

US steps closer to war with Iran

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Global Research, August 22, 2007

Asia Times Online 22 August 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#),
[IRAQ REPORT](#)

The Bush administration has leaped toward war with Iran by, in essence, declaring war with the main branch of Iran's military, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which it plans to brand as a terrorist organization.

A logical evolution of US President George W Bush's ill-defined, boundless "war on terror", the White House's move is dangerous to the core, opening the way for open confrontation with Iran. This

may begin in Iraq, where the IRGC is reportedly most active and, ironically, where the US and Iran have their largest common denominators.

A New York Times editorial has dismissed this move as "amateurish" and a mere "theatric" on the part of the lame-duck president, while at the same time admitting that it represents a concession to "conflict-obsessed administration hawks who are lobbying for military strikes". The political analysts who argue that the main impact of this initiative is "political" are plain wrong. It is a giant step toward war with Iran, irrespective of how well, or poorly, it is thought of, particularly in terms of its immediate and long-term implications, let alone the timing of it.

Coinciding with President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's highly publicized trip to Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, the news received front-page coverage in the New York Times, next to a photograph of Ahmadinejad and his Afghan host, President Hamid Karzai, as if intended to spoil Ahmadinejad's moment by denigrating the Iranian regime. Just two weeks ago, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice implicitly put Iran on a par with the Soviet Union by invoking comparisons to the Cold War, and in essence compared it to al-Qaeda.

Thus if an unintended side-effect of the Cold War terminology was to enhance Iran's global image, the "terrorist" label for the IRGC aims to deliver a psychological blow to Iran by delegitimizing the country.

Also, it serves the United States' purpose at the United Nations Security Council, where a British-prepared draft of a new round of sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program has been floating around for a while and will likely be acted on this autumn. The draft calls for tightening the screws on Iran by broadening the list of blacklisted Iranian companies and even may lead to the interdiction of Iranian ships in the Persian Gulf. This is indeed a dangerous move that could easily trigger open confrontation.

With the window of opportunity for Bush to use the "military option" closing because of the US presidential elections next year, the administration's hawks – "it is now or never" – have

received a huge boost by the move to label the IRGC as terrorists. It paves the way for potential US strikes at the IRGC's installations inside Iran, perhaps as a prelude to broader attacks on the country's nuclear facilities. At least that is how it is being interpreted in Iran, whose national-security concerns have skyrocketed as a result of the labeling.

"The US double-speak with Iran, talking security cooperation on the one hand and on the other ratcheting up the war rhetoric, does not make sense and gives the impression that the supporters of dialogue have lost in Washington," a prominent Tehran University political scientist who wished to remain anonymous told the author.

The US has "unfettered" itself for a strike on Iran by targeting the IRGC, and that translates into heightened security concerns. "The United States never branded the KGB [Russian secret service] or the Soviet army as terrorist, and that shows the limits of the Cold War comparison," the Tehran political scientist said. His only optimism: there are "two US governments" speaking with divergent voices, ie, "deterrence diplomacy and preemptive action", and "that usually, historically speaking, spells policy paralysis".

However, no one in Iran can possibly place too much faith on that kind of optimism. Rather, the net effect of this labeling, following the recent "shoot to kill" order of Bush with regard to Iranian operatives in Iraq accused of aiding the anti-occupation insurgents, is to elevate fears of a US "preemptory" strike on Iran. Particularly concerned are many top government officials, lawmakers and present or former civil and military functionaries who are or were at some point affiliated with the IRGC.

There is also a legal implication. Under international law, the United States' move could be challenged as illegal, and untenable, by isolating a branch of the Iranian government for selective targeting. This is contrary to the 1981 Algiers Accord's pledge of non-interference in Iran's internal affairs by the US government. [1]

Should the terror label on the IRGC be in place soon, US customs and homeland-security officials could, theoretically, arrest members of Ahmadinejad's delegation due to travel to the UN headquarters in New York next month because of suspected ties to the IRGC. Even Ahmadinejad, with his past as a commander of the Basij Corps, a paramilitary arm of the IRGC, risks arrest.

The US has opened a Pandora's box with a hasty decision that may have unintended consequences far beyond its planned

coercive diplomacy toward Iran. The first casualty could be the US-Iran dialogue on Iraq's security, although this would simultaneously appease Israeli hawks who dread dialogue and any hints of Cold War-style detente between Tehran and Washington.

It would also become more difficult for Syria to collaborate with Iran with respect to Lebanon's Hezbollah, who owe much to the

IRGC since their inception in the early 1980s. The consensus in Iran is that chaos in Iraq is in Israel's interests, but not that of the US, and that the United States' Middle East policy is being held hostage by pro-Israel lobbyists who have painted an enemy image of the dreaded IRGC that is neither accurate nor in tune with the history of US-IRGC interaction.

The US and the IRGC The current noise masks a hidden history of cooperation between the

US military and the IRGC – in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan and, more and more likely, Iraq.

In Bosnia, the US military and intelligence interacted with the IRGC, which had trained Bosnian Muslims, and fought alongside it against their Serbian enemies. They also funneled arms to the IRGC, mainly through Croatia, with the tacit consent of the US government.

In Afghanistan, US military commanders have had similar interaction with commanders of the IRGC, including the elite Quds division of the IRGC, which supported anti-Taliban forces and helped those forces take over Kabul in 2001 with relative ease.

In Iraq, the IRGC has supported various Shi'ite militias as well as the Iraqi military and intelligence and, unofficially, it can credit for the relative stability of the eight Shi'ite provinces, including those in the south. The new US diplomatic engagement of Iran over Iraq is having direct and immediate effects on Iran's behavior inside Iraq, promising further results by the joint expert committees set up as a result of the latest round in the dialogue.

Yet true to the United States' traditional Janus-faced approach toward Iran, just as Iranian and US military and intelligence officials are about to embark on systematic discussions over Iraq and regional security, they will in effect be prevented from doing so by the labeling of the IRGC as terrorist.

Coming 'war of attrition'? The idea of an all-out military confrontation between the US and Iran, triggered by a US attack on the IRGC, has its watered-down version in a "war of attrition" whereby instead of inter-state warfare, we would witness medium-to-low-intensity clashes.

The question, then, is whether or not the US superpower, addicted to its military doctrine of "superior and overwhelming response", will tolerate occasional bruises at the hands of the Iranians. The answer is highly unlikely given the myriad prestige issues involved and, in turn, this raises the advisability of the labeling initiative with such huge implications nested in it.

No matter, the stage is now set for direct physical clashes between Iran and the US, which has blamed the death of hundreds of its soldiers on Iranian-made roadside bombs. One plausible scenario is the United States' "hot pursuit" of the IRGC inside Iranian territory, initially through "hit and run" commando operations, soliciting an Iranian response, direct or indirect, potentially spiraling out of control.

The hallucination of a protracted "small warfare with Iran" that would somehow insulate both sides from an unwanted big "clash of titans" is just that, a fantasy born and bred in the minds of war-obsessed hawks in Washington and Israel.

Note 1. The Algiers Accords of January 19, 1981, were brokered by the Algerian government between the US and Iran to resolve the situation that arose from the capture of American citizens in the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979. Through this accord the US citizens were set free. Among its provisions it was stated that the US would not intervene in Iranian internal affairs. – Wikipedia

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