

In Public's Eyes, Iran Biggest Foreign Menace

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Global Research, February 11, 2006

IPS 11 February 2006

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02/10/06 WASHINGTON, Feb 9 (IPS) - The escalating crisis over Iran's nuclear programme appears to have persuaded the U.S. public that Tehran now poses a greater threat to the United States than any other country, or even al Qaeda, according to recent surveys.

And even though the public remains worried and unhappy about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, a significant percentage has already begun thinking of eventual military action against Iran.

"Americans are telling us that they would prefer we pack our bags and leave Iraq now, and yet they appear ready to do some damage to Iran if it proceeds with its nuclear programme," said John Zogby, president of the polling firm, Zogby International, which released a survey last week in which nearly half of the respondents (47 percent) said they favoured military action, preferably along with European allies, to halt Iran's nuclear programme.

Still, despite the high level of concern, the polls do not show eagerness to take military action now or unilaterally. The public appears to prefer an effort to settle the crisis diplomatically, preferably through the United Nations.

If that fails, the poll respondents indicated they would prefer for any military action to be undertaken in conjunction with other countries and, in any event, strongly oppose an invasion designed to overthrow the regime, as in Iraq.

"Are people clamouring for military action at this point? Definitely not," said Steven Kull, director of the University of Maryland's Programme on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

"Between now and military action, the public would definitely be looking for more negotiations. And then they want to try to do something multilaterally," he said. "They'd have to cross a whole bunch of hurdles before you'd get military action."

Nonetheless, the latest poll, released Tuesday by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, found that some 27 percent of respondents cite Iran as Washington's greatest menace — three times the percentage who ranked it at the top of foreign threats just four months ago.

The same survey, which polled 1,500 adults during the first week of February, also found that nearly three in four (72 percent) believed Tehran was "likely" to launch attacks on Israel if it obtained nuclear weapons. An even higher percentage (82 percent) said they believed the Iranian government would likely transfer nuclear weapons to terrorists.

The latest results strongly suggest that the combination of belligerent declarations by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; Tehran's defiance of European appeals not to resume its uranium enrichment activities; and efforts by Israel and its allies here to mobilise international and U.S. opinion has moved the Islamic Republic to the centre of the public's foreign-policy consciousness.

This shift in some ways echoes how the hawks in the administration of President George W. Bush focused the public's post-9/11 fears on former President Saddam Hussein in the year-long run-up to the Iraq invasion in March 2003.

"How Dangerous is Iran" was the bold headline that ran along a photo of Ahmadinejad on the cover of this week's "Newsweek" magazine. "The Next Nuclear Threat" and "Radical Islam in Power" topped the cover.

Similarly, a familiar cast of Washington hawks — many of whom greeted Ahmadinejad's election and declaration that Israel should be "wiped off the map" as a godsend for their own efforts to rouse the public against Iran — has also been talking up the threat.

"An 'Intolerable' Threat" was the title of the neo-conservative Wall Street Journal's lead editorial, while the "Weekly Standard" featured an article entitled "Iran or Bust: The Defining Test of Bush's War Presidency," which argued that Iran had become "the central crisis of the Bush presidency."

In an interview on the public television network PBS's "Newshour" this week, Vice President Dick Cheney, citing Ahmadinejad's "pretty outrageous statements," described the nuclear standoff as "dangerous" and warned that "no options are off the table," even as he rejected repeated questions by the host about "striking parallels" between the escalating crisis and the run-up to the Iraq war.

At the same time, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blamed Iran for inciting this week's violent protests in the Middle East against offensive cartoons about Mohammed published in European newspapers.

In that respect, the Pew poll results were perhaps the most striking. Over the last 15 years, an average of only about six percent of respondents rated Iran as the "greatest danger" to the United States. In October, the same month that Ahmadinejad threatened Israel for the first time, that grew to nine percent, still far below Iraq (18 percent), China (16 percent), and North Korea (13 percent).

But the latest survey found that the percentage had tripled to 27 percent compared to China (20 percent), Iraq (17 percent), North Korea (11 percent), and al Qaeda/terrorists (four percent).

Moreover, two-thirds of respondents listed Iran's nuclear programme, which U.S. intelligence agencies believe is still a decade away from developing an actual weapon, as a "major threat" — compared to 60 percent who described North Korea's nuclear programme that way, despite the fact that Pyongyang is believed to have built as many as a dozen bombs. Pew director Andrew Kohout, however, noted that 55 percent of respondents in the October poll said they believed that Iran already possessed nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless, the public is divided about what to do about Iran, according to the survey's results. Nearly four in five respondents (78 percent) said they wanted the UN to deal with the situation, compared with only 17 percent who said the United States should.

Nearly 80 percent of respondents said they had heard about Iran's announcement that it would resume its enrichment activities. Nearly half of those who said they had heard a lot about it ranked Iran as the greatest threat to the United States, according to the poll.

"There's been so much written and broadcast about the intransigence of the Iranians, it would've been remarkable otherwise," Kohout told IPS.

A poll taken in late January by the Washington Post and ABC television network found strong support for diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions to persuade Iran to curb its nuclear programme.

Asked in the same poll whether they would support U.S. bombing of suspected nuclear sites if those steps don't work, 42 percent were in favour, while 54 percent opposed the idea.

In a similar poll taken at the same time by Fox News, nearly 60 percent of respondents said the United States should be prepared to "use whatever military force is necessary" to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons if diplomacy failed, and 47 percent said they considered Iran more of a threat than Iraq was when the U.S. invaded.

More than 90 percent of respondents said they were either "very concerned" (68 percent) or "somewhat concerned" (23 percent) that Iran would give nuclear weapons to terrorists; and more than 80 percent who said they were either "very" (54 percent) or "somewhat concerned" (27 percent) that it would attack a neighbouring country.

Kull attributed these more dramatic results in large part to the impression created by Ahmadinejad since his election. "I think this is caused more by the personality of the president and his comments than specific developments in the negotiations over the nuclear programme. He certainly comes across as a hothead, and that has definitely focused people's minds."

At the same time, less than 20 percent in the Fox News poll and a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted a few days before described Iran as an "immediate" or "imminent" threat. (END/2006)

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