

# Fast trigger on a new Persian Gulf oil crisis

by Judith Wyer

Over the past three months the fanatical Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian government has repeatedly stated its intentions to block the Straits of Hormuz, the outlet for about 50 percent of Western Europe and Japan's oil, should Iraq use Super Etendard fighter jets against Iran's oil installations. With the Iran-Iraq war entering a critical phase and Henry Kissinger's smelly footprints all over the Middle East, the threat of such a Persian Gulf crisis and new oil cut-off is imminent.

On Sept. 28, the U.S. State Department put out a warning in response to a statement made the day before by Ali Khamenei, the president of Iran's Islamic Republic, who said that Iran will attack any ship carrying weapons or other imports to Iraq. Though the State Department did not mention Iran, it stressed that the United States "viewed with grave concern attempts by any party to interfere with the right of passage of non-belligerent ships through international water, principally . . . in the Persian Gulf."

A congressional source reported that the United States has detailed military contingencies in the event of a "blow-up" in the Gulf, noting: "Don't be surprised to see a task force directed towards the Arabian Sea." The Islamic Revolutionary Guards, equipped with heavy artillery, have taken positions on Larak Island in the Straits of Hormuz, which Khomeini has threatened to mine.

A critical factor in whether Khomeini carries out his threats is whether France finally delivers the five Super Etendards and Exocet missiles, and whether Iraq, desperate to end the three-year war with Iran, is left no recourse but to use them. To a large extent, this is up to Washington.

When Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz meets Secretary of State George Shultz during the United Nations General Assembly, Arab diplomats say that Aziz will plead that Iraq must hit Iran's oil installations, unless Shultz assures him that the United States will shut down numerous U.S. illegal arms channels to Iran and force Iran to negotiate peace.

But in view of Shultz and his State Department's strong pro-Syrian tilt in managing the Lebanese crisis, Aziz's request might be read as a tall order. Syrian President Hafez al Assad, who has always maintained a warm relationship with

Shultz's top adviser Henry Kissinger, met Shultz in July and insisted that any cooperation he would give on Lebanon would be contingent upon an end to the U.S. overtures to Iraq. It is the White House, not the Kissinger-dominated State Department with its notorious softness on Khomeini, that has favored moving towards formal relations with Iraq (the two countries do not have official diplomatic relations). Besides Lebanon, U.S.-Iraq ties are considered a likely topic at Shultz's meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Khalim Khaddam Sept. 30.

France agreed to meet Iraq's bid for the Super Etendards in April, but has stalled on delivery because of pressure from the White House, which fears an expanded Gulf war. On Sept. 20 Paris announced another delay, but a few days later Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson, a critic of the United States in Lebanon, told the press that "when we make a contract, we usually honor these contracts." France is said to be waiting until after the Aziz-Shultz meeting before deciding on if or when to deliver.

The Sept. 27 Iranian threat to attack cargo ships was interpreted in Washington as menacing Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, two major transshipment points for Iraqi imports. According to a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, even if the Super Etendards are not delivered, Iran will find another excuse to "raise hell with oil exports." He warned that Iran will attack Saudi or Kuwaiti oil installations either by an air assault, or by terrorism using Iranian-backed Muslim fanatics.

On Aug. 20 Ayatollah Khoini, the Soviet-trained ring-leader of the 1979 hostage affair, formed an Assembly of United Islamic Movements from various terrorist gangs in the Muslim world for just this purpose.

## The Soviet angle

Well timed with a possible oil crisis, the Soviet Union's Oil Minister announced Sept. 25 that the natural gas pipeline has been completed ahead of schedule and is ready to deliver gas to European customers. Because the compressor stations are unfinished the U.S.S.R. cannot yet deliver the full volume of gas. Instability of the Middle East has served Moscow's interests in making Western Europe dependent upon it for fuel. Last year the Soviet Union captured 15 percent of Europe's oil market, not including gas sales. Over the same period U.S. imports of oil from Saudi Arabia dropped from over 1 million barrels a day to just over 100,000 barrels per day.

Should Khomeini move to shut down Gulf oil he will be doing Moscow a big favor. Khomeini himself and his closest circle known as the Imamis, including Khoini, maintain their own little-publicized ties to Moscow.

Not only would Iran advance Moscow's bid to make Europe economically dependent, but an oil crisis may be used by Moscow to weaken Western Europe's support of Washington on arms talks, as the countdown to deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles in December begins.