

THE GLOBE AND MAIL, FRIDAY, JULY 16, 1982

Middle East ill prepared to stop Ayatollah's armies

By ERIC MARGOLIS

Special to The Globe and Mail

Religious-military movements, that emerge suddenly, led by messianic leaders determined to purge their fellow Moslems of heresy, and devastating Mongol, Turk and Persian invasions from the East are recurring themes in the history of Middle East.

Today, as the Iranian armies besiege Basra these themes reappear like a bad dream, sparking apprehension through the Middle East. An Iranian-led Islamic Republic in Iraq seems likely unless the Iraqi Army displays more resolve in defending its homeland than it did in its previous fighting with Iran.

The fighting ability of the Iraqi forces is questionable: in 22 months of fighting they have reportedly lost one third of their original strength of 210,000 regulars, at least 50 per cent of their air force of 335 combat planes, and half their armor. The

Once the Gulf states are absorbed, the Ayatollah's armies could well turn upon Iran's more important foe, Saudi Arabia. Ayatollah Khomeini and his disciples regard the Saudi royal family as heretical puppets of the West who have sold their souls to the United States. Should the Iranians decide to invade Saudi Arabia, little would stand in their way. The Saudi Army of 35,000 men and the tribal National Guard of 30,000 have almost no effective military capability and would be easily brushed aside.

Without direct U.S. military involvement, only the armies of Jordan and Egypt could hope to defend Saudi Arabia. But Jordan's small army is tied down at home, watching Israel, the Palestinians and the Iraqi border. King Hussein is high on Ayatollah Khomeini's hit list, thanks to his ardent support of Iraq.

An Egyptian military intervention in Arabia, even though strongly supported by the United States,

disintegration of two Iraqi divisions during the battle for Khorramshahr is indicative of the growing morale problems in the Army, 40 per cent of whose conscripts are Shiite Moslems whose loyalty to the Sunni Moslem Government in Baghdad is questionable.

By opening their offensive at Basra, the Iranians are either staging a diversion or are planning a campaign up the Tigris and Euphrates Valley toward Baghdad. But the marshes in this area will present the Iranians with the same tactical problems encountered by the Iraqis in their unsuccessful siege of Abadan. A more attractive invasion route lies from the city of Ham, on the central front, directly westward — and downhill — to Baghdad, only 170 kilometres away. Here, the Iranians could be expected to launch a major armored thrust using their superior British-supplied Chieftan tanks.

If Iraq falls, few observers doubt

would not necessarily stop the Iranians. The Egyptian Army is in chaos and largely immobile; the logistical problems of supporting two or three mechanized Egyptian divisions deep in eastern Arabia would be awesome.

Equally significant, Islamic fundamentalism is becoming widespread among the enlisted, NCO and junior officer ranks of the Egyptian Army who are reported as furious over President Hosni Mubarak's failure to help the Palestinians in Lebanon. There is thus a possibility that units of the Egyptian Army might defect to the Iranians.

Just as Egypt and the other Arab states, with the important exception of Iran's one Arab ally, Syria, have abandoned the Palestine Liberation Organization in the rubble of Beirut, the Palestinians have found a new and mighty champion.

Iran is becoming the avenger of the PLO and is directly menacing

that the Iranians would turn their attention to the oil states of Arabia. The Iranians could either seek enormous cash payments from the vulnerable oil producers as "war reparations" or invade them directly.

The greatest immediate peril is faced by the Gulf states who, along with the Saudis, have poured money into Iraq's war coffers. Kuwait, overtly anti-Iranian, would be the first target of the vengeful Iranians, whose vanguards are less than 75 kilometres from its capital. Iranian forces could occupy Kuwait in a day.

Continuing down the Gulf, Iranian forces could easily occupy Doha, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates whose rulers have been the object of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's wrath. Some of these city states, where Shiite Moslems and Palestinians comprise half the population, might not even wait for their Iranian "liberators" before overthrowing their present governments.

those Arab states who supposedly betrayed the Palestinians — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Jordan. This phenomena could even lead to a military alliance between Israel and the above states to oppose the Iranians, the PLO and Syria.

The alliance's prospects could be unfavorable since an important lesson of the Iran-Iraq war — one that has not been lost on the Arabs — was that religious zeal coupled with close-assault infantry attacks could overcome the most advanced weapons.

In spite of these dramatic scenarios of Islamic revolution there is the real possibility that the death of the 82-year-old Khomeini could, in typical Middle Eastern fashion, result in the rapid disintegration of the Iranian state and its armies. If Persian history is any useful guide, Iran's moments of glory have been shortlived and usually followed by ruin and disaster.