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June 22, 2003

Iran's in the crosshairs of Bush's bombsight

By **ERIC MARGOLIS** -- Contributing Foreign Editor



MONTREAL -- President George Bush, who assured Americans on March 17 there was "no doubt that the Iraqi regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised," now warns Iran is working on nuclear weapons.

Bush seems determined to press his crusade against Muslim nations. But another important reason impels him on. He is running a political Ponzi scheme: diverting the public from the Enron and stock market swindles by invading Afghanistan, then covering that mess by invading Iraq, and now trying to cover up the growing Iraq disaster by fanning a new crisis with Iran.

Soon after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called for the U.S. Army to march on Tehran, his American neo-conservative supporters launched a get-Iran campaign, featuring the identical propaganda they used to fan war fever against Iraq: weapons of mass destruction; threats to the U.S.; terrorism and human rights violations. Some imaginative neo-cons even claim Saddam's unfindable weapons were moved to Iran.

The Bush administration, which openly seeks to overthrow the Tehran regime and funds anti-government groups, applauded last week's student protests in Iran. No mention, however, was made of students beaten and jailed in Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states for protesting the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Nor why an anti-Tehran Iranian Marxist group, which is on the U.S. terrorist list, is allowed to maintain offices only blocks from the White House .

Just as the U.S. intensified claims Iran was secretly developing nuclear capability, the UN's nuclear control agency, IAEA, and Europe called on Tehran to allow more intrusive inspection of its facilities, which are under UN controls. Tehran insists they are only for civilian use.

Iran's nuclear programs and missile development have deeply alarmed Israel. Threats of attacks on Iran's reactors are coming from the U.S. and Israel.

The latter's U.S.-supplied long-range F-15 strike aircraft are capable of hitting Iran.

Though Iran denies nuclear ambitions, it is probably developing covert weapons capability.

In 1994, the head of West Asia's most capable intelligence agency



revealed to me Iran had offered to pay his cash-strapped nation's total defence budget for 10 years in exchange for nuclear know-how.

He said the offer was refused.

Secret negotiations

Before his overthrow, the late shah was secretly negotiating with the U.S. for reactors, and with Israel for Jericho missiles armed with nuclear warheads.

Any regime in Iran, clerical, royal, or otherwise, will seek nuclear weapons.

A nation of 68 million with great oil wealth, which lost 500,000 men in the U.S.-promoted 1980 invasion by Iraq, has as much right to nuclear weapons for self-defence as Britain, France, India, or the U.S.

Iran's nuclear ambitions are aimed at countering Israel's large nuclear arsenal - reportedly over 200 weapons - and threats from Iraq. While Iran long accepted UN nuclear supervision, Israel flatly refused UN inspection, even creating a fake control room at its main Dimona reactor, according to defector Mordechai Vanunu, to fool U.S. specialists in the only inspection it ever allowed, in 1969.

President Bush's trumped-up war against Iraq, and now threats of war against Iran over its alleged nuclear projects, while turning a blind eye to Israel's nuclear arsenal is hypocritical and assures a continuing strategic arms race in the region. Nuclear and bio warfare disarmament of the entire Mideast - including Israel - is the right answer, as the UN has long urged.

Last fall, leading neo-con Richard Perle revealed plans for a U.S. campaign against Iran: stirring student unrest; then inciting a broader revolution to overthrow its Islamic theocracy.

Last week, as U.S. pressure on Iran mounted, student riots erupted in Iran, sparked by CIA-staged pirate TV broadcasts using U.S.-based Iranian royalists calling for rebellion.

Iranians are an educated, sophisticated people with an ancient history. Some find President Mohammed Khatami's Islamic regime narrow-minded, too repressive, or ineffectual, though it permits far more freedom of speech, political expression and women's rights than America's autocratic Arab or Central Asian allies, and is less corrupt.

Crushing U.S. sanctions on Iran have inflicted severe economic woes, and high unemployment.


More importantly, Iran is undergoing the same generational revolution that swept away the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

Seventy percent of Iranians are under 30, half under 18. They are rebelling against hidebound Shia orthodoxy; many seek the "decadent" western life the mullahs have struggled to fend off.

This ferment does not necessarily mean a counter-revolution will return Iran to the shah's days, when a thieving elite grotesquely aped the West and cozied up to the U.S. and Israel. The lacklustre Reza Shah, a.k.a. "The Baby Shah," waits in Washington for restoration with help from his wealthy neo-con friends.

He hardly seems the man to lead a new Iran. Iran's Beverly Hills- and Paris-based royalists are unlikely to return to power, except on U.S. tanks.

More likely is internal political convulsions, leading to a gradual erosion of the mullahs' power, and their replacement by a secular government that will be Islamic, but more forward-looking. Still, a major revolution cannot be totally discounted, particularly if fuelled by the U.S. and perhaps supported by American forces in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan.

 E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

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