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## Mideast Conflict Boosts Chances of Iran-US Showdown

by Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON - The week-old Israeli-Hezbollah conflict is likely to boost the chances of U.S. military action against Iran, according to a number of regional experts who see a broad consensus among the U.S. political elite that the ongoing hostilities are part of a broader offensive being waged by Tehran against Washington across the region.

While Israel-centred neo-conservatives have been the most aggressive in arguing that Hezbollah's Jul. 12 cross-border attack could only have been carried out with Iran's approval, if not encouragement, that view has been largely accepted and echoed by the mainstream media, as well as other key political factions, including liberal internationalists identified with the Democratic Party.

"In my reading, this is the beginning of what was a very similar process in the period, between (the Sep. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against New York and the Pentagon) and the Iraq war," according to Gregory Gause, who teaches Middle East politics at the University of Vermont.

"While neo-cons took the lead in opinion formation then, eventually there was something approaching consensus in the American political class that war with Iraq was a necessary part of remaking the Middle East to prevent future 9/11s," he said.

"That strong majority opinion was bipartisan à (and) crossed ideological lines -- neo-cons supported the war, but so did lots of prominent liberal intellectuals," he went on. "I think it is very possible that a similar consensus could develop over the next few years, if not the next few months, about the necessity to confront Iran."

Indeed, almost as if to prove the point, the U.S. Senate voted unanimously Tuesday to approve a resolution that not only endorsed Israel's military actions in Gaza and Lebanon without calling on it to exercise any restraint, but also urged U.S. President George W. Bush to impose across-the-board diplomatic and economic sanctions on Tehran and Damascus. The House of Representatives was expected to pass a similar resolution Wednesday.

To Gause and other analysts, Tehran, even before the current crisis, offered a tempting target of blame for Washington's many frustrations in the region.

In addition to its long-standing support for Hezbollah, whose political power has, in Washington's view, stalled last year's so-called "Cedar Revolution", Iran has backed both Hamas, including the Damascus-based military wing that last month precipitated the current round of violence by abducting an Israeli soldier outside Gaza, and Shia militias that have helped push Iraq to the brink of a sectarian civil war.

"The world needs to understand what is going on here," wrote the influential liberal New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman last week as Israel launched its military counter-offensive against Hezbollah.

"The little flowers of democracy that were planted in Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories are being crushed by the boots of Syrian-backed Islamist militias who are desperate to keep real democracy from taking hold in this region and Iranian-backed Islamist militias desperate to keep modernism from taking hold."

But Iran can be blamed for other ills, as well. By allegedly promoting instability throughout the region, as well as fears of an eventual military confrontation with Washington, Iran can also be blamed for the rise of oil prices, from which it is profiting handsomely, to record levels.

And its repeated rejection of U.S. demands that it respond to the pending proposal for a deal on its nuclear programme adds to the thesis that Iran is engaged in its own form of asymmetric warfare against Washington. Indeed, it has become accepted wisdom here that Iran encouraged Hezbollah's Jul. 12 raid as a way to divert attention from growing international concern over its nuclear programme.

"There has been a lot of connecting of the dots back to Iran," according to ret. Col. August Richard Norton, who teaches international relations at Boston University. "This goes well beyond the (neo-conservative) 'Weekly Standard' crowd; we've seen the major newspapers all accept the premise that what happened Jul. 12 was engineered in some way by Iran as a way of undermining efforts to impede its nuclear programme."

"(There has been a) build-up of domestic forces that now see Iran as inexorably at the centre of the entire regional spiderweb," noted Graham Fuller, a former top Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and RAND Corporation Middle East expert. "The mainstream is unfortunately grasping for coherent explanations, (and) the neo-con/hard right offers a fairly simple, self-serving vision on the cause of the problems, and their solution."

In much the same way that Saddam Hussein was depicted, particularly by neo-conservatives, as the strategic domino whose fall would unleash a process of democratisation, de-radicalisation, moderation, and modernisation throughout the Middle East, so now Iran is portrayed as the "Gordian Knot" whose cutting would not only redress many of Washington's recent setbacks, but also renew prospects for regional "transformation" in the way that it was originally intended.

The notion that, as the puppet master behind Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Shia militias in Iraq, an aggressive and emboldened Iran is the source of Washington's many problems has the added virtue of relieving the policy establishment here of responsibility for the predicament in which Washington finds itself or of the necessity for "painful self-examination, or serious policy revision," according to Fuller.

"Full speed ahead -- no revision of fundamental premises is required. And, even though we revel in being the sole global superpower, God forbid that anything the U.S. has done in the region might have at least contributed to the present disaster scene," he said.


As was the case with Iraq, the only dissenters among the policy elite are the foreign policy "realists", who argue that this administration, in particular, has made a series of disastrous policy errors in the Middle East -- especially by providing virtually unconditional support for Israel and invading Iraq.

They also include regional specialists like Norton, who maintain that the depiction of Hezbollah, for example, as a mere proxy for Iran -- let alone the notion that Tehran was behind the Jul. 12 attack -- is a dangerous misreading of a much more complex reality.

These forces have been arguing for some time that Washington should engage Iran directly on the full range of issues -- from Tehran's nuclear programme to regional security -- that divide. But the current crisis, and Israel's and the neo-conservatives' success in blaming Iran for it, is likely to make this argument a more difficult sell.

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