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# Iran helped cultivate Mideast crisis, US says

The Boston Globe

## Web of ties has Tehran at center

By Farah Stockman, Globe Staff | July 21, 2006

WASHINGTON -- What began as a kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Lebanese militants is now being seen by some senior Bush administration officials as a defining moment in a far larger struggle by Iran and its allies against the United States and the West.

Although US officials say they have no evidence that Iran directly ordered the Islamic extremist movement Hezbollah to carry out the kidnapping, they contend that the move was part of a coordinated effort by groups allied with Iran to frustrate US interests across the Middle East.

"We see this as a power play by Iran," said a senior US official who has been closely following the developments in the Middle East. "It's scary because Iran is a powerful country. One of the things that they are trying to say to us is, 'Look what we can do to you. Look how much pain we could cause.'"

Iran's role in the current crisis has been a matter of debate since Israeli soldiers were kidnapped in a cross-border Hezbollah attack on July 12. Israel has responded by launching punishing air and artillery strikes in Lebanon. Israel accuses Iran of directly ordering the Hezbollah attack. Israel also accuses Iran of sending operatives from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to fight alongside Hezbollah, and says Iranians helped fire a sophisticated rocket that hit an Israel ship off the Lebanese coast last Friday.

But US officials hold a more nuanced position: that Iran has funded and encouraged extremist allies to sow chaos and rise up against the West.

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"There has been a growing sense among the Iranian hard-liners and the Syrians, that the tide is turning their way in the regional balance of power," said the official. "Does it mean that the supreme leader [of Iran] told [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah to conduct an operation on such and such a date? I don't know. We don't have any evidence of a direct order like that. But we have tons of evidence of a very strong web of relations between Iran and Hezbollah, facilitated by Syria."

For instance, shortly before the Hezbollah kidnapping, Syria appears to have facilitated a meeting in Damascus between Nasrallah and Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, "with the possible participation of Syrian and Iranian intelligence officers," according to a detailed report by Anthony

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Cordesman , a former Defense Department official now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Cordesman did not cite his sources on the meeting, and US officials say they are uncertain if it ever took place.

But it is clear, however, that Iran has long provided Hezbollah with arms and in recent years increasingly sophisticated weaponry, including longer-range rockets being used in the current crisis that can penetrate deep into Israeli territory. Cordesman's report said Iran also provided unmanned aerial vehicles that made flights over northern Israel in November 2004 and May 2005. [Continued...](#)

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