

The Toronto Sun
June 25, 1989

Gorby playing favorites in Iran

"I feel almost at home," beamed Iranian leader Ali Akbar Rafsanjani to his even more beaming Moscow host, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Now we know the Russians and Iranians are grand masters of cynicism, but this really bordered on being too much. A few months ago, Iran's ayatollahs were denouncing the USSR as a "cesspool of devils" and Gorbachev as a "great Satan." Then off goes the late Imam Khomeini to paradise, and up pops his No. 2 in satanic downtown Moscow.

Soviet-Iranian relations were bound to improve, to be sure, but the visit of the Iranian Parliament's speaker looks curiously by the minute. In fact, one may well ask, what in the name of Omar Khayyam is going on?

The wily Rafsanjani is now the big kabob in Tehran. In spite of his fiery rhetoric, Rafsanjani is a moderate who wants closer relations with both the West and the Soviets. Ahmad Khomeini, the son of the late ayatollah, is Rafsanjani's main rival. Khomeini Jr. controls the military and security services.

Both men have joined with a third, figurehead Ali Khamenei, to form a triumvirate that will be replaced after national elections in August. Rafsanjani and Khomeini are now jockeying for power.

Waiting in the wings is the Ayatollah Montazeri who was Khomeini's designated successor until he split with the late Imam and was forced to resign. Montazeri is a moderate nationalist who opposes Rafsanjani's secret links with western and Israeli intelligence services — and warmer relations with the Soviets. Montazeri has powerful support inside Iran, particularly among the common people. View Rafsanjani's Moscow trip as a key part of the power struggle under way in Tehran.

While in Moscow, the Iranian leader signed deals to



Eric
MARGOLIS

reopen cross-border rail links, supply Iranian natural gas to the USSR and, most likely, buy Soviet arms on easy credit terms. This was expected. Totally unexpected, and quite incredible, was the decision to extend the Iranian leader's state visit and for him to travel down to the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

Why? First, because by doing so Rafsanjani was given de facto recognition to Soviet rule over Moslem Azerbaijan, something never before formally accepted by Iran. Azerbaijan was once part of Iran and is today split between the two neighbors. Stalin even tried to invade Iranian Azerbaijan at the end of World War II.

Khomeini started the process of Iranian recognition of Soviet rule in Central Asia. Rafsanjani is continuing it — no doubt in return for substantial Soviet arms aid.

Even more odd is the timing. Soviet Asia is being wracked by riots. In the past few weeks, Islamic fundamentalism, economic misery and frustration exploded into savage riots in Soviet-ruled Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Ethnic violence has swept through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. All form the southern tier of the last great 19th century empire — Soviet Central Asia.

So here we see the chief spokesman for Islamic fundamentalism, Rafsanjani, junketing through the very

Soviet regions where Islamic nationalist zeal is erupting — a prospect which scares the Soviets silly. In fact, Gorbachev said Islamic fundamentalism had "bared its teeth" in Central Asia and warned of the grave dangers of a holy war.

Sending Rafsanjani to Azerbaijan seemed like pouring gas on a fire. But obviously the Iranian and Soviet leaders have made a deal. Iran is to help quiet down Moslem tempers in Central Asia and stop stirring up anti-communist ardor, as it has been doing in the past. Moscow, in turn, will lend its powerful support to Rafsanjani in the coming power struggle — and provide the arms that may swing the armed forces away from Ahmad Khomeini and over to Rafsanjani.

As a neat side deal, Iran will keep its supporters in Afghanistan from forming a united government with the other mujahedin groups, so helping the Marxist regime there stay in power. Moscow, in turn, will keep preventing Iran's enemy, Iraq, from resuming the Gulf War.

All this intrigue is enough to make one's turban spin, but that's life over in West Asia. The bottom line is that the clever Soviets have just scored a major coup in post-Khomeini Iran and stolen a march on the West.

While the Americans are gloomily trying to figure out what to do next, the Russians and Iranians are kissing and hugging. Moscow has chosen to go with the clear front-runner in highly strategic Iran. No doubt Rafsanjani will also open doors to the West, but the advantage clearly lies with Moscow.

But if Ahmad Khomeini or Ayatollah Montazeri can break Rafsanjani's grip ... ah then, my friends, the great Iranian game will change.

As the poet Omar said, politics "is all a checkerboard ... where destiny, with men for pieces, plays."