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War is the only way to stop Iran

by Joshua Muravchik

The logical flaw in the indictment of a looming “very bad” nuclear deal with Iran that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered [before Congress this month](#) was his claim that we could secure a “good deal” by calling Iran’s bluff and imposing tougher sanctions. The Iranian regime that Netanyahu described so vividly — violent, rapacious, devious and redolent with hatred for Israel and the United States — is bound to continue its quest for nuclear weapons by refusing any “good deal” or by cheating.

This gives force to the Obama administration’s taunting rejoinder: What is Netanyahu’s alternative? War? But the administration’s position also contains a glaring contradiction. National security adviser [Susan Rice declared](#) at an American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference before Netanyahu’s speech that “a bad deal is worse than no deal.” So if Iran will accept only a “bad deal,” what is President Obama’s alternative? War?

Obama’s stance implies that we have no choice but to accept Iran’s best offer — whatever is, to use Rice’s term, “achievable” — because the alternative is unthinkable.

But should it be? What if force is the only way to block Iran from gaining nuclear weapons? That, in fact, is probably the reality. Ideology is the *raison d’être* of Iran’s regime, legitimating its rule and inspiring its leaders and their supporters. In this sense, it is akin to communist, fascist and Nazi regimes that set out to transform the world. Iran aims to carry its Islamic revolution across the Middle East and beyond. A nuclear arsenal, even if it is only brandished, would vastly enhance Iran’s power to achieve that goal.

Such visionary regimes do not trade power for a mess of foreign goods. Materialism is not their priority: They often sacrifice prosperity to adhere to ideology. Of course, they need some wealth to underwrite their power, but only a limited amount. North Korea has remained dirt poor practicing its ideology of *juche*, or self-reliance, but it still found the resources to build nuclear weapons.

Sanctions may have induced Iran to enter negotiations, but they have not persuaded it to abandon its quest for nuclear weapons. Nor would the stiffer sanctions that Netanyahu advocates bring a different result. Sanctions could succeed if they caused the regime to fall; the end of communism in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and of apartheid in South Africa, led to the abandonment of nuclear weapons in those states. But since 2009, there have been few signs of rebellion in Tehran.

Otherwise, only military actions — by Israel against Iraq and Syria, and through the specter of U.S. force against Libya — have halted nuclear programs. Sanctions have never stopped a nuclear drive anywhere.

Does this mean that our only option is war? Yes, although an air campaign targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure would entail less need for boots on the ground than the war Obama is waging against the Islamic State, which poses far smaller a threat than Iran does.

Wouldn't an attack cause ordinary Iranians to rally behind the regime? Perhaps, but military losses have also served to undermine regimes, including the Greek and Argentine juntas, the Russian czar and the Russian communists.

Wouldn't destroying much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure merely delay its progress? Perhaps, but we can strike as often as necessary. Of course, Iran would try to conceal and defend the elements of its nuclear program, so we might have to find new ways to discover and attack them. Surely the United States could best Iran in such a technological race.

Much the same may be said in reply to objections that airstrikes might not reach all the important facilities and that Iran would then proceed unconstrained by inspections and agreements. The United States would have to make clear that it will hit wherever and whenever necessary to stop Iran's program. Objections that Iran might conceal its program so brilliantly that it could progress undetected all the way to a bomb apply equally to any negotiated deal with Iran.

And finally, wouldn't Iran retaliate by using its own forces or proxies to attack Americans — as it has done in Lebanon, Iraq and Saudi Arabia — with new ferocity? Probably. We could attempt to deter this by warning that we would respond by targeting other military and infrastructure facilities.

Nonetheless, we might absorb some strikes. Wrenchingly, that might be the price of averting the heavier losses that we and others would suffer in the larger Middle Eastern conflagration that is the likely outcome of Iran's drive to the bomb. Were Iran, which is already embroiled in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Gaza, further emboldened by becoming a "nuclear threshold state," it would probably overreach, kindling bigger wars — with Israel, Arab states or both. The United States would probably be drawn in, just as we have been in many other wars from which we had hoped to remain aloof.

Yes, there are risks to military action. But Iran's nuclear program and vaunting ambitions have made the world a more dangerous place. Its achievement of a bomb would magnify that danger manyfold. Alas, sanctions and deals will not prevent this.

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