

August 27, 2006

Iran Opens a Heavy-Water Plant

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

TEHRAN, Aug. 26 — Just days before it is supposed to suspend enrichment of uranium or face the prospect of sanctions, Iran continues to project an image of defiance and confidence. Its position regarding the demand that it suspend enrichment remains a determined “no.”

On Saturday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a provocative, if symbolic, gesture by formally inaugurating a heavy-water plant. The plant, which Iranians say is intended for peaceful purposes, would also produce plutonium, which could be used in building nuclear warheads.

“There are no talks of nuclear weapons in Iran,” President Ahmadinejad said as he announced the opening of the plant. “And we are not a threat for any country, even the Zionist regime that is the enemy of the countries in the region.”

But he added, “We tell the Western countries not to cause trouble for themselves because the Iranian people are determined to take big steps.”

The action was the latest in a series of not-too-veiled threats against the West if Iran is saddled with sanctions.

But Iran’s public posture has all but guaranteed that the members of the United Nations Security Council will have to at least address Iran’s violations of the resolution setting Aug. 31 as the deadline for suspending enrichment.

Iran’s public confidence is based on three primary factors, political analysts here said: a strong belief that two of the council’s permanent members, Russia and China, will support Iran’s call for talks and oppose moving toward sanctions; that the United States is far too bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan to be willing to engage in another conflict in the region; and that the perceived victory of Hezbollah in its war with Israel has strengthened Iran’s political capital in the region.

“After the defeat of Israel by Hezbollah forces, China and Russia should not want to leave the side that won the war, which is the Islamic world,” said Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of the conservative daily newspaper Kayhan.

On Tuesday, Iranian officials formally responded to a package of incentives that Western diplomats had hoped would encourage Tehran to voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment. Iran still faces an Aug. 31 deadline to comply with the Security Council resolution threatening punitive actions if Iran does not stop.

Though Iran’s response was accompanied by moderate comments from Iranian officials, it did not accept suspension. The 21-page document was provided to the five permanent members of the Security Council

and Germany at a meeting in Tehran. The Swiss ambassador accepted it on behalf of the United States, which does not have diplomatic relations with Iran.

While the details of the response were not released, Mr. Shariatmadari, who was appointed by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said the package noted 50 "ambiguities" in the incentives package that needed clarification. Those, he said, included questions as basic as "Who is responsible for implementing the incentives," he said. "The E.U., the U.S., the nuclear agency, who?"

Soon after it gave its reply, Iran's public posture reverted back to confrontation. The deputy speaker of Parliament, Mohammad Reza Bahonar, cautioned that too much pressure on Iran could lead to calls for a nuclear weapons program.

"Our country is confronted with illogical countries who have nuclear weapons," he was quoted as saying in Saturday's edition of the reformist newspaper Shargh. "If they put too much pressure, our people might ask the government to produce nuclear weapons as a deterrent instrument."

On Friday, a midlevel cleric, Ahmad Khatami, said during a Friday Prayer ceremony that the West ought to be cautious in the way it addressed Iran.

"You cannot use the language of force against this nation," Mr. Khatami said in a speech broadcast around the nation from central Tehran. "Do not test us as you have tested us before."

As is customary, Mr. Khatami stood with his right hand gripping the barrel of an automatic weapon as he addressed thousands of people gathered for the ceremony. "You cannot deal with a nation as great as the Iranian nation this way. It is a very stupid approach. Russia and China, we count on you to be careful not to fall into the trap America has set for you."

For Iran, the issue of its nuclear program is as much about domestic politics as it is about international relations.

President Ahmadinejad was elected last year on a populist economic message, promising a redistribution of the nation's vast oil wealth and immediate economic improvements. Instead, while the economy remains gridlocked, inflation and unemployment high, Mr. Ahmadinejad has turned the nuclear issue into his *raison d'être*. Focusing on national pride, the president and Ayatollah Khamenei have succeeded in winning public support for the nuclear program.

While the depth of that support could be tested by sanctions, the president continued to appeal to pride as he opened the heavy-water plant in Arak, south of Tehran.

"Having nuclear technology and using it is a blessing and is the right of all nations, including Iran," Mr. Ahmadinejad said. "As the people's representative, I pursue whatever people want. Today they want to have nuclear technology and I pursue this demand and will not back down."

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Iran nuke negotiators report progress

AP Associated Press

By GEORGE JAHN, Associated Press Writer

19 minutes ago

Senior negotiators for Iran and the European Union reported progress Saturday at talks meant to find common ground for resolving Tehran's defiance of a U.N. demand that the Islamic republic freeze uranium enrichment or risk sanctions.

In an encouraging sign, the two sides agreed to hold further discussions Sunday.

"We had some good and constructive talks and we have made some progress in some areas, and we shall continue ... tomorrow," chief Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani said, speaking through an interpreter.

Cristina Gallach, spokeswoman for Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, confirmed that more talks would be held Sunday. "The feedback from the table is that the talks have been constructive and positive," she said.

The discussions have been billed as possibly the last chance for Iran to avoid sanctions for rejecting the U.N. Security Council's demand that it suspend its uranium enrichment processes, which can be misused to make nuclear bombs.

Being held at the Austrian chancellor's office, the talks are looking for a basis to open negotiations between Iran and six world powers that have offered a package of economic and diplomatic incentives meant to persuade Tehran to limit its nuclear program.

The five permanent Security Council members — the United States, China, Britain, France and Russia — along with Germany have demanded that Iran halt enrichment as a condition for the talks, but the Iranians have steadfastly refused to do so.

With the two sides seemingly so far apart, hopes for success had been slim for the mission by Solana, who is formally authorized by the six powers to carry their message and listen to the Iranians, without actually negotiating.

Still, positions appeared to have shifted slightly.

European officials who insisted on anonymity for sharing confidential information with The Associated Press suggested that at least some of the six nations were at least ready to listen if Iran committed itself to an enrichment freeze soon after the start of negotiations instead of doing so as a condition for such talks.

The officials declined to provide details. But such a readiness would deal a blow to U.S.-led attempts to hold fast to the demand that Iran freeze enrichment before any talks commence — or face the prospect of Security Council sanctions.

One of the officials said Solana discussed the issue with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice before going into the meeting but declined to offer details.

As late as Friday, U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said Washington expected the Security Council to start discussing a draft on sanctions as early as next week unless Tehran reversed course and agreed to freeze enrichment.

But there might be opposition to that within the council. Russia and China have resisted a quick move to sanctions even while agreeing to them as the ultimate punishment.

And French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy on Thursday appeared to suggest the demand on freezing enrichment first and talking later was negotiable. "The question is to know at what moment this suspension takes place compared to negotiations," he said.

He later appeared to reverse himself, saying in separate comments that suspension "is an absolute prerequisite for restoring trust and resuming negotiations."

A European diplomat told AP the mixed signals seemed to reflect that a sizable number of countries within the 24-member EU oppose a quick move to sanctions — even though Britain, France and Germany formally represent the bloc within the six-nation negotiating group.

China, meanwhile, repeated on Saturday its stance that patience was needed in dealing with Iran.

During a meeting with EU leaders in Finland, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao urged Tehran "to make constructive steps" toward ending the standoff, but added: "Our purpose is that the nuclear issue of Iran will be settled peacefully."

Burns had dismissed suggestions of cracks in the six-power coalition on when Iran should commit to enrichment Friday, a day after those six countries ended confidential discussions on Iran in Berlin.

Outlining the U.S. view of the timetable on Iran, Burns said the six nations would consult further by phone Monday and hoped to present a unified approach on sanctions to their foreign ministers by the time the U.N. General Assembly opens Tuesday.

"The American view is that following these discussions on Monday and perhaps some others early next week, we should move this to the Security Council and draft a resolution" on sanctions, he said.

Iran says it wants to develop an enrichment program to produce fuel for nuclear reactors that generate electricity. But there are growing concerns it seeks enrichment technology to make weapons-grade uranium for the core of warheads.

The six powers agreed on a package of economic and political rewards in June to be offered to Tehran, but only if it stops enrichment before the start of negotiations aimed at a long-term enrichment moratorium.

But the international alliance also warned of punishments, including U.N. sanctions, if Tehran did not halt enrichment — something Iran refused to do by the Aug. 31 deadline set by the Security Council.

Associated Press writer Robert Wieldaard in Helsinki, Finland, contributed to this report.

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Periscope

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INTELLIGENCE

How Close Is Iran to Having Nuclear Weapons?

AMERICAN INTEL agencies appear to be pushing back against conservatives who claim that their judgments about Iran's nuclear program are not hair-raising enough. In a development that reminded some experts of the fights over pre-war Iraq intel, hard-liners on the House intelligence committee last month produced a report declaring the U.S. intel community "needs to improve its analysis and collection" on Iran's WMD programs. A caption in the report even claimed that "Iran is currently enriching uranium to weapons grade."

Last week, however, the House committee assessment was slammed by U.N. nuclear experts, who pointed out that there's little evidence Iran is anywhere near producing weapons-grade uranium. And three U.S. officials familiar with recent intel reporting on Iran, who asked for anonymity due to the sensitive subject matter, said that U.S. agencies have not altered assessments that Iran is years away from producing a nuclear bomb. As two of the officials acknowl-



WEAPONS GRADE? Iranian President Ahmadinejad at a plant opening

edge, recent intel reporting indicates that if anything, technical problems are slowing down Iran's nuclear program. David Albright, a former U.N. WMD inspector and independ-

ent expert, told NEWSWEEK: "Iran's gas-centrifuge program is moving unexpectedly slowly. The program was expected to be much further along by this point." Albright says this as-

essment is supported by data produced by U.N. investigators; one of the government officials says that because U.N. inspectors still have some access to Iranian nuke facilities, their reporting is at least as good as info being produced by clandestine U.S. spies. Another of the U.S. officials said intel reports show Iran was experiencing significant problems with gyroscopes it has been trying to install on missiles that could deliver Iranian bombs to targets in the region and even further.

Officials in National Intelligence Director John Negroponte's office have told journalists that U.S. intel believes Iran will not be able to produce a nuke until about 2010 at the earliest, and perhaps not until 2015. A spokesman for Negroponte's office says intel agencies are now working on a new National Intelligence Estimate—a classified report laying out the consensus view of all agencies—about Iran's nuclear effort; the spokesman said that for the moment, the agencies' Iran nuke timeline was unchanged, "but we're researching it."

—MARK HOSEBALL

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM WATCH

SPECIAL WATERBOARDING EDITION

Now they're planning to dig trenches around Baghdad to keep out insurgents. Do Mexican border as a package deal?

CW

CW

Bush



He's sure that all "decisions I made are the right decisions." If you don't know it's broken, how can you fix it?

C. Powell



With apparent backbone transplant, he's publicly opposing Bush on torture. Where have you been?

Pope



Stunned that Muslims were offended when he cited their religion as "evil and inhuman." Welcome to the NFL.



OBAMA

Obama



Ill. senator and global phenom is back from Africa and top draw on campaign trail. Watch your back, Hillary.

Ann Richards



Not born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but witty, smart and tough nonetheless. We'll miss her.

O. Fallaci

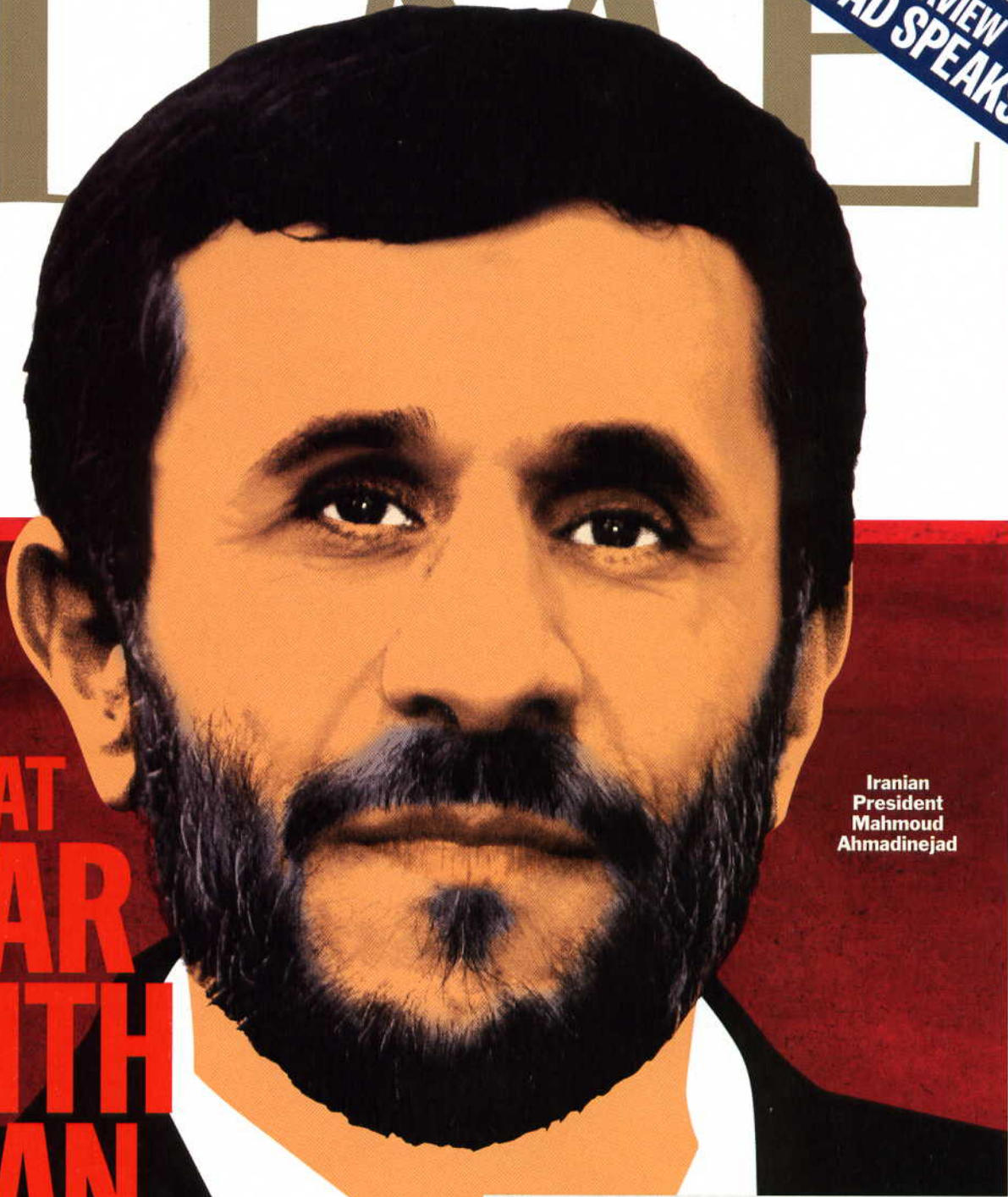


Bullies and phonies can breathe easy—Italy's fierce idealist won't be calling to interview them anymore.

Read the daily edition of Conventional Wisdom Watch at xtra.newsweek.com on MSNBC

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
AHMADINEJAD SPEAKS

TIME



Iranian
President
Mahmoud
Ahmadinejad

**WHAT
WAR
WITH
IRAN
WOULD LOOK LIKE**

(And how to avoid it)



TIME

A Date With a Dangerous Mind

EXCLUSIVE:

Face to face with Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the man whose swagger is stirring fears of war with the U.S.

By Scott MacLeod/Havana

MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD ISN'T ONE for ceremony. We are waiting in a villa outside Havana when Ahmadinejad strides in without notice, taking even his aides by surprise. He is wearing blue-gray trousers, black loafers and the trademark tan jacket that even he calls his "Ahmadinejad jacket." He mutters something to himself as he settles into an aging leather chair with bad springs. For a moment, he seems irked by the chair, perhaps because it makes him seem even smaller than his 5 ft. 4 in., but soon he's smiling, prodding, leaning forward to make his points. "We are living our own lives," he says, when asked about his differences with the Bush Administration. He jabs the back of my hand for emphasis. "The U.S. government should not interfere in our affairs. They should live their own lives."

When he made his first trip to the U.S. last year for a meeting of the U.N. General Assembly, Ah-

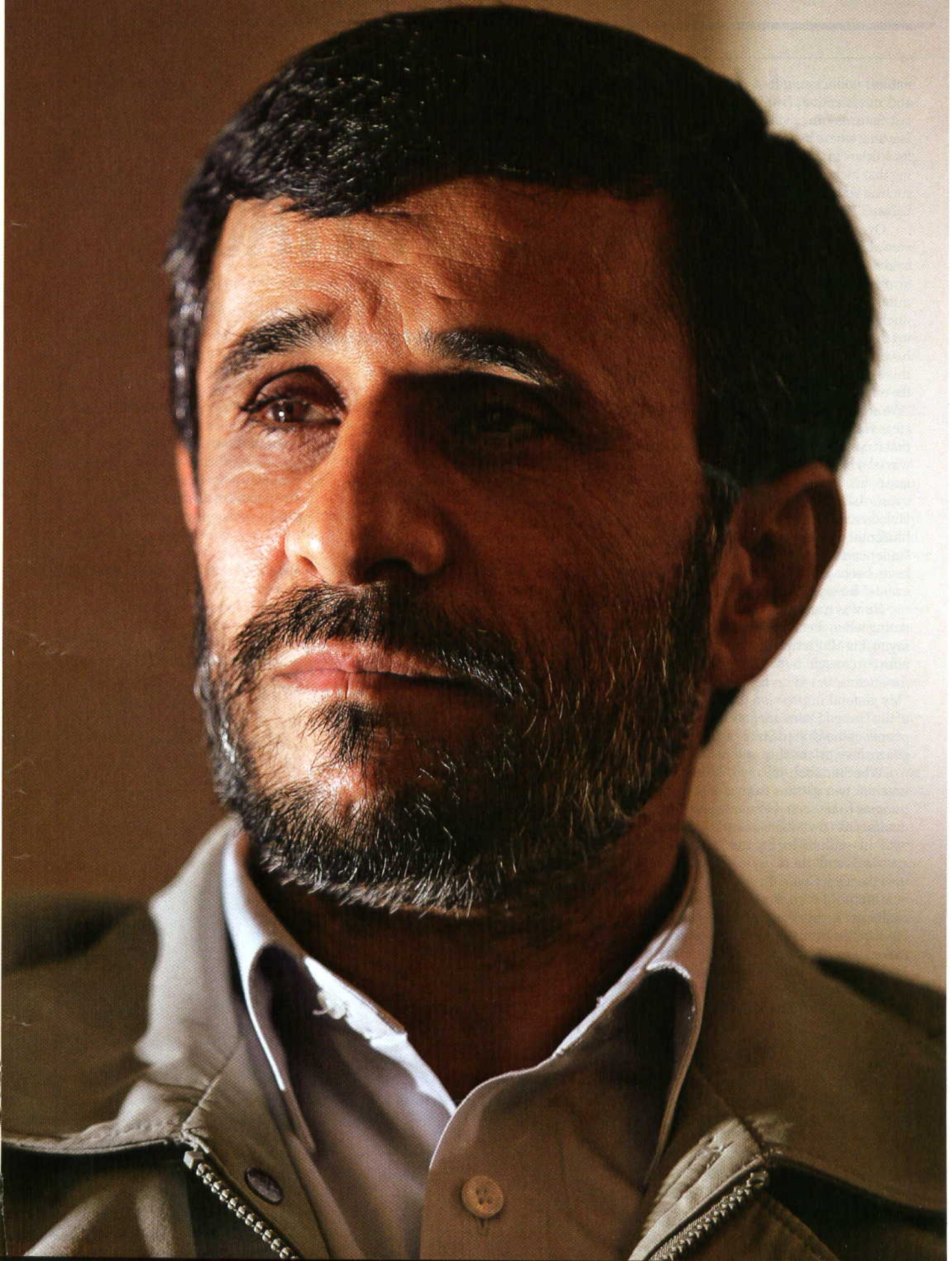
madinejad was still a curiosity—a diminutive, plainly dressed man who had come out of nowhere to win Iran's presidential election. But in New York City this week, he won't have trouble being recognized. His incendiary statements—he has declared the Holocaust a "myth," has said Israel should be "wiped away" and has called the Jewish state "a stain of disgrace"—have made him the most polarizing head of state in the Muslim world. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran has built up its influence in Lebanon and Iraq and made clear its intention to become the dominant power in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. He has also accelerated work on Iran's civilian nuclear program, which the U.S. believes is geared toward producing a nuclear bomb. Though pictures of the Iranian President often show him flashing a peace sign, his actions could well be leading the world closer to war.

For all his bluster, Ahmadinejad remains an enigma. His powers are limited by Iran's political structure, in which ultimate authority over matters of state rests with the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The regime has threatened to retaliate against American interests "in every part of the world" if the U.S. were ever to launch a military strike against Iran. But Ahmadinejad has also made rhetorical gestures of conciliation, sending an open letter to George W. Bush and inviting the U.S. President to a televised discussion about "the ways of solving the problems of the international community." (Bush ruled it out last week. "I'm not going to meet with him," he said at a White House news conference.)

Ahmadinejad is a skilled, if slippery, debater. In his press conferences, he has shown himself to be a

POWER BROKER

Ahmadinejad, in his trademark jacket during an interview last week, aims to make Iran the dominant player in the Middle East



natural politician, gifted in the art of spin and misdirection. Our meeting took place last Saturday in a villa on the outskirts of Havana, where he was attending the confab for leaders of nonaligned nations, a gathering that included other irritants to the West such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe.

Over the course of the 45-minute interview, he was serious, smiling and cocky—evidence of a self-assurance that borders on arrogance. His brown eyes locked onto mine when he made a point about Iran's nuclear program. His rhetoric was measured, but he was adamant on the issues that have made him so controversial. He dismissed U.N. demands that Iran suspend its uranium-enrichment program but said, "We are opposed to the development of nuclear weapons. We think it is of no use and that it is against the interests of nations." He waved a hand dismissively when I couldn't grasp his logic in questioning the Holocaust. Asked to defend his claim that the Holocaust was a myth, he went on a rambling rant, claiming that those who try to do "independent research" on the Holocaust have been imprisoned. "About historical events," he says, "there are different views."

He was more generous and accommodating when it came to discussing the U.S., saying his May letter to Bush was a genuine effort to reach out. He spoke highly of Americans, based on his trip to New York. "My general impression is that the people of the United States are good people... The people of the United States are also seeking peace, love, friendship and justice."

Whether such talk will be enough to save the two nations from a confrontation remains to be seen. Nor is it clear that Ahmadinejad's own job is secure. Impatience with his failure to fix Iran's economy is growing, and there is some speculation that the Old Guard may try to push him out. But until then, he seems likely to keep challenging the West, stirring things up. He aspires to unite Muslim opinion and make Iran the dominant player in the Middle East, restoring the country to its ancient imperial glory.

Ahmadinejad's handlers said our interview would last only 30 minutes, but he let it go on despite their protests. At last we were passed a note: "The time is over and Mr. President has an important meeting with the Cuban President. Goodbye." Ahmadinejad bolted from the room, swapped his jacket for a suit coat and climbed into a Mercedes. As the car pulled away, he sat in the back with an aide, smiled one more time and threw us a final wave. ■

"WE DO NOT NEED ATTACKS"

On the eve of a visit to the U.S., Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaks to TIME's Scott MacLeod about debating President Bush, pursuing nuclear energy and denying the Holocaust

TIME: What were your impressions of New York during your visit to the U.S. last year?

AHMADINEJAD: Unfortunately we didn't have any contact with the people of the United States. We were not in touch with the people. But my general impression is that the people of the United States are good people. Everywhere in the world, people are good.

TIME: Did you visit the site of the World Trade Center?

AHMADINEJAD: It was not necessary. It was widely covered in the media.

TIME: You recently invited President Bush to a televised debate. If he were sitting where I am sitting, what would you say, man to man?

AHMADINEJAD: The issues which are of interest to us are the international issues and how to manage them. I gave some recommendations to President Bush in my personal letter, and I hope that he will take note of them. I would ask him, Are rationalism, spirituality and humanitarianism and logic—are they bad things for human beings? Why more conflict? Why should we go for hostilities? Why should we develop weapons of mass destruction? Everybody can love one another.

TIME: Do you feel any connection with President Bush, since he is also a religious man, a strong Christian?

AHMADINEJAD: I've heard about that. But there are many things which take place and are inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ in this world.

TIME: Why do your supporters chant "Death to America"?

AHMADINEJAD: When they chanted that slogan, it means they hate aggression, and they hate bullying tactics, and they hate violations of the rights of nations and discrimination. I recommended to President Bush that he can change his behavior, then everything will change.

TIME: How do you think the American people

feel when they hear Iranians shouting "Death to America" and the President of Iran does not criticize this?

AHMADINEJAD: The nations do not have any problems. What is the role of the American people in what is happening in the world? The people of the United States are also seeking peace, love, friendship and justice.

TIME: But if Americans shouted "Death to Iran," Iranians would feel insulted.

AHMADINEJAD: If the government of Iran acted in such a way, then [the American people] have this right.

TIME: Are America and Iran fated to be in conflict?

AHMADINEJAD: No, this is not fate. And this



can come to an end. I have said we can run the world through logic. We are living our own lives. The U.S. government should not interfere in our affairs. They should live their own lives. They should serve the interests of the U.S. people. They should not interfere in our affairs. Then there would be no problems with that.

TIME: Are you ready to open direct negotiations with the U.S.?

AHMADINEJAD: We have given them a letter, a lengthy letter. We say the U.S. Administration should change its behavior, and then everything will be solved. It was the U.S. which broke up relations with us. We didn't take that position. And then they should make up for it.

TIME: Does Iran have the right to nuclear weapons?

AHMADINEJAD: We are opposed to nuclear weapons. We think it has been developed just to kill human beings. It is not in the service of human beings. For that reason, last year in my address to the U.N. General Assembly, I suggested that a committee should be set up in order to disarm all the countries that possess nuclear weapons.

TIME: But you were attacked with weapons of mass destruction by Iraq. You say the U.S. threatens you, and you are surrounded by countries that have nuclear weapons.

AHMADINEJAD: Today nuclear weapons are a blunt instrument. We don't have any problems with Pakistan or India. Actually they

are friends of Iran, and throughout history they have been friends. The Zionist regime is not capable of using nuclear weapons.

Problems cannot be solved through bombs. Bombs are of little use today. We need logic.

TIME: Why won't you agree to suspend enrichment of uranium as a confidence-building measure?

AHMADINEJAD: Whose confidence should be built?

TIME: The world's?

AHMADINEJAD: The world? The world? Who is the world? The United States? The U.S. Administration is not the entire world. Europe does not account for one-twentieth of the entire world. When I studied the provisions of the NPT [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty], nowhere did I see it written that in order to produce nuclear fuel, we need to win the

“Today nuclear weapons are a blunt instrument. Problems cannot be solved through bombs. [They] are of little use. We need logic.”

support or the confidence of the United States and some European countries.

TIME: How far will Iran go in defying Western demands? Will you wait until you are attacked and your nuclear installations are destroyed?

AHMADINEJAD: Do you think the U.S. Administration would be so irrational?

TIME: You tell me.

AHMADINEJAD: I hope that is not the case. I said that we need logic. We do not need attacks.

TIME: Are you worried about an attack?

AHMADINEJAD: No.

TIME: You have been quoted as saying Israel should be wiped off the map. Was that merely rhetoric, or do you mean it?

AHMADINEJAD: People in the world are free to think the way they wish. We do not insist they should change their views. Our position toward the Palestinian question is clear: we say that a nation has been displaced from its own land. Palestinian people are killed in their own lands, by those who are not original inhabitants, and they have come from far areas of the world and have occupied those homes. Our suggestion is that the 5 million Palestinian refugees come back to their homes, and then the entire people on those lands hold a referendum and choose their own system of government. This is a democratic and popular way. Do you have any other suggestions?

TIME: Do you believe the Jewish people have a right to their own state?

AHMADINEJAD: We do not oppose it. In any country in which the people are ready to vote for the Jews to come to power, it is up to them. In our country, the Jews are living and they are represented in our Parliament. But Zionists are different from Jews.

TIME: Have you considered that Iranian Jews are hurt by your comments denying that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust?

AHMADINEJAD: As to the Holocaust, I just raised a few questions. And I didn't receive any answers to my questions. I said that during World War II, around 60 million were killed. All were human beings and had their own dignities. Why only 6 million? And if it had happened, then it is a historical event. Then why do they not allow independent research?

TIME: But massive research has been done.

AHMADINEJAD: They put in prison those who try to do research. About historical events everybody should be free to conduct research. Let's assume that it has taken place. Where did it take place? So what is the fault of the Palestinian people? These questions are quite clear. We are waiting for answers. ■



FAITH AND POWER

Standing behind a copy of the Koran, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad observes a military procession in Tehran last April

Photograph for TIME
by Abbas—Magnum



“It’s not a question of whether or not a strike could be effective. It certainly would be. But are you prepared for all that follows?”

RETIREED MARINE GENERAL ANTHONY ZINNI, on the prospect of U.S. military action against Iran



What Would War Look Like?

A flurry of military maneuvers in the Middle East increases speculation that conflict with Iran is no longer quite so unthinkable. Here's how the U.S. would fight such a war—and the huge price it would have to pay to win it

By Michael Duffy

THE FIRST MESSAGE WAS ROUTINE ENOUGH: a "Prepare to Deploy" order sent through naval communications channels to a submarine, an Aegis-class cruiser, two minesweepers and two mine hunters. The orders didn't actually command the ships out of port; they just said to be ready to move by Oct. 1. But inside the Navy those messages generated more buzz than usual last week when a second request, from the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), asked for fresh eyes on long-standing U.S. plans to blockade two Iranian oil ports on the Persian Gulf. The CNO had asked for a rundown on how a blockade of those strategic targets might work. When he didn't like the analysis he received, he ordered his troops to work the lash up once again.

What's going on? The two orders offered tantalizing clues. There are only a few places in the world where minesweepers top the list of U.S. naval requirements. And every sailor, petroleum engineer and hedge-fund manager knows the name of the most important: the Strait of Hormuz, the 20-mile-wide bottleneck in the Persian Gulf through which roughly 40% of the world's oil needs to pass each day. Coupled with the CNO's request for a blockade review, a deployment of minesweepers to the west



coast of Iran would seem to suggest that a much discussed—but until now largely theoretical—prospect has become real: that the U.S. may be preparing for war with Iran.

No one knows whether—let alone when—a military confrontation with Tehran will come to pass. The fact that admirals are reviewing plans for blockades is hardly proof of their intentions. The U.S. military routinely makes plans for scores of scenarios, the vast majority of which will never be put into practice. "Planners always plan," says a Pentagon official. Asked about the orders, a second official said only that the Navy is stepping up its "listening and learning" in the Persian Gulf but nothing more—a prudent step, he added, after Iran tested surface-to-ship missiles there in August during a two-week

military exercise. And yet from the State Department to the White House to the highest reaches of the military command, there is a growing sense that a showdown with Iran—over its suspected quest for nuclear weapons, its threats against Israel and its bid for dominance of the world's richest oil region—may be impossible to avoid. The chief of the U.S. Central Command (Centcom), General John Abizaid, has called a commanders conference for later this month in the Persian Gulf—sessions he holds at least quarterly—and Iran is on the agenda.

On its face, of course, the notion of a war with Iran seems absurd. By any rational

18 months, Rice has kept the Administration's hard-line faction at bay while leading a coalition that includes four other members of the U.N. Security Council and is trying to force Tehran to halt its suspicious nuclear ambitions. Even Iran's former President, Mohammed Khatami, was in Washington this month calling for a "dialogue" between the two nations.

But superpowers don't always get to choose their enemies or the timing of their confrontations. The fact that all sides would risk losing so much in armed conflict doesn't mean they won't stumble into one anyway. And for all the good arguments against any war now, much less this one, there are just as many indications that a genuine, eyeball-to-eyeball crisis between the U.S. and Iran may be looming, and sooner than many realize. "At the moment," says Ali Ansari, a top Iran authority at London's Chatham House, a foreign-policy think tank, "we are headed for conflict."

So what would it look like? Interviews with dozens of experts and government officials in Washington, Tehran and elsewhere in the Middle East paint a sobering picture: military action against Iran's nuclear facilities would have a decent chance of succeeding, but at a staggering cost. And therein lies the excruciating calculus facing the U.S. and its allies: Is the cost of confronting Iran greater than the dangers of living with a nuclear Iran? And can anything short of war persuade Tehran's fundamentalist regime to give up its dangerous game?

ROAD TO WAR

THE CRISIS WITH IRAN HAS BEEN YEARS IN THE making. Over the past decade, Iran has acquired many of the pieces, parts and plants needed to make a nuclear device. Although Iranian officials insist that Iran's ambitions are limited to nuclear energy, the regime has asserted its right to develop nuclear power and enrich uranium that could be used in bombs as an end in itself—a symbol of sovereign pride, not to mention a useful prop for politicking. Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has crisscrossed the country in recent months making Iran's right to a nuclear program a national cause and trying to solidify his base of hard-line support in the Revolutionary Guards. The nuclear program is popular with average Iranians and the élites as well. "Iranian leaders have this sense of past glory, this belief that Iran should play a lofty role in the world," says Nasser Hadian, professor of political science at Tehran University.

But the nuclear program isn't Washington's only worry about Iran. While stoking nationalism at home, Tehran has dramatically consolidated its reach in the region. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has sponsored terrorist groups in a handful of countries, but its backing of Hizballah, the militant group that took Lebanon to war with Israel this summer, seems to be changing the Middle East balance of power. There is circumstantial evidence that Iran ordered Hizballah to provoke this summer's war, in part to demonstrate that Tehran can stir up big trouble if pushed to the brink. The precise extent of coordination between Hizballah and Tehran is unknown. But no longer in dispute after the standoff in July is Iran's ability to project power right up to the borders of Israel. It is no coincidence that the talk in Washington about what to do with Iran became more focused after Hizballah fought the Israeli army to a virtual standstill this summer.

And yet the West has been unable to compel Iran to comply with its demands. Despite all the work Rice has put into her coalition, diplomatic efforts are moving too slowly, some believe, to stop the Iranians before they acquire the makings of a nuclear device. And Iran has played its hand shrewdly so far. Tehran took weeks to reply to a formal proposal from the U.N. Security Council calling on a halt to uranium enrichment. When it did, its official response was a mosaic of half-steps, conditions and boilerplate that suggested Tehran has little intention of backing down. "The Iranians," says a Western diplomat in Washington, "are very able negotiators."

That doesn't make war inevitable. But at some point the U.S. and its allies may have to confront the ultimate choice. The Bush Administration has said it won't tolerate Iran having a nuclear weapon. Once it does, the regime will have the capacity to carry out Ahmadinejad's threats to eliminate Israel. And in practical terms, the U.S. would have to consider military action long before Iran had an actual bomb. In military circles, there is a debate about where—and when—to draw that line. U.S. intelligence chief John Negroponte told *TIME* in April that Iran is five years away from having a nuclear weapon. But some nonproliferation experts worry about a different moment: when Iran is able to enrich enough uranium to fuel a bomb—a point that comes well before engineers actually assemble a nuclear device. Many believe that is when a country becomes a nuclear power. *That* red line, experts say, could be just a year away.



AFP-GETTY

WAR GAMES

An Iranian submarine trawls the waters of the Persian Gulf during military exercises last April

measure, the last thing the U.S. can afford is another war. Two unfinished wars—one on Iran's eastern border, the other on its western flank—are daily depleting America's treasury and overworked armed forces. Most of Washington's allies in those adventures have made it clear they will not join another gamble overseas. What's more, the Bush team, led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, has done more diplomatic spadework on Iran than on any other project in its 5½ years in office. For more than

NUCLEAR TARGETS

If it comes, a U.S. military strike against Iran would aim to hit as many as 1,500 sites. But even that might not be enough to end Iran's ambitions

THE MISSILE THREAT

Iran has an arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles capable of hitting Israel and southern Europe. The Shahab-4 may have been tested, but no longer-range missile has been produced.

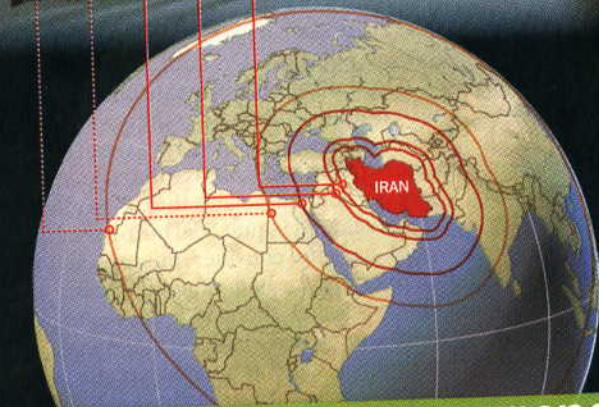
Shahab-5
Potential range:
3,400 miles (5,500 km)

Shahab-4
Potential range:
1,250 miles (2,000 km)

Shahab-3
Maximum range:
840 miles (1,350 km)

Shahab-2
Maximum range:
435 miles (700 km)

Shahab-1
Maximum range:
205 miles (330 km)



TEHRAN
The city and its suburbs contain a host of nuclear and missile R&D facilities. Among them are the Kalaye Electric Co., which produces centrifuge parts and is the site of uranium-enrichment activity; the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group, which develops Iran's ballistic and cruise missiles; and the Tehran Nuclear Research Center.

ARAK
Iran recently opened a heavy-water-production plant to supply a planned heavy-water nuclear reactor, which could either produce isotopes for medical and industrial use or secretly provide plutonium for bombs.

BUSHEHR
Its new, Russian-built 1,000-MW light-water reactor should soon be up and running. It could produce electricity or spent fuel for a quarter-ton of plutonium—enough for 30 atom bombs a year.

WHAT WAR WOULD LOOK LIKE: THE U.S.'S OPTIONS

LIMITED AIR STRIKES

Aimed at crippling Tehran's nuclear program, the actual campaign would last several days. Heavy bombers like the **B-1**, **B-2** and **B-52** would fly from Missouri, Guam or Diego Garcia to attack dozens of key nuclear and missile sites using various munitions, including "bunker busting" GBU-28 bombs to hit underground facilities. **Tomahawk cruise missiles** launched from ships and subs in the gulf would also target fixed air-defense and radar installations.

A FULL-SCALE ATTACK

A longer and bloodier scenario with hundreds of targets, an invasion would have the ultimate goal of removing the Iranian regime. Targets would include nuclear facilities and missile sites, Iran's air-defense system, radar installations, Revolutionary Guard and other military command centers, government offices and even oil pipelines. **U.S. ground troops** would push across the borders from Iraq and Afghanistan, eventually converging on Tehran.



WOULD AN ATTACK WORK?

THE ANSWER IS YES AND NO.

No one is talking about a ground invasion of Iran. Too many U.S. troops are tied down elsewhere to make it possible, and besides, it isn't necessary. If the U.S. goal is simply to stunt Iran's nuclear program, it can be done better and more safely by air. An attack limited to Iran's nuclear facilities would nonetheless require a massive campaign. Experts say that Iran has between 18 and 30 nuclear-related facilities. The sites are dispersed around the country—some in the open, some cloaked in the guise of conventional factories, some buried deep underground.

A Pentagon official says that among the known sites there are 1,500 different "aim points," which means the campaign could well require the involvement of almost every type of aircraft in the U.S. arsenal: Stealth bombers and fighters, B-1s and B-2s, as well as F-15s and F-16s operating from land and F-18s from aircraft carriers.

GPS-guided munitions and laser-targeted bombs—sighted by satellite, spotter aircraft and unmanned vehicles—would do most of the bunker busting. But because many of the targets are hardened under several feet of reinforced concrete, most would have to be hit over and over to ensure that they were destroyed or sufficiently damaged. The U.S. would have to mount the usual aerial ballet, refueling tankers as well as search-and-rescue helicopters in case pilots were shot down by Iran's aging, but possibly still effective air defenses. U.S. submarines and ships could launch cruise missiles as well, but their warheads are generally too small to do much damage to reinforced concrete—and might be used for secondary targets. An operation of that size would hardly be surgical. Many sites are in highly populated areas, so civilian casualties would be a certainty.

Whatever the order of battle, a U.S. strike would have a lasting impression on Iran's rulers. U.S. officials believe that a campaign of several days, involving hundreds or even thousands of sorties, could set back Iran's nuclear program by two to three years. Hit hard enough, some believe, Iranians might develop second thoughts

about their government's designs as a regional nuclear power. Some U.S. foes of Iran's regime believe that the crisis of legitimacy that the ruling clerics would face in the wake of a U.S. attack could trigger their downfall, although others are convinced it would unite the population with the government in anti-American rage.

But it is also likely that the U.S. could carry out a massive attack and still leave Iran with some part of its nuclear program intact. It's possible that U.S. warplanes could destroy every known nuclear site—while Tehran's nuclear wizards, operating at other, undiscovered sites even deeper underground, continued their work. "We don't know where it all is," said a White House official, "so we can't get it all."

WHAT WOULD COME NEXT?

NO ONE WHO HAS SPENT ANY TIME THINKING about an attack on Iran doubts that a U.S. operation would reap a whirlwind. The only mystery is what kind. "It's not a question of whether we can do a strike or not and whether the strike could be effective," says retired Marine General Anthony Zinni. "It certainly would be, to some degree. But are you prepared for all that follows?"

Retired Air Force Colonel Sam Gardiner, who taught strategy at the National War College, has been conducting a mock U.S.-Iran war game for American policymakers for the past five years. Virtually every time he runs the game, Gardiner says, a similar nightmare scenario unfolds: the U.S. attack, no matter how successful, spawns a variety of asymmetrical retaliations by Tehran. First comes terrorism: Iran's initial reaction to air strikes might be to authorize a Hizballah attack on Israel, in order to draw Israel into the war and rally public support at home.

Next, Iran might try to foment as much mayhem as possible inside the two nations on its flanks, Afghanistan and Iraq, where more than 160,000 U.S. troops hold a tenuous grip on local populations. Iran has already dabbled in partnership with warlords in western Afghanistan, where U.S. military authority has never been strong; it would be a small step to lend aid to Taliban forces gaining strength in the south. Meanwhile, Tehran has links to the main factions in Iraq, which would welcome a boost in money and weapons, if just to strengthen their hand against rivals. Analysts generally believe that Iran could in a short time orchestrate a dramatic increase in the number and severity of attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq. As Syed Ayad, a secular Shi'ite cleric

and Iraqi Member of Parliament says, "America owns the sky of Iraq with their Apaches, but Iran owns the ground."

Next, there is oil. The Persian Gulf, a traffic jam on good days, would become a parking lot. Iran could plant mines and launch dozens of armed boats into the bottleneck, choking off the shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz and causing a massive disruption of oil-tanker traffic. A low-key Iranian mining operation in 1987 forced the U.S. to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers and escort them, in slow-moving files of one and two, up and down the Persian Gulf. A more intense operation would probably send oil prices soaring above \$100 per bbl.—which may explain why the Navy wants to be sure its small fleet of minesweepers is ready to go into action at a moment's notice. It is unlikely that Iran would turn off its own oil spigot or halt its exports through pipelines overland, but it could direct its proxies in Iraq and Saudi Arabia to attack pipelines, wells and shipment points inside those countries, further choking supply and driving up prices.

That kind of retaliation could quickly transform a relatively limited U.S. mission in Iran into a much more complicated one involving regime change. An Iran determined to use all its available weapons to counterattack the U.S. and its allies would present a challenge to American prestige that no Commander in Chief would be likely to tolerate for long. Zinni, for one, believes an attack on Iran could eventually lead to U.S. troops on the ground. "You've got to be careful with your assumptions," he says. "In Iraq, the assumption was that it would be a liberation, not an occupation. You've got to be prepared for the worst case, and the worst case involving Iran takes you down to boots on the ground." All that, he says, makes an attack on Iran a "dumb idea." Abizaid, the current Centcom boss, chose his words carefully last May. "Look, any war with a country that is as big as Iran, that has a terrorist capability along its borders, that has a missile capability that is external to its own borders and that has the ability to affect the world's oil markets is something that everyone needs to contemplate with a great degree of clarity."

CAN IT BE STOPPED?

GIVEN THE CHAOS THAT A WAR MIGHT UNLEASH, what options does the world have to avoid it? One approach would be for the U.S. to accept Iran as a nuclear power and learn to live with an Iranian bomb, focusing its efforts on deterrence rather than pre-



THE AGITATOR

Ahmadinejad, shown saluting crowds in Ardabil Province, insists on Iran's natural right to nuclear technology

emption. The risk is that a nuclear-armed Iran would use its regional primacy to become the dominant foreign power in Iraq, threaten Israel and make it harder for Washington to exert its will in the region. And it could provoke Sunni countries in the region, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to start nuclear programs of their own to contain rising Shi'ite power.

Those equally unappetizing prospects—war or a new arms race in the Middle East—explain why the White House is kicking up its efforts to resolve the Iran problem before it gets that far. Washington is doing everything it can to make Iran think twice about its ongoing game of stonewall. It is a measure of the Administration's unity on Iran that confrontationalists like Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have lately not wandered off the rhetorical reservation. Everyone has been careful—for now—to stick to Rice's diplomatic emphasis. "Nobody is considering a military option at this point," says an Administration official. "We're trying to prevent a situation in which the President finds himself having to decide between a nuclear-armed Iran or going to war. The best hope of avoiding that dilemma is hard-nosed diplomacy, one that has serious consequences."

Rice continues to try for that. This week in New York City, she will push her partners

to get behind a new sanctions resolution that would ban Iranian imports of dual-use technologies, like parts for its centrifuge cascades for uranium enrichment, and bar travel overseas by certain government officials. The next step would be restrictions on government purchases of computer software and hardware, office supplies, tires and auto parts—steps Russia and China have signaled some reluctance to endorse. But even Rice's advisers don't believe that Iran can be persuaded to completely abandon its ambitions. Instead, they hope to tie Iran up in a series of suspensions, delays and negotiations until a more pragmatic faction of leadership in Tehran gains the upper hand.

At the moment, that sounds as much like a prayer as a strategy. A former CIA director, asked not long ago whether a moderate faction will ever emerge in Tehran, quipped, "I don't think I've ever met an Iranian moderate—not at the top of the government, anyway." But if sanctions don't work, what might? Outside the Administration, a growing group of foreign-policy hands from both parties have called on the U.S. to bring Tehran into direct negotiations in the hope of striking a grand bargain. Under that formula, the U.S. might offer Iran some security guarantees—such as forswearing efforts to topple Iran's theocratic regime—in exchange for Iran's agreeing to open its facilities to international inspectors and abandon weapons-related projects. It would be painful for any U.S. Administration to recognize the legitimacy of a regime that sponsors terrorism and calls for Israel's destruction—but the time may come when that's the only bargaining chip short of war the U.S. has left. And still that may not be enough. "[The Iranians] would give up nuclear power if they truly believed the U.S. would accept Iran as it is," says a university professor in Tehran who asked not to be identified. "But the mistrust runs too deep for them to believe that is possible."

Such distrust runs both ways and is getting deeper. Unless the U.S., its allies and Iran can find a way to make diplomacy work, the whispers of blockades and minesweepers in the Persian Gulf may soon be drowned out by the cries of war. And if the U.S. has learned anything over the past five years, it's that war in the Middle East rarely goes according to plan. —Reported by Brian Bennett/Baghdad, James Graff/Paris, Scott MacLeod/Cairo, J.F.O. McAllister/London, Tim McGirk/Jerusalem, Azadeh Moaveni/Tehran and Mike Allen, Sally B. Donnelly, Elaine Shannon, Mark Thompson, Douglas Waller, Michael Weisskopf and Adam Zagorin/Washington