

ERIC
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Iran-Iraq war

Deep in the swamps along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers — the birthplace of civilization — Iran and Iraq are locked in savage battles, the outcome of which could alter the face of the Middle East.

Iran's latest offensive against Iraq's vital port of Basra has apparently run out of steam. After suffering some 50,000 casualties in the past two weeks, Iran's huge, ill-equipped army has failed to sever the Baghdad-Basra highway, Iraq's strategic backbone.

Lightly armed Iranian troops, many of them children or old men, staged night-time human-wave attacks against the heavily entrenched Iraqis. Led by chanting mullahs, the Iranians were mowed down by Iraqi tanks firing canister shells (giant shotgun charges), artillery and helicopter gunships.

Iraq has held, but many military observers now fear that Iran, which has 250,000 men massed before Basra, may launch a simultaneous offensive further north against the Mandali sector. If this happens, Iraq might not be able to stop the second Iranian offensive since Iraqi mobile reserves are fully committed to the south.

Both sides are apparently growing desperate as the war drags into its fourth year. Iraq has suffered close to 100,000 casualties while the Iranians are reported to have suffered as many as 600,000 dead and wounded. Both nation's economies are being devastated.

Iran's current strategy is to keep maximum military pressure on Iraq while waiting for the Baghdad regime to either collapse under economic pressure or by internal revolution. The war of attrition has placed Iraq in peril: Its oil exports have now fallen to only 700,000 barrels a day — all via the vulnerable pipeline through Turkey.

But, according to Mideast analyst Fred Axelgard of Georgetown University's Centre for Strategic Studies, Iraq is hard at work on building a new spur pipeline that will connect to the Saudi system. Expected to be ready within 12 months, the new line will increase Iraq's oil exports — and thus badly needed income — by another 500,000 barrels a day. A further pipeline expansion through Saudi Arabia is also under study.

If these new pipelines come into service, Iran will have failed in its attempt to economically strangle Iraq. The latest massive Iranian offensives are designed to break Iraqi resistance before new revenue reinvigorates Baghdad's war efforts. The Iranians are also aware that the U.S. is providing technical and perhaps monetary aid to Iraq for these new oil lines.

The entire world is watching this major war — the largest since Korea — with mounting apprehension. Oil importers have taken up sides and are discreetly helping the belligerents. No one much likes the Iraqis but even fewer nations would care to see Iran win this war.

France remains Iraq's principal supporter, providing arms and \$6 billion worth of credit. If Iraq falls, France's investment will be lost and its efforts to secure more Mideast oil will fail. Japan, another large oil importer, is discreetly supporting Iran through credits and some technical assistance. This is the first time Japan has taken an active strategic role outside of Asia and may be a harbinger of things to come.

Russia, furious at Iran for executing or jailing local communists, has just told Tehran that it is "on its own." Moscow has informed the Iranians that it will not support them if Khomeini makes good on his threat to close the Persian Gulf. But most military experts doubt that Iran has the capacity to block or mine the two deep channels through the Strait of Hormuz. They believe Iran can only harass shipping.

A U.S.-British-French naval force now lies at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, ready to assure free passage of 20% of the West's oil. U.S. ships there have lately been warning off Iranian vessels and aircraft. American naval units are on high alert for expected kamikaze attacks from special Iranian suicide pilots based at Bandar Abbas.

China, an increasingly important supplier of low-tech arms, has just switched its support from Iraq to Iran, a clear indication that Peking thinks Iran will triumph in the war. The conservative Arab states, terrified at the spectre of revolutionary Iran, have poured over \$25 billion into Iraq's coffers. Now, according to my sources, Turkey, long a neutral in the war, may be considering aiding Baghdad so as to prevent the occupation of Iraq's northern oil fields, upon which it depends.

Should Iraqi resistance collapse under military pressure or a coup in Baghdad by war-weary officers, the result would be grave. Iran would almost certainly occupy tiny Kuwait; Bahrain would also likely fall to a Shiite coup. While most analysts in Washington with whom I have spoken don't think Iran would march into Arabia, I believe they would. Iranian armies could easily occupy the Gulf Emirates and perhaps even Saudi Arabia.

These oil-producing nations are almost defenceless. Only Turkey and Egypt could provide effective military support — but probably not in time. Egypt is experiencing mounting Islamic fundamentalism and loathe to take any military action. The U.S. could, at best, provide aircraft and some tanks, but not enough to halt the rampaging Iranians. Lebanon showed the limits of U.S. power in the area. Israeli intervention is considered by everyone to be out of the question.

The violent, bloody battles along the Iran-Iraq border could well determine the future of the Mideast and the security of Western oil supplies. If Iran wins, oil will not be cut off, but its price would inevitably rise dramatically, plunging the West into recession. The West's enormous stake in the Mideast now lies in the hands of Iraq's army.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)