

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Show of strength in the Gulf

Iran has launched another "final offensive," but the war may yet go on a while longer.

The announcement on March 10 in Teheran that Iran would launch a "final offensive" against Iraq should be taken with a pinch of salt, even though it was followed on March 12 by a ground-forces' offensive in the southern sector of the front with Iraq. That this communiqué was made in the name of Ayatollah Khomeini does little for its credibility: Rival factions have now mastered the art of putting into Khomeini's mouth what they want to hear.

However, the new ground offensive followed more than a week of mutual air raids against Iraqi and Iranian cities including Teheran, Baghdad, the Iraqi oil center of Kirkuk, and Iran's second largest city, Esfahan. Such renewed military activities, claiming many civilian victims on both sides, have little to do with the Gulf situation per se and much more with the ambiguous relationship both Iran and Iraq have with Europe and the United States.

Khomeini has hardly become a moderate and is likely to approve military plans for a full-scale offensive against Iraq, a military deployment made possible by more than six months of relative peace on the front which allowed Teheran to buy large stocks of weapons. One such new weapon, never used by Iran before, was experimented with on March 11 as ground-to-ground middle-range missiles were unleashed on Kirkuk. China, North Korea, and the old Israeli connection running through Kuneitra and Damascus were the sources of supply.

However, the last few days of fighting showed that Iran's primary weakness, its lack of airplanes, has not been resolved. Only two Iranian fighters could reach Baghdad to strafe Iraqi workers with machine-guns in the early hours of the morning, fleeing quickly before Iraqi jets could scramble. That did much to encourage Iran's President, Ali Khamenei, as well as Parliament Speaker Hashemi-Rafsanjani to call on the United Nations to mediate with Iraq on ending the bombardment of civilian targets.

Iran may be armed to the teeth—except for its lack of an air force—but it is also economically exhausted. Many a mullah fears that Khomeini's death will unleash such an internal factional fight that either through internal strife or external military threats from Iraq and the Soviet Union, their power will crumble to nothing.

Hence, for mullahs like Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and a few others who are more committed to their Swiss bank accounts and their lucrative export of pistachio nuts to Israel than to ideology, hopes lie with the Kissinger faction in the United States, French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, and West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who have all warned recently against "destabilizing Iran." This, they say, would be an invitation for a Soviet invasion of the northern part of the country. The conclusion Kissinger drew in a *Los Angeles Times* article was that the Gulf war should be kept going "with no winner or loser."

The decision reached by Dumas and Genscher, as underlined by a stream of articles in the French press recently, is to bring about a reconciliation with the mullahs' regime and to have Europe organize a "smooth transition of power" when Khomeini dies. Dumas's and Genscher's choice for such a transition is none other than their old friend Sadegh Tabatabai, Khomeini's son-in-law, whom they hope will become the next prime minister. As Genscher and Dumas know well, business, in a concrete sense, can be done with Tabatabai. Not only was he once arrested for drug trafficking in Germany. According to *L'Express* of Paris, Bonn is now completing the construction of six submarines for Iran!

Last winter, French President Mitterrand proposed a "European peace initiative" by Paris and Bonn which, via the good offices of Syria's Assad, could negotiate an actual cease-fire. The key to such a deal was Mitterrand's astounding promise that the United States—not consulted, at least officially—would release some \$4 billion in Iranian assets held in American banks. Though there were no official negotiations with the Soviets, Moscow let the matter proceed as long as it went through its Syrian ally, Assad, whom Mitterrand met in late November to discuss the Gulf situation.

However, the renewed fighting these days may be the end of the European role. It is at least a reminder from Baghdad, which has a fast-developing relationship with Washington, that it is the primary factor when one thinks of making deals with the mullahs. Baghdad knows that its attacks on Iranian cities have the decisive consequence of strengthening the Iranian warmongers, making any compromise difficult. For all of Iran's "final offensives," the war may yet last quite a while longer.