

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Iraq poised to knock out Khomeini

Iran is no match for their well-trained and equipped neighbors, whom Khomeini is now provoking toward war.

An entire armed division of Iranian troops, numbering up to 20,000 men and commanded by Iranian generals, is presently in Iraq under the sponsorship of the Iraqi government, according to Iranian sources. Its mission: to carry out the overthrow of the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Iraq, which has bitterly opposed the Khomeini regime from the beginning, has fostered the establishment of an exile government in Baghdad, in association with Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar, who was forced to flee Iran when Khomeini's coup was launched in February 1979. Under its umbrella, a group of Iranian military leaders and political figures opposed to the Khomeini dictatorship has gathered in Baghdad.

Iraq's intention is to defend, by military force if necessary, the interests of the nation-state in the area against the encroachments of the spreading Islamic fundamentalist cancer. The disintegration and balkanization of Iran under conditions of ever worsening chaos has posed a threat to every Muslim nation in the region, especially oil-rich Saudi Arabia. And Iran has openly pledged its support to Shiite radical and Muslim Brotherhood elements in various Arab countries.

Since the start of the looming Iraq-Iran confrontation, with both armies and navies mobilized and scattered reports of border clashes

and aerial dogfights along the frontier, virtually every Arab country has acknowledged Iraq's leadership. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and the smaller Gulf states have sent messages to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in solidarity with Iraq against the Iranian kooks. Even Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization have shown signs of wanting to mend fences with Baghdad, and are distancing themselves from Iran's radical Muslim extremism.

Iraq-Iran parameters

The mechanics of what Iraq eventually intends to be a surgical-procedure to eliminate the ayatollah involve some of the most complex and risky maneuvers imaginable.

First, there is the question of backing. Iraq is well aware that the Iranian regime is supported, covertly, by Zbigniew Brzezinski's National Security Council—and that any Iraqi showdown with Iran would raise the gravest alarm in Washington. Worse, it might give Washington and Teheran a pretext to upset and destabilize the entire oil-producing area. Thus, a key question is whether in the next days ahead—possibly during Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko's visit to Paris April 22—Iraq can get a green light from France and the U.S.S.R.

Militarily, Iraq is far superior to the Iranian armed forces, which

have crumbled into utter disarray since the revolution. According to informed military sources, "The Iranian Army will not fight on behalf of Khomeini." Very little of Iran's equipment is in working order, while Iraq has a battle-tested army with very sophisticated Soviet-made weapons.

On April 10, Baghdad's Al-Thawra ridiculed the U.S.-Iranian conflict, calling the break in diplomatic relations "fabricated" and "a new chapter in the exposed theatrics between Washington and Teheran." Khomeini, said Al-Thawra, "is playing the U.S. game" in direct coordination with the Camp David powers of Israel and Egypt.

That fact was underscored last week with the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. According to Washington analysts, the Israeli move could not be justified from any other vantage point except that it was meant to distract Iraq from its confrontation with Iran by creating the threat of a second front.

Inside Iran, the steady Iraqi pressure has led to panic among the ruling clique. Most of Khomeini's closest aides, such as President Bani-Sadr, Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh, and Ibrahim Yazdi are specialized agents of the Anglo-American intelligence services and the Mossad of Israel. Now, faced with the Iraqi challenge, they face the difficult task of trying to mobilize a population for a war to support a hated and incompetent regime. Threats of military action by Washington have served somewhat to rally the country behind Khomeini, but they are not enough.

As a result, the Iranians have responded by lashing out against Iraq with barrages of propaganda and sponsoring terrorist attacks.