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Attacking Iran: Lessons from the Iran-Iraq War

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This policy brief seeks to contribute to and inform the debate concerning a possible attack by the United States and/or Israel on Iranian nuclear and military facilities. The presumed aim of such an attack would be to weaken the Islamic Republic, particularly by hindering its ability to build a nuclear weapon. However, the history of the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 calls into question the contention that an attack will weaken the regime in Tehran. This policy brief examines Iran's reactions to the Iraqi invasion in order to shed light on Iran's possible reactions to a U.S. or Israeli attack. It will assess how the Iranian people responded to the invasion and its effects on Iranian politics and the position of the new regime. It will also explore the nature of the policies adopted by the Islamic Republic in waging the Iran-Iraq War that carried on for eight years after the Iraqi invasion.

The subjects addressed in this policy brief are only a small part of the factors that must be addressed when considering a policy towards Iran that includes a military option. The ramifications of such an attack will be immense and unpredictable. It is therefore critical that we examine Iranian responses to the Iraqi invasion in order to draw whatever lessons we can and to understand the implications of a future attack. Further, Iran's security policies, and its policy outlook more generally, has been shaped enormously by the country's experience in the Iran-Iraq War. As the Iranians themselves continuously point to the lessons of the war and their bearing on the present day, it behooves policymakers to follow suit.

The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 was a movement of several different groups that were united most strongly in their opposition to the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah. Following the ouster of the Shah in February 1979, the union of those groups began to break down.¹ Though many of the Iranians who had participated in the revolution supported the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the system of *vilayat-i faqih* or guardianship of the jurist, and the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, most did not fight for the sort of absolute power that Khomeini and his allies were eventually able to yield. Further, there was little consensus among Iranians on the nature and policies of the new Islamic Republic and the scope of religious leadership, which led to a degree of disillusionment with the revolution and the new regime.

In invading Iran, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein assumed that the divided Iranians and their dilapidated armed forces would be unable to put up much of a fight. He was wrong. Iranians responded to the invasion by uniting against him and under their current leadership, even though many opposed the direction the revolution had taken. Iran's leaders quickly resurrected the armed forces by halting military trials and purges and enforcing conscription. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), which was established following the revolution to serve primarily as an internal security force, transformed into

a second military and rushed to confront the invading forces.² Thousands of volunteers were incorporated into both the IRGC and the regular military.³ They were driven to defend the country, the revolution, and the Islamic Republic by a potent combination of nationalism, revolutionary mission, and religious zeal that was stoked by the foreign threat.

The Iranian leaders effectively capitalized on those feelings by allowing them to fuel the military campaign, particularly by arming the irregular revolutionary forces—the IRGC and the Basij, composed of the regime’s most loyal supporters—and sending them to lead the campaign against the Iraqis. Their dedicated and determined defense, combined with the Iraqi forces’ poor performance, caused the invaders to stall and then retreat.⁴

The IRGC and the Basij remain today as the Islamic Republic’s most devoted defenders. They have a substantial interest in the survival of the regime, and can therefore be expected to vigorously confront attacking forces, just as they did when the Iraqis invaded. In shocking displays of courage and allegiance, the Iranian Basijis became notorious in the Iran-Iraq War for their willingness to clear minefields with their own bodies in human waves. These forces can be expected to show similar tolerance for sacrifice and a war of attrition in the case of a future confrontation.⁵

An attack on Iran by the United States or Israel will likely add to the ranks of the regime’s supporters. Just as a divided population came together to confront the Iraqi invasion, Iranians of all stripes will unite in opposition to an attack. The upshot will be a stronger, more cohesive, and more militant Islamic Republic. In the words of Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s reformist former president and a harsh critic of some of Iran’s current leaders and policies, “If there should one day be any military interference in Iran, then all factions, regardless of reformists or non-reformists, would [unite] and confront the attack.”⁶ Iranians interviewed by Reuters, Radio Farda, and the Campaign for Human Rights in Iran made the same argument. “A war will unite the regime, and it will also force many to unite behind a regime they don’t even support” said a 56-year-old woman living in Tehran. “What else should we do, [cheer] for Israel, which would kill our countrymen working in the nuclear sites?” Similarly, a Tehran-based journalist who said he sympathized with the opposition Green Movement wrote that, “[Iranian] society will not welcome any country that attacks its soil.”⁷

An attack on Iran will not only bring Iranians together under the current regime; it will also unite them in support for a decision to acquire nuclear weapons. At this time the evidence suggests that Iranian leaders are developing and acquiring the technology that would enable them to produce nuclear weapons. However, the evidence also suggests that they have not made the decision to proceed with a concerted attempt to establish a nuclear weapons program. An attack on Iran will damage, but not destroy, Iran’s nuclear

program. Even if it targeted Iranian nuclear facilities and was limited in scope, an attack will most likely be interpreted by Iranians as a declaration of war, an attempt at regime change, and a determination to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear technology or enrichment capability of any nature. It will also convince them that accelerating that drive and ultimately possessing nuclear weapons is the only way to safeguard their regime and their country from future attack.⁸ Hans Blix, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, recently put forward this view. “I don’t think you can convince anyone to give up an atomic programme through the threat of violence,” he stated. “Rather, it will cause them to move even faster on it, in order to defend themselves. . . . If the decision to build a bomb has not yet been taken, a military strike would ensure more than ever that it is.”⁹

In this way, the nuclear program symbolizes how Iran views its position in the world, with a mix of strength and vulnerability. The nuclear program has come to represent a source of national pride, a badge of Iran’s modern power status, and an emblem of its imperial past. At the same time, it is seen as an essential tool to reduce Iran’s vulnerability by creating a bulwark against threats of attack or invasion. It is therefore an admission of Iran’s relative weakness. An attack on Iran would reinforce this sense of vulnerability and would be seen as a reenactment of previous efforts to curb Iran’s independent power. It would accordingly solidify the place of nuclear weapons in assuring that power.

While the regime may increase its strength in the wake of an attack by winning new supporters, it may also be able to capitalize on an attack to eliminate its internal enemies. That is precisely what happened following the 1980 Iraqi invasion. Ayatollah Khomeini and his allies used the war to strengthen their control over the state along the war-making state-making nexus, following the pattern of revolutionary elites in other countries.¹⁰ Their main rival for power within the Islamic Republic was the secular leaning constituency led by President Abolhassan Banisadr, who had tried to curry favor among the regular armed forces and to steer the war effort in his role as commander in chief. To minimize Banisadr’s power, Khomeini sent his own representatives to oversee the armed forces, which eroded their support for the president, and built up a competing power base in the IRGC. In 1981, he succeeded in impeaching Banisadr and then expelling him from Iran. The resulting more cohesive Islamic Republic was able to prosecute the war with far more success: the Iranian forces broke the stalemate that had prevailed since the Iraqi invasion, and then proceeded to expel the Iraqis and chase them into Iraq.¹¹

Throughout the war Khomeini used the conflict to discredit and eliminate his internal rivals. By keeping the people mobilized for the war and focused on Iran’s external enemies, he was able to consolidate his power with fewer constraints and less debate. He continued to keep the regular military in check through close supervision. The work of fighting the war also kept the armed forces preoccupied and thus too busy to stage a

coup. By war's end, the military had been securely integrated into the Islamic Republic and ceased to represent a threat to the regime. Khomeini simultaneously championed the loyal Revolutionary Guards by allowing them to steer the war effort while giving them credit for successes and shielding them from criticism.¹² This was achieved in part by depicting the war in Islamic terms. In a religious war, success accrued to the religious soldiers and leaders—the Revolutionary Guards and Ayatollah Khomeini.¹³

Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the powerful IRGC would be able to achieve similar results in the case of a strike on Iran. The Revolutionary Guards have long warned of the dangers posed by Iran's external enemies and have characterized internal opposition as the work of external forces. An attack on Iran will seemingly vindicate the IRGC's position and enable them to increase repression and their own power. Iranians favoring any sort of softer line will be undermined and suppressed. Hossein Ghazian, an Iranian sociologist who was jailed in Iran and is now a visiting scholar at Syracuse University, said that, in the case of an attack, the regime would have "enough legitimacy, excuses, and reasons to repress those opposed to it."¹⁴

Similarly, in a 2005 op-ed in *The New York Times*, Iranian human rights activists Shirin Ebadi and Hadi Ghaemi put forward "The Human Rights Case Against Attacking Iran." They argued that, "for human rights defenders in Iran, the possibility of a foreign military attack on their country represents an utter disaster for their cause." The authors also drew a parallel with the Islamic Republic's behavior following the 1980 Iraqi invasion. The "threat of foreign military intervention will provide a powerful excuse for authoritarian elements to uproot [independent human rights organizations] and put an end to their growth," they argued. "Human rights violators will use this opportunity to silence their critics by labeling them as the enemy's fifth column. In 1980, after Saddam Hussein invaded Iran and inflamed nationalist passions, Iranian authorities used such arguments to suppress dissidents."¹⁵

In a report released by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran in November 2011, Ghaemi, writing as the president of that organization, emphasized that the parallel is still valid. In summarizing the views of Iranians interviewed by the Campaign, Ghaemi wrote that, "an attack would further militarize the state, exacerbate the human rights crisis in Iran, and undermine Iranian civil society and the pro-democracy movement. . . . A military strike would likely lead to an upsurge of political violence, threatening all those considered enemies of the government. Given the mass executions of numerous political prisoners during the Iran-Iraq War, strong fears were expressed about the fate of hundreds of current political prisoners in the event of a conflict with the United States."¹⁶

On the whole, the Iran-Iraq War proved to be a very useful tool for consolidating the revolution and Khomeini's leadership. The war was "the main means for rallying popular support behind the regime," and Iran used it to "harness the energies of the mobilised revolutionary rank and file, settle domestic scores, consolidate power and focus on the mission of the revolution abroad."¹⁷ As the war's use for the revolution internally became apparent, the two became intertwined. The war came to stand for all the revolution was capable of.¹⁸ Iranian leaders both during and after the war have emphasized that the conflict was a blessing and that the Islamic Republic benefited from its experience in the war. While making a virtue of necessity, their position indeed reflects the fact that the war was a boon for the revolution and that Iran triumphed in adversity.¹⁹ The contention that Iran can thrive in hardship plays an important role in its rhetoric against Western pressure and sanctions, and will be an important feature in the response to an attack.

The depiction of the war as a vehicle for the revolution reflects the tendency of Iranian leaders to make foreign policy a proxy for domestic policy. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's leaders characterized the process of waging war as essential to and the most important part of the process of advancing the Islamic Republic internally. Prosecuting the war was less contentious and in many ways easier to deal with than the critical issues relating to Iran's internal politics and development.²⁰ Iranian leaders often argued that "ending the war victoriously [was] the key to solving all [the] difficulties" plaguing Iran's economy and society.²¹ Similarly today, there is far greater agreement regarding Iran's basic foreign policy positions than there is regarding the government's domestic policies. For the eight years following the Iraqi invasion, Iran was willing and able to devote almost all its energy and resources to fighting its external enemies. We can therefore expect Iran's leaders to execute any retaliatory campaign with minimal concern for domestic constraints.

Because Iranian leaders staked so much on the war and emphasized that waging it would bring so much good to Iran, ending the war in anything less than near-total victory became incredibly difficult. Given that an attack on Iran is likely to be similarly beneficial for cementing domestic unity and providing the regime with an excuse to consolidate its power, the impetus for a prolonged retaliatory confrontation will be heightened. In the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian leaders saw a means to maintain the domestic unity that had been so highly fractured prior to the Iraqi invasion. Therefore, drawing out the campaign against the external enemy was seen as a way to keep up support for those leaders. As it is expected that an attack on Iran now would similarly bring a divided population together under the current leadership, it is also expected that Iranians would remain united in support for a campaign of retaliation for such an attack.

The way the Iran-Iraq War is characterized in Iran also sheds light on probable responses to a future attack. Iran's leaders emphasized that in the war Iranians were fight-

ing on behalf of Islam, while the Iraqis and their supporters were fighting to destroy it. For Islam to be preserved, they argued, the Islamic Republic had to be preserved. Fighting for the regime's survival was therefore equated with fighting for the survival of the faith.²² By injecting religion into the prosecution of the war in this way, Iran's leaders provided "unquestionable rationale for the war."²³ Iranian leaders may adopt a similar strategy in mobilizing support for a retaliatory campaign against a future attack. Depicting confrontation and retaliation in the context of an ideological struggle both serves the interests of Iranian leaders and heightens the intractability of conflict.

Another way Iranian leaders characterized the Iran-Iraq War was as a Western and international campaign against the Islamic Republic. They claim that the United States encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Iran and that the international support for Iraq demonstrates the determination to confront and contain the Islamic Republic. Doing so again served to rally support for the Iranian war effort and heightened the stakes of the conflict. An attack against Iran today, including even limited strikes by a single actor targeting Iran's nuclear facilities, will be viewed in a similar fashion. It will be seen as a campaign by Israel, the United States, and the West to secure their domination of the Middle East and its resources and to extinguish the threat of the Islamic Republic through regime change. Like the 1980 Iraqi invasion, an attack will be viewed in Iran as part of a pattern of Western subversion and aggression that links together British and Russian economic exploitation, occupation during World War II, the coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953, and years of support for the Shah's repressive regime. For those in Iran who question the standard narrative of concerted and constant Western aggression, an attack on Iranian territory will dispel any doubt and engender the next generations of Iranians who subscribe to that view.

Despite the grandiose terms Iranian leaders use to describe the Iraqi invasion and the Iranian response, those leaders were trying to make rational decisions about the best way to prosecute the war and to consolidate the Islamic Republic. The decision to invade Iraq, for instance, was seen as necessary for protecting Iran. Iranian leaders feared that if left in power, Saddam Hussein would invade Iran again. Iranian leaders today can be expected to make similar use of revolutionary and Islamic rhetoric, and they can also be expected to respond to threats in ways they deem to be beneficial to the regime. The foreign policy behavior of the Islamic Republic has consistently embodied a rational pragmatism clothed at times in ideological garb.

Military action against Iran, and even the continuing threat of attack, is likely to give the Islamic Republic a new lease on life. Its devoted supporters will be strengthened and mobilized, and it will enjoy the additional support of those who will join in condemning and retaliating for an attack. Threats of a possible strike, and certainly a strike itself,

substantiate and animate the security narrative Iranian leaders have been propagating for years: that the West is determined to raze the Islamic Republic. They have mastered the art of using the threat of attack, signs of Western hostility towards Iran, and even invasion to consolidate their power. Further, the more likely an attack appears, the more determined Iranians will be to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. The policy of attacking and threatening Iran has served as the lifeblood sustaining the Islamic Republic. We have yet to see how the regime might sustain itself without it.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 50.
- 4 Steven Ward, "Iran's Challenging Victory Narrative," *Historically Speaking* 10/3 (2009), 41-42. Barry Rubin, "Iran's Revolution and Persian Gulf Instability," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, ed. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger, 1983), 139. O'Ballance, 58. Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 43. Saskia Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 19.
- 5 Lieutenant Colonel Leif Eckholm, "Invading Iran: Lessons from Iraq," Hoover Institution Policy Review 168 (Aug. 1, 2011).
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- 15 Shirin Ebadi and Hadi Ghaemi, “The Human Rights Case Against Attacking Iran,” *The New York Times* (Feb. 8, 2005).
- 16 “Raising Their Voices: Iranian Civil Society Reflections on the Military Option,” International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2011).
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- 18 Shahram Chubin, “The Last Phase of the Iran-Iraq War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire,” *Third World Quarterly* 11.2 (1989), 2. Shahram Chubin, “Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire,” in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, ed. Efraim Karsh (Houndmills: The MacMillan Press, 1989), 14-15. Shahram Chubin, *Iran’s National Security Policy: Intentions, Capabilities & Impact* (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994), 66. Farhad Kazemi and Jo-Anne Hart, “The Shi’a Praxis: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy in Iran,” in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 60. Menashri, 208.
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