

Widened war danger as Iran falls into domestic chaos

by Robert Dreyfuss, Middle East Editor

With the winter weather coming to an end in the Persian Gulf, the 17-month-old war between Iraq and Iran is about to enter a new and deadlier phase. Both Baghdad and Teheran are reported to be planning new military offensives in the spring, and, according to intelligence sources, a dramatic escalation of the war will begin no later than early April.

What makes the situation more dangerous than it was last year at this time is that Iran, exhausted after a year and a half of fighting, is facing two crises. Economically, the Teheran regime is literally bankrupt and unable to finance either its war effort or its domestic welfare economy; and politically, Iran is preparing to face the political breakdown that will follow the death of Ayatollah Khomeini.

For Khomeini's backers in London, Switzerland, and Tel Aviv, and among the remnants of the Carter administration, the crises in Teheran can no longer be avoided or postponed. According to U.S., British, and Israeli intelligence sources close to the leadership of the Khomeini regime, a desperate Iran may choose a reckless expansion of the war into the neighboring Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, regardless of the consequences, rather than face military defeat by Iraq and an internal collapse that would lead to the extinction of the Khomeini dictatorship.

"Iran is losing the war," said one Middle East analyst, "and the mullahs may decide that there is no other choice but to expand the war and involve the superpowers in a confrontation." The chief target of such an Iranian attack, according to several sources, would be the oil fields of nearby Kuwait.

Despite the radical changes in Iran's political leadership since 1979, however, especially since the fall of President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr in 1981 and the subsequent campaign of terrorist bombings that wiped out dozens of top mullahs, the Teheran regime remains a political asset of the same Anglo-Venetian and Israeli circles that toppled the Shah and put Khomeini in power as part of a broader policy of wrecking industrial development in the region. Although Iran receives external

assistance today from both Washington and Moscow, the behind-the-scenes controllers of the Teheran clique—such as Savama secret service chief Gen. Mossein Fardoust and ex-Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi—are still allies of the Socialist International, the British SIS, and the "third force."

The decision to propel Iran against the states of the Arab Gulf, therefore, is not a decision of a passel of disheveled mullahs, but one taken at the highest levels of the European oligarchy. An attack on Kuwait by Iran, combined with a disintegration of Iran's regime toward civil war, would result in an almost immediate U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

Eugene Rostow, head of the Pentagon Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, who is close to the Israeli Mossad circles supplying Iran's armed forces and *pasdaran*, or Revolutionary Guard, with advanced weapons, thus knew better when he said, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*: "There comes a time in every administration when the Soviet Union tests the United States. Iran is the place where we will be tested."

More accurate is the prediction of Tory British Parliament member Julian Amery: "The crisis in Iran will become a civil war and threaten to destabilize the Persian Gulf. Both big powers have interests to protect, and they will be drawn into conflict there almost spontaneously."

And Britain's Lord Chalfont, a longtime observer of Iran, describes Iran and the war in the Persian Gulf as the single most dangerous flashpoint on the global scene today.

Khomeini regime squeezed

For the first time since the start of the Iran-Iraq war, the Khomeini regime is at the end of its rope. From financial reserves of tens of billions of dollars in 1980, and despite the influx of more than \$7 billion from the United States after the U.S. hostages were freed, Teheran is down to less than \$600 million in foreign assets.

Desperate to increase its revenues, during the month of February Iran cut its price of oil three times, finally bringing the asking price down to \$30 per barrel. "But

that will not do any good," said an experienced OPEC analyst. "Because of the war, Iran is forced to confront an additional cost of \$6 per barrel because of insurance premiums for tankers that enter the war zone in the northern Gulf. So Iran's oil is still not competitive." Iranian oil exports are stuck at about 500,000 barrels a day, *less than a tenth of 1978 levels*.

In addition, Saudi Arabia, which is supporting Iraq financially and politically, is determined to block Iran's return to the oil market and thus to maintain the squeeze on Iran. "The Saudis will undersell Iran in OPEC no matter what it takes," said one source. "So Iran may attack the Gulf states, like Kuwait, as a warning to Saudi Arabia."

Although the Soviet Union is taking advantage of Iran's predicament to step up its own economic involvement in Iran, an involvement which produced a record trade level of \$1.2 billion during 1981 and participation in some 50 projects in Iran, Moscow is unable and unwilling to bail out Iran in its crisis. "Although a lot of Iranian oil is being bartered in the Soviet Union's bloc, all they are getting in return is cigarettes and potatoes," said one expert.

And, although Moscow and its allies in Eastern Europe and Asia are supplying limited quantities of weapons to Iran, the primary sources of Iranian arms are Israel and the West. That continued flow requires hard cash, something that Iran simply does not have. Food imports, another politically critical requirement, also place enormous demands on Iran's resources, and the current squeeze means that Iran's mullahs may no longer be able to feed Iran's 40 million people. Domestic food production has collapsed since the 1979 revolution, leading to a sharp rise in imports.

Finally, according to military experts, Iraq plans to restart its war drive in the spring, when the end of the rains enables Iraq's armored divisions to have mobility. Iraq has mobilized a huge force of almost 1,500,000 soldiers and militiamen, with a reserve of 500,000 more.

Faced with all these challenges, the mullahs are well aware that their balancing act of the past three years is in danger. Supporting Teheran, however, is the revenue from exports of opium and other drugs, which some analysts believe could be funneling several billion dollars annually in "black" money into Iran.

End of the Ayatollah?

Complicating things further are the persistent rumors that Ayatollah Khomeini is dying. Now 83, Khomeini is frequently absent for long periods of time, and, in early February, it was announced by the Pars New Agency that a council of mullahs had been formed to "replace" Khomeini. The rumors themselves have caused a rise in tensions.

"The situation is ripe for confrontation between the

U.S. and U.S.S.R.," said a former National Security Council official. "Rumors are everywhere about what is happening in Iran, and as the situation worsens both Washington and Moscow will start to worry about what the other side might be doing. This is a recipe for escalation."

Richard Falk, the Princeton University professor who supported the Khomeini revolution and served as an unofficial adviser to Cyrus Vance, is himself involved in rumor-mongering: "After Khomeini's death there will be a civil war, spreading throughout the entire country, and perhaps the army will join the fray." According to Falk, the situation will be up for grabs, with the result either "pro-Western, pro-Soviet, or 'the Libya model.'"

Thomas Ricks of Georgetown University, another member of the original pro-Khomeini U.S. network, is also spreading rumors. "The CIA is planning to support a military coup d'état in Tabriz very soon," says Ricks, oblivious to the fact that no military coup could succeed in maintaining order in Iran, given the presence of several million Iranians in armed gangs, militias, tribes, and so forth. "General Bahram Aryana, in Turkey, can take over Tabriz with a couple of thousand men," says Ricks. He predicts that Iran will disintegrate along the lines of its major ethnic groups, pitting a central Teheran-Qom-Isfahan axis against the outlying provinces.

Giving some credence to Ricks' views was the revolt in Amol, a city on the Caspian Sea, in which nationalist military men, not leftists or Bani-Sadr supporters, were said to be involved. But if the CIA is indeed involved in an effort to help Aryana stage a rebellion, its only effect in the real world would be to provide Moscow with an excuse to intervene more directly in Iran. Aryana himself, based in Paris and Istanbul, is said to be seeking support from Israel's Mossad as well as the CIA, and from a number of Israeli-linked U.S. officials such as the State Department's Michael Ledeen.

The Soviet Union, content to see its influence in Iran increase incrementally, has no intention of an Afghan-style invasion. Moscow's only concern in Iran now is not to allow the United States to reclaim the country as a forward base, and while the U.S.S.R. cannot have the regime it desires in Teheran, it can block with ease the establishment of even the slightest hint of an American-allied government again.

For its part, the State Department seems still convinced that the Islamic Republican Party and the clergy in Iran are the only alternative to takeover by the Tudeh Party, the same idiotic reasoning that dominated the Carter administration's thinking on Iran. Though they may play around with the exiled Iranian military, the State Department and CIA appear to link American interests in Iran with maintaining the barbarically fundamentalist regime.