

Threat from Iran vexes Bush officials

Tom Infield and Warren P. Strobel
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WASHINGTON — It appears to be intent on acquiring nuclear weapons. It's stepped up its biological and chemical arms programs. It's No. 1 on the State Department's list of terrorism sponsors, and intelligence officials say it's harboring some senior al-Qaida leaders.

Iran, some senior administration officials privately concede, is as big a threat to the United States and American interests as Iraq ever was, probably bigger. But they don't want to talk about Iran because, they admit, they don't know what to do about it.

Even among the Bush administration hard-liners who first pushed to topple Saddam Hussein, there's no consensus about how to deal with the Iranian regime, which, as former CIA director James Woolsey puts it, has been "at war with us for nearly a quarter-century."

"They seized our embassy personnel as hostages in 1979 in Tehran. They blew up our embassy and our Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. And they have conducted a wide range of terrorist acts against the United States," Woolsey has said.

Now, U.S. intelligence officials charge, Iran is trying to undermine American efforts to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. There is evidence that Saif al Adel, a senior al-Qaida leader, has found sanctuary in Iran and helped direct last week's bombings in Saudi Arabia, which killed 34 people, eight of them Americans. He and other al-Qaida operatives may be planning further attacks in Saudi Arabia, Kenya and elsewhere, U.S. officials say.

But the American response to the third member of President Bush's "axis of evil," along with Iraq and North Korea, is unlikely to be war, at least not any time soon.

"I don't see any pressure for conflict or war," said Anthony Cordesman, a Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington research center, who's served in both the State and Defense departments.

America's options in Iran are limited. The U.S. military has its hands full in Iraq.

And unlike with Iraq, the U.N. Security Council hasn't ordered Iran to dispose of weapons of mass destruction.

The Iranian government is even harder to deal with, administration officials say, because it's set a new standard for divided government.

President Mohammad Khatami and his supporters in the Iranian Parliament deny that Iran is supporting terrorism or harboring al-Qaida renegades. The Shiite Muslim clerics who hold supreme power and their allies in the Revolutionary Guard, meanwhile, underwrite terrorist groups, shelter their leaders and send weapons to Palestinian terrorists.

"When we ask the Iranians we talk to about these activities, they say they don't know anything about them," said one senior U.S. official, who like the others spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The ones who do know about them are not the ones we talk to."

So for now, the United States is engaged in a balancing act, seeking to unseat the Islamic hard-liners, who are increasingly unpopular after 25 years of political repression and economic stagnation, while

dealing with the more moderate part of the regime.

There may be a contradiction in this, "but so what?" said Ray Takeyh, an Iran expert at the National Defense University, which the Defense Department operates.

The best the United States may be able to do is construct a policy of "managed tensions," Takeyh said. Under this approach, Washington would cooperate with Tehran on is-

suues of common interest while resisting Iranian actions it opposes.

"Despite themselves, the administration has sort of stumbled onto this policy," Takeyh said.

For 22 years, four American presidents have hoped that moderates in Iran somehow would prevail, but the hard-liners have outlasted Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. America's patience, however, is likely to evaporate if the cur-

rent President Bush is presented with conclusive evidence that Iran was behind new terrorist attacks on Americans or is about to build a nuclear weapon.

"There is concern right now," said an administration official. "People are spending a lot of time trying to figure out how to deal with it."

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Terror alert level rises to 'orange'

Frank James
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

WASHINGTON — As U.S. and Saudi officials braced for what they feared would be imminent attacks in Saudi Arabia, the Bush administration raised the terror threat level to "high" in the United States and warned of possible car and suicide bombings or strikes by gun-toting terrorists in this country.

Following recent attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco believed linked to al-Qaida, the embassies of the United States, Britain and Germany closed their doors in Riyadh, and a Saudi official said more bombings were inevitable there.

Putting the United States on orange alert status, the second highest, administration officials cited increased communications, or "chatter," among terrorists similar to contacts that have typically preceded other attacks.

Homeland Security Department officials said they lacked specifics about locations of any possible terrorist attacks. Even so, they urged extra vigilance, particularly for places where large crowds gather, such as sports arenas.

Homeland Security officials didn't rule out further terrorist strikes on U.S. and Western targets overseas like last week's suicide attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca, which killed 75 people, including eight Americans and 21 bombers.

Al-Qaida, the global organization behind the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, was clearly the focus of Tuesday's move from elevated risk to high risk, or from yellow to orange. But U.S. officials didn't rule out possible attacks from other sources.

"Threats may also emanate from other anti-U.S. terrorist groups, regional extremist organizations and ad-hoc groups or disgruntled individuals not connected to existing terrorist organizations or state sponsors of terrorism," Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said in a written statement.

Ridge informed state homeland security advisers of the decision by conference call on Tuesday. He asked state officials "to review their current security measures and deploy additional measures, particularly going into a holiday weekend where there will be many large public gatherings."

The increase in the terror-alert level was likely to further burden financially strapped states and cities that will have to step up security around important venues that attract crowds and symbolic targets like important buildings.

The decision to change the alert level was made at a midday meeting at the White House that required Ridge to cut short an appearance before a congressional committee.

The meeting of President Bush's Homeland Security Advisory Council came after warnings by the FBI to state and local officials in recent days of possible terrorist attacks in the U.S. Earlier in the week, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, warned foreign journalists that he believed further attacks in his nation and the United States were likely.

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