Iran's Response to a U.S. Attack

By Michael V. Rienzi
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Editor’s Note: Readers, you can click the PDF button on the menu above to make this article into a PDF suitable for printing or e-reading. Michael Rienzi lays out a detailed analysis of Iran’s potential reactions to a strike and finds the following thesis to be likely. Iran’s reaction to an attack by the US would be to use all means at its disposal including their large arsenal of missiles, asymmetric warfare, regular forces, and economic/political disruption methods that would cause large amounts of devastation, casualties, economic disruption, and fear; in the hopes that the enemy would lose the support of its citizens and allies, thus forcing them to end the confrontation; Iran would use all means at its disposal to accomplish this goal rather quickly as they would try to avoid an extended conflict.

“Iran would not hesitate to retaliate if attacked. If enemies intend to endanger our welfare and security, we will adopt measures which will make them regret their actions.”Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
Brig. Gen. Mohammad Hejazi

Introduction

The US sees Iran developing nuclear weapons as a serious threat to its national security and its strategic objectives in the Middle East. They have tried with very little success to find a way to either totally eliminate Iran’s nuclear program or to at least setup safeguards that would prevent Iran from turning a civilian program into a nuclear weapons program. As time goes by one can assume Iran is getting closer to developing nuclear weapons. Even if we take into account the damage and delays to Iran’s program due to the Stuxnet virus, sanctions, and elimination of some of their nuclear scientist, these must only be considered delay tactics and not a strategy that will prevent Iran from developing weapons without some sort of additional measures.

The IAEA report in early November is further proof of this. Iran does have time on its side; while the mullahs did face their biggest threat in years during the massive uprisings in 2009, they have since been contained and almost completely eliminated. Recent oil sanctions imposed by the US have already resulted in Asian countries asking for waivers. EU oil sanctions will not be enforced until July and even then are no sure bet. This brings the very real possibility that if Iran continues on its current path of attempting to develop nuclear weapons, they will eventually succeed unless stopped by some external force.

It is important to note that according to many experts, the point is fast approaching where Iran becomes very close to developing the capability to produce nuclear weapons. If the US decides that Iran obtaining a
nuclear bomb is unacceptable and will do anything in its power to stop them. Iran and the US could be heading towards a military confrontation in the near future. It is this scenario that leads to the research question: how will Iran react to a strike by US military forces on its nuclear facilities?

The hypothesis generated for this question is if attacked, Iran’s reaction would be to use all means at its disposal including their large arsenal of missiles, asymmetric warfare, regular forces, and economic/political disruption methods that would cause large amounts of devastation, casualties, economic disruption, and fear; in the hopes that the enemy would lose the support of its citizens and allies, thus forcing them to end the confrontation; Iran would use all means at its disposal to accomplish this goal rather quickly as they would try to avoid an extended conflict.

**Findings**

It is well known that Iran could retaliate using multiple methods. In wars, the actors always calculate and pay close attention to what are or will be the potential number of casualties, the economic impact, and the psychological impact of their military members and citizens at home. If the US were to attack, Iran will not hesitate to resort to asymmetrical warfare. Asymmetric warfare has the capability to cause a major impact on casualties, economies, and the psyches of the adversary.

Iran understands they are not capable of squaring off against the US in a conventional sense. This is not to say Iran wouldn’t launch conventional missiles against US targets, or confront US ground troops with Iranian troops in the highly unlikely scenario of US ground troops entering Iran. However, any chance of Iran succeeding against the American military machine would be through the use of a well-organized asymmetric battle plan. In an interview conducted with Afshin Molavi from the New American Foundation located in Washington DC, he was asked what asymmetric warfare tactics the US should be most worried about. Mr. Molavi suggested “that direct attacks on US troops and contractors in Afghanistan, carried out by Iranian proxies should be a major concern.” There is no arguing that Iran has already supplied weapons to insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, but Mr. Molavi suggests “that more lethal weapons would be supplied and the number of attacks would skyrocket with the Quds force having a more direct role than before.” Interestingly, Molavi also states “while it is no sure bet, Iran might keep their asymmetric attacks throughout the Persian Gulf limited.” He goes on by explaining that “China, who has a personal interest in seeing a continuous flow of oil come out of the Gulf, might put pressure on Iran to not take any actions that would further destabilize the region, thus interrupting the flow of oil.”

If this war were to ever to take place, it would be conducted mostly from the air and sea, something the Iranians fully understand. The buildup of their Navy, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran Navy (IRGCN) and their naval strategy revision which occurred a few years ago proves this. The thoughts of a country building up their Navy conjures up images of a country adding numerous surface ships such as destroyers, frigates, maybe even aircraft carriers, while Iran has added some of these types recently, the majority of their buildup has constituted mostly of small boats that are fast and capable of firing lethal missiles, including cruise missiles. They have built up these forces partially through acquisitions of Chinese missile boats and Chinese C802 anti-ship cruise missiles and torpedoes. Iran’s use of fast attack crafts have a history of success; during the Tanker Wars in the 1980’s Iran used swarming techniques to overwhelm larger slower moving ships throughout the Gulf. Furthermore, the one time they decided to face the US navy in a conventional naval battle, they lost the majority of their surface ships within hours. Iran has since learned its lesson and will rely heavily on unconventional methods to attack the US fleet. In matter of fact, “the IRGC claims that Iran would use its growing arsenal of modern weapons, including cruise missiles, modern mines, and submarines, but in a different way and at a time and place the enemy would not know or expect.” (ONI, pg7)
When Mr. Molavi was asked his opinion concerning Iranian swarming attacks, he suggested that “they will not be effective.” He theorizes that “these attacks would only be effective during times of peace when a target would have its guard down, but in times of war, the target, in this case the highly advanced US warships would be ready and have the capability to eliminate this threat.” However, it should be noted that even the most advanced warships are highly vulnerable to small boats that are in close proximity. When small boats are able to get within hundreds of yards of these ships, the ships have to rely heavily on small arms and crew served weapons to eliminate the threat. If dozens of boats are in close, the ship would be hard pressed to eliminate every single one of them before being hit with enemy fire. The reader might recall US/Iranian computerized war games conducted in 2002 by the US Department of Defense where. During the war game, the red team which played the part of Iran relied heavily on swarming tactics to attack the US fleet. This resulted in over a dozen US warships sinking and thousands of sailors perishing.

In altering their naval strategy, they have implemented a passive defense where their weapons including these small boats would be well hidden or concealed so to survive an initial attack. They also implemented a command and control which is decentralized. Iran is fully aware of US capabilities to eliminate command and control in the early hours of battle so they devised a plan where individual units would have the ability to wage their attacks without the consent of higher authority in the case of war. There are many people who suggest Iran would close the Strait of Hormuz if they were to be attacked, and it should be mentioned that they would do so using asymmetric warfare including the speed boat attacks, mines, as well as cruise missiles lining the Iranian coast. It should be noted though that while Iran might have the capability to close the Strait, it would be in their best interest to not do so, unless of course the US were to blockade Iran from exporting its oil first. Anything short of that though, and Iran would be cutting off it nose to spite its face.

It was mentioned earlier that a major motivation behind conducting asymmetric warfare is that it targets the psyche of its adversaries military and citizens at home. In supporting this idea and the hypothesis of this paper, the following is quoted from the Office of Naval Intelligence assessment on Iranian capabilities “In an effort to attack political will, Iranian leadership has stated that if the US took military action against Iran, 200,000 American soldiers will be seriously imperiled in the region and the US Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf would be turned into a sea of fire.” (ONI, pg11) Furthermore, according to the ONI report, Iran would try to spread the conflict throughout the Middle-East and around the world. How would they carry this out?

They could supply more lethal weapons to insurgents in Afghanistan to attack US troops and bases there. They could do so by targeting Gulf Cooperation Council states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait which are either housing US troops and ships or providing intelligence to US forces. “Teheran has warned that it would target Gulf Cooperation Council States in any retaliation for a US attack.” (International Security & Counter Terrorism Research Center, pg1) They could carry out attacks on US or Israeli embassies throughout the world, conduct kidnappings of government officials, cyber-attacks etcetera. “Iran’s response could go global, analysis say, but the scale would depend on the scale of the US attack” (Peterson, pg1) It is important to note that this suggestion of Iran responding in proportion to the US attack against them goes against the hypothesis of this study. Iran has a history of conducting the types of operations mentioned above; so the next question that should logically follow is who would Iran rely on to carry out some of these attacks beyond the Persian Gulf region?

There are numerous groups that Iran has funneled money and weapons to throughout the Middle-East including Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. According to The Council on Foreign Relations, “US officials say Iran provides funding, weapons, training, and sanctuary to numerous terrorist groups-most notably in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.” (Bruno, pg1) Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice
once said “Iran has been the country that has been in many ways a kind of central banker for terrorism in important regions…” It is suggested though, that there is only one group that has the capability to strike throughout the Middle-East and beyond. That group is called Hezbollah. “Hezbollah, whose name means "Party of God," is a Lebanese organization of several thousand Shiite militants that oppose the West and Israel, and seeks to create in Lebanon a Muslim fundamentalist state modeled on Iran.” (Anonymous, pg1)

As reported by the Council of Foreign Relations, “Hezbollah and its affiliates have planned or been linked to a lengthy series of terrorist attacks against the United States, Israel, and other Western targets. These attacks include: a series of kidnappings of Westerners in Lebanon, including several Americans, in the 1980s; the suicide truck bombings that killed more than 200 U.S. Marines at their barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983; the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, which featured the famous footage of the plane’s pilot leaning out of the cockpit with a gun to his head; two major 1990s attacks on Jewish targets in Argentina—the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy (killing twenty-nine) and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center (killing ninety-five); a July 2006 raid on a border post in northern Israel in which two Israeli soldiers were taken captive. The abductions sparked an Israeli military campaign against Lebanon to which Hezbollah responded by firing rockets across the Lebanese border into Israel.”(Council on Foreign Relations, pg4) According to most terrorism experts, most if not all of the terrorist attacks listed above were supported by Iran. In the case of war with Iran, the US and for that matter Israel, could expect to see similar attacks carried out by Hezbollah at the request of Iran, including possibly within the US. It is widely believed that Hezbollah has cells throughout the US currently with the main purpose of raising money, however, in the case of war; they could suddenly change their mode of operation to include terrorist attacks on US soil.

There is a counter argument however, it is not Hezbollah which has the capability to launch attacks throughout the world and within the US; it is actually the Quds Force. “According to the State Departments 2010 Country Reports on Terrorism, the IRGC and more specifically the elite Quds Force, remains Iran’s primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad.” (Bruno, pg2) “The Al Quds Force is comprised of 5,000 to 15,000 members of the IRGC; this is the equivalent of one Special Forces division.” (Cordesman, Toukan, Wilner, pg52) They run many of Iran’s unconventional warfare training camps and they have offices in many Iranian embassies located throughout the world. It has been primarily the Quds Force that has provided training and weapons to the Shiite insurgents in southern Iraq and some Taliban elements in Afghanistan. Here in the US, it was purported in October 2011 that the Quds Force was behind the plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the US in Washington DC. No matter which entity has the ability to carry out these attacks against US interests throughout the world, they are sure to have a psychological impact on the minds of US policy makers and the general public.

Over the past ten years Iran has built up their missile capability. Due to their geographic location and the proximity of major choke points in the Persian Gulf and the number of US bases not too far from Iranian shores, Iran rightfully felt their missile capability would go a long way in deterring their enemies. However, as we see from the ranges of their Shahab class missiles (see appendix), Iran is not limiting itself to hitting targets only in their immediate area. In matter of fact, former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested that “Iran could if it wanted to, launch scores, even hundreds of missiles into Europe.”

In March 2010, Iranian Minister of Defense General Ahmad Vahidi reported “that the Nasr-1 cruise missile is capable of destroying 3,000 ton targets and this short range surface to surface missile will be capable of being fired from the air and underwater in the near future.” (Cordesman, Toucan, Wilner, pg49)

In February 2011, IRGC chief Mohamed Ali Jafari stated that “Iran had developed supersonic smart
ballistic missiles which cannot be tracked and can hit targets with high precision and have a range of 300km.” (Cordesman, Toucan, Wilner, pg47)

Iran has been known to exaggerate their capabilities in the past; so why should we believe them now? There have been reports made available to the public over the past few years that state Iran has received some assistance from China and Pakistan and a great amount of assistance from North Korea in developing their weapons programs. These countries are already known to possess these weapons systems so it would not be a stretch to believe one of them or all of them have shared their technology with Iran.

Iran has also improved their long range anti-ship missiles which are based on land including some of the islands off the Iranian coast. These include the Seersucker HY-2 and CSS-C3. They have also improved their shorter range cruise missiles by importing the Chinese made C801/802. These missiles while having a shorter range then the Seersucker, possess greater accuracy, stealthier due to their lower cruising altitude and have a much faster setup time. The C802 was successfully used by Hezbollah during the war in 2006, striking an Israeli warship in the Mediterranean. They also developed the ship based Nasr-2 anti-ship missile.

When all the information is taken into account of Iran’s capabilities and strategic objectives in case of war, we could find Iran using their missiles to severely damage US warships and supply ships, or at the very least, keep them a certain distance from Iranian waters. The vulnerability of US ships to Iranian anti-ship missiles “extends throughout the Persian Gulf, into the Gulf of Oman, and in nearby waters of the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea.” (Cordesman, Toucan, Wilner, pg14) Iran could also be expected to launch missiles at US bases throughout the Gulf, including ports in Kuwait, UAE, and Bahrain where the US Fifth Fleet Headquarters are located as well as a number of US warships, mainly mine sweepers and coastal patrol ships (PC). It should be assumed however, that in the case of US initiating an attack on Iran, all US warships will be out to sea leaving these ports vacant. While vacant in regards to US warships, keep in mind that many of these ports are not solely military. They are also major commercial shipping ports such as Jebel Ali located near Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. In addition to Iran striking US bases, ships, and ports, Iran would also strike offshore oil platforms, petroleum facilities, tankers and anything else that would cause economic pain. Then there is the very real possibility of Iran striking Israel with its ballistic missiles. This of course would be on top of Iran instructing Hezbollah to conduct operations against Israel that would make the casualties suffered during the 2006 war seem minimal.

Iranian long range missiles might not be accurate; however, Iran wouldn’t necessarily be looking to hit any particular target in Israel. Military installations, residential areas, not matter, as long as whatever is hit causes a considerable amount of damage and casualties. When the question of Iran potentially hitting Israel and the GCC countries with missiles was posed to Molavi, he suggested “that Iran would do so, only if it was believed that Israel or the GCC countries were involved.” He goes on to say “that it is possible Iran would launch missiles at Israel, but they would keep it to a minimum because Iran would be reluctant to escalate the war.” If we are to take Iran’s rhetoric seriously, retaliation by Iran via its missiles can be expected at the onset of war. Iran understands the United States capabilities to take out many of their missile platforms within the first weeks if not days of the war. Iran’s retaliation depends heavily on their missile capabilities and it would be foolish of them to let the US take that capability away without ever firing them off.

When discussing Iran’s military capabilities most of the focus is on the IRGC and what there mode of operation would be in the case of an attack. As a military planner, the IRGC should be the major focus in any confrontation with Iran for these are the most loyal, best trained forces in the Islamic Republic. However, while it might be easy to forget, Iran does have conventional forces as well. They include a
branch of the army, navy, and air force that is separate from the IRGC. How would Iran use these forces and what are their capabilities?

According to Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iran’s conventional army, navy, and air force are severely limited in capability, but are strong enough to create major problems for any invasion. They are unlikely to win any major military clash if the US intervened decisively to defeat them.” (Cordesman, pg1) We need to keep in mind however, short of some special force operations, the US would be reluctant to send ground forces into Iran; any attack on Iran would be carried out mostly by air and sea. Assuming this is accurate, the use of the Iranian conventional army would be limited to defensive purposes, primarily on the borders and guarding various installations within Iran.

Also according to Cordesman, “like the IRGC, Iran’s conventional forces have significant capabilities for irregular warfare and to threaten, intimidate, and conduct asymmetric operations and wars of attrition.” (Cordesman, pg1) This belief is not widely held though, when the questions of Iran’s conventional forces were posed to Afshin Molavi, he responded that “Iran’s conventional forces can be counted on to defend the homeland; however, they cannot be counted on to carry out asymmetric attacks.” He argues that the conventional forces do not receive the same training, equipment, and loyalty from the mullahs that the IRGC receive. Part of the reason is the mullahs still look at the conventional forces as leftovers from the time of the Shah and of course the IRGC is a product of the revolution. When it comes to the loyalty of the conventional forces to the Islamic regime, it should be noted that some of them are probably resentful for being treated as second class to the IRGC, secondly, it has been reported that a good number of the conventional forces had shown loyalty to the Green Movement during the uprisings that took place in 2009. This loyalty to the Green Movement was mentioned by Molavi as well.

Regardless of their loyalty, it would be beneficial for the US to take into account Iran’s conventional force capabilities. According to Cordesman, “most key equipment in its army, navy, and air force are obsolete or relatively low quality imports.” (Cordesman, pg1) The makeup for Iran’s conventional forces is as follows: 350,000 in the army, 18,000 in the Navy/Marines, 35,000 in the air force, and about 40,000 paramilitary. In the same report that Cordesman suggests Iran’s conventional forces have significant capability to carry out asymmetric attacks, he also states that they are made up of “mostly poorly trained conscripts.” This raises red flags in that how can a force be capable and effective in carrying out asymmetric attacks when they are poorly trained? Yes, we have seen poorly trained forces carry out asymmetric attacks against the US throughout Iraq and Afghanistan, but they were only effective in creating casualties, not in defeating or removing US forces from the battlefield. Furthermore, these asymmetric attacks were conducted against ground troops with the majority of them being IED’s placed on the side of the road. Considering US attacks on Iran would be carried out by mostly air and sea, any asymmetric battle plan would need to be more sophisticated than just planting IED’s on the side of roads. Thus, these sophisticated attacks will need to be carried out by well trained personnel.

Iran’s conventional army does possess tanks, armored personnel carriers, and small amounts of self-propelled artillery weapons, but many of these are outdated and would be of little use anyway because again, the US would be reluctant to send in ground troops. The one weapon that Iran’s army could bring to the fight and the US should take note of is Iran’s updated and modified man-portable surface to air and anti-ship missiles. These could threaten low flying aircraft and littoral warships. As mentioned above, Iran would mostly likely use its army for defensive purposes and border control. It is possible Iran might have some of its army personnel augment the IRGC, but the fact that the clerical regime has very little trust in these forces and knows their limited capabilities regarding weapons and training, the regime would be reluctant to use them in any mission deemed critical. There should be no surprise if Iran decided to
conceal the army’s tanks and weapons to save them from destruction, for they wouldn’t be any real threat to US forces in battle anyway.

Iran’s air force in most respects, are worse off than the army. Cordesman states “they are Iran’s weakest military element.” (Cordesman, pg3) While they have 312 combat aircraft, 40 to 60% have limited to no mission capability. Many of their planes are outdated and grounded because due to sanctions they have not been able to obtain needed parts. Similar to the army, but probable even more so, Iran’s air force would most likely not be used in any major confrontation. This is not to say Iran wouldn’t use their planes for intelligence gathering purposes or to possibly attack ships near its coast or even on Special Forces personnel if Iran obtained information on where they were operating, but the air force cannot be counted on to make much of a difference against a vastly superior force.

Iran’s regular Navy (IRIN) “lacks modern surface vessel combat capability and depends on four obsolete frigates and three obsolete corvettes from the shah’s error.” (Cordesman, pg4) Iran has recently constructed “what it calls the MOWJ class destroyer, although, in reality it is a corvette.” (ONI, pg24) They have also built more missile patrol boats and retrofitted older ships with upgraded weapon systems including their more advanced missiles. It will be interesting to see how Iran would use IRIN ships in case of war with the US. It does not take a military expert to realize Iran’s Navy would be severely handicapped against US naval power. However, with Iran’s new strategy of trying to project their Navy beyond their shores and further out to see, one cannot see how the IRIN would not be forced to confront the US Navy. In 2008, “IRIN commander Rear Admiral Sayyari stated that the IRIN will push operations further out into the Gulf of Oman and even the Indian Ocean to protect Iran’s maritime interests.” (ONI, pg25) Iran has followed through on this by sending warships to conduct anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa and more recently sending ships into the Mediterranean. While there recent strategy modifications see Iran sending IRIN ships further out to sea, the IRGCN has been given the mission of patrolling the Persian Gulf and protecting Iranian territorial waters. Under this strategy IRIN ships could be the first to confront US warships; this of course could lead to a repeat of what was seen in Operation Praying Mantis where the US Navy wiped out most of Iran’s surface fleet in a few hours during the Iran-Iraq war.

Regarding Iran’s submarine capabilities, the only major submersibles in their fleet are three Kilo class vessels. However, Iran has also purchased or built a number of midget submarines. Iran does not have the capability to launch missiles from their subs, “they are likely to use their submarines against seaborn enemy forces and commercial shipping traffic through the laying of mines and firing of torpedoes. They would also be used for reconnaissance missions and covert Special Forces insertion.” (NTI, pg1) The IRIN is in charge of operating the Kilo class subs while the IRGCN and IRIN both operate the various midget submarines. It is important to note that the coastal waters of Iran are very shallow limiting the Kilo class capabilities in these waters. Therefore, Iran operates its midget subs in coastal waters and the Kilo subs further out to sea. It would be interesting to see if Iran would attempt to have its Kilo class subs engage US warships in open waters. The most likely scenario to take place is Iran having its Kilo class subs attack US supply ships if docked or anchored in locations such as Fujairah in the UAE. These ships would be more vulnerable than a US warship underway in open waters. The midget subs would of course play a considerable role in Iran’s asymmetric battle plans.

There are reports that Iran is in the process of adding to its submarine fleet. According to the Fars News agency, “sources revealed in October 2011 that Iran is building a new semi-heavy submarine equipped with highly advanced weapons. The submarine called ‘Fateh’ (Victor) weighs 600 tons and is equipped with various types of advanced defense systems and weapons, including several kinds of torpedoes and sea mines.” (Payvand, pg1) This addition though wouldn’t necessarily alter Iran’s strategy in deploying

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their subs; Iranian submarines will have a role in any counter attack, but it will be limited due to the quantity in their fleet and the superior foe they would be up against. It should be noted however that if Iran decided they wanted to close off the Strait of Hormuz, their submarines would play a major roll.

When attempting to formulate Iran’s military response to a US attack and tying it into the hypothesis of this paper, its best to take into account a statement made by Anthony H. Cordesman. He predicts the “US could destroy all key elements of Iranian military power in virtually any scenario in a matter of weeks, if Washington had the support of Iran’s neighbors.” meaning the use of airbases etcetera. “It could inflict devastating damage in a matter of days.” (Cordesman, pg5) The question then must be asked, would Iran allow for its military to be destroyed before having the ability to carry out any extensive counter attack? The research question was focused on Iran’s response to an attack by the US solely on its nuclear facilities, Iran could of course not respond at all; meaning their military for the most part wouldn’t become victim to US firepower. However, as will be explained in greater detail later in the study, Iran not responding to an attack doesn’t seem likely. It seems more likely that Iran would in fact respond potentially leading to an escalation of war.

The last major variable which needs to be acknowledged by the US when facing possible Iranian retaliation is Iran’s ability to carry out economic and political warfare. It was already written how Iran might attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz using asymmetric warfare, but what other options do they have? First off, the initial attack by the US itself would cause oil prices to skyrocket based on speculation and fear. Iran could target oil installations and refineries throughout the Gulf on land and sea. (See Appendix for location of Gulf Oil Installations) According to Geo-Strategy Direct, “Leading Gulf Cooperation Council Arab officials and analysts have warned that a US air strike on Tehran could spark massive Iranian retaliation on the six GCC states. They said the result could be the destruction of Gulf Arab crude oil and natural gas facilities as well as refineries.” (Geo-Strategy Direct, pg7) This would cause the price of oil and gas to skyrocket further hampering any economic recovery that many nations are currently struggling to attain.

The question must be asked again, would Iran attack GCC states if the US attacked Iran? The common perception which is similar to Molavi’s response is this would all depend on what Iran perceives to be the GCC countries complicity to the US attack. The answer based on recent history should be obvious. The Iranians would likely believe, most if not all the GCC states directly or indirectly assisted the US. Why would this be the case? The State Department cables that were obtained and released by Wikileaks shows Saudi Arabia asking the US to “cut of the head of the snake” (Iran) before they are able to obtain nuclear weapons. If there was ever any doubt of Saudi Arabia tolerating an attack on Iran, this was put to rest after the cable leaks.

Secondly, we have seen over the past 18 months a major acquisition of US weapons by Saudi Arabia, UAE, and others throughout the Gulf, the most recent acquisition being bunker busting bombs by the UAE. These countries are purchasing these weapons with only one threat in mind, and that threat is Iran.

If Iran were to launch attacks against these installations, the one that needs to be mentioned according to Afshin Molavi is “Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq Plants” located in Saudi Arabia. With a capacity of producing 7 million barrels per day, the facility is the primary oil processing site for Arabian extra light and Arabian light crude oils. A successful attack on this facility would cause long term damage to Saudi Arabia and its oil production. If Iran were to retaliate according to the hypothesis of this paper, then it is a sure bet they would strike Abqaiq. Furthermore, if the US were preventing Iran from exporting oil, Abqaiq could become a priority target.

But could GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia offset any negative affects Iran has on the oil supply?
According to Prince Turki al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia “Saudi Arabia has so much (spare) production capacity- nearly 4 million barrels per day- that we could almost instantly replace all of Iran’s oil production.” (Tait, pg1) Saudi Arabia also has another option, one which they previously carried out during the first Persian Gulf War. As a precautionary measure before military action commenced in 1990-1991, “the Saudis had stored huge quantities of oil outside the warzone.” (Freedman and Karsh, pg343) There are two points that would need to be addressed before Saudi Arabia repeated history, first we are assuming that Saudi Arabia would be informed of any pending attack and done so in a time frame that allows them to remove a good amount of oil from the Persian Gulf. Secondly and more importantly, if the US were to attack Iran, they would want to do so achieving complete surprise. A major indicator for Iran of a pending US attack would be seeing the Saudis store oil outside the Gulf region. For these reasons, it is unlikely Saudi Arabia would repeat what they did during the lead up to the first Persian Gulf War.

There are other ways for Iran to cause economic damage besides cause an increase in the price of oil. Iran is known to have IRGC members located throughout the region in places such as Kuwait, Oman, and most importantly the United Arab Emirates. The UAE, particularly Dubai is considered the economic center of the Middle-East with its large amount of trade, the home of major western companies, and tourism. Dubai has a very large population of Iranians living and working there. According to Afshin Molavi, “while the majority of these Iranian expatriates own legitimate businesses and are only interested in trade and making money, it would only be natural to expect some of these companies to be nothing more than fronts operated by IRGC members and Iranian citizens loyal to the Iranian regime.” Currently the sole purpose of these shell companies and agents are to raise funds and collect intelligence. In the case of war where the US attacks Iran, it shouldn’t come as a surprise to see Iran carry out terrorist attacks on western targets throughout Dubai. This would include nightspots frequented by westerns, the major shopping districts that populate the area, and of course US military personnel.

Kidnappings of western business people may occur as well. “These actions would have a devastating effect on the UAE, by ultimately shutting down Dubai.” (Afshin Molavi) But closing the economic center of the Middle-East would have an impact not only in the UAE and the region, but also in Europe and Asia. While we focused on the UAE, the same could be applied to a lesser extent in Kuwait, Oman, and others in the region.

In addition to the economic instability that Iran would cause, they would also cause political instability. As mentioned earlier, uprisings in Bahrain this past year could be a preview of what we would see. It would be a sure bet that Iran would take advantage of large Shiite populations in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and others to cause political upheaval in their respective countries. The purpose of this would be plain old retaliation, but also Iran would try to use these uprisings as a means to put pressure on the governments to end any support for the US war effort and possibly force the countries to pressure the US into ending hostilities. This pressure could inevitably work because the one thing that worries these Kingdoms more than an Iran with nuclear weapons is a major uprising in their own country that leads to them being removed from power. Recent events in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and possibly Syria have not done anything to eliminate those fears either.

**Conclusion**

There are alternative thoughts to the ways Iran might retaliate if the US were to conduct military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. The views range anywhere from Iran using all means at its disposal to doing nothing at all. The purpose of this paper is to provide guidance on what could be expected and this is to be done by proving the hypothesis to be credible or not. Iran has closely watched US military actions in the neighboring countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. They have studied the US strategy in countering asymmetric warfare and counter insurgency. They have also noticed the debates and bickering
that occurred in Washington over the past 10 years and tried to decipher what the US government and its
population is willing to tolerate when it came to its war on terror. They have seen the US confront a
situation in Iraq that appeared to be hopeless during a time of high sectarian strife, and high casualties
among Iraqi civilians and US troops. Iran also noticed however, instead of the US pulling out when times
were bleak, the US doubled down with a surge of forces.

When trying to figure out how Iran might react to a US attack, it would behoove us to try to obtain an
understanding of Iran’s perspective of US actions in Iraq, in other words to see it through Iran’s point of
view. This is very difficult however. The common theory from many US adversaries is that they can wait
the US out; that they don’t necessarily need to fight to win, but only fight to survive. The thinking goes,
eventually the US will withdraw when the number of casualties become too much to bear on the US
population and support for the war wanes. When this theory is applied to the US Iraq war, the question
must be raised, if this was true then why did the US not pull out when the war was going horribly wrong
from 2004 to 2007 and the pressure to pull out was at its greatest? Opponents of this theory would say the
fact that the US not only stayed, but increased their troop presence proves an adversary cannot wait the
US out and Iran would see it as such when creating their own strategy in dealing with any US military
action. However, interestingly enough, others offer a different point of view which needs to be taken into
consideration. Molavi believes that Iran was not surprised that the US stayed in Iraq as long as they did,
but “they are now surprised by the fact the US had decided to pull at the end of last year.” If this is
accurate, then perhaps Iran does see the US as not having the willpower to see their missions through. The
two opposing theories on how Iran views the US withdrawal could potentially lead to extremely different
strategies in dealing with any attack.

Molavi brings up other factors about the Iranian regime that need to be taken into account as well; such as
“the Iranian regime is not suicidal, they are survivalist. They would not take any action that would
escalate the war to the point where the US would start targeting the regime.” In Molavies thinking, Iran
would retaliate, but their retaliation will be calculated and carried out via a low intensity conflict that
would drag out over time. He also makes it a point to stress that while Iran might have the capability to
retaliate by carrying out terrorist strikes in the US, they would refrain from doing so due to the reasons
mentioned above such as the avoidance of escalation. Wayne E. White, former Deputy Director, Near East
and South Asia Office, of the US State Department said something similar; “what could be perhaps more
dangerous for the entire Gulf and beyond, as well as Iraq, is that the Iranians might surprise everyone by
not striking back immediately, by biding their time and looking for a better opportunity.” (Anthony,
Seznec, pg9)

Molavi also points out that the Iranians were shocked by the ability of the US to take down the Iraqi
government in three weeks’ time when it took the Iranians eight long bloody years of war, only to fight
Iraq to a standstill. This is a point well taken, but needs to be put into perspective. The Iranians must have
been impressed with US capabilities in 2003, but it is very possible and Iranian officials have recently
made comments that suggest they no longer see the

US being as strong as they were just a few short years ago. Iran believes 10+ years of war has tired and
weakened the US military establishment. While, yes the US still has the firepower, they no longer have
the will or endurance to carry out large military operations. Secondly, the US is broke and no longer has
the economic means to fight another war. Lastly, the US population is sick of war and wants their
government to focus on internal issues such as improving the economy and creating jobs.

The IRGC, which has embedded itself in the everyday functions of the Iranian government and has seen
their influence on Iranian domestic and foreign policy grow over the years, perceive the US military and
US foreign influence to have weakened. At the same time, Iran has seen their foreign influence increase as
well as their military capabilities. Based on IRGC official comments and actions over the past few years, they can be expected to put great pressure on the Iranian regime to retaliate immediately in any case of a US attack.

Iran believes through the use of fourth generational warfare, which invokes a heavy toll on the US, Iran could end the hostilities fairly quickly in their favor. “The fourth generation of war uses all available networks-political, economic, social and military to convince the enemy’s political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly” (ONI, pg10) Fourth generational warfare also targets the population of its adversary not by bombs and missiles, but by psychological means. This is could be done by inflicting a heavy death toll on US military personnel which would be shown via the 24/7 news coverage we have come to expect.

The question is how would Iran carry out this fourth generational warfare? Being that this war would be carried out by US forces solely through attacks by air and sea, Iran cannot depend on carrying out a low intensity conflict which causes a great amount of casualties over time. This usually occurs only when the adversary has placed ground troops on foreign soil and the occupied country uses the advantage of knowing the terrain and local support to launch attacks at times of their choosing. War with the US would not offer this opportunity, Iran would need to inflict as much damage on the US in a short period of time hoping the US and perhaps its allies would ask for a truce. As mentioned earlier, Iran does have the capability to carry this out and would have too if they wanted any chance to succeed as the war would surely escalate. Iran could of course prevent an escalation by not retaliating, or by doing so covertly at a later date. But based on Iran’s military buildup, rhetoric, and perceptions of the US strategic power in the Middle-East, it would be a stretch to conclude that one, Iran would not immediately retaliate leading to an escalation, and two, Iran would not retaliate with all its might against a far superior force.

It is for these reasons I believe the hypotheses which states: “Iran’s reaction to an attack by the US would be to use all means at its disposal including their large arsenal of missiles, asymmetric warfare, regular forces, and economic/political disruption methods that would cause large amounts of devastation, casualties, economic disruption, and fear; in the hopes that the enemy would lose the support of its citizens and allies, thus forcing them to end the confrontation; Iran would use all means at its disposal to accomplish this goal rather quickly as they would try to avoid an extended conflict” is credible and has a likely chance of occurring if the United States were to commence an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

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About the Author

Michael V. Rienzi

Michael Rienzi is a Navy Reservist and holds a Masters Degree from American Military University (AMU) in Intelligence Studies with a concentration in Homeland Security.

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