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SHOWDOWN WITH IRAN



International



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As the United States and Iran are locked in a battle for power and influence across the Middle East, FRONTLINE travels to Iran and gains unprecedented access to Iranian hardliners shaping government policy and pieces together the untold story of how Iran and the US arrived at the brink of war in *Showdown with Iran*.

“Anyone who attacks us will be very sorry. So if the United States makes such a mistake, they should know that we will definitely respond. And we don’t make threats,” deputy head of Iran’s National Security Council, Brigadier General Mohammed Jafari, tells FRONTLINE in his first television interview.

Jafari, who is also a top commander in the Revolutionary Guards’ Qods Force—the special Iranian operations unit accused by the Bush administration of training and supplying Shia extremists inside Iraq—was the target of an American raid in Iraq last January, part of a new Bush administration drive to seize Iranian agents inside Iraq. While five lower-level Qods Force operatives were arrested, Jafari himself escaped unscathed—only to appear a few months later at an international conference on Iraq’s security, seated across from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Before invading Iraq, the Bush administration rebuffed a series of overtures from Iran’s reformist government—including offers to help the U.S. stabilize Iraq after the invasion—which culminated in a secret proposal for a grand bargain resolving all outstanding issues between the US and Iran, including Iran’s support for terrorism and its nuclear program. The US, who had branded Iran part of the “Axis of Evil”, decided on a confrontational approach.

“If things had gone better in Iraq,” says Hillary Mann, the Iran expert on the National Security Council during the run-up to the war, “then yeah—I think Iran was next.”

Vali Nasr, author of *The Shia Revival*, believes the Bush administration’s confrontational approach discredited Iran’s reformists, and inadvertently helped bring the new hardline government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power. “The wars of 2001 and 2003 have fundamentally changed the Middle East to Iran’s advantage, he says. “The dam that was containing Iran has been broken.”

As Presidents Bush and Ahmadinejad trade rhetorical barbs, there are increasing signs that the Bush administration is seriously considering military action before it leaves office, if Tehran continues to defy U.N. demands that it cease enriching uranium for its nuclear program. “There is a sense the drum beat is rolling, that many of the people who argued to take the United States into Iraq are again beating the war drums,” the *Washington Post*’s Robin Wright tells FRONTLINE. “They’re saying diplomacy doesn’t work. They’re saying Iran has to be taught a lesson.”

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