

What will constitute victory?

THE GREAT GULF WAR

by Sterett Pope

For almost forty-five months now, Iran and Iraq have been locked in a tragic and bloody war. Though the number of deaths is estimated in the hundreds of thousands and the number of wounded and dislocated said to exceed the million mark, the conflict shows few signs of resolution or even abatement. Great powers and the small nations in the region monitor developments with growing consternation, but no outside party seems able to put a stop to the fighting.

In many ways the protracted conflict between Iran and Iraq bears comparison with the First World War. Millions of men are mobilized along several fronts, where trenches and fortifications prevent rapid and decisive breakthroughs by either side. The role of heavy artillery, and now credible allegations and threats concerning the use of chemical weapons, reenforce this grisly analogy. But there are important differences between the present conflict and the Great War. Neither Iran nor Iraq, both with underdeveloped and oil-dependent economies, has shown the capacity or the willingness to bear the tremendous logistical burden necessary to take and hold enemy territory. Also, while both parties possess impressive modern arsenals, both are dependent on superpower patrons for the spare parts and high-technology ordnance to operate them. Because relations between the contenders and their superpower suppliers have been unsteady, each has been unwilling to make full and perhaps decisive use of its modern weaponry. These are the elements that have given the Iran-Iraq war a low-technology, labor-intensive character—that is, a distinctively Third World quality.

In analyzing the war, three distinguishing factors should be carefully considered: the importance of petroleum, the role of the superpowers, and the course of Iran's dynamic and ongoing revolution. Together, these factors have informed the genesis and development of the war, and they are likely to determine its future.

FIRING UP

When Iraqi armies invaded Iran in September, 1980, the Iranians, no less than most people, were startled by the attack—this despite the fact that border hostilities between the two countries had been heating up for months. In retrospect, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's motives seem

clear enough. Iraq's ostensible *causa belli* concerned sovereignty over Shatt al-Arab, a fifty-five-mile waterway that joins the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to the Persian Gulf. The Shatt, which forms the border between Iran and Iraq at the head of the Gulf, has great strategic and economic value to both countries; and it provides Iraq with its only access to the sea. Before the war, joint sovereignty over the Shatt had been mandated by the Algiers Agreement, which Saddam and the late shah signed in 1975. While not entirely favorable to Iraq, this agreement was a reasonable arrangement that threatened little more than Iraq's national pride. Clearly, the question of the Shatt did not justify the risks of war; Saddam's real motives in attacking his neighbor concerned something far more menacing: the Iranian Revolution.

Since the fall of the shah's government in February, 1979, the tumultuous course of Iran's revolution had severely destabilized relations between nations in the Persian Gulf region. No sooner had Khomeini and his lieutenants come to power in Teheran than they began to commend their revolution as a blueprint for political and religious renaissance throughout the Muslim world. Iran's strident Islamic rhetoric was soon exhorting Gulf Arabs to overthrow their corrupt and infidel governments. Iraq, with its disenfranchised Shi'i majority and its Shi'i theological centers in Nejad and Kerbala, was particularly vulnerable.

With the onset of the hostage crisis in November of 1979, Iranian leaders seemed to delight in searching out new enemies abroad; and members of Iran's Islamic government quickly identified Saddam Hussein as an arch-confederate of the satanic United States. In April, 1980, Khomeini unleashed a war of words on Iraq's secular regime, urging Iraqis to "cut the hand of America that has emerged from Saddam's sleeve." And with rare and unwitting prescience, Iran's secularist president Bani Sadr commented that "threats from Iraq are not a negative thing....This struggle gives us life; it fires us up....[Iraq and America] bring about precisely the conditions our people need for the continuation of the revolution."

If Iraq was thrown on the defensive politically, the military balance of power had tipped in its favor. Most of Iran's military high command had fled abroad in the first months of the Revolution; whole divisions were dismantled; and the officer corps was continually subjected to purges by competing revolutionary authorities. The revolutionary government itself was far from unified or secure; by the fall of 1980 a power struggle was taking shape

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between the Islamic Republican party (IRP) and President Bani Sadr and his allies out of government. Meanwhile, elements of Iran's Army were bogged down in a bloody campaign against insurgent guerrilla fighters in Kurdistan. The seizure of the U.S. embassy in Teheran in November, 1979, further sapped the strength of the Iranian Army by denying it access to vital spare parts and high-technology ordnance from America.

In retrospect it becomes clear that Iran's aggressive foreign policy together with its military weakness acted to draw the country into war. Its revolutionary rhetoric menaced all the Arab regimes of the Gulf and prompted Iraq to strike back. In invading Iran, Saddam Hussein had more political than military or territorial goals in mind. If Iraq could quickly defeat Iran's army, it could discredit and destroy Iran's revolutionary government and make peace on its own terms. With the egregious Khomeini out of the way, Saddam could secure full sovereignty over the Shatt and lay claim to political hegemony in the Gulf. It was a bold plan and, in hindsight, a most wishful one.

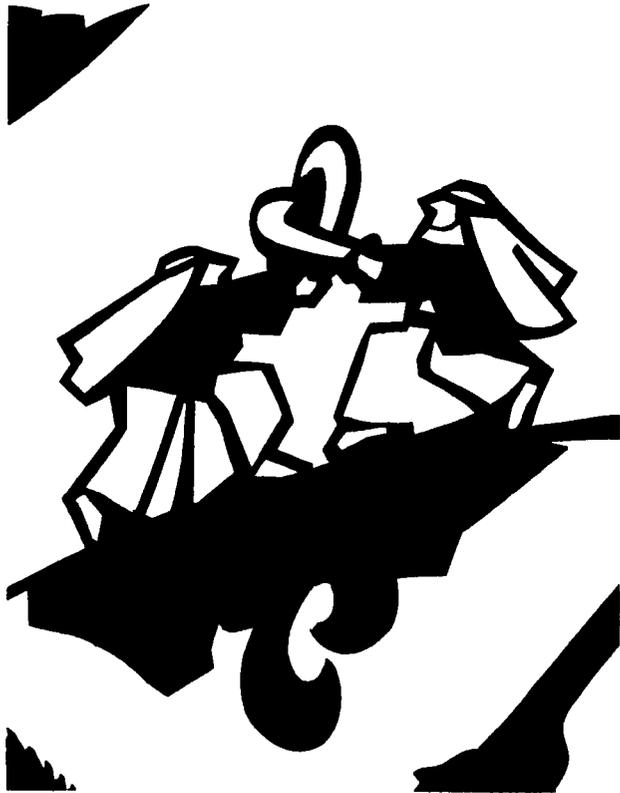
THE WAR OF ATTRITION

From the outset the Iran-Iraq conflict has been something short of total war. In launching his invasion of Iran in pursuit of largely political goals, Saddam refused to seize strictly military opportunities. During the first eighteen months of the conflict Iran was thrown on the defensive; and for its own political reasons, it too eschewed military pragmatism. The ruling IRP viewed the remnants of the shah's military establishment with suspicion and preferred to mobilize irregular "Islamic" militias—namely, the Revolutionary Guards, whose numbers have roughly doubled to 200,000 since the start of the war.

A distinctive feature of the war until now has been the refusal or inability of either party to exploit fully its sophisticated weapons systems. This is partly due to the strange fact that both parties ran afoul of their superpower patrons and suppliers. Throughout the '70s the shah had pursued one of the world's most aggressive policies of weapons procurement, and Iran became the first U.S. ally to win the right to purchase the latest American fighter planes straight off the assembly line. The shah's high-technology weaponry was so sophisticated that it required American support personnel in addition to constant resupply and maintenance. Under the pall of the hostage crisis and a U.S. economic embargo, much of this colossally expensive gadgetry became little more than a bad joke. Of course Iran acquired arms and ordnance wherever it could: from governments as varied as North Korea, Israel, and the People's Republic of China, and from the brisk black market of Europe's private arms dealers. These purchases were adequate to equip Iran's infantry, but the elite air and tank corps remained short of matériel and were held in strategic reserve even as they continued to suffer periodic purges by the zealots in Teheran.

Iraq's uneasy relations with its arms patron, the Soviet Union, had a similar result. In 1972, Iraq and the USSR signed a twenty-year treaty of friendship and cooperation, an arrangement which usually connotes a close working alliance between the Soviet Union and a client state. But the Iraqi government's persecution of local Communists had soured relations between the two countries; and when Iraq invaded Iran, the Soviet Union loudly announced its

neutrality, in effect snubbing its ally and tilting to Iran. Moscow still had hopes for Iran's anti-imperialistic revolution and courted Teheran by severely restricting its arms shipments to Iraq. As a result, Iraq chose to husband its high-technology resources carefully, largely holding them in reserve.



In the opening weeks of the invasion, Saddam Hussein committed a decisive strategic blunder. Completely misreading the political struggles in Teheran and expecting the imminent political collapse of Iran's Islamic government, Saddam refused to seek a military victory per se. Instead of staging a blitzkrieg to seize control of the industrial and communications centers of Iran's oil-producing province of Khuzistan, he tied his troops down in costly sieges of the port cities of Abadan and Khorramshahr, which were stoutly defended by Revolutionary Guards. Saddam soon found himself caught in a war of attrition, a war which in the long run he could not win. Iran's population is three times that of Iraq, its economy considerably larger, and the country more self-sufficient. But more important, Iraq's oil-exporting facilities proved much more vulnerable than those of Iran. In the first months of the war Iran launched air strikes that cut Iraq's oil exports through the Persian Gulf. In April of 1982, Iran negotiated the closure of the Syrian-Iraqi pipeline by agreeing to sell Syria oil at concessionary prices. Now, only Iraq's pipeline through Turkey remains. In 1979, Iraq exported 3.5 million barrels a day; by 1983, oil exports had been reduced to 0.65 mbd.

Both Iran and Iraq rely almost exclusively on oil sales to provide both foreign exchange and government revenues. A distinctive feature of the political economy of Gulf

states is that oil revenues allow the governments to launch ambitious development programs without the necessity of levying taxes at home or borrowing money abroad. Under normal conditions, government revenues are largely independent of domestic economic performance and political pressures. Consequently, the Gulf states usually enjoy tremendous budgetary flexibility. At the same time, they are extremely vulnerable to volatile international energy markets and the dislocations of war. Iran's destruction of nearly 80 per cent of Iraq's oil-exporting capacity has been a devastating blow, despite much brave Iraqi talk of dramatic increases in the carrying capacity of the Iraqi-Turkish pipeline and of the ongoing construction of a new pipeline through Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, Iraq has exhausted nearly \$30 billion in foreign currency reserves and has raised a comparable figure from other Arab states in the area.

Iran's oil production, on the other hand, has actually expanded since the outbreak of the war, rising from 1.3 mbd in September, 1980, to 2.7 in January of this year. Iran's production facilities and its terminals on the Gulf have proven generally impervious to Iraqi air attacks, in large part due to the elaborate defense precautions taken by the shah. Despite the tremendous burden of the war effort, Iran's economy and its government budgets have grown in the past three years. Of the more than \$20 billion in oil revenues that the Iranian government spent last year, roughly a third went toward the war effort. This leaves a comfortable \$14 billion for current and development expenditures and ad hoc disbursements to Iran's revolutionary institutions.

Iraq, for its part, garnered only \$8 billion in oil revenues last year and spent as much as \$12 billion on the war alone. To cover this shortfall and pay for mounting trade deficits and current expenditures, Iraq raised an estimated \$15 billion in foreign loans and credits during the same period. The simple fact is, without the tremendous wealth of Iran, Iraq, and the other Arab states of the Gulf, both war efforts would have ground to a halt long ago.

Why Saddam Hussein opted for a ruinous war of attrition remains a matter of speculation. When easy political victory was not forthcoming, Saddam was apparently unwilling to commit his best troops and most precious resources to the uncertain prospect of a decisive military victory. He may have feared the political consequences of a wartime economy at home or heavy casualties on the front. Or he may have calculated that Iraq did not have the logistical and military capacity to mount an all-out offensive to seize control of Khuzistan. Whatever his other failings, Saddam must be credited with holding out for almost four years against a vastly superior foe. By skillfully lobbying other Gulf states and overseas creditors, and by gradually slowing Iraq's massive development programs, he has so far avoided economic collapse. This impressive performance cannot continue indefinitely.

In the fall of 1982, after Iraq had suffered dramatic reverses and Iran pressed attacks into Iraqi territory, the Soviet Union tilted back to Iraq. Moscow criticized Iran's refusal to negotiate and resumed its arms shipments to Iraq, including new-model Soviet tanks and warplanes. In the spring of 1983, Khomeini moved to suppress Iran's Tudeh (Communist) party, and his regime orchestrated a Stalinist-style show trial of Tudeh leaders, who appeared

on television and confessed to spying for the Soviet Union.

With the renewal of massive Soviet arms shipments, Iraq's armored and air power has been considerably enhanced. Moreover, in the past twelve months Saddam Hussein has assembled an impressive arsenal of French and Soviet air and naval weapons, including fighter aircraft, helicopters, frigates, and several kinds of sea and air-launched missiles. Saddam hopes to use this arsenal to interdict tanker traffic in the northern waters of the Gulf and in this way to strike at Iran's oil exports. In August of 1982, Iraq declared an "exclusion zone" in the upper Gulf and announced that all "enemy vessels" were fair game for Iraqi attack. Since then Iraq has repeatedly announced sinkings of Iranian warships and tankers, although most of these reports remain unconfirmed. Only in recent months have desultory Iraqi attempts to interdict shipping in the Gulf gained any credibility.

It is possible that by sustaining attacks against tankers in the northern Gulf for as long as a month, Iraq could reduce seriously or halt entirely Iranian oil exports. That Iraq has yet to do so would indicate that at present it cannot; but Iraq's interdiction capability may become a crucial factor in the future.

THE IMPERIAL REPUBLIC

In the course of 1982 the tide of battle turned decisively against Iraq. In a series of successful counteroffensives, Iranian troops liberated Abadan and Khorramshahr and pushed Iraqi forces back to the border. After nearly two years of war, Iranians in Khuzistan celebrated these victories and exuberantly embraced the prospect of peace. Throughout the spring and summer, parliament debated the question of war or peace. Islamic radicals welcomed the opportunity to defeat Saddam Hussein militarily and bring "Islamic government" to Iraq. Partisans of peace warned against foreign adventures and addressed the necessity of rebuilding the fatherland and strengthening the revolution at home. The debate was lively and the peace party seemed to gain ground. Conciliatory statements were issued by Speaker of the Parliament Rafsanjani and President Khamene'i, two of Iran's most astute and powerful politicians. But in June, 1982, Khomeini intervened decisively in favor of the radicals. In a national address Khomeini declared that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his government was a minimum condition for peace. Iranian armies would press on to liberate sacred Shi'i shrines in southern Iraq and allow the Iraqi people to "free themselves from the talons of Saddam's tyrannical clique and...link themselves to the Iranian nation." The imam seemed to be advocating conquest and annexation of Iraq.

Since that landmark speech, vocal supporters of peace have grown silent in parliament, even though Khomeini's lieutenants have continued to tantalize reporters and analysts with conflicting and inconsistent statements concerning Iran's goals in the war and its terms for peace. They have hailed each new Iranian offensive as the final push to victory; but after much revolutionary fanfare and self-congratulation, each offensive has proved no more conclusive than the last. No doubt many Iranians have tired of this costly and apparently fruitless struggle; and yet observers are continually confounded by the determination of Ayatollah Khomeini, an eighty-four-year-old cleric whose political prestige and longevity have come to seem

unlimited. Most analysts agree that, should Khomeini die or retire, open debate over the war will surface once again (of course this offers Iraq little in the way of consolation). As Bani Sadr ruefully quipped after fleeing from Iran in 1981: "We no longer say 'when Khomeini dies' but, rather, 'if Khomeini dies.' "

Since taking the offensive in the summer of 1982, Iran has generally conducted a campaign of attrition—a sound strategy, given Iran's enormous economic advantage. Each offensive and popular mobilization seems larger and more awesome than the last; but each has quickly ground to a halt as Iran's leaders have exploited small gains for propaganda purposes and then withdrawn in the face of Iraq's superior artillery and air defenses. Iran seems bent on carrying out a policy of logistical and psychological exhaustion; an all-out Iranian offensive has been threatened many times but never seriously attempted. If Iraq can continue its massive arms acquisition effort, chances for an Iranian breakthrough will only decrease.

According to observers, there is good reason to believe that were Khomeini to pass from the scene, a new peace party would make a strong bid for power in the high councils of Iran's Islamic government. Iran's reign of revolutionary terror has now given way to a phase of greater moderation, marked by consensus and consolidation. After Bani Sadr's fall from power and the Islamic Republican party's decisive defeat of the *Mujahidin* in 1981, the fury of street battles and mass executions quickly subsided; and in December, 1982, Ayatollah Khomeini inaugurated a new phase of "stability and construction." The imam sharply criticized the illegal excesses of revolutionary courts and committees and insisted that revolutionary justice must follow due process. More than ever, Khomeini and his lieutenants have sought to reassure Iran's bazaar community, a socially conservative group that favors a laissez-faire economy, social order at home, and an end to military adventures abroad. Radical circles, however, still have influence. In particular, elements within Iran's quasi-autonomous revolutionary institutions—the Revolutionary Guards and the rural Reconstruction Crusade—continue to agitate for social and economic reforms. And radicals still have spokesmen in government, like Ayatollah Montazeri, generally considered Khomeini's chosen successor, and Mohsen Reza'i, the militant commander of the Revolutionary Guards.

But after five years of revolution, radical proposals con-

cerning land reform, nationalization of foreign trade, and the confiscation of the assets of expatriot Iranians have been consistently defeated by the Council of Guardians—Iran's supreme court, which may veto legislation passed by parliament and which Khomeini has packed with conservative theologians. Arbitrary arrests and violations of private property have been curbed; and foreign exchange control and restrictions on travel in and out of Iran have been eased under Foreign Minister Velayati, a social conservative and former peacenik. Of course the war has increased government intervention in the economy; but incredibly, Commerce Minister Asgar-Oladi attempted last year to deregulate grain distribution. A public outcry over hoarding and price-gouging led quickly to Asgar-Oladi's ouster; and Prime Minister Musavi took the occasion to lash out against "evil merchants and monopolists." Clearly, Iran's leaders are still divided on important questions of national policy, and even now its parliament remains an open forum for boisterous debate on many issues. Khomeini's demise, or his blessing, may rally radical forces in the future—a scenario that naturally would affect both economic policy and the war effort.

For the moment, however, Ayatollah Khomeini seems committed to a costly military campaign that holds little prospect of rapid resolution. His calculations in taking the war to Iraq seem as inscrutable as did Saddam Hussein's in opting initially for a war of attrition. The imam may have expected the kind of quick political victory that Saddam once anticipated, or, like Saddam before him, he may have become the prisoner of his own ambition.

Some observers speculate that, having committed himself to a march on Kerbala and then Jerusalem, Khomeini can no longer make peace; that he would be unable to justify the tremendous human losses that Iran has suffered over the last two years for no real gain. Khomeini has repeatedly promised victory to the families of the war's dead and wounded, and he recently directed a large part of his Fifth Anniversary of the Revolution address to just this constituency. Other observers insist that the venerable ayatollah is driven by a deep personal hatred for Saddam Hussein who, at the shah's behest, ordered Khomeini's deportation from Iraq in 1978. Nietzsche once remarked that "the truly great haters in world history have been priests," and he added: "likewise the most ingenious haters." Ayatollah Khomeini may well be the towering Nietzschean figure of our time. [WV]

COMING

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