

Iran plays a daring game in the Gulf

Shock and bewilderment are the prevailing reactions in Washington to this week's announcement by Iran that it will support Iraq in trying to drive U.S. influence out of the Mideast.

Worse, the naughty Iranians are already breaking the UN embargo of Iraq. Which means that the blockade won't work unless the world also gangs up on Iran.

That official Washington should have been in the least surprised by Iran's reaction only shows how ignorant most Americans are when it comes to Mideast affairs and how poorly thought-out was President George Bush's snap decision to send the cavalry to Arabia.

Anyone familiar with the old Mideast saw "the enemy of my enemy is my brother" would have known exactly what Iran would do. But didn't Iran and Iraq just fight an eight-year war in which the two Muslim nations suffered nearly one million casualties?

Yes, but in the ever shifting political sands of the region, that was yesterday. The main cause of the war was the Shatt el-Arab, a river on the Iran-Iraq border which was the only access to the Gulf for Baghdad's vital oil exports. Both sides claimed the river.

Iraq, egged on by the U.S., finally attacked K.-o-mein's Iran in a failed effort to permanently secure both banks of the river. Now Iraq has just signed a peace treaty with Iran, and has agreed that the centre dividing line of the Shatt el-Arab will remain the recognized border.

So, in effect, Iraq's long, bloody war with Iran was for nothing, a huge waste of life and treasure? Yes, if Saddam had not invaded Kuwait. By doing so, Saddam got 200 miles of coastline and, at long last, open access to the Gulf. The Shatt el-Arab is no longer needed. I've been wondering for the last month if Saddam and



the mullahs in Tehran didn't make a secret deal before the invasion of Kuwait. Tehran would okay the takeover of Kuwait, a bitter foe of Iran, in exchange for a return to the pre-war status quo. I also suspect that as part of the deal, Iraq may cede to Iran part of the vast Majnoon oilfield that straddles their border.

But why is Iran risking its growing international respectability in order to help that modern-day Ali Baba, Saddam Hussein? Because Iran's leaders rightly fear that if U.S. tanks roll into Baghdad and overthrow Saddam, those forces might keep right on rolling east to Tehran.

In spite of all the propaganda here about morality and justice, Iranians know the U.S. intervention in the Gulf is about raw imperial power — oil, colonies and strategic geography. Iran has oil and is three times larger than Iraq. Washington has never forgotten its humiliation after the fall of the shah and would dearly like to overthrow Iran's Islamic regime — after Iraq, the only real challenge to U.S. hegemony in the Mideast.

Iran will thus discreetly back Iraq, but not so obviously as to provoke a worldwide boycott. Turkey, which used to do billions of dollars in trade with Iraq, will, I suspect, smuggle its goods into Iraq via Iran. Goods from India and Pakistan will follow the same route.

The Iranians want to keep Saddam alive as a shield but not strong enough to again menace their country. They will also use Iraq as a potent ally in their increasingly bitter conflict with the Saudi royal family and Washington's Arab marionettes, the Gulf emirates.

The Iranian leaders, who, in spite of their medieval outfits are very sharp thinkers, are looking north. They see the entire southern tier of the rickety Soviet Union — the Muslim republics of Central Asia — seething with unrest. When the inevitable explosion comes, two nations bordering the region, Iran and Turkey, will assume great strategic importance. Pan-Persian influence will vie with Pan-Turkism for the allegiance of Central Asia's Turkic and Farsi-speaking peoples.

As the Arab world continues to implode in a shameful tragedy of name-calling, backstabbing, betrayal and treachery produced by the Kuwait crisis, Iran expects that one day soon it will pick up the pieces.

Tehran will then offer moral, political and religious leadership to the dispirited Arabs and liberated Muslim Central Asians. And, beneath the turbulent political surface of the Mideast, a pro-Iranian Islamic earthquake is building up from Morocco to the Gulf.

That's why Tehran may be the next target after Baghdad for George Bush's B-52s.

Americans have short memories. Most have forgotten how the U.S. Navy entered the Gulf War on Iraq's side and sank most of Iran's small fleet. Or how the U.S. cruiser *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian airliner — and that its captain was actually given a medal for this heroic act.

Iranians have long memories and even longer grudges against the U.S. Great Satan — who is now just next door.