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Iran's Nuclear Threat

By Massimo Calabresi

With war in Iraq looming and North Korea defiantly pursuing its own nuclear program, the last thing President Bush needs is another nuclear crisis. But that is what he may soon face in Iran. On a visit last month to Tehran, International Atomic Energy Agency director Mohamed ElBaradei announced he had discovered that Iran was constructing a facility to enrich uranium — a key component of advanced nuclear weapons — near Natanz. But diplomatic sources tell TIME the plant is much further along than previously revealed. The sources say work on the plant is "extremely advanced" and involves "hundreds" of gas centrifuges ready to produce enriched uranium and "the parts for a thousand others ready to be assembled."

Iran announced last week that it intends to activate a uranium conversion facility near Isfahan (under IAEA safeguards), a step that produces the uranium hexafluoride gas used in the enrichment process. Sources tell Time the IAEA has concluded that Iran actually introduced uranium hexafluoride gas into some centrifuges at an undisclosed location to test their ability to work. That would be a blatant violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a signatory.

The IAEA declined to comment. A senior State department official said he believed El Baradei was trying to resolve the issue behind the scenes before going public. But experts say the new discoveries are very serious and should be handled in public. "If Iran were found to have an operating centrifuge, it would be a direct violation [of the non-proliferation treaty] and is something that would need immediately to be referred to the United Nations Security Council for action," says Jon Wolfstahl of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Iran insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and told elBaradei that Tehran intends to bring all of its programs under IAEA safeguards. U.S. officials have said repeatedly they believe Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons.

The new discoveries could destabilize a region already dangerously on edge in anticipation of war in Iraq. Israel — which destroyed an Iraqi nuclear plant in Osirak in a 1981 raid — is deeply alarmed by the developments. "It's a huge concern," says one Israeli official. "Iran is a regime that denies Israel's right to exist in any borders and is a principal sponsor of Hezbollah. If that regime were able to achieve a nuclear potential it would be extremely dangerous." Israel will not take the "Osirak option" off the table, the official says, but "would prefer that this issue be solved in other ways."

The revelations come at a particularly bad time for Washington, which is locked in a battle to gain U.N. approval for an attack on Iraq and to build consensus among its allies for a multilateral approach to the crisis in North Korea. Critics of the Administration say Bush's hard public line against the so-called "Axis of Evil," combined with the threatened war with Iraq, have acted as a spur to both Iran and North Korea to accelerate their nuclear programs. "If those countries didn't have much incentive or motivation before, they certainly did after the Axis of Evil statement," says one western diplomat familiar with the Iranian and North Korean programs. The Administration counters that both programs have been underway for many years.
