

Designating IRGC foreign terrorist organization, U.S. actions against Iran raise war risk, many fear

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WASHINGTON — As President Bush escalates the United States' confrontation with Iran across a broad front, U.S. allies in Europe and the Middle East are growing worried that the steps will achieve little, but will undercut diplomacy and increase the chances of war.

In the latest step, Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are considering designating Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps , the elite military force that serves as the guardian of Iran's Islamic state, as a foreign terrorist organization.

News of the decision was leaked to newspapers in what a senior State Department official and Washington -based diplomats said was a sign of an intensifying internal struggle within the U.S. government between proponents of military action and opponents, led by Rice.

State Department officials and foreign diplomats see Rice's push for the declaration against the Revolutionary Guards as an effort to blunt arguments by Vice President Dick Cheney and his allies for air strikes on Iran . By making the declaration, they feel, Rice can strike out at a key Iranian institution without resorting to military action while still pushing for sanctions in the United Nations .

Partisans of military force argue that Rice's strategy has failed to change Tehran's behavior.

"It really does seem this is more tied to the internal debate that is going on in the administration on Iran , rather than a serious attempt to influence Iranian behavior," said an Arab diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity.

"How that debate will play out is what's concerning" Arab and European countries, he said.

Designating the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist group "is the State Department trying to do something short of war," said former U.S. diplomat Charles Dunbar , a professor of international relations at Boston University .

"What else can we do?" said Dunbar, who worked for the State Department in Tehran from 1963 to 1967.

The Revolutionary Guard would be the first military unit of a sovereign government ever placed on the department's list of terrorist organizations. The move would allow the Treasury Department to go after the group's finances and those of its reputed business network inside and outside Iran .

The Bush administration has been engaging Iran in an increasingly strident war of words since the spring, when the Bush administration demanded tougher U.N. sanctions over Iran's nuclear energy program. The White House says that Bush remains committed to diplomatic and financial actions to persuade Iran to stop enriching nuclear fuel, which the U.S. says can be made into a bomb but that Iran insists is intended only for electricity generation.

Recently, the administration has stepped up the rhetoric, accusing Iran of providing Shiite Muslim militias in Iraq with particularly deadly roadside bombs that have killed dozens of U.S. service members.

"We are confronting Iranian behavior across a variety of different fronts on a number of different, quote- unquote, battlefields, if you will," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Wednesday.

Earlier this year, the Pentagon temporarily moved an additional aircraft carrier into the Persian Gulf as a warning to Iran . U.S. commanders in Iraq have also highlighted intelligence they say shows that the Revolutionary Guard's Qods force is shipping sophisticated road-side bombs, known as explosively formed penetrators, into Iraq .

Bush and his aides also have accused Iran of playing an unhelpful role in Afghanistan — although some State Department officials say the reality is much more complicated.

Finally, Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates traveled to the Middle East in late July and early August, bearing promises of billions in weapons sales to friendly Arab states and a \$30 billion, 10-year military aid package to Israel .

The rationale: Iran .

What remains unclear is what the administration will do if none of those steps has an impact on Iran , whose leaders seem confident as they see Bush unpopular at home and bogged down in Iraq .

"The coercion ... undermines diplomacy. And once diplomacy is undermined, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy," said Ray Takeyh , an Iran expert at the Council on Foreign Relations .

By early 2008, "You're in a position where you have a series of escalatory measures ... And then the military option becomes something you can consider," Takeyh said.

On the nuclear front, since taking office in 2005, Rice has backed a European-led effort to persuade Iran to stop enriching uranium in exchange for economic, political and security benefits.

The U.N. Security Council has passed two resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran for its nuclear work. But negotiations on a third have stalled and a September deadline for enacting new sanctions will likely be missed, say State Department officials and diplomats.

Critics say that designating the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist group could further undermine the effort, and also scuttle U.S.-Iranian talks in Baghdad on Iraq's security. Those talks have achieved little.

On Iran's role in Iraq , U.S. ground commanders in Iraq oppose proposals from Cheney and his allies to counter-attack inside Iran itself, saying they believe they can contain Iran's growing influence without acting outside Iraq .

Privately, some are hostile to suggestions that the military strike another country, saying they are mired in Iraq .

"Let them put on the uniform and go there then," said one military official in Baghdad who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the topic.

Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno , the No. 2 commander in Iraq , said Friday that Shi'ite factions, backed by Iranian groups, are now responsible for nearly half the attacks in Iraq , compared to 30 percent in January.

Odierno said he could deal with the problem inside Iraq , without going over the border into Iran . But he conceded that the military still is learning about how Iranian networks run through Iraq .

"We're just in the beginning stages" of denting Iranian influence, he said. Iran's abilities are "still significant. So we still have an awful lot of work to do."

By Warren P. Strobel and Nancy A. Youssef, McClatchy Newspapers
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