

# **Covert Action and Counter-Proliferation: The Case of Iran**

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- A tool of statecraft used to advance foreign policy objectives.  
In this case: Disrupt Iran's nuclear program
- The 'third option' between diplomacy and open warfare (Johnson, 1991)
- Four categories for covert action: propaganda, political, economic, **paramilitary** (Johnson, 1991)
- Paramilitary actions are an extreme form of covert action aimed at coercing an adversary through violent means
- Can be directed against either human or material assets



- Assassination attempts against at least three Iranian nuclear scientists
- Scientists are attractive targets for assassination
- Assassinations have a wider target audience





Effectiveness limited by:

- Operational capabilities of the targeting actor/ pre-operational surveillance
- Targeted program relies heavily on indigenous talent
- Targeted program is too advanced for one individual to have an impact
- Blowback: Retaliation, public embarrassment if operation fails



- Several reported instances, e.g. 2006 explosion of UPS power supply units at Natanz that destroyed about 50 centrifuges
- Equipment can be modified either on-site or by infiltrating procurement networks
- Fairly high chance of success if the targeted program is heavily dependant on foreign suppliers/ traffickers.
- Particularly effective against highly specialized equipment





Effectiveness limited by:

- Extreme potential for blowback: Modified equipment might still be useful to targeted actor
- It may be difficult to assess if the desired sabotage has actually occurred
- Requires repeated efforts over a protracted period of time.
- Targeted actor will adapt eventually



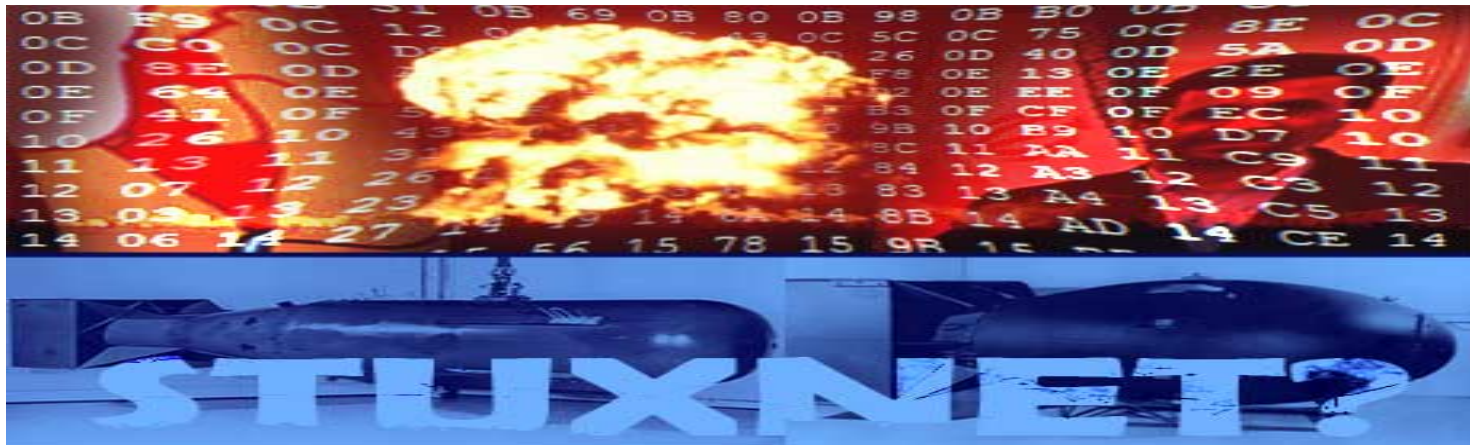
- The Stuxnet worm targeted the enrichment plant at Natanz
- But, its “mission profile” may have been more extensive than just inflicting material damage
- Possible internal disruption and intelligence collection







- Tactical success, limited strategic impact
- Stuxnet neither caused a lengthy shutdown of enrichment at Natanz, nor did it have a lasting impact on the amount of installed and enriching centrifuges
- Considerable potential for blowback







- Covert action is not a silver bullet to prevent an Iranian bomb and is often launched for lack of a better strategy
- Effectiveness decreases considerably over time
- Covert counter-proliferation action has never been sufficient to alleviate a strategic threat
- Danger of confusing tactical successes with strategic impact.
- Meanwhile, Iran's nuclear program progresses slowly but steadily