

Iran suffers setback in Gulf war, growing discontent at home

by Thierry Lalevée

The de facto truce in the eight-year-old Gulf war between Iran and Iraq during the Ramadan month of fasting, has brought to the surface a seething political instability inside Iran itself. The period following the May superpower summit is likely to be a turbulent one in the Gulf.

As soon as the month of fasting was over, Iraq launched a series of air and ground attacks with significant success. On May 23, its air force struck directly at Larak Island in the Strait of Hormuz, hitting and setting fire to one of the largest tankers in the world, which has been used by Iran to stockpile its oil reserves.

In the days following, Iraq launched an air and ground offensive in northeast Iraq, retaking some of the ground held by the Iranian Pasdarans (Revolutionary Guards) and their Kurdish allies. On May 28, it launched an offensive in the southern region around Basra, following up on its earlier victory in the Faw Peninsula by driving the Iranians out of the Fishlake area north of Basra.

Except for renewed attacks against foreign tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, and the holding of what it called the "largest naval maneuvers" ever in the Gulf of Oman on May 24, Iran has been unable to retaliate against the Iraqi drive.

Among the Iranian prisoners seized by the Iraqis on May 28 were 12-year-old boys. Among the dead, the average age was between 14 and 16 years. Most obviously did not belong either to the regular army or the Pasdarans, but to the Baseej units, untrained groups of youth sent to the front as cannon-fodder with the duty of becoming Shahid, martyrs to Khomeini's glory.

Among the reasons for its setbacks, despite propagandistic claims, Iran has not met its goal of producing at home the kinds of weapons it needs. Over the last few months, there have been claims that Iran was going to produce its own jetfighter, the Al Fajr (Dawn). Although one may have actually flown, Iran is nowhere near the mass production it badly needs. Its home-made missiles, mostly produced from Chinese technology with the help of some 700 Chinese technicians located in the Kerman area, have proven to be remarkably inaccurate, and have had little impact on Iraq. Deprived of an effective air force and air defense capability,

Iran has had to rely on obsolete battlefield weapons with fewer and fewer tanks. On May 28, Iraq seized five British-made Chieftain tanks; they had never been used.

Paying the price of the defeat in Faw, the Iranian chief of staff was replaced in late April by Brig. Gen. Ali Shahbazi. Perhaps an indication of the kind of strategy he is expected to follow, IRNA, the Iranian news agency, placed much emphasis on his background and special training in guerrilla warfare operations. This could indicate that over the next few months, the Iranian forces may deliberately shy away from the main battle fronts, and instead concentrate on guerrilla warfare in northeastern Iraq, involving the deployment of its special Kurdish units as well as the Badr 9 unit made up of Iraqi Shi'ites belonging to the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

A heavier focus on guerrilla warfare has other implications; it means that Pasdaran units could be deployed in the rest of the Gulf, and be ready to strike, in particular, at Saudi Arabia during the late-July to early-August period of the Mecca pilgrimage. There, Iran could score the kinds of spectacular success that it has been deprived of on the Iraqi battle front.

The battle for power

Iranian leaders well know that, ultimately, what is just as lacking as weapons is good morale, both within the army and in the population. There are confirmed reports of mass demonstrations in several Iranian regional centers since early March, in protest over a collapsing standard of living. While during the early phase of the protests, the Pasdarans were ordered not to react, to avoid provoking bloodshed, lately the repression has been ferocious.

The reason is that the early demonstrations in March, which started as economic protests, by April and May had merged with active political demonstrations, coinciding with the hard-fought parliamentary elections of April 15 and May 13. Both rounds of elections were severely criticized by the Council of the Guardians of the Constitution, as heavily rigged. However, an intervention by Ayatollah Khomeini personally, and by the renowned maniac Sadiq Khalkhali,

who was general prosecutor in the immediate post-revolution period, ordering tens of thousands of executions, forced the "Guardians" to retract their criticism, days before the second round of the elections.

What seemed likely after the first round of elections was confirmed in the second round: An entirely new parliament will convene on June 7. With younger parliamentarians, its main characteristic will be radicalism. This has been Khomeini's personal wish, and his answer to Iran's economic plight and military setbacks. In the days prior to the first round, Khomeini and his advisers launched a series of all-out attacks on more conservative religious elements in the national Association of the Struggling Clergy (ASC). Most were accused of advocating an "American-made Islam." Instead, Khomeini demanded that future parliamentarians be dedicated to "the Islam of the poor, of the oppressed and disinherited."

Not surprisingly, this became the name of a parliamentary list headed by Khomeini's son Ahmed; the Coalition of the Oppressed and the Disinherited. Under the same sponsorship, a radical splinter-organization of the ASC was created only a few days before the first round, with almost the same name.

Toeing Khomeini's line, the radicals are advocating an all-out war against Iraq, and a resumption of the "human wave tactics" of the war's early days. The events in the Fishlake area show that this is in process of implementation.

Domestically, the radicals are advocating a "socialist economy, tempered by Islamic considerations," according to an April 15 declaration by Habib Shirazi of the board of governors of the Iranian central bank. This implies a new round of land reform, and also the nationalization of all major industrial activities, in particular, import and export industries. The radicals are also advocating a major increase in taxes on all major businesses. Immediately targeted is the business class or Bazaaris, who have protested, but have not yet hinted at any retaliation.

To compensate for this economic package, which could be voted as early as June, the government has taken some measures of liberalization on other fronts. For example, in recent months, a most unpopular measure had been the decision that all airline tickets must be paid for in dollars, at an inflated rate. This effectively shut down more than 60% all foreign travel, rich and poor alike. Recently, this measure was repealed.

That won't be enough to avoid continued troubles at home. After the first round of elections, several major demonstrations protested the obvious vote fraud in Qom, Mashhad, Tabriz, and Isfahan, as well as in smaller towns where the population was treated to the rare spectacle of local imams preaching against the government.

One of the remaining grand ayatollahs who hierarchically ranks above Khomeini, Ayatollah Golpeyagani, sent an open letter to the ayatollah in the first week of May. Citing the

hardships imposed on the Iranian population by the Gulf war, and what he described as the "total inability of Iran to ever win this war," he advocated an immediate cessation of hostilities. Khomeini's well-publicized answer was to state that if Golpeyagani wished an end to the war, "you should pray to the Almighty for Khomeini's death."

Afterward, as active as ever, Khomeini gave speech after speech on the need to pursue the war. On May 27, he warned that the "biggest sin [for the mullahs] would be to desert the revolution now." "Satanist elements" were trying to force Iran to end the war, he ranted. Iran's President Khamenei said much the same, defining Iran's present agenda as one of "resistance, sacrifice, further belief in God . . . until the final victory."

But disturbances have not abated. In the small southern town of Aghajari, one of the recently elected radicals in parliament was mobbed by the local population; the Pasdarians intervened by cutting off the ears of those demonstrators they could catch!

Nevertheless, the radical new parliament is expected to create a new and more radical government. Though this is unlikely to affect the position of Prime Minister Mir Hussein Moussavi, who has also benefited from Khomeini's support, other ministries will be affected. Foreign Minister Velayati is rumored to be on the way out, perhaps to be replaced by Deputy Prime Minister Ali Reza Mo'ayyeri, a former ambassador to Paris, or Ali Besharati, who is now the acting foreign minister. Besharati was only the third deputy minister a little over a year ago, but he is a rising star.

The power of General Prosecutor Mousawi Khomeini, an election winner, and an East bloc-trained mullah, are expected to be widened. More power may also go to Interior Minister Ali Akhbar Mohtashemi, who is considered a potential prime minister after the presidential elections in October. Mohtashemi has been the front-man for Khomeini's radicalization campaign. Having appointed his own assistant, Morteza Tabatabaie, mayor of Teheran last October, Mohtashemi was in a position to rig the elections. He has been close to the Khomeini family since the early 1970s, when all were living in exile in Iraq. He then became a liaison between Khomeini and Palestinian leaders George Habash and Yasser Arafat, as well as Syria's President Hafez al Assad, and organized the training of Iranian commandos in Palestinian and Syrian camps. Later, he helped build the Pasdarians, and masterminded the "strategic relationship" between Iran and Syria. During his several years as ambassador in Damascus, he created the first terrorist squads of the Islamic Jihad and of Hezbollah.

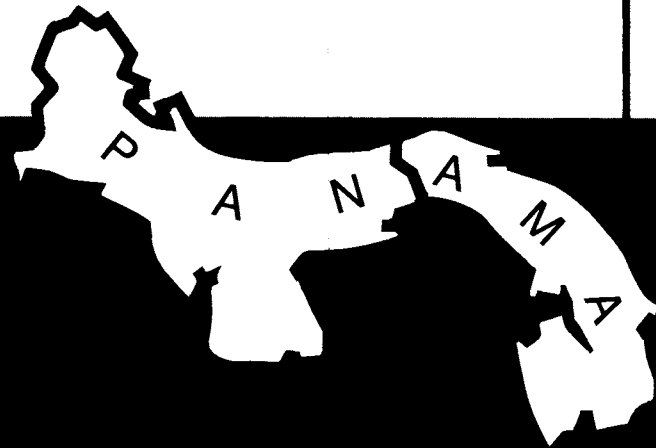
It is impossible to predict how long this crowd will be able to maintain itself in power. However, it is a safe bet that the coming months will witness both a radicalized Iran and increased domestic disturbances, with plenty of meddling by both superpowers.

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