

# Iran is Gulf war's wild card

**S**addam Hussein, true to form, has pulled another surprise out of his bag of tricks by sending 90 of his best warplanes to refuge in neighboring Iran.

What, everyone is asking, does this mean?

One rumor holds that Iraq's air force commanders staged an unsuccessful coup against Saddam and then high-tailed it, with their best planes and pilots, to Iran. Another, that Iraqi pilots decided to avoid suicidal combat against the coalition's overwhelmingly powerful air armada and simply defected to Iran.

I believe the reason is more complex — and ominous.

Before fighting started, Iraq moved its entire 200 plane civilian fleet to Iran for safekeeping in what was clearly a prearranged deal with Tehran. Now Saddam has sent his best warplanes to Iran — Mirage F-1s, MiG-29s and Su-24s — to preserve them from certain destruction either in the air or on the ground. The warplanes he has kept are primarily older MiGs and Sukhois that will be used later on for ground attack.

Note that the low-flying Su-24s were the only Iraqi aircraft that had even a faint chance of penetrating Israeli air defences — a fact that will be a relief to the beleaguered Israelis.

Even though Iraq and Iran fought an eight-year war, the U.S.-led attack on Baghdad is now forcing Iran to shift away from its announced policy of absolute neutrality. Before the fighting began, Iran announced that it bitterly opposed any U.S. military presence in the region and called for an Islamic holy war, or jihad, against American and British forces.

The Iranians are extremely clever people and should not be underrated. By sheltering Iraqi aircraft, Tehran is sending, I suspect, the same type of warning that China delivered to U.S.-led UN forces during the Korean war: Approach our border too closely, and we may intervene.

Remember that the U.S. scoffed at Chinese threats and pushed up to the Chinese border along Yalu River. One million Chinese "volunteers" attacked southward, driving UN forces back towards Seoul. Tehran may be saying to the U.S.: Keep your troops confined to Kuwait. If you push into southern Iraq, we may intervene in the war.

Basra, Iraq's second city and main military zone in the south, may shortly come under coalition ground attack. From Basra, Iran is only a few miles away, just across the narrow Shatt al-Arab waterway.

Could the Shatt al-Arab become the Yalu River of the Gulf War? Most experts think not. Iran's wily leader, Hashemi Rafsanjani, has repeatedly stated a war with the U.S. would be "suicidal." But he is also clearly worried that the pow-

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erful U.S. forces in the region may move against Iran once they finish demolishing Iraq.

Iranians have not forgotten that the U.S. mounted a naval war against them during the conflict against Iraq, that the U.S. gave secret support to Iraq during the long war, or that the captain of the cruiser USS *Vincennes*, which shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, was given a medal for the action.

The regime in Tehran is also badly divided on the issue of the Gulf war. Rafsanjani's faction urges neutrality and the type of limited support for Baghdad shown by its granting haven to Iraqi warplanes. But more militant factions are openly calling for Iran to join Iraq in a mighty holy war against U.S. domination of the Gulf region.

Last week a senior mullah, Mehdi Karroubi, urged Iran to fight on the side of Iraq. Among the powerful Iranian Revolutionary Guards, or Pasadrans, there is growing support for the idea of sending "volunteers" to help Iraq.

I think we will shortly learn that the Iranian airfields to which Iraq's planes flew were run by the militant Revolutionary Guards — rather than the competing Iranian regular air force.

I have also learned from Pentagon sources that the U.S. is seriously considering a direct land attack on Baghdad as a way of avoiding heavy positional fighting in Kuwait. This would come as a wide flanking assault almost due north up the road from the Rafha junction in Saudi Arabia toward Baghdad.

But this route — the only good road through the rough terrain — leads directly to the twin cities of Najaf and Kerbala. They are the two holiest cities of Shia Muslims, the sites of the graves of Shia saints Ali and Hussein. Any assault on these holy cities, with their large Shia populations, could easily trigger a military response by Shia Iran.

The cities are no more than 130 miles from the Iranian border, where large Iranian military formations are massing.

Inside Iran, there is growing popular pressure for war against the widely hated Americans and their despised "henchmen," the Saudis. Iran, which sees itself as the rightful power in the region, is growing more nervous and agitated by the day as U.S. forces near its long border with Iraq.



**IRANIAN LEADER RAFSANJANI**