

The Pitfalls of Offensive Counterproliferation

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The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was intended to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, and it has achieved remarkable success. Since the treaty was entered into force in 1970, only three states have managed to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, namely India, Pakistan, and North Korea. The collective West initially opted for peaceful measures to ensure non-proliferation, such as the formation of [NSG](#) after India's 1974 test aimed at limiting the flow of nuclear fuel and technology to "could be" nuclear states.

However, there have also been forceful measures to prevent nuclear proliferation. The U.S. and Israel have repeatedly engaged in counterproliferation (CP) and in some cases, "offensive counterproliferation" such as in [Iraq](#), and Syria, and most recently Iran. But does this forceful compliance achieve lasting non-proliferation goals? Or does it entrench the target state's psychological dependence on nuclear weapons for survival?

As the decade of 1980s unfolded, non-proliferation efforts turned violent when the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak was attacked by Israel and subsequently destroyed. Although the reactor program was severely damaged, Iraq continued to [pursue a nuclear weapon](#). Thereafter, the Gulf War of 1991 put an end to Iraq's nuclear program forever. Although [Richard Betts](#) argues otherwise; he notes that Osirak was not the key component to weapons production.

Like Osirak, the [Al-Kibar](#) nuclear facility in Syria was targeted by Israeli airstrikes in 2007. The site was alleged to be a plutonium production facility based on a North Korean reactor. Syria, a signatory of the NPT, could not protest Israeli violation of its airspace and the destruction of a site undeclared to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In 2008, the IAEA concluded, after a visit, that chemically processed uranium traces were found around the site of the destroyed reactor. The IAEA requested further inspection, but the Syrian government denied access. The attack on Al-Kibar demonstrates limited success in offensive CP. Although it is not yet certain whether Syria was close to making a bomb or even attempting to make one, the attack certainly imposed a logistical setback on Syria, triggered the IAEA inspections on a site which was undeclared to the agency, and resulted in greater international scrutiny of Syrian nuclear activities.

The most significant factor in the Israeli CP strategy is Iran. The CP strategy in Iran was marked by the targeted assassination of individuals associated with Iran's nuclear program. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was considered responsible for the Iranian nuclear weapons program, was [assassinated](#) in 2020. In addition to this, another peculiarity of the Iran CP involves the use of cyber-attacks to disrupt reactor operations. The infamous Stuxnet had damaged a considerable number of centrifuges in the Natanz nuclear facility and highlighted lapses and vulnerabilities in its cyber and operational security.

In 2025, Iranian nuclear facilities became targets of kinetic attacks by the U.S. and Israel. The U.S. claimed victory by announcing the ["obliteration"](#) of the targeted Iranian nuclear facilities.

However, Iran, several independent analysts, and even the U.S. [Defense Intelligence Agency](#) (DIA) disagreed with the U.S. president. Nonetheless, the twelve-day war concluded in a ceasefire, which did not last and the U.S. and Israel resumed actions to curtail Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Contrary to the instances in Iraq and Syria, the IAEA agrees more with Iran than with the U.S. and Israel on matters of Iran's enrichment, nuclear facilities, and nuclear weapons ambitions. As the war began in early hours of March 2026, the IAEA chief [Antonio Grossi](#) said that Iran has "no structured program to build nuclear weapons". Not to mention Iran is a signatory to the NPT, its government has no plans to acquire nuclear weapons, and the late Ayatollah Khamenei had even issued a [religious verdict](#), acting as the principal block to Iran's nuclear weapons.

In Iraq, Syria, and Iran, it can be argued that offensive CP yields unsatisfactory results and often backfires on legitimate, peaceful non-proliferation efforts. The 2003 U.S. invasion, which forced regime change in Iraq, was initiated under the pretext of Iraqi WMDs and nuclear weapons program. It was later concluded that [no substantial proof](#) existed that the Iraqi nuclear weapons program continued after the 1991 Gulf War. David Allison and Tyler Brown note that "The Gulf War destroyed much of Iraq's ability to acquire material for a nuclear weapon, and the program was abandoned in the early [1990s](#) in the face of international sanctions and inspections."

But the Iranian case might become the most striking example of a failed offensive CP effort. The assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, politico-military leadership, and nuclear facilities has only emboldened Iran and the hardliners within. According to John J. Mearsheimer, Iran's new Ayatollah may consider [going nuclear](#). Although offensive CP may reduce a state's opportunity to build a nuclear weapon, it always backfires as far as the willingness of the target country to acquire nuclear weapons is concerned. A state that becomes vulnerable to foreign invasions/surgical strikes will certainly be more inclined than before to acquire nuclear deterrence.

In conclusion, non-proliferation efforts tend to yield positive results if they remain peaceful. The NPT's peaceful mechanisms have prevented even technologically capable states, such as Japan and Germany, from acquiring nuclear weapons. Moreover, it is to the NPT's credit that Libya stopped its nuclear program. Ukraine was disarmed in 1994, and South Africa abandoned its fully operational nuclear weapons between 1989 and 1991. Using military means against a proliferator not only does not dismantle the target nuclear program but may instead bolster the target country's resolve to rely more on nuclear deterrence to secure state sovereignty. The same effect is generated in other states too, those who may fear their survival and seek nuclear weapons to offset adversary disarmament or decapitating strikes. With treaties faltering, increased signaling, and continued breach of state sovereignty, states that subscribe to hardcore realist points-of-view will inevitably choose the nuclear route over arms control.

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