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T H E I R A N

32

A Historical/Political Analysis

By Mamoon Amin Zaki

When the Gulf war between Iran and Iraq began in 1980, many people thought that Iraq would achieve a swift and decisive victory because of the chaotic situation of the Iranian government.¹ But Iran stood fast and the war goes on. The Gulf war, like all other wars, is bound to come to an end sooner or later because both belligerents are profusely hemorrhaging economically, militarily, and most of all, in human casualties. And the outcome of this war may lead to a social change of historical magnitude not only in the Middle East, but also beyond the region.

Imam Ayatollah Khomeini's regime needs a decisive victory in order to justify the enormous casualties of young "martyrs" (estimated to be more than half a million), and the loss of property sustained by Iran. So far, Khomeini has been able to justify this holocaust in the name of God. This sacrifice, asserts Khomeini, shall not go in vain, for God shall reward the believers with a decisive victory. After all, it is written in the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, that whenever the believers fight against the infidels (in this case the Iraqis) God would send his armies to support the believers.

This argument has been convincing to the Iranians. If Khomeini or his successor succeeded in toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein, the concept of the Divine support to the Iranian regime would be corroborated among devout Moslems. Khomeini and his followers would capitalize on this concept and inspire a religious tide in the Moslem world.

There are more than 900 million Moslems scattered all over the world, with a large majority living in underdeveloped nations, or as underprivileged minorities elsewhere. A victorious Iran would be able to inspire the Moslems of the entire Arabian Peninsula, Africa, and the Far East to galvanize and start a holy march against the enemies of Islam.

Far beyond the boundaries of the Middle East and Africa, the echo of an Islamic victory would be heard in such remote countries as Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and China, for example. Moslems in Afghanistan constitute a majority of the population. The leftist government now sitting in Kabul, the capital city, with the help of the Soviet Union, has been fighting against the Mujahidin fighters since 1979. And the Mujahidin still control more than half of the territory in Afghanistan.



IRAQ

WAR:

33

The Moslem tide would substantially enhance the military prowess of the Afghani Mujahidin and probably convince the Soviets of the futility of the idea of annexing Afghanistan.

In fact, the Soviet Union itself would be facing substantial difficulties controlling its 50 million minority (almost 25 percent of the Soviet population) of Moslems who, for the last six decades, have been impervious to Marxist indoctrination. Furthermore, both China and India have large Moslem minorities and are eagerly awaiting the outcome of the Gulf war.²

On the other hand, if Saddam Hussein succeeds in surviving this war (which he started), the picture of the Middle East would be dramatically reversed. The religious tide would be pushed back and the secular-nationalist-socialist ideology would prevail. A non-victorious Iran would be a perfidious event in the Moslem world and Khomeini's claim of Divine support would be rendered fallacious.

Saddam Hussein's main assets are his political experience, his enormous economic potential and his youth — when compared to the octogenarian Khomeini. His tenure in office has been contemporaneous with such outstanding Arab lead-

ers as Presidents Gamal Abdul Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt, King Hussein of Jordan, and President Hafez al-Assad of Syria. Furthermore, he enjoys the advantage of enormous oil riches. All the above-mentioned statesmen have presided over poor countries and depended on outside economic aid.

President Nasser's radical pan-Arabist ideology during the 1950s and '60s was not dissimilar to that of Saddam Hussein. But, Nasser's Egypt was plagued by overpopulation, widespread disease, high illiteracy, foreign debt and shortage of funds and economic resources. His leadership depended basically on charisma and electrifying rhetoric. Egypt's social ills played an important role in hampering Nasser's pan-Arabist plans.

In contrast, Iraq is a country of medium size (about the size of California) with a population of 14 million, and it sits on enormous oil reserves. There are unconfirmed reports that Iraq's oil reserves exceed by far that of Saudi Arabia. Plus, with its two great rivers and fertile land, Iraq has the capability, if its full agrarian potential is exploited, to feed all of its Arab neighbors.

Should he survive the war, Saddam

Hussein, with his economic revenues, will be able to embark anew on vast development projects for Iraq, as well as influence the future of the Arab world.

Historical Background

The dispute between Iraq and Iran is an old one, the roots of which go back to the 16th century when Iraq, then Mesopotamia, was a province of the Ottoman Empire.³

In the beginning, the two adjacent old Muslim Empires — the Ottoman and the Persian — were seemingly on good terms. However, when Shali Ismael Safavi of Persia adopted Shi'ism as the official sect of his government, strife with the Sunni Ottomans began and lasted for centuries.

Sultan Selim Yauz, the King of the Ottomans, who was fanatically religious, dedicated his efforts to the extermination from his empire of the "heresy" of Shi'ism. The Ottoman and the Persian armies collided in 1514 in the valley of Chaldiran, whereupon the Persians were soundly defeated.

In 1555, the Treaty of Umasiyah was signed, which represented the first diplomatic attempt to adjust the relations of the two Muslim empires and to demarcate the borders separating them. Again, a ter-

territorial dispute erupted in the 17th century and the Persians attacked the Ottomans. Sultan Murad IV defeated the Persians and, subsequently, the Qasr Sherine Treaty was signed in 1639. This treaty included an important provision in which the Persians acknowledged full sovereignty of the Ottomans over the Shatt al-Arab River. Shatt al-Arab is a navigable river, 218 kilometers long and 700 meters wide. It is formed from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and flows in the southern part of Iraq.

In 1727, the Persians attacked again, but the war ended with the signing of the Amir Ashraf Treaty within the year. Provision seven of the treaty specified that the entire territory of Arabistan east of Shatt al-Arab River was to be placed under the domain of the Ottomans.

In 1747, The Nadir Shah Treaty was signed and it reemphasized the terms of the Qasr Sherine and Amir Ashraf Treaties.

Subsequent to the Nadir Shah Treaty, the two empires witnessed a period of relative tranquility until 1818 when the Persians once again attempted to conquer the Shatt al-Arab River. Severe battles erupted and the Persians were defeated. The signing of the first Arzroom Treaty followed in 1823.

Because of the constant Persian threat to the extremely strategic and economically important territory of the Shatt al-Arab River, the Ottomans decided to solve the problem with their neighbors once and for all. An enormous military campaign was waged by the Ottomans and the Persians were pushed back almost to the outskirts of their capital city of Tehran. However, Russia and Great Britain, both with interests in the Middle East, intervened and the war was stopped. Subsequently, lengthy negotiations followed, under the auspices of the two great powers, which culminated in the signing of the second Arzroom Treaty in 1847 by Shah Muhammad and Sultan Abdul Majid. In this treaty, the Ottomans retained the Shatt al-Arab River within the borders of the province of Mesopotamia, but, for the first time, surrendered the entire territory of Arabistan to the Persians.

A quadripartite international commission, comprising Russia, Great Britain, Persia and the Ottomans, was formed to finalize the demarcation of the borders between the Persian and the Ottoman Empires. However, eruption of war between Great Britain and Persia in 1851, and the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, brought those diplomatic efforts to a halt.⁴

Later, efforts of the quadripartite commission were resumed and culminated in the signing of two agreements — the Protocol of Tehran in 1911 and the Constantinople Protocol in 1913.

In 1914 the commission finalized the demarcation of the borders, incorporating the entire bed of the Shatt al-Arab River within the borders of Mesopotamia.

Article five of the Constantinople Protocol specifically laid down that "as soon as any part of the frontier has been delineated by the commission, that part should be held to be finally fixed and should not be open to subsequent examination or revision."⁵

At last, the ancient, bloody dispute between the Ottoman and Persian Empires was solved. Or so it seemed.

Origin of the New Conflict

In 1921, after Mesopotamia became the Kingdom of Iraq, Faisal Ibn-Hussein was enthroned as Iraq's king. [Persia became Iraq in 1935.] From the beginning, Iran's attitude toward the new kingdom was less than cordial. For eight years, Iran was reluctant to recognize Iraq and it became obvious that Reza Shah Pahlavi was reviving Iran's old claims to the Shatt al-Arab River and other border areas. However, as a result of British mediation and Faisal's prudence, relations between Iraq and Iran improved and, in August 1929, the two countries exchanged diplomatic representation. In 1932, King Faisal I and Premier Nuri al-Sa'id visited Iran to negotiate various issues of concern to both countries, but the two sides never agreed on a solution to the border problem. It remained dormant. When King Faisal died in 1933, Iran disavowed all obligations signed with the Ottoman Empire and reinitiated its claim to the Shatt al-Arab River.

Iraq stood adamant on its right to its territory, referring to the 1913 Constantinople Protocol and the delineation of the border by the international commission in 1914. The view of the Iraqi government was that the part of the Ottoman Empire which formed the new state of Iraq was formally fixed by this delineation.

Tension increased between the two countries as news broke that Iran was mobilizing and re-arming its military forces with weapons purchased from Czechoslovakia. In November 1934, when the tension peaked, Iraq took the issue to the League of Nations for an appropriate solution to the Shatt al-Arab dispute. The debates in the League of Nations were lengthy but fruit-

less as both sides remained adamant about their claims, citing historical, geographical and legal proofs. Iran refused Iraq's suggestion to refer the issue to the International Court of Justice.⁶

But after Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, anxiety prevailed throughout the Middle East. President Kemal Ataturk of Turkey sent personal letters to the heads of both Iraq and Iran, urging them to solve the boundary issue as soon as possible in order to confront the European menace. Turkey also suggested that Iraq and Iran withdraw their border issue from the League of Nations so that it would be free to deal with the security of the entire Middle East region. The issue was withdrawn and both sides began serious negotiations.

After giving some concession in the Shatt al-Arab territory, Naji Shawkat, the representative of Iraq, succeeded in negotiating the signing of the Treaty of Peaceful Settlement of Dispute Between Iraq and the Iranian Empire. Shawkat then continued his contact with Turkey and Afghanistan for a quadruple Middle East treaty that included Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan. On July 4, 1937, the four countries signed a nonaggression treaty, the Sa'ad Abad Pact.⁷ Subsequently, for two decades, Iran and Iraq nurtured a cordial relationship.

In 1955, both Iraq and Iran, along with Turkey, Pakistan and Great Britain, joined in the Baghdad Pact. The royal regimes in Baghdad and Tehran seemed to have agreed on a peaceful coexistence.

But in 1958, when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a military coup, the Shah of Iran, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, started a border feud all over again. The *New York Times* reported:

"In a press conference held on November 29, 1958, the Shah of Iran discussed the eternal dispute with Iraq. He stated that the provisions of the border's treaty of 1937 are unbearable and unprecedented. The Shah, thus, expressed his desire to cancel the treaty."⁸

An extensive mass media campaign was waged by Iran against Iraq, depicting the latter as the usurper of Iranian territory. Simultaneously, the Iranian army was mobilized along the southern border of Iraq.

Iraq's response was rather rational. Hashim Jawad, the Iraqi minister of foreign affairs, turned to Western powers and world public opinion indicating that Iran's behavior was threatening the interests of the



Middle East as well as world peace.⁹

As a result of intervention by the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union, the Shah was restrained; the situation was defused, and a military conflagration on the Iran-Iraq borders was averted.

The problem, however, was never decisively solved and the dispute lasted throughout the military rule in Iraq between 1958-1968, and several years after the Ba'ath Party in 1968 took over the reigns of power in Iraq. Finally, after strenuous diplomatic efforts, The Treaty of Algiers was signed in 1975 by Saddam Hussein and Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

Noticeably, all disputes between Iraq and Iran during the last six decades have been solved by means of peaceful diplomacy — not war. Yet, a noteworthy point is that during all these times, Iraq was negotiating from the position of weakness and fear of Iran's preponderance. Iraq's population and territory equal one-third those of Iran. The Treaty of Algiers was signed under circumstances unfavorable to Iraq. In 1975, the Shah, as a result of the influx of American weapons, was at the peak of his might and Iran was the most awesome power in the Middle East. Iraq, on the other hand, was fighting an internal war with its Kurdish minority in the north, and the government in Baghdad was rather shaky.

By 1980, however, the situation was reversed. Iran, one year after the fall of the Shah, was inflicted with internal turbulence and the regime of Imam Khomeini seemed vulnerable. For the first time, Iraq felt powerful enough for a military confrontation with its larger neighbor. Hence the long Gulf war (which lately has invited action by the superpowers, particularly the United States' naval escorts for reflagged Kuwaiti oil tankers to protect them against attacks by Iran. Iraq, in 1984, started what is now generally known as the "tanker war").

Ideological Issues

Khomeini intends to establish an Islamic republic headed by the Supreme jurisprudence (williat al-faqih). He believes in the establishment of an Islamic world governed by the laws of God. The imperfection of the existing world, Khomeini believes, stems from two sources.¹⁰

First, he believes that the Western concept of the "nation-state" is philosophically defective because it is the creation of man's "inferior mind."

Second, he believes that the existing

international system is essentially iniquitous partly because the superpowers monopolize world power to themselves at the expense of the masses.

From this stipulation, Khomeini divides the world into two camps: The camp of the "oppressors" (Mustakbirin), which is led by both the United States and Soviet Union — the "Greatest Satan" and the "Godless Communist," respectively — and the camp of the "oppressed" (Mustaz'afin), consisting mainly, but not exclusively, of the people of the Islamic and other Third World countries.

By creating an Islamic world whose political and social values are derived from the perfect laws set forth by God in His holy book, the Qur'an, Khomeini believes man will be able to establish a society which is as close as possible to perfection.

The phrase "exporting Islamic Revolution" is not simply a revolutionary cry; it is a paramount pillar of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The doctrine of the export of Islamic revolution aims simultaneously at three interconnected goals in Iran's foreign policy (1) paving the way toward the ultimate goal of the establishment of an Islamic world ruled by the *Shari'ah*, (2) promoting populist, independent Islamic governments in other states, and (3) protecting the first and only such state and government in Iran.¹¹

Facing Iran's religious system is Iraq, under the rule of Saddam Hussein, the secretary of the Ba'ath revolutionary Arab nationalist party. The Ba'ath Party assumed leadership when the Arab world witnessed an important historical development — the radicalization of Arab nationalism in the 1950s. This can be traced to the Palestine war in 1948 and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel. So traumatic to the Arabs was the loss of Palestine that it precipitated transformation of Arab nationalism, shifting the emphasis from the attitude of romantic glorification of the past to the failure of the present. The Arab world was in need of a new nationalist creed and leadership to cope with the modern world and the Ba'ath (meaning resurrection) Party arose to assume that responsibility.¹²

While Iraq and Iran are stubbornly engaged in a costly ideological war of mutual annihilation, there are other forces that are preventing all efforts of a settlement. The Gulf war is providing several arms-producing countries with lucrative business. And the United States remains suspicious of

both Khomeini and Saddam Hussein. Both leaders, the U.S. believes, are adamantly against Israel and the influence of the Western powers in the Middle East.

From the onset of his regime, Khomeini flagrantly vilified the "zionist entity" and also the United States.

President Saddam Hussein, also has been invariably pan-Arabist, anti-Israel and anti-West. He vehemently rejected the "Camp David Accord" and urged all "progressive" elements to oppose it and pursue their struggle against the "zionist entity."

Although the Iraqi regime has lately softened its staunch anti-Israel stance and has promised not to hamper peace efforts between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the United States still has its suspicion that Iraq's change of attitude is dictated by the ephemeral contingency of the Gulf war.

As for Khomeini, it is not in his interest to end the war so long as Saddam Hussein is still in power. Any settlement, short of toppling Saddam Hussein, would be tantamount to a total ideological defeat for Khomeini, and would damage his credibility.

Khomeini's strongest asset lies in his religious status among Moslems. Most Iranians, and non-Iranian Moslem zealots, are firmly convinced that Imam Khomeini has the Almighty God on his side. One of the evidences of this support forged by the followers of Khomeini is the manner in which the Shah, the most powerful political figure in the Middle East, was overthrown in 1979. If it was not for God's will, exclaim believers, then how could Khomeini, the exiled, frail octogenarian clergyman, topple the Shah, commander of the most formidable military machine in the Middle East? Besides his local awesome power, the Shah had the United States, the most powerful country on this planet, on his side. Yet, despite all these factors, Khomeini, depending entirely on his religious influence among the people of Iran, was able to overthrow him.

As far as the war with Iraq is concerned, the Iranian leadership sees it as a holy war (*Jihad*) against the socialist "infidel regime" of Iraq. Khomeini, counting on Divine help, made the pledge that he would not stop the war before removing Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime from Baghdad.¹³ Thus, if, for any reason, Khomeini agrees to stop the war without fulfilling his pledge, then his religious foundation would be utterly shattered. His followers would come to the conclusion that either Khomeini does not possess the

Divine support he claims, or, the more terrifying explanation: all religious foundations are nothing but a mammoth hoax.

Contrary to Khomeini's dilemma, the position of Saddam Hussein is much more relaxed. He has shrewdly made overtures toward a peaceful settlement, but was rejected several times by Iran. Thus, Saddam Hussein may have gained the sympathy of the international community. He is aware that if his peace efforts bear fruit, he would be able to boast that he has been able to confront Iran's preponderance for several years and keep Iraq's integrity intact.

Meanwhile, the destructive war is sapping the human and economic sources of both countries, and despite the efforts of several Islamic countries (and a U.N. ceasefire resolution) it seems that there is no hope for a peaceful settlement for the foreseeable future unless either Ayatullah Khomeini or Saddam Hussein no longer remain on the scene.

Conclusion

The Gulf war is basically a conflict between religious and secular ideologies, both of which are attempting to prevail in the Middle East. The origin of both ideologies can be traced to the same sources — frustration with backwardness and anti-imperialist feelings.

Before the Islamic revolution, [the vast majority of] the Iranian people were under the yoke of the throne of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. They were brutalized by a police state, impoverished and controlled by Western interests. The religious outcry by Khomeini for freedom, dignity and economic equity under an Islamic regime was met by thunderous approval of the Iranian masses. And the regime, eight years after the revolution, is showing no signs of weakness. The Iranians hope that, when the war is over, Iran can still utilize its vast resources and accomplish dramatic development and that their regime would become a model for the rest of the Moslem world.

Ba'athism, on the other hand, under the leadership of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, is an ideology stipulating that religion has no role in the function of government. The Ba'ath Party intends to mobilize the 125 million Arabs in the region and steer them to build a "United Arab Socialist country" in order to cure the Arab world from its backwardness and other social ills.

Obviously, both ideologies aspire to serve their peoples and provide for their welfare,



but they differ in their methods of implementing their plans.

All these dreams of good future and prosperity will go unfulfilled unless Iran and Iraq agree to end their destructive war and steer their energies toward the welfare of their peoples. Should Iran and Iraq fail to come to a peaceful agreement, their irreplaceable resources will be depleted and their peoples will suffer for a long time. □

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37

FOOTNOTES

1. See Mamoon Amin Zaki, "The Iran-Iraq War: Is it Coming to an End?" *Council Communiqué*, April, 1985, Memphis.
2. Adil A. Al-Dajani, "al-Muslimoon fi al-sin" (Moslems in China), *Asyad*, No. 2106, March 20, 1985, p. 55.
3. See Ali Wardi, *Social Aspects of Iraqi Modern History* (Arabic), (Baghdad: Irshad Press, 1969).
4. K. Y. al-Izzi, *Mushkilat Shatt al-Arab fi dhil al-mu'ahadat' wa-al-qanun* (The Problem of the Shatt al-Arab River in Accordance with International Law) Baghdad: Dar al-Hurriyah, 1980, pp. 26-30.
5. Government of Great Britain, letter from Sir F. Humphry to Sir J. Simon, No. 61, 31 January, L/P&S/2877 (confidential).
6. Stephen H. Longrigg, *Iraq: 1900-1950. A Political and Social History* (London: Oxford University, 1953) p. 267.
7. See (Official Gazette of Iraq) No. 1619, 22 March 1938.
8. *The New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1959.
9. al-Izzi, *op. cit.* pp. 98-100.
10. See R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Persian Gulf," *Current History*, January, 1985.
11. Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1976) p. 12.
12. See Elyas Farah, *Evolution of Arab Revolutionary Ideology* (Baghdad: Government Press, 1970).
13. See Saddam Hussein, *Tariquna Khass fi bina' al-ishlirakiyah* (Our Special Way of Building Socialism) (Baghdad: Dar al-Hurriyah Press, 1977).