

Comment

Iran smells victory in war with Iraq

Fao — an odd name — is an obscure oil terminal at the southern end of Iraq's Euphrates River delta. Its piers and pipelines were long ago shelled into junk by Iranian artillery just across the Shatt el-Arab waterway dividing warring Iran and Iraq. Yet this week the name Fao has sent shivers of terror down the oil-producing Gulf.

At long last, after 5½ years of bloody warfare, the Iranian revolutionary genie may be about to escape from its bottle and burst most terribly on the Arabian Peninsula. The cork that contained this Islamic genie was Iraq's defences on the Fao Peninsula.

The port of Fao was the southern anchor of Iraq's 800-mile long front with Iran. Last week Iranian troops, who have become highly adept at the art of marsh warfare, managed to cross the Shatt el-Arab in motor-boats or rafts and storm Fao. For the next two days, the Iranians fought off heavy Iraqi counterattacks while pouring more men into the expanding bridgehead.

Now the Iranians have advanced across the marshy estuary of the Euphrates, terrain that degrades Iraq's superiority in tanks, artillery and aircraft. As of this writing, Iranian troops had fought to within eight miles of the Iraqi naval base of Umm al Qasr in spite of desperate counterattacks by elite Iraqi units and heavy air strikes against the flanks of the advancing Iranian columns.

Until last week Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and the Gulf states, were protected from Iranian wrath by the heavily defended peninsula between Fao and Umm al Qasr. If Umm al Qasr falls, Iranian troops would for



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the first time be able to strike directly at Iraq's second most important ally after the Saudis, oil-rich Kuwait.

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have given Iraq over \$14 billion to finance its war against Iran — and to prevent the revolutionary Islamic armies of Imam Khomeini from pouring into oil-rich Arabia. Khomeini and the other grim mullahs of Iran have vowed to overthrow the pro-western, conservative rulers of Arabia and Jordan whom they term heretics and puppets of the U.S.

From Umm al-Qasr to Kuwait City is only 80 miles of flat highway. Kuwait's tiny armed forces would be brushed aside by any determined Iranian thrust. From Kuwait, the Iranians need only motor southwards along good highways for another 220 miles until they reach Ras Tannurah — the centre of Saudi Arabia's great oil fields. Only a few more hours drive would take the Iranians to Bahrain and Qatar. Thus, if Iraq's Fao defences collapse, the entire Gulf and Arabia — providing 60% of the world's oil reserves — could quickly fall into the hands of militant Iran.

Arabia's kings and emirs are almost defenseless in

spite of having spent billions on arms; their feeble armies would likely fall apart at the first clash with tough, veteran Iranian troops. That is why Arabia's rulers are so frightened. If the gap at Fao cannot be plugged, the Iranians may well erupt into a helpless Arabia — just as the French revolutionary armies of the 1790s burst on the unprepared monarchies of Europe.

Who will defend Arabia and its oil if Iraqi lines break? Pakistan, which already has 15,000 troops "on loan" in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf is the obvious candidate. But even though relations between Iran and Pakistan are chilly, it is most unlikely that the Pakistanis would risk a general war with their neighbor Iran.

Jordan, with its small but excellent army, is the next choice. But having been denied transport and air defence arms by the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S. Congress, Jordan may be unable and unwilling to move or sustain large numbers of troops in the Gulf.

This leaves Egypt as the only Mideastern nation capable of stemming an Iranian assault on Arabia. Yet how well would an Egyptian army, seething with anti-American and Islamic fundamentalist sentiment, fight against Iran?

If Egypt is discounted, only Israeli or American troops remain, and neither option is at all realistic. Iran, sensing victory after years of war and over 500,000 dead, will pour everything into the attack around Fao. Iraq, aware that defeat at Fao could mean its collapse and erasure, will also fight furiously. Watching with growing fear will be the Petro-Arabs, the world's financial markets and the U.S.