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Mideast war highlights dangers of a nuclear Iran

By Lawrence J. Haas

WASHINGTON - The growing war in the Middle East must not divert our attention from the far more ominous challenge facing the region and the world * Iran's progress toward developing an atomic bomb.

Indeed, the war makes the case. Imagine what might be unfolding if Iran, the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism, had nuclear weapons to use itself, to give to two of its major terrorist clients (Hezbollah and Hamas) or to blackmail the West over its foreign policy.

By now, Iran would have threatened Israel over its military campaign, ordered Washington to contain Tel Aviv, pressured Europe (which it already can reach with its missiles) to pressure the United States, directed Lebanon's shaky government not to interfere with Hezbollah's operations within its borders, sent Iran's troops into battle or its ships to disrupt oil deliveries, dropped the bomb without warning, or given it to Hezbollah for its own use.

Iran's leaders, who are perhaps just a year or two from developing the bomb, have vowed to use it or distribute it.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatens to "wipe" Israel "off the map," while other leaders muse that an Iran-Israel nuclear exchange would damage the former but destroy the latter.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, says the Islamic Republic is ready to give its nuclear know-how and technology to other nations and groups.

Today, Iran stands behind Hezbollah in its reckless provocations, both rhetorically and operationally.

The rockets that land in Haifa come via Tehran, as do Ahmadinejad's warnings of all-out war if Israel confronts Hezbollah's other sponsor, Syria, with which Iran has grown closer.

It's par for the course. Tehran kept its nuclear program hidden for 18 years, then broke agreements with European negotiators to halt it.

More recently, Iran has kicked international nuclear inspectors out of its country, boasted of its progress toward enriching weapons-grade uranium, and scoffed at an offer of incentives from the West to drop its program altogether.

Tehran's focused march toward nuclear weaponry reflects Ahmadinejad's view of his religious destiny, which is to provoke a violent confrontation with the West that will signal the return of Shiite Islam's long-hidden 12th Imam, or "Mahdi," and will mean the end of the world.

So sure is Ahmadinejad of the Imam's return that he gave \$20 million to the mosque from which the Mahdi supposedly will emerge, says he will base national policy on that return, and, as Tehran's mayor in 2004, ordered an urban reconstruction project to make the city more amenable to the return.

Backed by Khamenei and the hard-line ruling clerics, Ahmadinejad worries little about the niceties of diplomacy and the norms of global conduct.

An Ahmadinejad with a nuclear bomb would worry not at all. Nor would any fanatic with hopes to end the world and the means with which to try.

Thus, we must view today's Middle East conflagration as a timely, if unexpected, opportunity * a tool with which to rally the international community toward necessary action as Iran marches toward a nuclear future.

That action need not mean war, for we have numerous ways to ratchet up the pressure on Tehran, from sanctions that target the government and, in particular, its leaders to more aggressive outreach to a population that has grown weary of the mullahs and largely supports the United States.

Working with our allies, we can freeze the global assets of Iran's leaders, many of whom have enriched themselves while suppressing domestic dissent in increasingly brutal fashion.

We can restrict their travel and refuse to engage them as legitimate colleagues on the world stage.

We also can strengthen our ties to the Iranian people, most of whom are below the age of 30.

Most Iranians know life only since the Islamic revolution of 1979, and many of them chafe at restrictions on speech, political activity and other freedoms that are growing tighter.

We can invest more in television, radio, the Internet and other free communication to talk directly to Iran's people, provide greater moral support to Iran's brave and often tortured dissidents and encourage labor unrest that could help propel a popular insurrection against the regime.

Sometimes, war does more than bring death and destruction.

Sometimes, it crystallizes challenges that lay ahead. This is one of those moments.

We must not let it pass without action.

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