

the possibility of providing Saudi Arabia with 1,200 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

The paper reported an unnamed state department official said intelligence analysts have warned Iran might launch a major ground attack against Iraq during the Persian Gulf war.

MAP shows Persian Gulf area where Iran and Iraq have been at war for almost four years. Iranian planes crippled a tanker yesterday and Iraq said its warplanes hit two ships near Iran's key Kharg Island oil terminal.

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reports indicated the tanker was sinking.

Iraq said its attacks on "two large naval targets" were part of Iraq's declared "total siege of Kharg Island and other Iranian ports."

The risk of war spreading

Iranian attacks on Saudi and Kuwaiti shipping in the Persian Gulf are threatening to transform the localized war between Iran and Iraq into a potentially explosive great power confrontation.

These recent attacks were clearly aimed at demonstrating Iran's oft-stated resolve to shut down the Gulf — and 19% of the world's oil supply — if its own oil exports were blocked by Iraqi action. Over the past month, increased Iraqi air attacks against tankers loading at Iran's principal oil terminal on Kharg Island have reportedly cut Persian oil exports by 55%.

Both Iran and Iraq must keep exporting oil in order to maintain their armies in the field. Iran, and its ally Syria, have managed to reduce Iraq's oil exports by at least 80%. Iraq is showing evident strains in this economic war of attrition in spite of \$32 billion in aid from the Arab states and France.

Iran's oil-producing neighbors — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and the Gulf Emirates — are extremely frightened by the prospect of Iranian attacks on their oil export terminals, pipelines and storage tanks. Saudi Arabia's main export terminal at Ras Tanura is only 15 minutes flying time from Iranian air bases and vulnerable to surprise, low level strikes.

In spite of U.S. radar AWACS aircraft based in Saudi Arabia, the ability of the Saudi Air Force to intercept Iranian aircraft flying in the early morning haze that covers the Gulf is questionable. Last week, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait announced that their air forces would fly top cover for tankers. By doing so, these nations, whose military capabilities are extremely limited, are risking what they have feared

ERIC MARGOLIS

Analysis



for years — an open clash with Iran.

U.S. President Ronald Reagan's offer to send U.S. Air Force planes to Saudi Arabia to protect Gulf shipping has only heightened war fever in the region. The Arabs, furious at the U.S. for its deepening involvement with Israel and profoundly disturbed by the American fiasco in Lebanon, do not want U.S. military units on their soil.

Saudi Arabia's powerful oil minister, Shiek Yamani, went as far as saying that U.S. military involvement in the Gulf might well provoke Russian intervention. Given the present tense relations between Moscow and Washington, this danger must be taken very seriously.

There is little doubt that the U.S. is being drawn into the war — but on which side is a matter of some dispute. Senior Iraqi officials with whom I have spoken insist that the U.S. is now backing Iran in an effort to restore lost American influence in that nation. The Iraqis charge that the U.S. and Israel are shipping large quantities of arms to Iran. We do

know that last year, Israel supplied Iran, through European middlemen, with over \$220 million in military supplies.

The U.S. denies collusion with Israel and insists it is trying to limit Israeli and South Korean arms sales to Iran. The Iraqis are convinced, however, that the U.S., China, Japan and Western Europe, with the exception of France, are now openly backing Iran.

As a result, Iraq has been turning increasingly to Moscow for arms and economic aid. Until recently, Russia supplied arms to both sides, often using its satellites as surrogates. But when the Imam Khomeini crushed the Iranian Communist Party and jailed a large number of KGB agents, Moscow apparently decided to throw its support to Iraq. Not surprisingly, this caused China, Moscow's foe, to switch its support from Iraq to Iran.

By contrast, the Iranians insist that both the U.S. and Russia are giving full backing to Iraq in an attempt to destroy the Islamic Revolution. All of this confusion suggests that the great powers are trying to play both sides, hoping that Iran and Iraq will finally exhaust themselves and stop fighting.

In this murky situation, only one thing is certain: The present game now under way of great power musical chairs creates a growing risk of a military clash in the Gulf between the U.S. and USSR. Neither superpower wishes a confrontation, but both are being inexorably drawn by their tangled alliances into the Gulf conflict.

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