

The battle for Iran after Khomeini

by Thierry Lalevée

In a background briefing to the press on July 13, CIA chief William Webster cut through several weeks of ambiguities by underlining two basic truths to be considered when dealing with Iran. Cooling off the enthusiasm of those who have seen a sign of weakness in Iran's apparent inability to react to the shooting down of the Iranian Airbus, he stressed, "Iranians are very patient; that is often overlooked."

In addition, after weeks of false reports that Khomeini was dead or dying, Webster blandly pointed out, "We have been confused for a long time. But for a man of his age, there is some inevitability."

Some basic facts and figures tell more about the real state of Iran. The country, which was self-sufficient in food production at the start of the Gulf war, now has to import up to \$2 billion worth of foodstuffs. Over the last six months, Iran has fallen \$5 billion short in meeting foreign debt payments, the first shortfall in 10 years, with payment delays of between one and two years.

Most of the imported food has to be distributed free, as basic subsidies to the millions of Iranians who have been driven out of the countryside by the war. In the last two years, the number of Teheran's inhabitants has reached 10 million, one-fourth of the national population.

On July 14, Armed Forces commander Hashemi Rafsanjani declared that it would be "very good to find a miraculous way of ending the war quickly. . . . In any event, we have to prepare ourselves for a long lasting war."

As Rafsanjani was speaking, Iraq was scoring two more victories. On July 15, Baghdad claimed to have killed up to 20,000 Iranian soldiers in a battle for control of the Iranian city of Delhoran.

Iran's dilemma

In any other country, such a disastrous situation would have paved the way for another revolution. Yet, while skirmishes between an angry, and sometimes hungry, population and Revolutionary Guards do occur, a new revolution is nowhere in sight. Nine years of systematic internal repression, as well as the continued betrayal of the opposition movements in exile by most Western powers, have ensured that there is simply no present alternative to the mullahs' regime.

Even in the aftermath of Khomeini's death, any expected change will still be based on Islamic fundamentalist ideology. However, that knowledge is of little help to the present leadership, which would actually welcome a well-organized opposition abroad, if it could be branded as yet another external threat against which the entire nation has to be mobilized.

That principle is the underlying factor behind Iran's apparent lack of reaction to the Airbus crisis. As long as that crisis can be manipulated to rally the Iranian population around the leadership, there is simply no need to go into a further flight forward. However, watch for the expiration of the 40-day period of mourning for the victims of the airline tragedy, when another such operation will then be necessary.

Intertwined crises

That being said, the Iranian leadership is indeed confronted by a series of intertwined crises, the war front with Iraq, the internal social and economic collapse, and the ambiguities in its foreign relations. Should it capitalize on the Airbus crisis, to strengthen relations with the East bloc countries? Since early July, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Poland have received the green light from Moscow to resume large-scale weapons deliveries to Iran. An East German delegation went to London to meet Iranian representatives to negotiate the price.

No doubt, Iran will buy East bloc weapons, just as it will buy any weapons that it desperately needs. Doubtless, too, it will develop closer diplomatic relations with the East bloc, while it welcomes calls such as the one made by Henry Kissinger in the July 11 *Newsweek*, "It is time to dialogue with Iran." Washington's commitment to re-establish closer relations with Teheran is so obvious that Iranian diplomats can just wait and see, and bargain.

But the real battle is on the front with Iraq. There can be no diplomatic breakthroughs with Iran in a position of military weakness, and Teheran will not accept a ceasefire while losing the war. Despite the obvious faction fight inside the Iranian leadership for control in the post-Khomeini period, this is the consensus which has emerged in recent weeks.

It was because he understood that fact, that Khomeini decided to appoint Hashemi Rafsanjani commander in chief, in the knowledge that because of his personal ambitions, Rafsanjani would not allow himself to be the commander of a losing army. Information coming from Iran indicates that Rafsanjani is busy trying to reorganize the entirety of the armed forces. Since last July 8, there has been a general mobilization; all men able to carry weapons have been called on to join in the fight. Many battles lie ahead during the months of August. And no one will be surprised if the new commander in chief join hands with his radical opponents to unleash a few spectacular actions off the battlefield, in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia, or elsewhere; the only aim being to galvanize his troops.