacked and humiliated, Iran might be tempted, as Mr. Ahmadinejad has suggested, to strike back, although Iran has limited military options.

At least some Sunni governments in the region, not least Saudi Arabia, would be secretly delighted to see the Shia mullahs in Tehran bloodied. But the grave risk of any military action spiralling into a regional war, especially if Mr. Ahmadinejad tried to make good on his threat to attack Israel, remains.

"Arab leaders would like to see Iran taken down a notch," said Steven Cook, an analyst specializing in the Arab world at the Council on Foreign Relations, "but their citizens will see this as what they perceive to be America's ongoing war on Islam."

Building tension

The confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program has been simmering for more than five years. These are some of the key flashpoints.

August, 2002: Iranian exiles say that Tehran has built a vast uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy water plant at Arak without informing the United Nations.

December, 2002: The existence of the sites is confirmed by satellite photographs shown on U.S. television. The United States accuses Tehran of "across-the-board pursuit of weapons of mass destruction." Iran agrees to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

June, 2003: IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei accuses Iran of not revealing the extent of its nuclear work and urges leaders to sign up for more intrusive inspections.

October, 2003: After meeting French, German and British foreign ministers, Tehran agrees to stop producing enriched uranium and formally decides to sign the Additional Protocol, a measure that extends the IAEA's ability to detect undeclared nuclear activities. No evidence is produced to confirm the end of enrichment.

November, 2003: Mr. ElBaradei says there is "no evidence" that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. The United States disagrees.

February, 2004: An IAEA report says Iran experimented with polonium-210, which can be used to trigger the chain reaction in a nuclear bomb. Iran did not explain the experiments. Iran again agrees to suspend enrichment, but again does not do so.

March, 2004: Iran is urged to reveal its entire nuclear program to the IAEA by June 1, 2004.

September, 2004: The IAEA orders Iran to stop preparations for large-scale uranium enrichment. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell labels Iran a growing danger and calls for the UN Security Council to impose sanctions.

August, 2005: Hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is installed as Iranian President as Tehran pledges an "irreversible" resumption of enrichment.

Jan. 10, 2006: Iran removes UN seals at the Natanz enrichment plant and resumes nuclear fuel research.

February, 2006: The IAEA votes to report Iran to the UN Security Council. Iran ends snap UN nuclear inspections the next day.

July 31, 2006: The UN Security Council demands that Iran suspend its nuclear activities by Aug. 31.

Aug. 31, 2006: The UN Security Council deadline for Iran to halt its work on nuclear fuel passes. IAEA says Tehran has failed to suspend the program.

Dec. 23, 2006: The 15-member UN Security Council unanimously adopts a binding resolution that imposes some sanctions and calls on Iran to suspend its uranium-enrichment activities and to comply with its IAEA obligations.

March 24, 2007: The Security Council unanimously approves a resolution broadening UN sanctions against Iran for its continuing failure to halt uranium enrichment. Iranian officials call the new measures "unnecessary and unjustified."

April 10, 2007: Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs says Iran will not accept any suspension of its uranium-enrichment activities and urges world powers to accept the "new reality" of the Islamic republic's nuclear program.

May 23, 2007: The IAEA says in a new report, issued to coincide with the expiration of a Security Council deadline for Tehran, that Iran continues to defy UN Security Council demands to halt uranium enrichment and has expanded such work. The report adds that the UN nuclear agency's ability to monitor nuclear activities in Iran has declined due to lack of access to sites.

Oct. 24, 2007: The United States imposes new sanctions on Iran and accuses the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps of spreading weapons of mass destruction.

Sources: BBC, Reuters, Financial Times, Radio Free Europe

Target: Iran

Despite continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has ample air and naval power to strike Iran. In addition to nuclear installations, other likely targets include ballistic missile sites, Revolutionary Guard bases, and naval assets.

Syria: Earlier this year, Israel bombed a site in Syria's Deir ez-Zor region that it suspected was part of a nascent nuclear program.

Osirak: Israel in 1981 had its aircraft bomb Iraq's nuclear reactor before it became operational.

Natanz: Believed to be Iran's primary uranium-enrichment site and a key target of any attack.

B1: A supersonic, intercontinental bomber, capable of penetrating deep into defended airspace and dropping more than 50-tonnes of conventional bombs on a single mission.

B2: America's biggest stealthy long-range bomber, capable of flying half-way around the globe to deliver up to 23 tonnes of bombs on multiple targets.

F-117: The original stealth fighter, almost invisible on radar, was used to drop the first bombs in both Iraq invasions.

F-18: Carrier-borne fighter-bomber capable of many roles from air combat to bombing missions.

EGBU-28: The newest of the U.S. "bunker busters," it uses a GPS guidance system and can penetrate six metres of concrete to deliver four tonnes of high explosives.

SOURCES: FEDERATION OF AMERICAN SCIENTISTS, GLOBAL SECURITY.ORG, ASSOCIATED PRESS

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