

Should the U.S. strike back at Iran?

MARK N. KATZ

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There have been an increasing number of reports that Iran is providing arms to Iraqi Shiite militants, who are using them to target both American and Iraqi government forces alike. These Iranian-backed Shiite militants are now seen as more of a threat to American efforts to stabilize Iraq than are al-Qaida in Iraq and other Sunni insurgent groups. American officials are now warning that if Iran does not stop, the United States may strike against it.

Assuming that these reports are true, it is certainly understandable why the U.S. administration of George W. Bush and American military commanders in Iraq would want to retaliate against Iran. But striking Iran only makes sense if doing so will serve to end Iranian military assistance to Shiite militants inside Iraq. Short of an all-out invasion of Iran that ousts the Islamic Republic, however, it is difficult to see how a U.S. strike against Iran would actually result in decreased Iranian support for them. Indeed, it might lead to even greater problems for the United States.

What is it that the U.S. could strike inside Iran that would induce Tehran to stop supporting militant Shiites in Iraq? Iran's Russian-built atomic energy reactor and other nuclear sites? Damage to or even the loss of these is unlikely to result in Tehran contritely realizing that it should stop meddling in Iraq. Instead, an infuriated Tehran may actually step up its involvement there.

Iranian oil producing and exporting sites? The U.S. certainly could destroy these and cripple the Iranian economy. Unfortunately, this would also result in much higher oil prices than the record high ones prevalent now. This, of course, would severely damage the economies of many countries, including those of our closest allies as well as our own. American influence and

prestige would decline even further. To top it off: even a drastic decline in income would not prevent Tehran from meddling in Iraq.

Iranian military targets? The U.S. could undoubtedly cause significant damage to these, but those elements most loyal to the Islamic Republic – the Revolutionary Guards and the basij (a zealously patriotic popular militia) – would undoubtedly survive. And, of course, they could continue to arm Shiite militants inside Iraq.

Iranian arms manufacturing plants and storage facilities? These would probably be the most logical targets. But assuming that the U.S. could in fact destroy them all, Tehran would quickly rebuild plants for fabricating these relatively low tech weapons. Other countries – such as Russia – might even help them.

It might be argued that if Iranian support for Iraqi Shiite militias did not halt after one round of American strikes against Iran, then the United States could simply keep on launching attacks until Tehran changes its behavior. But unless the U.S. is willing to directly invade Iran and replace the anti-American regime there like it did in Afghanistan and Iraq, repeated attacks that do not topple the Islamic Republic are unlikely to make Tehran change its behavior. And because the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are ongoing, it seems highly unlikely – as Tehran is undoubtedly well aware of – that the American Congress and public are willing to undertake a full-scale invasion of Iran (which has a larger population than Afghanistan and Iraq combined).

The problem the United States faces, then, is that while not striking Iran allows Tehran to support Shiite militants in Iraq, striking Iran through any means short of an all-out invasion (which appears highly unlikely at this point) will not end Iranian support to them either. Indeed, the U.S. striking Iran may well backfire and result in the heightened perception of American foreign policy as blundering and incompetent.

Can the United States, then, do anything about Iranian meddling in Iraq? In my view, reports that Tehran was involved in negotiating a ceasefire between the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and the Shiite Mahdi Army after their recent clash in Basra is even worse news than that Iran has provided support for the latter. The fact that the American-backed Iraqi government has turned to Iran in this matter suggests that even it sees Tehran as more relevant than Washington.

Although the United States may not be able to stop Iranian arms from reaching Iraq, it could attempt to supplant Iran as the power that brokers disagreements between various Shiite factions. Although this might be

distasteful to many in Washington, the U.S. must be able to offer Shiite politicians like Moqtada al-Sadr carrots for his cooperation as well as sticks for his non-cooperation. We may not like him, but it is worth our while to give him the opportunity to pursue interests other than Iranian ones. This will require far more nuanced and astute diplomatic efforts – including talking to people we don't like.

Will this work? There is no guarantee that it will. But just trying could well upset Tehran and cause problems in its relations with different Iraqi Shiite groups. Revolutionaries and militants are notorious for being suspicious of and falling out with one another. The United States needs to encourage this trend and not discourage it.

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Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.