



Midnight Hammer and After

By

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American military strikes against Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities on June 22 present a tableau of military-operational excellence that surprised Iran and much of the international community. The joint operation featured the most extensive use of the B2 Spirit bombers in any single operation. Seven bombers attacked Iranian targets at Fordow and Natanz with highly accurate GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) bombs.

An American submarine also fired thirty Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM) against surface infrastructure targets at Isfahan. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine described it, the entire operation was a complex timed maneuver requiring exact synchronization across multiple platforms in a narrow piece of airspace.

American deception tactics contributed to surprise as neither Iraqi fighters nor their surface-to-air missile defenses attempted to interdict the American bombers and their supporting fighter aircraft, all of which returned safely.

According to General Caine, Operation Midnight Hammer involved more than 125 aircraft, including the seven B2 stealth bombers, numerous fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, and dozens of refueling tankers. Some 75 precision-guided munitions were used in Midnight Hammer, including fourteen GBU-57 MOPs, which were used for the first time in combat.

The operational excellence of Midnight Hammer doubtless constituted a setback to Iran's nuclear enrichment programs, although exactly how much of a setback remains to be determined. Battle damage assessment is dependent on overhead photography unless and until further information is obtained from intelligence sources near or at the affected sites.

There also remained unsettled issues relative to American and allied strategy going forward. The Trump administration's declaratory policy wants to draw a line between going to war with Iran, on one hand, and neutralizing its nuclear capabilities and potential, on the other. This is a fine line to draw and Iran response, and follow-on condemnations, suggest they see the American position as a distinction without a difference.

After the strikes, President Trump indicated that Iran should come to the diplomatic table and negotiate the status of its nuclear future. Iran rejected further negotiations. This left the American and Israeli defense communities to await whatever diplomatic or military response the Iranians offered, including possible military attacks against American forces deployed in the Middle East.

Based on experience, Iran would likely respond with continuing missile strikes against Israel and asymmetrical warfare against the United States. With regard to the latter, Iran's options included: (1) disrupting the flow of maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz; (2) committing cyberattacks against American military or societal targets; (3) committing missile or insurgent attacks against American military personnel in Iraq or elsewhere in the region; (4) supporting protest demonstrations or terrorism in the American homeland, perhaps making use of prepositioned cells made up of illegal aliens; and/or (5) encouraging Iranian proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, and Yemen to further harass American, Israeli, and allied interests.



Thus far, Iran limited its response to employing a small number of missiles against Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, even giving the Americans advance warning of the strike. For the Trump administration, this is the best possible outcome. Already, imagery intelligence suggests Iran is digging out its capabilities at Fordow and Esfahan. What the future may hold is uncertain. Whether Iran is simply buying time and learning lessons for future success or whether the regime truly desires peace is up in the air.

Future options for Iran have their positives and negatives. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz would harm Iran's own economy, which needs the infusion of cash from oil sales to China.

Cyberattacks are a low-risk, low-cost option that may appeal to Iran in the near term, but they present a more serious potential threat to civilian targets compared to more heavily defended military ones. They will also draw severe reprisals from very competent American and Israeli cyber forces.

Additional attacks against American military personnel and facilities in Iraq are an option, as are missile or unconventional warfare against other regional states hosting American military bases. However, this path was not successful the first time.

Support for antiwar demonstrations or outright terrorism in the American homeland, including "lone wolf" terrorists recruited online, are still a possibility. New stories of Iranian illegal aliens arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement are almost a daily occurrence.

As for Iranian proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah are on the ropes, momentarily, due to prior engagements with Israel, but the Houthis declared their intention to plus-up their disruptions of commerce in the Red Sea in the wake of Midnight Hammer. Whether this is possible is yet to be seen.

With respect to Iran's future nuclear options and American responses, they may proceed in one of three ways: (1) a continuing "whack-a-mole" competition in which Iran continues surreptitious enrichment and the US and Israel continue to monitor its progress and, if necessary, repeat Midnight Hammer, or worse; (2) Iran undergoes a change of regime due to domestic opposition, leaving uncertain for a time exactly who is in charge and who controls the supplies of enriched uranium and nuclear infrastructure, never mind the armed forces and security police; or (3) Iran agrees to negotiate with the US and representatives of the international community another deal to limit its stockpiles of fissile material and its levels of enrichment.

These are possible options, but by no means the only options. Iran may pursue an unexpected path in an effort to outthink the United States and Israel. Whatever the future holds, President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu must keep a close eye on a regime that is built on destroying both countries. Hope is critical to human perseverance, but it is not a strategy.

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