

Faction fight begins the post-Khomeini era

by Thierry Lalevée

The inability of the dark-ages Iranian regime to proceed with its long-awaited land offensive against Iraq and the imminent death of Ruhollah Khomeini has produced a breakdown crisis in Iran. Although Khomeini appears to be alive and talking, the country is already witnessing the political turmoil of the post-Khomeini era. Khomeini himself gave the signal by telling his fellow countrymen on Aug. 9: "Work as if I am no longer with you." A few days earlier, his mausoleum had been completed in the middle of the "Graveyard of the Martyrs," followed by an emergency meeting of the 61 members of the "Assembly of Experts" whose task will be to unseal the "Ayatollah's" will and appoint his successor.

The 35-minute Aug. 9 radio speech was Khomeini's second political intervention of the year. It was also his first visible political act since early July when he is said to have suffered yet another heart attack. Official confirmation has not been given, but observers have noted that for several weeks, none of the leading Iranian politicians were able to quote him in their speeches. On Aug. 6, Khomeini received Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Moussavi, an event that was witnessed on national television.

Terrorists and obscurantists

Khomeini's reappearance coincides with the public outbreak of a major factional fight in Teheran. It was directly to that issue that Khomeini addressed himself. He denounced recent terrorist actions, such as the hijacking of a French airliner and the mining of the Red Sea, by Iranians. "How can we approve such things which go against the feelings of the world, against Islam and against reason? It is said that Radio Teheran praised the hijackers. This is wrong, the radio cannot say such a thing, it has to be prevented. [These events] are threatening the lives of innocent people."

At a minimum, this was a rebuff to Iranian President Khamenei, who on Aug. 3, a few hours after the release of the French airline passengers, warned Paris and other Western capitals to expect more such incidents.

Khomeini concluded his speech by calling on the Pasdars (Revolutionary Guards) and the armed forces to stay out of politics—"otherwise it will be the end of the Islamic Republic." This is a rebuff of the leaders of the Revolutionary Guards, who have been accused of systematically interfering in military affairs.

Apparently, Khomeini's speech was aimed at shifting the

balance of political power away from the most intransigent elements in the elite known to be associated closely with the Soviet Union: the forces around President Khamenei and his brother, Prime Minister Mir Moussavi, the brains behind the recent wave of Soviet-sponsored Iranian terrorism. It is no coincidence that Iran's denial of responsibility for the mining of the Red Sea came from Moussavi only hours after he had met with Khomeini.

Khomeini is trying to tilt the balance in favor of the forces associated with the powerful speaker of the parliament, Hojatessalam Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who advocates a rapprochement with the West and an end to the Iraq war *as the best means to perpetuate the obscurantist rule of the mullahs in Iran*. Khomeini's main concern is to maintain the uneasy equilibrium of the Islamic Republic in the face of more crises to come.

Rebellion in the army

This has been spectacularly demonstrated in recent weeks, as the army has been hit by a wave of resignations at the highest level. Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Qasem Ali Zahirnezhad, resigned denouncing the "continuous interference of incompetent people in army affairs." Following suit, the commander of the ground forces, Gen. Nasser Rahimi, reportedly wrote Khomeini about the "foolish acts of the demagogues" in Teheran. Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Madhavi-Kani of the "Society of the Militant Clergy" sent a military delegation to Europe last July to meet with former Defense Minister Admiral Madani, now in exile in Paris. As Madani was quick to tell British members of parliament and the press, he was asked to return to mediate the war with Iraq. The same delegation met with other exiles and Western leaders.

The faction fight also erupted during the first sessions of the Iranian parliament, which handed a vote of confidence to Moussavi, and confirmed the appointment of three ministers, notably including the new minister of intelligence, Hojatesalam Mohammed Mohammadi Reyshahri. A former president of the Revolutionary Tribunal and the man who condemned Sadegh Ghotbzadeh to death, Reyshahri's name has been increasingly linked to the Khamenei brothers. However, the parliament then rejected five ministers, including Defense Minister Mohammed Salimi, whose job is mainly concerned with logistics. Hours later, Rafsanjani was himself forced to intervene in support of his opponent Moussavi, as parliamentary members threatened to refuse to confirm other ministers.

Nothing could make clearer that Khomeini's influence is rapidly declining, and with it, Iran's governability.

Iraq has chosen this point to launch a military offensive, bombarding several targets around the Kharg Islands over the past few days. The attacks are a signal that the Soviet Union will not allow a diplomatic settlement of the war. A lasting Gulf war and the disintegration of Iran are Moscow's best guarantee of domination throughout the region.