

ERIC
MARGOLIS



Quiet war

While everyone's attention is riveted on the tiny wars in Central America and Lebanon, the world's major armed conflict — the three year-old struggle between Iran and Iraq — has almost disappeared from view.

After bitter, see-saw fighting, the Gulf War has become a tiresome stalemate. The 200,000 Iraqi and 300,000 Iranian soldiers dug in along the 500 mile front are each incapable of gaining a victory over the other.

In spite of all the high-tech, modern weaponry available, the Gulf War has come very much to resemble the static trench warfare of World War I.

Military activity is characterized by long periods of quiescence punctuated by brief spasms of intense, and always unsuccessful Iranian assaults that quickly dwindle away due to lack of mobile armored reserves and supplies.

Then the Iranians, who are short of everything, have to wait for months in order to amass enough munitions and supplies in order to make another expensive and futile night infantry assault on the heavily entrenched Iraqis. The Iranians, who are down to about 100 serviceable aircraft and a few hundred tanks, simply cannot make a decisive breakthrough and drive onto their goal, Baghdad.

Odd assortment of suppliers

Far more interesting than the military operations is the curious assortment of arms suppliers to the two warring nations. France has become Iraq's leading supplier, no doubt in order to secure a stake in that nation's huge oil reserves. Iraq is also receiving regular arms shipments from Egypt, Jordan and Romania.

Russia, trying desperately to maintain good relations with both sides, is allowing a trickle of arms and spare parts to flow to Iraq while also making some small arms deliveries to Iran.

Iran, which has had great difficulty obtaining spare parts for the American arms purchased by the Shah, is now receiving an assortment of hardware from Israel, North Korea, Syria and Czechoslovakia. Russia is using the Czechs as a discreet conduit for deliveries; Israel is making money and managing to bedevil her hated Iraqi foes. Syria's leader, Gen. Assad, despises Iraq's strongman, Gen. Hussein.

Even the Chinese have now gotten into the act by supplying early 1960s technology aircraft to both sides: To Iran through North Korea and to Iraq through Egypt. The United States would probably like to help Iraq but does not out of fear of driving Iran towards the Russians and because of intense Congressional opposition to any form of aid to Baghdad, an arch-enemy of Israel. Needless to say, all of these eager arms suppliers are making great sums of money from the two arms-poor but oil-rich combatants.

The Iranians, who have rejected all Iraqi peace initiatives, are demanding the ouster of Gen. Hussein and \$50 billion in war reparations from Iraq as their price for stopping the war. With three times the population of Iraq, the Iranians now apparently believe that they can outlast their enemy in a war of attrition. This belief is probably correct: Iran, whose oil exports are rising, has growing foreign currency reserves and a GNP that grew at 2.2% last year. Iraq has been unable to halt the flow of Iranian oil exports in spite of using French supplied Exocet missiles against Persian offshore oil rigs.

By contrast, Iraq, whose oil exports have now fallen to only \$700 million annually — less than the cost of one month's fighting — are down to their last \$3 billion in reserves and are experiencing a 35% inflation rate.

Seek loans from France

For the first time, Iraq has had to seek loans from France in order to finance her current import bill. Even Iraq's strongest financial backers, the conservative Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, nations that live in terror of the prospect of rampaging Iranian revolutionary armies next door, are being forced to curtail their aid because of the drop in world oil prices.

The Khomeini regime is evidently hoping that Iraq's growing economic distress and war weariness will result in a coup against Saddam Hussein, a not unreasonable aspiration considering that no Iraqi leader has left office alive since 1958.

The Iraqis, on the other hand, are hoping that the Imam Khomeini will soon succumb to age, plunging Iran into chaos that will end the war.

The Western powers and the Arab oil producers are hoping mightily that somehow Iraq will manage to bottle up the revolutionary Persian genie without seeing Iran disintegrate and fall into the hands of Russia.

The East Bloc, which has just witnessed the destruction of the Iranian Communist Party, probably does not have any better idea of what to do in this unfathomably complex, and potentially explosive situation — and by arming both sides they will likely please neither.

Iran and Iraq, like opposing sides in World War I, are waiting for their opponent to cave in from economic and political exhaustion, a dangerous and often self-defeating strategy that leaves both victor and vanquished vulnerable to the predators waiting in the wings.

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