

Egypt edges closer to role in Gulf War

One Arab in four is an Egyptian. Egypt is also the intellectual, cultural, military and industrial leader of the Arab world. Yet for the past decade, since Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David peace treaty with Israel, Egypt has been an outcast, shunned and scored as a traitor by its Arab neighbors.

The recent Arab summit at Amman, Jordan, has just readmitted Egypt as a member in good standing in the not-so-fraternal fraternity of Arab nations. Cairo has not been forgiven its recognition of Israel: It's simply that Arabs are now so alarmed by Iran that Egypt's sins must be temporarily overlooked.

Alarmed is probably an understatement. In the eastern outskirts of besieged Basra, Iraq's second city, some 200,000 Iranians in 20 divisions have concentrated and are amassing supplies for the next big push against what has become the Verdun of the Gulf War. Five hundred miles to the north, Iraqi defenses are under severe pressure as Kurdish rebels press on Mosul and Kirkuk.

On the central front, Iran has been quietly massing its reserves of armor and regular troops. Compared to this looming battle, all the fuss and ado of the Gulf tanker war is merely a distracting skirmish. The real decision will be made on land by the battalions of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Iraq's Arab allies have almost no military power — with the exception of Syria. But the Syrians, who have feuded with the Iraqis for decades, still side with Iran; their large army is busy watching the Israelis. Which leaves Egypt as the only Arab nation that can lend real military support to Iraq.

For the past five years Egypt has given a great deal of covert aid to Iraq. Almost one million Egyptians work as farmers and laborers in Iraq, replacing men who



have gone to the front. Egypt's expanding military industries supply Iraq with copies of Soviet arms, munitions, communications equipment and assemble Chinese aircraft — arms exports, said to total nearly \$1 billion last year. Egyptian officers serve as advisers with the Iraqi military. Discreet American military aid to Iraq is channeled through Egypt.

But all of this is clearly not enough. The Arab heads of state assembled at Amman feared that Iraq was about to break, removing the cork that was holding the Iranian revolutionary genie in its bottle. So they and the U.S. have turned to Egypt's 445,000-man armed forces for aid in saving Iraq's embattled regime.

Gen. Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's able and cautious leader, is now under intense pressure from his Arab allies and U.S. financial supporters to take military action. In recent years he wisely turned down requests by the Reagan administration's wildmen to invade Libya, even when they promised him Libya's oil fields.

Now, however, Egypt is itself threatened by Iran. An Iranian victory over Iraq would throw gasoline on the spreading fires of Islamic fundamentalism inside Egypt that are being fuelled by the nation's intolerable and steadily worsening economic problems.

Could Egyptian military intervention have a significant impact on the Gulf War? This would mean sending mechanized, armored and artillery brigades to the front. Men can be airlifted, but their heavy equipment must first come by ship and then go overland to Iraq whose only access to the sea has long been shut by the Iranians.

Egyptian divisions would have to be shipped to the Jordanian port of Aqaba and then make a long, overland trip of 800 miles to the southern front. Such an operation would be slow and full of problems. Now that Egypt has largely switched to U.S.-made arms and equipment, maintaining, repairing and arming its brigades deep in Iraq — which uses Soviet arms — would be a logistical nightmare. Keeping large Egyptian units fighting 1,000 miles from their bases would be almost an impossible task, even with substantial U.S. help.

Nor can Mubarak completely trust the loyalty of troops sent to fight in Iraq. The junior officer ranks and conscripts of the Egyptian army are riddled with Islamic fundamentalist and nationalist cells. Some units might refuse to fight; others might turn around before boarding ships at Suez and march on Cairo.

Many Egyptians feel their country is being dragged into a war by the Americans and have no sympathy whatever for the Iraqi regime or the oil sheiks of the gulf. Others see the Gulf War as an opportunity to escape from Egypt's loss of independence to the Americans who supply, on credit, the arms and wheat the nation could not otherwise afford.

For the smaller Arab states who hear the thunder of Iranian guns drawing closer, Egypt appears the only hope. But Egypt could turn out as weak a reed as the Iran of the late shah, whose dynasty was supposed to last a thousand years.