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Experts: Iran Ready to Take It to the Brink

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WASHINGTON — With a dubious nuclear technology program, the capture of British sailors last week and reports of meddling in fledgling Iraqi affairs, **Iran** — a member of the now-notorious "axis of evil" — appears to be testing the waters to see how far it can push the West.

Some foreign policy analysts say Washington may find it difficult to fight back.

"The costs of the Iraq war are higher than just the soldiers who are dying and the money we are spending," said Joseph Cirincione, director of the non-proliferation project at the **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq squandered much of the U.S. authority in the Middle East and may have damaged America's ability to get help from Muslim states to fend off threats from Iran, he said.

"We really destroyed our relationship with the Arab world, and we are now in a much weaker position with Iran," he said.

"Iran is drawing a line in the sand," said Alireza Jafarzadeh of **Strategic Policy Consulting**. Jafarzadeh, formerly linked to the Washington, D.C.-based National Council of Resistance of Iran, which has been called a terrorist organization by the State Department, has won much support on Capitol Hill for his work as a staunch watchdog of Iran's nuclear weapons programs.

"Iran clearly wants all players in Iraq to know that the bigger and more populated and stronger neighbor is the big bully in the alley," he said.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran has claimed hundreds of nuclear experts are working directly for Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and that Iran seeks to have a nuclear bomb within two years. Last week, FOX News showed satellite images of two locations in Iran that are suspected of being sites for Iran's continued efforts to produce nuclear weapons.

On Monday, the head of the **International Atomic Energy Agency** and his weapons inspectors toured one of those facilities. The tour came after Iran was rebuked by the IAEA two weeks ago for noncompliance with weapons inspectors. IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei told Reuters that he was pleased with Iran's cooperation.

The tour also followed an announcement by the Iranian Foreign Ministry on Sunday that it would resume construction on centrifuges, a move critical to building a nuclear bomb. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said Iran will not begin enriching uranium, the process of injecting gas into centrifuges.

The U.S. responded by suggesting that the United Nations may want to seek sanctions on Iran. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told "FOX News Sunday" that the United States has been working with the IAEA and European nations to make certain the Iranians know "they only have two choices — to cooperate or face isolation."

Last week, experts warned the House International Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia that a nuclear bomb in the hands of Iran would spell imminent disaster for the United States.

"A nuclear-capable Iran, under their present leadership, could be an unparalleled earthquake, with shockwaves that could rock the foundations of U.S. vital interests in the region, at home and around the world," said Paul Leventhal, founder of the Nuclear Control Institute. Leventhal added that Iran's support of terrorist organizations could lead to the further proliferation of nuclear materials.

Reports indicate that Iranians are helping insurgents in Iraq fight U.S. forces and are terrorizing Iraqis aiding the new interim government, and before that, the Coalition Provisional Authority. Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Pa., who has been keeping a close eye on Iranian weapons acquisition and sales for years, emphasized this problem in recent Capitol Hill hearings.

"In my opinion, the bulk of what we are seeing in terms of unrest in Iraq is being carried out both by Iranians, by those groups being supported by Iran's money and by those organizations that are determined not to have Iraq be a stable nation," he said.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who testified at the hearing, concurred, but did not overemphasize Iran's role.

"I agree with you that Iran is important. I wouldn't say it is the key to everything," he said.

Iran also demonstrated its disregard for international relations last week when it captured eight British sailors who said they had mistakenly crossed into the Iranian side of a disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway between Iran and Iraq. The prisoners, who were released after a week in captivity, were paraded about on international television in what some say was a message by hard line leaders that the country will not be trifled with.

"It is the first shot across the bow," said Nile Gardiner, international affairs analyst with the Heritage Foundation.

"This is really a wake-up call for Downing Street and the Foreign Office," Gardiner said, referring to the British government. Iran "senses weakness in Iraq and a perceived weakness on behalf of Britain and America and they are testing and probing the strength of the West in regard to Iraq."

Even with the aggressive moves by the regime in Tehran, analysts vary on how to respond. Most of those who spoke with FOXNews.com agreed that a pre-emptive strike like the one launched against Saddam Hussein, who had repeatedly ignored U.N. disarmament resolutions and subverted international inspectors, is not a viable option for Iran. Direct negotiations with the government or supporting internal opposition groups combined with a "carrot and stick" approach appear more feasible at this time.

"It's very uncertain — we don't know what is going to happen here, it could go either way," Cirincione said. "A lot of it depends on keeping the pressure on, that means having a united front with the Europeans and the other nations in the region. It means having a comprehensive strategy offering Iran positive incentives as well as disincentives."

Richard Murphy, a senior fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations, said the Iranians are acting "paranoid" and "jumpy" because they perceive American and other Western interests

encroaching on the region. He suggested that it would behoove the United States to ensure any action taken against Iran's nuclear program has an international face.

"They are feeling that Uncle Sam is behind every corner waiting to bash them," said Murphy. "What we do not need is an openly hostile Iran intervening in Iraq."

Jafarzadeh, who said he believes the order to restrain the British soldiers came straight from the hard line theocracy, suggested that the international community be not only united, but firm as well. Anything less would make all efforts useless.

"What would make [the mullahs] bolder and more persistent in pushing their objectives is to see indecisiveness and confusion in the international community," he said. "Tehran will only take you seriously when you are serious, when you show teeth."