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Is Iran next?

Tehran is a year or two away from acquiring nuclear weapons. Is the Bush administration willing to go to war -- again -- to stop it?

By Mark Follman

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July 10, 2003 | In August 2002, seven months before U.S. missiles began ripping into the Iraqi capital, a senior British official close to the Bush administration told Newsweek: "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran."

The quote ricocheted across the media, leaving opponents of the war convinced of the administration's wider designs in the Mideast. But those provocative words may have been less a burst of broad war-on-terror bluster than a more focused alarm over the spread of nuclear weapons: By some accounts Iran could now be less than a year from building them.

"It's undeniably true they're closer to nuclear weapons than we thought," says Flynt Leverett, a former National Security Council advisor now at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy in Washington. Leverett believes Iran is closer to two years away from nuclear capability, but he also points to last year's whistleblowing by an Iranian dissident group -- around the time of the British official's statement -- as another alarming example of a familiar pattern: a failure of U.S. intelligence. "What's so disturbing was that until the National Council of Resistance of Iran stood up in Washington last August with photographs of facilities at Natanz and Arak, we didn't have a clue they existed," he says.

Recent inspections of those sites, combined with concerns about the Russian-built nuclear reactor in progress at Bushehr, exposed [solid evidence](#) that Iran sits on the cusp of weapons production. On Monday, Tehran confirmed successful testing of its Shahab-3 midrange missile, capable of striking anywhere in Israel. And in the wake of violent street protests in June, the mullahs timed a new invitation to international arms inspectors precisely for the July 9 anniversary of a bloody 1999 student uprising.

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But even as the mullahs edge toward a nuclear capacity that could provoke American or Israeli retaliation, the Bush administration's Iran policy remains frozen in contradiction. While Washington has watched the recent pro-democracy protests in Tehran with interest and offered tepid encouragement, a number of officials have said the U.S. isn't considering military action to derail the weapons program. Yet, in mid-June, President Bush vowed the U.S. would not tolerate nuclear weapons in Iran -- leaving it unclear exactly what our policy is.

"I think the administration is deeply split, but the one thing all factions probably agree on is that a nuclear Iran scares the hell out of them," says Jim Lobe, an administration watcher and analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus. "This administration has put itself in the worst possible position by invading Iraq with a deceptive justification [of weapons of mass destruction]. Who's going to believe them now?"

"This administration can't sustain drift on the Iran nuclear issue much longer, given the way they've defined the war on terror," says one former Middle East policy maker in Washington, who requested anonymity. "At this point the only people at the table who really have a coherent strategy are the ones pushing for unilateral military action and regime change. I don't think that's a very smart policy."

What would be the real consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran? The nightmare scenario of the "mad mullahs" jumping to attack Israel is unlikely, says John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org. "The regime isn't irrationally suicidal," he says. But the nuclear specter must be taken extremely seriously -- as it is by Israel, which has signaled it would consider any nuclear-armed Iranian regime, not just the current one, a mortal danger. Combined with Iran's evolving missile program, nuclear weapons would pose "an existential threat to Israel in the future," Israeli military chief of staff Shaul Mofaz told reporters on May 27. Of course, a preventive Israeli strike on Iran could precipitate a Middle East war.

Beyond containing a potential nuclear threat, hawks see considerable benefit to the U.S. in "going to Tehran." Iran, with its strategic location, represents the last major military obstacle to U.S. hegemony in the Gulf, and hawks fear it could seriously undermine U.S. plans to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. As one of the two remaining "axis of evil" states, and alongside Syria the last significant rejectionist, terror-supporting state in the Mideast after the collapse of Saddam's regime, Iran is a natural target for U.S. hawks.

"The Iranian vision for the Mideast becomes clear when groups it finances engage in assassination and target [regional] minorities," writes Michael Rubin of Hebrew University in a 2003 report. "The Islamic Republic views any secular Muslim government as a threat." If the Tehran regime were taken out, militant groups opposed to Israel, like Lebanon's Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad in Israel's occupied territories, would lose their strongest foreign backer. And hawks see other global security dividends in a U.S. recasting of Iran: North Korea's principal arms buyer would evaporate; and Iran, like Iraq, offers an additional source of oil to further reduce American dependence on Saudi Arabia.

As in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, voices from Europe are sounding caution and backing diplomacy. "There is room for realpolitik to prevail," Rosemary Hollis, director of the Middle East program at London's Chatham House, wrote in Britain's Observer on June 29. "Head of the expediency council and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani is offering dialogue." But confidence in Rafsanjani's moderation may be hard to square with some of his past statements, like this one from his nationally broadcast Al-Quds Day sermon on Dec. 14, 2001: "If one day the Islamic world comes to possess the weapons like those Israel currently has, then the imperialists' strategy will come to a dead end, because even one nuclear bomb used on Israel will leave nothing left on the ground."

Was the war on Iraq just a stepping stone to Iran? There are some conspicuous similarities between Washington's recent framing of the Iran issue and the long but steady march toward war on Saddam.

"Remember how long it took before the Bush administration publicly acknowledged it was thinking about attacking Iraq?" asks Pike of Globalsecurity.org. "My surprise-free expectation is this could be the same scenario. I really question whether [internal] regime change could be effected soon enough to prevent nuclear weapons. We're on a collision course with Iran." Indeed, almost immediately after the toppling of Saddam, the administration started trotting out many of the same accusations for the mullahs: illegal weapons of mass destruction programs, harboring of al-Qaida operatives, and a brutal regime that tortures and kills its own people.

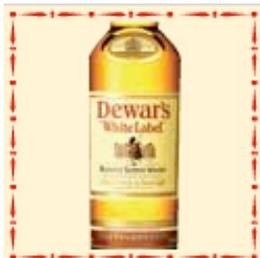
But no matter how unacceptable a nuke-wielding Iran may appear to U.S. policymakers, a U.S. invasion carries vast political and strategic risks. President Bush may not get such strong backing from the American people for another strenuous war effort, especially if U.S. soldiers continue to die daily in Iraq. By most measures, the U.S. military already looks stretched thin as it wades deeper into postwar morasses in Iraq and Afghanistan; that's notwithstanding potential conflict with North Korea, growing pressure to join multilateral missions in Africa, and Washington's pledge to help hunt down terrorists in any number of other global hotspots. And another U.S. attack on a Muslim state would enrage much of the Arab and Muslim world and threaten to completely unravel America's already shaky relations with Iraq's Shiites, who make up the majority of the country. (Shiism is the dominant religion of Iran.)

To date, discussion on the Iranian nuclear issue has ranged from rallying international support to pressure the regime into accepting stricter, more frequent inspections -- an approach favored by Russia and the European Union, which are more tied to economic trade with Tehran than the U.S. -- to the possibility of "surgical" air strikes, such as the Israelis carried out on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981.

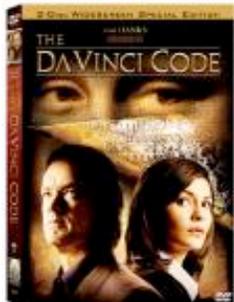
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