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## Attack on Iran would backfire, warns report.

Julian Borger, diplomatic editor  
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Â· UK nuclear expert fears for region after air strikes  
Â· Tragedy and turmoil would follow, says Blix

Any military action against Iran's atomic programme is likely to backfire and accelerate Tehran's development of a nuclear bomb, a report today by a British former nuclear weapons scientist warns.

In his report, Frank Barnaby argues that air strikes, reportedly being contemplated as an option by the White House, would strengthen the hand of Iranian hardliners, unite the Iranian population behind a bomb, and would almost certainly trigger an underground crash programme to build a small number of warheads as quickly as possible.

"As soon as you start bombing you unite the population behind the government," Dr Barnaby told The Guardian. "Right now in Iran, there are different opinions about all this, but after an attack you would have a united people and a united scientific community."

In a foreword Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector at the time of the Iraq war, argues that an assault in Iran could turn out to be every bit as disastrous.

"In the case of Iraq, the armed action launched aimed to eliminate weapons of mass destruction - that did not exist. It led to tragedy and regional turmoil.

In the case of Iran armed action would be aimed at intentions - that may or may not exist. However, the same result - tragedy and regional turmoil - would inevitably follow," Dr Blix wrote.

The report comes amid rapidly rising tension over Iran. The permanent members of the security council, with Germany, are discussing tougher UN sanctions against Tehran, after it defied its ultimatum to stop enriching uranium.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has described his country's nuclear policy as a train with no brakes or reverse gear. His government is reportedly planning to issue a new high-denomination banknote celebrating the programme, inscribed with an atomic symbol and a Koranic quotation: "If the science exists in this constellation, men from Persia will reach it."

Mr Ahmadinejad was in Saudi Arabia yesterday for talks with King Abdullah aimed at defusing Shia-Sunni tensions in Iraq and seeking consensus between the region's two great adversaries. But many fear that Iran's nuclear aspirations could trigger a Middle East arms race.

Advocates of military strikes against Iran - largely confined to hawks in and around the Bush administration and the Israeli government - argue that Tehran has made a strategic decision to develop a nuclear weapon, which it would then readily use against Israel or the US itself, perhaps contracting a terrorist group to smuggle the warhead to its target. Military strikes, they argue, would at least slow down the development of a weapon and could topple the clerical regime.

Dr Barnaby - now a consultant for the Oxford Research Group thinktank which published his report - said air strikes would be unlikely to destroy all the centrifuges Iran is using to enrich uranium.

An attack could trigger a walkout by Iran from the non-proliferation treaty and the departure of UN inspectors. It could also lead to the departure of Russian experts at an Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr, leaving a potential source of plutonium unmonitored, the report warned.

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