

A Need for Action: Policies and Propositions on Iran

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Abstract: *In the past twenty years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has advanced its nuclear aptitude. Over this period, it has become clear that the regime seeks nuclear capability beyond what is sufficient for biomedical research or energy production. In this time, relations between the United States and Iran have become increasingly hostile. The quagmire posed in the potential for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon threatens the security of the United States and every nation-state in the region. To the present, the United States has not adopted a concrete course of action to prevent this outcome. Previous policy implementations, and their unsuccessful iterations, have represented competing ideologies. With the current situation representing a metaphorical call-to-action, the United States must adopt a definitive policy outline to counter this potential threat. Outlined as follows are the specifics of the present, in addition to four potential policies for adoption. This paper aims to foster discussion on US-Iran relations and bring further attention to possible actions aimed at combating the formation of an eventual Iranian nuclear weapons state.*

Keywords: *Iran, Nuclear Weapons, JCPOA, Regime Change.*

The United States must take concrete action to address the potential nuclear weapons threat posed by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Over the course of the past twenty years, US strategy is best analogized as a pendulum swing:

Following the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush Administration considered the maximalist option of invading Iran to address the potential risk of a nuclear weapon. At the time, the chief proponent of such force, Vice President Dick Cheney, saw the potential for the production of a nuclear weapon, and Iran's arming of terrorist factions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as a dire threat to US and regional security.¹ By 2015, with no conventional military action being taken, a policy shift from the Obama Administration resulted in the signing

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¹ Ewen MacAskill and Julian Borger, "Cheney Pushes Bush to Act on Iran." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, July 16, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jul/16/usa.iran>.

of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)² to address these risks. This swing in policy, from military force to diplomacy, remained temporary. In 2018, the Trump Administration, seeing the deal as an ineffective means to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, withdrew from the JCPOA³ – leading to the effective collapse of Iranian nuclear compliance.⁴

Since the 2018 withdrawal, Iran has enhanced its nuclear facilities, stockpiled enriched uranium, and continued its development of ballistic missile technology. The initial goal of the 2015 JCPOA was to prolong the time it would take for Iran to make a nuclear weapon – estimated to be fifteen years. With these restrictions depleted, current estimates hold that the regime can manufacture a warhead in well under a year.⁵

Today, Iranian diplomats refuse to meet with US negotiators,⁶ Iranian leaders threaten the destruction of the US and its allies,⁷ and Iran's scientists advance development of its ballistic missile technology and nuclear expertise.⁸ According to the 2022 Threat Assessment of the DNI,

² "Iran Deal." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/iran-deal>.

³ Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned." The New York Times. The New York Times, May 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

⁴ Kiyoko Metzler, David Rising, and Edith M. Lederer, "Un Agency Says Iran Is Violating All Restrictions of Nuclear Deal." Defense News. Defense News, June 5, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2020/06/05/un-agency-says-iran-is-violating-all-restrictions-of->

⁵ Laurence Norman, "U.S. Sees Iran's Nuclear Program as Too Advanced to Restore Key Goal of 2015 Pact." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, February 3, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sees-irans-nuclear-program-as-too-advanced-to-restore-key-goal-of-2015-pact-11643882545>

⁶ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Top Diplomat Says U.S. Must Show Goodwill Gesture for Direct Talks." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, February 19, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-top-diplomat-says-2015-nuclear-deal-revival-depends-us-political-decision-2022-02-19/>.

⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "Iran Vows 'Revenge' on Anniversary of General's Killing in U.S. Air Strike." January 3, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/israel-iran-hackers-nuclear-soleimani/31637071.html>.

⁸ The Associated Press. "Iran Says It Fired 16 Ballistic Missiles during Annual Drill." ABC News. ABC News Network, December 24, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iran-fired-16-ballistic-missiles-annual-drill-81930349>.

it appears Iran has not decided whether or not to build a nuclear weapon, yet is increasingly capable of doing so, should it make that decision.⁹

These proliferations of nuclear capability, the means to launch nuclear weapons *via* ballistic missiles, and repeated acts and calls for hostility, represent an existential threat to the US and its allies. This threat of potential nuclear war can be addressed – yet it must be done now.

The reality of this threat will be further examined in the following presentation of the “Current Situation and Future Risks.” Following this, four potential policy options will be examined: “Option I: Remove Sanctions & Withdraw from Relations,” will entail the potential for an isolationist approach to affairs with Iran. “Option II: Diplomacy,” will address the ramifications and potential to negotiate for the cessation of nuclear proliferation. “Option III: Targeted Strike to Destroy Nuclear Infrastructure,” will examine a more robust, yet minimized, variant of military confrontation. This proposal will address the *pros* and *cons* of such force – especially in such an isolated variety. Lastly, “Option IV: Invasion to Force Regime Change,” will include a detailed discussion of historical precedent, the potential for great *costs*, and, ultimately, the recommended route to *definitively* solve the existential crisis posed by Iran’s nuclear proliferation.

In essence, it is clear that Iran is paving the way for the development of a nuclear weapon. These Options present varying and different ways to deal with this threat. Ultimately, however, the decision to act *definitively* – as proposed in Option IV – will become necessary:

The Current Situation and Future Risks

⁹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community §. With Information as of January 2022 (n.d.).

Since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iranian compliance has faltered. Under the agreement, Iran's uranium enrichment was capped at 20 percent.¹⁰ This figure represents the amount necessary to produce energy and conduct biomedical research. Enrichment beyond this percentage serves no purpose, other than working toward weapons-grade levels. Today, the Iranian regime enriches uranium up to 60 percent.¹¹ While this figure may or may not constitute the ability to produce a nuclear weapon, even if 60 percent enrichment itself is insufficient, Iranian capability is increasing. In the future, Iran will be able to exceed 60 percent. According to Norman Roule, a former CIA Official, "[60 percent enrichment is] about 99 percent of the enrichment work required to produce weaponization-status uranium, and some believe that 60 percent is actually sufficient for a nuclear weapon itself."¹²

Under the JCPOA – Iran was limited to installing a maximum of 5,060 of the oldest and least efficient centrifuges.¹³ As of 2021, Iran has installed more efficient centrifuges – including IR-4 and IR-6 models.¹⁴ With these centrifuges, Iran has the capacity to enrich uranium faster and with a higher yield than 60 percent. If no action is taken on part of the US to limit these

¹⁰ "Fact Sheets & Briefs." The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance | Arms Control Association. Arms Control Association, March 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

¹¹ Kelsey Davenport, "Iran's Nuclear Growth Puts Deal at Risk ." Arms Control Association. Arms Control Association, December 2021. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-12/news/irans-nuclear-growth-puts-deal-risk#:~:text=The%20stockpile%20of%20uranium%20enriched,kilograms%2C%20up%20from%2010%20kilograms.&text=In%20January%202021%2C%20Iran%20began,to%20compliance%20with%20the%20JCPOA>.

¹² "Iran Expert Norman Roule on Escalating Tensions with Tehran - 'Intelligence Matters' Transcript." CBS News. CBS Interactive, November 3, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-expert-norman-roule-on-escalating-tensions-with-tehran-intelligence-matters/>.

¹³ "Iran Nuclear Deal: What It All Means." BBC News. BBC, November 23, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655#:~:text=Under%20the%20JCPOA%2C%20the%20country,implementation%20day%22%20in%20January%202016>.

¹⁴ Frederik Voûte and Valerie Lincy, "Beyond the IR-1: Iran's Advanced Centrifuges and Their Lasting Implications." *Iran Watch: Publications*, November 22, 2021

enrichment capabilities, it appears that Iran has, or will soon acquire, the means to produce a nuclear weapon.

These actions are indicative of nuclear hedging. Ariel Levite, the preeminent scholar in this field, defined this principle as, “a national strategy of maintaining, or at least appearing to maintain, a viable option for the relatively rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons based on an indigenous technical capacity to produce them within a relatively short time frame ranging from several weeks to a few years.”¹⁵ This strategy can be used to posture. In doing so, a country maintains leverage in diplomacy, disputes, or defense. In the case of Iran, the regime is able to maintain supremacy in any negotiations with the US and places itself with the capacity to advance its nuclear capability over time. With Iran being less than a year away from constructing a nuclear weapon, hedging appears to be paying off. According to Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran in *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, “Ultimately, the nature of the Iranian nuclear challenge has changed, and the approach for dealing with this challenge must do likewise.”¹⁶

Although the ultimate intentions of Iran – whether or not the regime will decide to manufacture a nuclear weapon – are largely unknown, what is known is simple. Since the 2018 US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the regime consistently moved to further its centrifuge efficiency and resulting uranium enrichment. Even without mention of the enhanced ballistic missile capabilities, it appears that Iran has made itself ready to produce such a weapon, if it so desires. To maintain the status-quo would be to allow for the further continuation of these actions

¹⁵Ariel Levite, “Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited.” *International Security* 27, no. 3 (2003): 69. <https://doi.org/10.1162/01622880260553633>.

¹⁶ Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran, “Living with Nuclear Hedging: The Implications of Iran's Nuclear Strategy.” *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 687–707. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12337>.

– in the form of a developed and modernized nuclear program – capable of producing, at minimum, one nuclear weapon.

This situation could be analogized to the historical phenomenon of North Korea, in which the regime employed the same strategy of nuclear hedging. According to a study by Andrea Berger, the US sanctions and diplomatic efforts at the time were akin to a “house without foundations.”¹⁷ These ineffective measures lead to the gradual development of its nuclear program and resulting weaponry. If such precedent gives any clue to the future, this ongoing approach may not be in the best interest of the US, as it will not stop Iran from ultimately producing a nuclear weapon.

Option I: Remove Sanctions & Withdraw from Relations

This option represents the maintaining of the status-quo, if for a few alterations. The professed ‘withdraw from relations’ approach would need to coincide with the removal of all sanctions on Iran – a pseudo-isolationist approach. This is due, in part, to the Iranian regime viewing the ongoing sanctions as the major obstacle to further negotiations and the easing of hostilities.¹⁸ If these attitudes are accurate – which in on itself would constitute a great leap of faith – the removal of sanctions and relations entirely would prompt Iran to reduce its nuclear enrichment and limit the proliferation of its nuclear infrastructure. As noted, by failing to remove these sanctions or to continue on in hostilities with Iran, the nuclear threat posed will continue to grow. If Iran would come to see the US, and by virtue its allies, as non-hostile, this option could

¹⁷ Andrea Berger, “A House Without Foundations: The North Korea Sanctions Regime and Its Implementation.” *The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies: Whitehall Report*, no. 3-17 (June 2017): 1

¹⁸ Parisa Hafezi and John Irish, “U.S. Reluctance to Lift Sanctions Main Hurdle to Reviving 2015 Pact, Iran Official Says.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, December 5, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/us-reluctance-lift-all-sanctions-main-obstacle-reviving-2015-pact-iranian-2021-12-05/>.

bring about the desired outcome. As such, if this outline were to be actualized, all immediate relations and penalties would need to cease.

On face-value, this approach seems rational. The age-old adage, ‘why should the US concern itself with problematic foreign relations’ was popular throughout the post-WWI period. While this strategy ultimately ceased in the face of WWII, it can be argued that US isolationist tendencies were the correct route for the country to follow. In theory, if by removing sanctions and ‘minding its own business,’ the US could halt the threats against its interests, why risk escalation or another disastrous cycle of foreign policy debacle?

This approach, even with these stated alterations and motifs, remains problematic. Operating in a negative context – withdrawing and removing sanctions – has a cost. The US would surrender its ability to stop the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear program. Likewise, these assumptions – that Iran would reduce its uranium enrichment and limit nuclear proliferation – rely entirely upon the premise that US behavior is near sole responsible for Iran’s foreign and international policies. This premise, at best, is only partially accurate. There is no guarantee that Iran would halt the ongoing buildup of its nuclear capability, and even fewer indications that Iran would slow its ballistic missile development and its hostilities with US allies in the region.¹⁹ Such ‘assets,’ as the regime sees these actions, allows for a greater sphere of influence in combating the Saudi Arabian and Israeli regional powers, beyond even any deterrence against the West.²⁰ As such, the threat posed to our regional allies – namely Israel and much of Europe – is unlikely to subside. These potential consequences represent a steep cost for this option.

¹⁹ Release: Bipartisan group of 21 members raise concerns about potential Iran deal. *PRESS RELEASES*, March 10, 2022. The United States House of Representatives. <https://gottheimer.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=3074>.

²⁰ The Editors. “Iran and Saudi Arabia Battle for Supremacy in the Middle East.” *World Politics Review*, February 9, 2022. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27875/israel-iran-saudi-arabia-battle-for-supremacy-in-the-middle-east>.

Although this is listed as one of the four possible options, and despite sanctions still being in effect, it remains largely current policy. Since the 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA under the Trump Administration, the Biden Administration has maintained the status-quo. Although talks are ongoing, or are being attempted using the Russian Federation as a mediator, no concrete or even tentative agreement has been reached. Over the past four years, we have seen the fruits of this strategy. Iran has increased uranium enrichment, advanced ballistic missile technology, and there are ongoing threats and hostilities. To put simply, it has not worked and cannot be misconstrued to be an effective outline for the future. To continue this policy would leave the potential for history to repeat itself in the form of the successful nuclear hedging example performed by North Korea. Even in face of several alterations – namely removing sanctions – the consequences, the continuance of Iran’s actions, would be unacceptable to US security and interests. As such, this option is perhaps the worst possible route for the US to pursue, as there is no indication that any of the immediate, or future, nuclear threats would subside as a result.

Option II: Diplomacy

In contrast to the more isolation-minded approach expressed previously, *Option II* represents a swing back toward diplomacy. Although the current situation with Iran represents four years of noncompliance and hostility, an international agreement could alleviate many of the threats posed by the regime.

Although the original JCPOA was controversial, a result of its failure to address ballistic missile and terrorism threats, the deal did regulate and/or limit Iran’s nuclear capabilities. It placed a limiting centrifuge efficiency metric, capped uranium enrichment, and required international inspection of Iranian nuclear facilities. These constraints were logically sound. If

such a deal could be reinstated, or renegotiated in more favorable terms, would this represent the best policy option? Even if not based upon the pretenses of the previous JCPOA agreement, it appears that Iran is willing to come to the table. This hypothesis has been tested – being evidenced by ongoing talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia – in addition to conglomerate and separate negotiations with the Russian Federation and other European world powers.²¹

To answer this question, it is important to address Iran’s ultimate motivation. Although it is unclear as to if Iran has come to a conclusion on whether or not to manufacture a nuclear weapon, in face of the current situation, Iran is undeniably ‘biding its time’ by gradually increasing its nuclear capabilities. This lack of a clear decision leaves the potential to influence the mindset of the regime through negotiation. On the contrary, such nuclear hedging could be more indicative of Iran’s ultimate motivations – the creation of a nuclear weapon – if such forms of diplomacy are unsuccessful, or regardless.

While this policy could be pursued, the reality is that a new deal would appear dramatically different to its predecessor. In 2015, when the JCPOA was signed, Iran’s nuclear capabilities were radically less developed than they are today. The point of the deal was to lengthen the time it would take for Iran to make a nuclear weapon. Today, the same deal would be effectively pointless. US negotiators currently see Iran’s nuclear program as being too advanced to restore the goals of the JCPOA.²² This is evidenced in Iran having the ability to make a nuclear weapon in less than a year.²³ There can be no return to the JCPOA. At best, the diplomatic option can only provide a new agreement, if anything.

²¹ “Saudi Arabia Hopes to Reach Agreement with Iran - Crown Prince.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 3, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-hopes-reach-agreement-with-iran-crown-prince-2022-03-03/>.

²² Laurence Norman, “U.S. Sees Iran's Nuclear Program as Too Advanced to Restore Key Goal of 2015 Pact.” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company

²³ Ibid.

Following the Iranian presidential election of 2021, a different negotiating team arrived in Vienna with additional demands to the JCPOA and an offer of fewer concessions than its predecessors.²⁴ The regime demands the immediate easing of all US sanctions prior to resuming formal talks.²⁵ All current negotiations – if such a term can correctly describe what is ongoing – are being conducted by the Russian Federation, rather than any US team. This, taking into account the current war in Ukraine in which the US is providing arms support to fight Russia, makes the potential for success unlikely.

This debacle is not the only issue with negotiations. Following the 2015 JCPOA, Iran continued to advance both its ballistic missile technology and its funding of terrorist groups across the region. While these stipulations were not included in the JCPOA itself, the continual alleged violation of international law through Iran's testing of ballistic missiles – missiles designed predominantly for use in delivering atomic warheads – represent a clear antagonism to any form of agreement made to limit nuclear capability.²⁶ Further, the funding and sponsorship of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza and the West Bank, various terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East – including its internal Islamic Revolutionary Guard –²⁷ remain undeniable evidence of Iran's continued goal to combat US and allied interests well beyond the time a formal agreement would be reached. Asked

²⁴Barbara Slavin, "Iran Offers Less for More as Vienna Talks Stall." Atlantic Council, December 6, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-offers-less-for-more-as-vienna-talks-stall/>.

²⁵Joe Gambrell, "Negotiations to Revive Iran Nuclear Deal on 'Pause' after Russia Demands Sanctions Relief." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, March 11, 2022. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/negotiation-to-revive-iran-nuclear-deal-on-pause-after-russia-demands-sanctions-relief>.

²⁶Farnaz Fassihi and Jane Arraf, "Missiles Fired from Iran Hit near U.S. Consulate Site in Iraq." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 13, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/13/world/asia/iran-missiles-us-consulate-iraq.html>.

²⁷Louis Charbonneau, "Iran's October Missile Test Violated U.N. Ban: Expert Panel." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, December 16, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-missiles-un-exclusive/irans-october-missile-test-violated-u-n-ban-expert-panel-idUSKBN0TY1T920151216>.

simply, is an agreement truly possible if, by all historical precedence, hostilities are guaranteed to go on?

In a similar act of hostility, Iran has recently taken action to pressure the US into further concessions *via* a show of force. In March of 2022, Iran launched over a dozen missiles to sites surrounding the US Consulate in Iraq. Scapegoating the attack as an affront to “the strategic center of the Zionist conspiracies in [Iraq],”²⁸ this feat represents a further power manipulation against the US. A basic analysis of this, when coupled with the insisted and continual US reliance on Russia to act as a mediator, shows Iran holding *all* of the negotiating chips, while acting presumptuous with and baiting the current US administration.

In this context, to engage in talks of diplomacy, is to give up entirely. Any negotiation including Russia is, or should rationally be, a non-starter. Similarly, any Iranian preconditions to resuming diplomacy, such as the easing of sanctions, jeopardize any form of remaining leverage held by the US. If diplomacy were to resume, the necessary condition required must include individual talks between the two states and a limit on ballistic missile capacity. Iran must recognize that there will be a requirement to downgrade its centrifuge technology, its uranium enrichment percentage, and its overt hostilities in matters of negotiation. This, although logical and the only viable step toward a mutually beneficial conclusion, will simply not occur. Thus, as it currently stands, the Iranian refusal to meet with US diplomats, its acts contrary to good faith, and its use of a totalitarian state as a conduit leave any hope at a substantive agreement laughable. As such, it appears that pursuing this option would leave Iran with the ability to build a nuclear weapon – an unacceptable outcome.

²⁸ Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Iran § (2019).

Option III: Targeted Strike to Destroy Nuclear Facilities & Capabilities

Prior to such a discussion on explicit military action, it is important to recognize the effect that Iran developing a nuclear weapon would act as a catalyst for – *why* such a policy is needed. The proliferation of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, the likely outcome, remains among the greatest strategic, and security, concerns for the US, its European allies, and all nation-states in the region. The destruction caused by such an event can be easily compared to similar instances that have already occurred:

In response to the construction of nuclear weapons by India, Pakistan developed its own nuclear weapons program – ultimately culminating in the countries developing 156 and 165 bombs respectively.²⁹ This proliferation has led to the potential for nuclear war on several instances – most recently occurring in 2019, following an alleged Pakistani terrorist suicide bombing on a police barracks in India, which led to several airstrikes and eventual threats of nuclear attack and reprisal.³⁰ Similarly, in response to the decades of North Korean nuclear weapons stockpile and continual threats of destruction, an ‘overwhelming’ amount – 71 percent – of South Koreans now wish to develop their own nuclear weapons.³¹ While this appeal can likely be contained, and the current relationship between India and Pakistan is not one of immediate annihilation, if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons in the Middle East, there is not even the slightest of guarantees that the Saudis, the Emirates, and others would not respond in similar fashion. This much has been explicitly stated by the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince –

²⁹ Nuclear weapons by country 2022. Accessed April 7, 2022.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/nuclear-weapons-by-country>.

³⁰ Jeffrey Lewis, “‘Night of Murder’: On the Brink of Nuclear War in South Asia.” The Nuclear Threat Initiative. NTI, March 28, 2022. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/night-murder-brink-nuclear-war-south-asia/>.

³¹ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “South Koreans Overwhelmingly Want Nuclear Weapons to Confront China and North Korea, Poll Finds.” The Washington Post. WP Company, February 22, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/21/south-korea-nuclear-weapons/>.

“without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we would follow suit as soon as possible.”³²

Consequently, to avoid this outcome, a total destruction of nuclear capability – including facilities, centrifuges, and uranium stores – is of the absolute necessity.

As discussed, it appears that neither inaction nor diplomacy will achieve the desired policy outcome. The desired outcome – an end to the nuclear threat posed by the Iranian regime – can only be achieved *via* military action. This unfortunate reality is a direct result of both the pendulum swing of US action on Iran, and the Iranian disregard of US influence. In this case, we will examine the policy option of destroying any and all Iranian nuclear capabilities.

If achieved, the destruction of said means would accomplish two things: (i) the crippling of Iranian nuclear infrastructure, potentially indefinitely, and; (ii) the sending of a decisive message to Iran and the world that the US will not tolerate nuclear proliferation among rogue nations.

The US has the potential to effectively denuclearize Iran through various means. One option could be reminiscent of the previous Stuxnet computer virus. Developed and conducted as a joint operation between US intelligence and the Israeli Mossad/Unit 8200, the virus led to the covert destruction of 984 uranium enriching centrifuges, which constituted a 30 percent decrease in enrichment efficiency.³³ This virus worked so efficiently, that the gradual destruction of centrifuges went unnoticed for years, prior to its eventual discovery. If such an option were to be employed again, the US would, in theory, have the ability to destroy *all* centrifuges simultaneously rather than in a slow and covert manner.

³² “Saudi Arabia Pledges to Create a Nuclear Bomb If Iran Does.” BBC News. BBC, March 15, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43419673>.

³³ Michael Holloway, “Stuxnet Worm Attack on Iranian Nuclear Facilities.” Stanford Coursework. Stanford University, July 16, 2015. <http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2015/ph241/holloway1/>.

While this specific idea could achieve a destruction of centrifuges, it would not be the most practical in terms of destroying *all* major nuclear capabilities. In addition, while it has exhibited a successful historical precedent, there is no guarantee that a similar virus could be employed this time around. This is due to reports of Iran responding to Stuxnet by strengthening its cyber capabilities to disrupt or inhibit enemy communication systems³⁴ while working to defend its own mechanisms. If these countermeasures have truly strengthened the Iranian facilities, they could make this approach impractical, at best. Likewise, the potential remains for Iran to simply buy more centrifuges on the international market.

As such, in order to have the best probability of success in destroying not only the centrifuges but *all* major nuclear capabilities, the US would have to employ a much more overt methodology – a combination of military air and drone strikes. This would constitute an air campaign aimed at nuclear infrastructure. The use of such air power would represent the most effective way to achieve denuclearization without deploying US ground forces.³⁵ This would work to limit the human cost of the operation, while giving a more destructive edge in eventual outcome.

This outline is not without historical precedent. In 1981, the Israeli military conducted an airstrike, codenamed Operation Opera, to destroy the Osirak Nuclear Reactor in Iraq.³⁶ In a similar fashion, in 2007 the Israeli military conducted a bombing raid, codenamed Operation

³⁴ Andrea Shalal-Esa, “Iran Strengthened Cyber Capabilities after Stuxnet: U.S. General.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, January 18, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-cyber/iran-strengthened-cyber-capabilities-after-stuxnet-u-s-general-idUSBRE90G1C420130118>.

³⁵ “Good Atoms or Bad Atoms?” *Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University: The Choices Program*, n.d., 2.

³⁶ Brandon Sutter, “Operation Opera.” Stanford University, March 13, 2016. <http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2016/ph241/sutter2/>.

Outside the Box, in which 18 tons of explosives were dropped on the Deir ez-Zour nuclear facility in Syria, fully destroying the site.³⁷

Perhaps most importantly, in terms of potential retaliation, we learn the greatest insight. Following the attack in Iraq, despite severe international condemnation, there was no major outbreak of violence.³⁸ Following the attack in Syria, despite reports of the nation placing long-range missiles equipped with chemical warheads on alert,³⁹ there was never a direct counterattack. This is not to say that a similar attack on Iran would have the same result – but perhaps there are lessons to be learned from these situations. Perhaps a crippling and sudden attack acts as both a means to destroy a particular infrastructure *and* as an effective deterrent.

Although these strikes may have the potential for achieving the outlined goals, there are several drawbacks and potential contingencies. While previous examples of this type of operation were mentioned, neither were as advanced and technical as this sort of strike would have to be. Iran, having built up its nuclear program over a period of several decades, is more than likely to have distributed materials, plans, and facilities throughout its territory. According to Bruce Riedel, a former Defense Department official and current Brookings Institution analyst, “it is highly unlikely all the critical sites are known to U.S. and Western intelligence services, so parts of the program would doubtless survive, perhaps even the most critical elements.”⁴⁰

Additionally, it is likely that many of the Iranian facilities are reinforced and/or hidden deep

³⁷ Stephen Farrell, “Israel Admits Bombing Suspected Syrian Nuclear Reactor in 2007, Warns Iran.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 21, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-syria-nuclear/israel-admits-bombing-suspected-syrian-nuclear-reactor-in-2007-warns-iran-idUSKBN1GX09K>.

³⁸ Joshua Kirschenbaum, “Operation Opera: An Ambiguous Success.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 4 (December 2010): 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.3.4.3>.

³⁹ Ronen Bergman, “Wikileaks: Syria Aimed Chemical Weapons at Israel.” Ynetnews. June 14, 2011. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4056748,00.html>.

⁴⁰ Kristin Roberts, “Any U.S. Strike Might Not Destroy Iran Nuclear Sites.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, February 23, 2007. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-military/any-u-s-strike-might-not-destroy-iran-nuclear-sites-idUSN2344821820070223>.

within the earth. This would make them, potentially, resistant to even the best of non-nuclear US ‘bunker-buster’ bombs.⁴¹ In short, if such a strike were to occur according to this speculation, an unsuccessful operation could result in a major escalation of tensions.

In terms of this scenario, Iran would likely attack US and European bases throughout the Middle East, unleash its terrorist proxies – namely Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, alongside its Yemeni allies – on Israel and Saudi Arabia, and work to rapidly revamp its nuclear program from the remaining infrastructure. Because of this, this option would quickly escalate from a targeted series of strikes aimed at destroying nuclear capabilities, to a full-out war across the region. This war, being outside the scope of the original operation, would be disastrous for all parties involved. The US, believing the operation to be swift, would not be mobilized to fight a prolonged conflict – while Iran and the rest of the region would erupt in instantaneous bloodshed.

No matter what, the US would need to come to the realization that, unlike the isolated Israeli strikes, the Iranian airstrikes would have to represent a continual campaign. If a facility were to be left undamaged, in part or whole, it would have to be struck again. If additional intelligence indicated a previously unknown facility, it would have to be attacked. Likewise, this strategy becomes more akin to an aerial war than to a series of individual actions.

With the general benefits and drawbacks of this option presented, it appears that this policy would have to be backed by either a near-perfect awareness of Iranian nuclear facilities or the wherewithal to sustain a prolonged air campaign and resulting consequences. If the US is capable of such intelligence or willing to endure a prolonged military engagement, the operation

⁴¹ “Iran Nuclear Sites May Be beyond Reach of ‘Bunker Busters.’” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, January 12, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-strike/iran-nuclear-sites-may-be-beyond-reach-of-bunker-busters-idUSTRE80B0WM20120112>.

might be successful. Aside from the potential to ignite the Middle East into sudden violence, nearly all of Iran's leverage would be diminished either immediately or gradually over time. On the other hand, if the operation were to be a failure, a direct result of either of these two requisites lacking, the US would have brought itself into its third short-sighted war in a period of two decades.

This option has the potential to work similarly to historical examples. However, it leaves open far too much room for failure. This represents a high level of uncertainty.

Option IV: Invasion to Force Regime Change

Today, the actions taken by Iran – the increased enrichment of uranium, ballistic missile advancement, and threats of destruction – are no longer a mere game of ‘chicken,’ they are now akin to a mad dog running loose. Iran's strategy of nuclear hedging has led to this paradigm. In previously identifying the flaws in the status-quo, in pseudo-isolationism, and in diplomacy, what is left? It appears that the policy option most likely to alleviate the threat of Iran's emergence as a nuclear-weapons state, is one of invasion to force regime change.

I will not pretend that the prospect of regime change is one of great historical success – it is not. An overwhelming amount of research has shown that regime change rarely succeeds in producing improved economic conditions, developing lasting democracy, or promoting more stable relations to advance US interests.⁴² The US has repeatedly failed in its attempts to achieve these goals – most notably, and recently, being in Afghanistan. Yet, perhaps counterintuitively, an actual success in regime change would be nothing more than an idealized outcome – not the actual goal. If the strategy of *Option III* was to destroy all nuclear capacity, this option would

⁴² Benjamin Denison, “Opinion | Regime Change Rarely Succeeds. When Will the U.S. Learn?” The Washington Post. WP Company, January 9, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/09/regime-change-rarely-succeeds-when-will-us-learn/>.

accomplish that and more. A new, more friendly government, would simply be an added bonus to the entire destruction of both nuclear capacity and the governmental infrastructure capable of retaliation.

Before this can be endorsed, it is important to recognize the inherent problems involved in any potential invasion, beginning with geography. According to the intelligence firm Stratfor, “Iran is a fortress. Surrounded on three sides by mountains and on the fourth by the ocean [which makes it] extremely difficult to conquer.”⁴³ Any sort of incursion would place US troops at a distinctive disadvantage, as such geographic limitations would make it difficult to mobilize troops en-masse, which would be needed to physically occupy the country.

Beyond physical limitations, Iran is well-equipped with defensive measures. According to Hadi Ajili and Mahsa Rouhi in *Iran’s Military Strategy*, Iran maintains the use of effective mobile and fixed air defense systems, including the new Seveom-e-Khordad defense system.⁴⁴ This system, in particular, was used to shoot down the Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk US reconnaissance drone in June of 2019.⁴⁵ This drone, which costs around 176 million USD per unit, flies above 60,000 feet, making it extraordinarily difficult to shoot down. According to Amy Zegart, a fellow at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute of International Studies, “the fact that Iranians were able to shoot [the drone] down shows that they have some pretty significant capabilities ... [signaling] that Iran is more capable than we might have assumed.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Zachary Keek, “Why America Should Never Even Think about Invading Iran.” *The National Interest*. The Center for the National Interest, March 13, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/why-america-should-never-even-think-about-invading-iran-180088>.

⁴⁴ Hadi Ajili, “Iran’s Military Strategy.” Essay. In *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy December 2019-January 2020* 61, edited by Mahsa Rouhi, 6th ed., 61:139–52. IISS, 2019.

⁴⁵ Tara Law, “Iran Shoots down U.S. Drone: What to Know about the RQ-4 Global Hawk.” *Time*. Time, June 21, 2019. <https://time.com/5611222/rq-4-global-hawk-iran-shot-down/>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Given this, if the US were to launch an air campaign, it is likely that there would be more aircraft losses than anticipated and the operation would cost more than simple fuel and munitions.

According to the DIA Iran Military Power Report of 2019, although Iran lacks a modern air force, “Iran has embraced ballistic missiles as a long-range strike capability to dissuade its adversaries in the region – particularly the United States ... from attacking.”⁴⁷ These missiles, which represent the largest stockpile in the region, have been produced to strike both short and long range targets. In terms of defending against invasion, Iran would likely deploy its most accurate variant – the Fateh-110 SRBM⁴⁸, which would be used to effectively strike US troop transports and supply lines.

In terms of direct-contact defense, Iran has employed a guerrilla strategy aimed at preventing access to the country through maritime routes. The core of this strategy, aside from the previously mentioned missile deterrents, is composed of “fast attack craft (FAC) and fast inshore attack craft (FIAC), naval mines, [and] submarines,”⁴⁹ according to the DIA Iran Military Power Report of 2019. These mechanisms would work to envelop US battleships and carriers – acting as an effective deterrent and retardation for troop deployment. This strategy mirrors the findings of the Millennium Challenge of 2002 (MC02) – a major war-game operation held by the US to simulate a war with Iran. In the exercise, and according to a report, a simulated Iran “unleashed a barrage of missiles from ground-based launchers, commercial ships ... [and] swarms of speedboats loaded with explosives launched kamikaze attacks ... [which resulted in US forces being] quickly overwhelmed, and 19 U.S. ships were sunk, including [an aircraft]

⁴⁷ Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance 2019 § (2019). 30.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 32.

carrier.”⁵⁰ This represents a defense plan built on empirical analysis and successful historical precedent – making it a formidable opponent to any likely route of US, or other, invasion.

Along with defense mechanisms and strategy, Iran maintains a standing military of over 500,000 personnel. The military is largely split into the Islamic Republic of Iran Ground Force (IRIGF) – ~350,000 personnel – and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Force (IRGCGF) – ~150,000 personnel.⁵¹ The ground forces are equipped with ~1900 tanks, ~2600 armored vehicles, ~2900 towed artillery, and thousands of additional rocket launchers and small-arms.⁵² As such, the Iranian infantry represents a sizable and decently armed force of combatants, who would work to fight US ground forces during a potential invasion. This highlight of strategies, weaponry, and military personnel is not to say that an invasion would not be successful, but it is to emphasize the logistics that make this sort of operation more complex than similar instances.

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq represents such a conflict against a military similar in scale – being estimated at ~400,000.⁵³ Despite this, according to Jonathon Romaneski of The Ohio State University, “within only twenty-one days’ time [Iraq’s army] dissipated in the face of an invasion force just over [sic] half its size.”⁵⁴ Although the war eventually ended in debacle, the initial invasion represented one of the US military’s greatest successes following the second

⁵⁰ Micah Zenko, “Millennium Challenge: The Real Story of a Corrupted Military Exercise and Its Legacy.” *War on the Rocks*. Texas National Security Review, November 5, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/11/millennium-challenge-the-real-story-of-a-corrupted-military-exercise-and-its-legacy/>.

⁵¹ *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance 2019* § (2019). 72-74.

⁵² *Ibid*, 75.

⁵³ Sharron Otterman, “Iraq: Iraq’s Prewar Military Capabilities.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2005. <https://www.cfr.org/background/iraq-iraqs-prewar-military-capabilities>.

⁵⁴ Jonathon Romaneski, “The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 16 Years Later.” *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*. The Ohio State University, March 1, 1970. https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/march-2013-us-invasion-iraq-10-years-later?language_content_entity=en.

World War. In spite of this, and perhaps most importantly, it must be recognized that, unlike any potential Iran invasion, the US was able to deploy troops with ease. Although initial plans to stage an invasion from Turkey failed, the US positioned troops in Kuwait, which shared an easily traversable border with Iraq.⁵⁵ As such, a relatively ‘small’ invasion force of only 125,000 to 200,000⁵⁶ troops were enough to fully cripple the Iraqi military and government. An invasion of Iran would likely require, at minimum, nearly double that – a result of the need for reinforcements to guard troop deployments over disadvantageous terrain.

In addition to the logistical difficulties involved in the actual movement of troops, there is the size of Iran to take into account. In similar reasoning to the concern over whether or not the US can accurately locate each of Iran’s nuclear facilities, the same is true for any occupying force to capture; the country is big. Iran is effectively 3.8 times larger, in geographic area, than Iraq.⁵⁷ Similarly, Iran has a population of about 85,000,000 people, compared to the somewhat meager about 41,000,000 people living in Iraq.⁵⁸ This presents additional difficulty in both conquering and occupying the area – a further need for far more troops than the similar invasion of Iraq.

In order to successfully maintain stability in a country, an occupation force – post-initial conflict – must have a basic ratio of troops to civilians. According to a RAND study by military analyst James Quinlivan, the bare minimum ratio to provide security for the inhabitants of an

⁵⁵ Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K Sobchak, Jeanne F Godfroy, Matthew M Zais, Matthew D Morton, and James S Powell, “Deployment of the Invasion Force.” Essay. In *The U. S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 1: Invasion - Insurgency - Civil War, 2003-2006* 1, 1:62. United States Army War College Press, 2019.

⁵⁶ “Timeline: Invasion, Surge, Withdrawal; U.S. Forces in Iraq.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, December 15, 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-usa-pullout/timeline-invasion-surge-withdrawal-u-s-forces-in-iraq-idUSTRE7BE0EL20111215>.

⁵⁷ “Size of Iraq Compared to Iran.” MyLifeElsewhere. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://www.mylifeelsewhere.com/country-size-comparison/iraq/iran>.

⁵⁸ “Country Comparison Iran: Iraq.” Worlddata.info. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://www.worlddata.info/country-comparison.php?country1=IRN&country2=IRQ>.

occupied territory, while maintaining the ability to counter an active insurgency, is 1:50.⁵⁹ This ratio was derived from previous US engagements. This figure contrasts dramatically with the amount of coalition forces deployed in the previous example of Iraq, which amounted to 6.3 per 1000.⁶⁰ According to the Brookings Institution, in order to achieve a ratio of twenty troops to one thousand people (the same equivalent as the aforementioned 1:50), Iraq would require about 450,000 troops⁶¹ – which was never the scenario. Perhaps this lack of necessary ratio is what prompted the eventual cataclysm of the 2003 Invasion of Iraq.

Given these difficulties, any form of invasion would rely on the necessary condition of a sustained air campaign – lasting the entirety of the operation until eventual occupation – as a prerequisite to any troop deployment. As the geographical and natural boundaries of the country – namely its mountainous topography⁶² – inhibits the en-masse migration of troops, such deployments are at risk of ambush and attack without having sufficient reinforcements to properly defend themselves. Similarly, in the case of an amphibious assault, Iran could opt to, or attempt to, close the Strait of Hormuz⁶³ – a strategic ‘choke point’ involving access to the Persian Gulf, where a landing would be staged and much of the global oil shipping runs through.

⁵⁹ Stephen Budiansky, “A Proven Formula for How Many Troops We Need.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, May 9, 2004. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2004/05/09/a-proven-formula-for-how-many-troops-we-need/5c6dbfc9-33f8-4648-bd07-40d244a1daa4/>; James T. Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations.” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 25, no. 1 (1995). <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1751>.

⁶⁰ Peter J.P. Krause, “Troop Levels in Stability Operations: What We Don’t Know.” *MIT Center for International Studies: Security Studies Program*, February 2007, 1–10. <https://doi.org/617.253.1965>.

⁶¹ Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction.” Brookings. Brookings Institution, May 10, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-failure-in-iraq-a-retrospective-analysis-of-the-reconstruction/>.

⁶² “The Geopolitics of Iran: Holding the Center of a Mountain Fortress.” Stratfor. RANE, December 16, 2011. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>.

⁶³ Rockford Weitz, and Tufts University. “Explainer: Could Iran Close the Strait of Hormuz?” *Navy Times*. Navy Times/Tufts University, January 8, 2020. <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2020/01/08/explainer-could-iran-close-the-strait-of-hormuz/>.

To limit these contingencies, a US air campaign would require a massive effort.

According to Anthony Cordesman, the Emeritus Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “an initial U.S. strike will require a large force allocation consisting of ... the main Bomber Force, the Suppression of Enemy Air Defense System, Escort aircraft for the protection of the Bombers, Electronic Warfare for detection and jamming purposes, [and] Fighter Sweep and Combat Air Patrol to counter any air retaliation by Iran.”⁶⁴ These forces, in order to both make troop deployment feasible and limit US casualties, would be required to bombard Iranian naval yards, missile launch and production sites, and military bases near any points of entry. This bombing campaign would serve a dual purpose – specifically being in ‘softening’ Iranian defenses to allow for the passage of US troops, along with following the route proposed in *Option III* – destroying nuclear infrastructure.

The direct consequences of this invasion – aside from the war itself – are similar to those expressed as a result of *Option III*: including Iran deploying its terrorist and militant groups across the Middle East and North Africa. US and allied targets would be bombarded – with the conflict likely stretching into multiple theatres: namely, Israel in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, *etc.*⁶⁵ This would place a direct pressure on the US to occupy the country as fast as possible – to not only achieve the destruction of the Iranian government and nuclear infrastructure but to halt hostile reinforcements leaving the area.

Additionally, and although detailed estimations are not currently available in the open-source public domain, it must be understood that the US would suffer thousands of casualties.

⁶⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, “Analyzing the Impact of Preventive Strikes Against Iran’s Nuclear Facilities.” *Center for Strategic & International Studies: Burke Chair in Strategy*, September 10, 2012, 5.

⁶⁵ Tom Perry Rami Ayyub, “Lebanon's Hezbollah and Israel Trade Fire amid Iran Tensions.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, August 6, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/rocket-sirens-sound-northern-israel-golan-heights-israeli-military-says-2021-08-06/>.

For lack of official estimates on a war with Iran, a comparison to projected casualties in the first Iraq War will be presented:

In 1990, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council projected between 20,000 to 30,000 US casualties in a direct conflict with Iraq.⁶⁶ Although eventual US casualties amounted to a fraction of these estimates – 298⁶⁷ – the importance lies within the decision making itself. Having been presented with these projections – the *cost* of the war – the Bush Administration ultimately decided to pursue Operation Desert Storm. The outcome being one of complete success is inconsequential. The fact that such casualties were deemed acceptable takes precedence.

Although such projections are currently unavailable for a war with Iran, given the aforementioned size and capability of the Iranian military, the geographical limitations involved in invasion, and the potential for fighting to ensue in multiple theatres, it is likely that such a conflict would be, at best, similar, if not far greater in scale, to the historical criteria used for the previous 20,000 to 30,000 casualty estimation.⁶⁸ It is likewise important to understand the condition of the Iraqi military at the time – one of recovery.

Although the Iraqi military fielded the aforementioned ~400,000⁶⁹ personnel, the nation was dealing with the aftermath of a devastating and costly war with Iran. It is important to

⁶⁶ “Potential War Casualties Put at 100,000: Gulf Crisis: Fewer U.S. Troops Would Be Killed or Wounded than Iraq Soldiers, Military Experts Predict.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, September 5, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-05-mn-776-story.html>.

⁶⁷ DCAS reports - Persian Gulf War casualties - desert storm. Accessed April 7, 2022. https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_gulf_storm.xhtml.

⁶⁸ “Potential War Casualties Put at 100,000: Gulf Crisis: Fewer U.S. Troops Would Be Killed or Wounded than Iraq Soldiers, Military Experts Predict.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, September 5, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-05-mn-776-story.html>.

⁶⁹ Sharon Otterman, “Iraq: Iraq's Prewar Military Capabilities.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations,

recognize that casualty estimates from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)⁷⁰ vary. This variance does not grant an opportunity to trivialize the extent of the conflict, however. It merely allows the observer to see the difference between extensive and horrendous. According to John H. Sigler in the *International Journal*, the Iran-Iraq War “ranks sixth in battle deaths among the interstate wars since 1815” – being estimated at anywhere from 500,000 to 1 million dead.⁷¹ In a similar account, the *Correlates of War Project* estimates the cost of the war to include 500,000 Iraqi and 750,000 Iranian deaths.⁷² While the exact amount of combat deaths cannot be reasonably discerned, the magnitude of the conflict – the real *cost* in human capital – is apparent. This further emphasizes that, although Iraq had a formidable military in scale, it was one that had suffered immeasurably just several years prior. Perhaps the relative *ease* of US success in the Gulf War was a direct result of these events.

The presentation of these historical casualty estimations is not to insinuate that the US would suffer casualties in the near-million range. What is implied, however, is the realistic potential for casualties beyond the aforementioned 20,000 to 30,000 range derived from the Gulf War comparison.⁷³ It must be understood that, although the Gulf War is perhaps the best comparison to base a potential US-Iran conflict on, any military exchange with Iran would involve a larger, more technologically advanced, and non-near wholly diminished by recent conflict, force. As shown by historical precedent, fighting in the geographical region surrounding

⁷⁰ Devin Kennington, Joyce Battle, Malcolm Byrne, and Magdalena Klotzbach, “Iran-Iraq War Timeline.” Edited by Kari Mirkin. The Wilson Center. The National Security Archive - The George Washington University, July 2004.

⁷¹ John H. Sigler, “The Iran-Iraq Conflict: The Tragedy of Limited Conventional War.” *International Journal* 41, no. 2 (1986): 424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40202377>.

⁷² Charles, Kurzman, “Death Tolls of the Iran-Iraq War.” The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, October 31, 2013. <https://kurzman.unc.edu/death-tolls-of-the-iran-iraq-war/>.

⁷³ “Potential War Casualties Put at 100,000: Gulf Crisis: Fewer U.S. Troops Would Be Killed or Wounded than Iraq Soldiers, Military Experts Predict.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, September 5, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-05-mn-776-story.html>.

Iran has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. While not necessarily a judgement on potential US casualties, the US must prepare itself for any eventuality. The US must be willing to sacrifice, realistically, up to several hundred thousand troops. It must ask itself – is the potential nuclear threat posed by Iran worth these *costs*?

Beyond the discussion of casualties, it is important to recognize the international impact of invading a sovereign state. Under the United Nations Charter, specifically within Articles 2(4) and 51,⁷⁴ a nation is prohibited from using force, attacking, or invading a member of the UN – of which both the US and Iran are – without the proper consent and supervision from the Security Council. Such ‘permission’ would never be granted, as Iran’s chief allies – namely China and Russia – each maintain veto power on all resolutions. Under these laws, if the US were to invade, Iran would *legally* have a right to self-defense. While these stipulations, in the case of Iranian terrorism and nuclear proliferation are laughable, the circumstances surrounding them have no bearing on codified treatise. As such, to invade would be to brazenly violate these principles of internationalism and sovereignty. While the ramifications of such an event would be limited – a result of the US additionally having veto power on the Security Council – this violation of international law would not go under the radar. Potential conflicts (whether by sanctions or other means) would likely ensue with China and Russia. These could work to inhibit US interests in the economic sphere around the globe – similar to the recent sanctioning of Russia upon its invasion of Ukraine,⁷⁵ although likely not-nearly as severe.

Nonetheless, with the chief *costs* of invading Iran presented – being the potential for severe casualties and international condemnation – the cause for action must be re-emphasized.

⁷⁴ The United Nations (U.N.), “Article 2(4)”, (1988); The United Nations (U.N.), “Article 51”, § (1945).

⁷⁵ Anton Troianovski, “Bleak Assessments of the Russian Economy.” The New York Times. The New York Times, April 18, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/world/europe/russian-economy-bleak-assessments.html>.

Given the current reality, Iran has given every indication of its ultimate desire to produce a nuclear weapon. The overt threats of hostility, the funding of terrorism across the region, and its previously expressed goals of regional hegemony, mark this outcome as an existential threat to the security of the US and its allies. In a similar scenario to the Bush Administration seeing Iraq's successful invasion of Kuwait as an unacceptable outcome, so too must the US realize that Iran's procurement of a nuclear weapon is beyond unacceptable. While the costs of this Option are most certainly marked, the costs of inaction – or failure – are vastly higher. A hostile regime with nuclear capability threatens the global balance of power and the livelihood of the peoples within. This cannot be allowed to happen.

Transitioning – even if accomplishing these goals takes several months to a year, in contrast to the three weeks it took in the second Iraq War, the route for invasion remains possible. Although the act of 'nation-building' could involve the potential for yet another decades-long quagmire, similar to the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan – both abject failures, the immediate cessation of hostilities and nuclear threats could be accomplished in relatively quick, albeit costly fashion.

Perhaps the US does not even need to engage in 'nation building.' If a total destruction of the government and all nuclear infrastructure would lead to the accomplishment of US interests, by definition, there would be a regime change. A new regime, regardless if either friendly or hostile to US interests, would be incapable of acting in any feasible manner against the power that just leveled their predecessor. Beyond acting as an occupying force in order to maintain a subject level of law and order – including the access to emergency services, food, and other vital resources – the US could withdraw after a short period. If a hostile regime were to ever regain control, the dilapidated capacity that the country would have been left in following the war,

would make it both easy and simple for the US to return and diminish any further serious threat. This strategy could be akin to the ancient Romans ‘squashing’ temporary rebellions on the outskirts of their territories. This strategy – one of simply deploying and uprooting the existing governmental infrastructure – could markedly reduce projected casualties, as the US would likely not be committing itself to a long and exacerbated conflict. Nonetheless, and importantly, if the subsequent regime was indeed friendly, the US would have gained itself a valuable regional ally – yet this prospect is not overly important.

In short, it appears that the invasion to force regime change route would indeed accomplish each of the US’ primary goals. Any potential for a further Iranian nuclear threat would be totally destroyed and the government or infrastructure available to replenish and/or further combat US interests would no longer exist. While this option would, undeniably, result in the loss of American lives and international condemnation, it appears to be the only *definite* way to ensure the safety of both the US and its allies. As such, the severe *costs* of this Option must be recognized as necessary.

In Conclusion:

The four options presented in this paper are meant to foster a future discussion and public discourse on the topic of the Iranian Nuclear Threat. Although all ultimately flawed, as is the case in any policy proposal, such options provide an insight into the various possible routes for US action. Based on the current data, it is clear that Iranian nuclear capability is increasing. The regime has employed, and maintains, a policy of nuclear hedging. When faced with these realities, the requisite conclusion that the US *must* take concrete action to prevent the formation of a nuclear-armed Iran becomes apparent.

This urgency was proved from the preface to the first section – “The Current Situation and Future Risks.” In an initial examination of policy proposals, namely from, “Option I: Remove Sanctions & Withdraw from Relations” to “Option III: Targeted Strike to Destroy Nuclear Facilities & Capabilities,” the potential for mistakes or flawed execution became clear. The risk of Iran continuing its nuclear proliferation *via* the inaction proposed in Option I, the risk of diplomacy failing – or giving Iran greater leverage – found in Option II, and the many risks involved in Option III: unintentionally becoming entangled in a full-scale war without sufficient planning, missing or failing to destroy key targeted sites, failure to prepare for Iranian countermeasures, and allowing for the rebuilding of nuclear infrastructure – prove that a *definitive* solution to the existential nuclear threat posed by Iran, cannot be found in half-measures. As discussed at length within “Option IV: Invasion to Force Regime Change,” this route is the *only* way to ensure the security and interests of the United States and its allies. It is additionally the route with the most costs.

To misconstrue the counteracting or elimination of the nuclear threat posed by Iran as something that can be done with ease is to completely ignore reality. No matter which course of action the US pursues, there will be extensive costs. Regrettably, to fully realize its goals, the US *must* pursue the most burdensome of these costs. There can be no possibility – no potential – for Iran to either continue on or rebuild its existing nuclear infrastructure. Likewise, it must be assumed that anything that can go wrong will go wrong. The extensive risks posed in Options I-III thereby nullify their effectiveness. They are metaphorical ‘band-aids’ to the problem, not solutions. However, even with inclusion of this principle, Option IV would remain a success. The US would suffer severe casualties – potentially far more than anticipated – and be condemned internationally. Yet, the US would be secure, and the threat neutralized. Although

not likely, the US may additionally gain an ally in a new-Iranian regime. This course of action remains the only proposal impervious to many of the potential mistakes of the others. As such, it is the necessary route to combat this existential crisis and *stop* the eventuality of a nuclear-armed Iran.

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