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Ex-CIA Chief Says Only U.S. Can KO Iran Nuke Sites

While an Israeli air strike could cause a temporary setback to Iran's nuclear program, it would take the U.S. Air Force to finish the job, retired Air Force General and former CIA Director Michael Hayden [said](#) in an interview published September 4 in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*.

"I do not underestimate the Israeli talent, but geometry and physics tell us that Iran's nuclear program would pose a difficult challenge to any military," said Hayden, who was CIA director from 2006 to 2009.

"Israel's resources are more limited than those of the U.S," he added.



Hayden's comments supported previous statements by American officials that a single bombing raid would not be able to inflict significant damage on Iran's heavily fortified nuclear sites. "They will have to be revisited — which only the U.S. Air Force would be able to do," Hayden said. And he cautioned that a strike on Iran "will only set the Iranians back some time and actually push them to do that which it is supposed to prevent, getting nuclear weapons."

The Obama administration, meanwhile, is moving forward with plans for naval exercises and new antimissile systems in the Persian Gulf, along with a tightening of the embargo on Iranian oil. More than 25 nations will join the United States in a minesweeping exercise in the Persian Gulf later this month in what is billed as a demonstration of unity against Iran's threats to block oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, the *New York Times* [reported](#).

New warnings to Iran about what might trigger American military action are also under consideration, as are covert actions that have previously been considered and rejected, the *Times* said. Iran, meanwhile, has announced it will conduct military exercises of its own this fall, increasing the possibility of a confrontation in the Persian Gulf.

The increased military activity by the United States and its allies is meant to convince both Iran and Israel that the coalition is determined to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said repeatedly that a nuclear-armed Iran would represent an "existential threat" against Israel and warned that the Jewish state is prepared to launch a preemptive strike against Iran if economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts by the Western nations prove ineffective in containing the threat. In a speech to his cabinet in Jerusalem on September 2, Netanyahu decried the lack of a clear "[red line](#)" in the international effort to deter Iran.

"I believe that the truth must be told — the international community is not setting Iran a clear red line, and Iran does not see international determination to stop its nuclear project," Netanyahu said.

Hayden told *Haaretz* that he believed Iran would not have the ability to work on a nuclear weapon until 2013 or 2014, but said it is "probably true that the so-called 'window' regarding effective action is closing." White House Press Secretary Jay Carney also spoke of a closing [window](#) on August 30 when he



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reiterated President Obama's warning to Iran. The president "has made clear frequently that he is determined to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and he has led an unprecedented effort to pressure Iran to live up to its obligations," Carney told reporters. "The window of opportunity to resolve this diplomatically remains open but it will not remain open indefinitely," he continued.

Hayden said the targets in an attack on Iran would not only be difficult to destroy, but hard to find.

"There is no absolute certainty that all targets are known," he said, suggesting that efforts at concealment may be foiling the attempts of even the world's most sophisticated intelligence agencies to determine the exact nature of the activity at Iran's several nuclear sites. Iran has insisted its nuclear program is for producing fuel and medical isotopes. National intelligence estimates, based on reports from all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, have repeatedly found that while Iran's nuclear program may be nearing the capacity for weapons production, no evidence has been found that the Tehran regime has decided to pursue that course.

An International Atomic Energy Administration (IAEA) report to the United Nations last week said Iranian authorities had shut down the agency's inspection of its nuclear facility in Fordo, which is located in an underground bunker safe from aerial attack. While it found no evidence of weapons development, lack of cooperation by Iranian officials left the agency "unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities," the IAEA [report](#) said.

Speaking in London August 30, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said an Israeli attack would "clearly delay but probably not destroy Iran's nuclear program." And the coalition of nations now imposing economic sanctions against Iran "could be undone" if an attack were launched "prematurely," he said.

With numerous bases, personnel, and military assets in the region, the United States would likely be a target for retaliation, whether or not Americans participate in an Israeli-led attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Attacks would likely come not only from Iran, but from its non-state allies in the region as well. A spokesman for the militant Islamic organization Hezbollah warned in a live TV interview that any strike on Iran's nuclear sites would be met with "huge" retaliation: "The Zionist entity [Israel] will not be the only target. American bases in the region will be targets, too," he declared.

Tehran's ambassador to IAEA warned last week that his country would respond with force to any attack, regardless of when or by whom. "No one dare think of it or dare to attack," Ali Soltanieh [told](#) CBS News. "Any sort of aggression will be harshly greeted with an iron fist."

Photo of former CIA Director Michael Hayden: AP Images



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