



# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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### Is Iran the next U.S. war in the Middle East?

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President Obama says the U.S. “will do everything we can” to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons, and consequently would not rule out military action. However he said “[o]ur goal is to resolve this issue diplomatically, that would be preferable.” The President is right to favor the plowshare over the sword, but should be wary of sparks that could lead to the next conflagration in the Middle East.

The U.S. cannot afford another war. The American public is just coming to terms with the devastating cost, in lives and dollars, of two ill-considered wars. We will not casually accept another. There is little international support for a war. Europe is preoccupied with economic crisis, and global heavyweights Russia and China, who so far have agreed to economic sanctions against Iran, just vetoed UN actions against Syria to prevent military intervention there. While Arab states also want to keep Iran from getting the bomb, hearts and minds in the Middle East would not favor another U.S. war in the region, especially with the “Arab Spring” showing that democratic reforms are possible from within.

But even if diplomatic pressure grows, and Iran can “feel the pinch” of economic sanctions, there’s a risk a spark could ignite a war despite Washington’s preference for diplomacy. One spark might be Israel. Israel might act more precipitously than the U.S. to keep Tehran from developing nuclear weapons. Israel took unilateral strikes against Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007 to knock out their nuclear facilities. Israel may not wait for United Nations’ nuclear inspectors currently on the ground before deciding to handle the matter itself.

But even a limited Israeli airstrike risks enflaming the region. Not only would Iran retaliate, but its ally Hezb’allah could launch an attack from

Lebanon. Syria's regime, currently divided against its people, may regain support if it joins the fight. The U.S. would not stand by if Israel is attacked. Consequently, to avoid being drawn into a much wider conflict, the U.S. should do everything possible to restrain Israel from attacking.

A careless move by Iran could also ignite the region. Though not committed to confrontation itself, Iran has threatened actions that might provoke an armed response. Iran has boasted it might disrupt the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. This waterway facilitates up to a quarter of the world's oil, and a blockade would have a severe global impact. The U.S. and its allies would promptly force open the Strait, but the price of oil could double. A spike in fuel prices would be politically costly in this election year and a big hit on businesses in this fragile economy.

However much Obama wants to avoid war, the situation is highly volatile. Any spark could inadvertently enflame the region and entangle the U.S. in another war that would cost lives, dollars desperately needed at home, and America's political capital around the world. However, if the U.S. is committed to vigorous and creative diplomacy with Iran, and successfully constrains Tehran's nuclear ambitions through negotiation, then Washington will gain much-needed support for addressing more urgent situations in the region and around the world. Most importantly, though, President Obama will have avoided the "next" war in the Middle East just as the previous ones draw to an end.

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