

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Discontent in Iran

The mullahs have suffered setbacks at the hands of the Iraqis and the Pentagon—the summer could be full of surprises.

After its military breakthrough against Iraq in the Faw peninsula last February, Iran has been dealt two military setbacks of significance in the month of May.

First, while maintaining their artillery barrage against the Iranian Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guard) units now besieged in Faw, the Iraqis successfully crossed into Iran on May 19, seizing the border-town of Mehran. While the town has little strategic importance and was easily taken, the 100 square miles of Iranian territory surrounding it give Baghdad a new maneuvering capability in the face of an anticipated Iranian offensive during Ramadan (mid-May to mid-June).

To date, Iran has launched three separate assaults to recapture Mehran—to no avail.

Immediately less painful, Iran's second setback has longer-term implications. It happened on May 13: The U.S. naval task force in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz intercepted an Iranian coastal vessel as it attempted to board an American cargo ship. Since 1985, Iran has exercised a self-proclaimed right to check civilian vessels which might be carrying cargoes bound for Iraq. In January 1986, when the Iranians first boarded an American vessel, outcries in the United States were quickly quashed by the U.S. State Department, which recognized Iran's action as part of the "rights of a nation at war"!

Therefore, as in the case of the U.S. raid on Tripoli, the May 13 action represented a Pentagon slap in the

face of Foggy Bottom. The Pentagon announced thereafter that all American ships would be accompanied by a military vessel.

On May 16, Iran's President Ayatollah Khamenei announced that the "very presence of American military vessels in the Gulf . . . is an act of war against Iran."

However, the mullahs were too shocked to go for immediate reprisals. Less than two weeks earlier, they had sent to Washington one of their pet "opponents," former Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi. Just before his departure, Yazdi and former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan had been allowed to create a new opposition group: "The Alliance for the Defense of our Liberties and of Iran's National Sovereignty."

Much repression had followed the death of anti-Khomeini Grand Ayatollah Shariat-Madari in late March. Safety valves were needed to prevent his disciples from exploding. Bazargan's new organization was considered "useful" by the ruling mullahs.

Lavishly received by State Department officials, Yazdi transmitted such messages as Iran's extreme concern about its present military situation and its desperate lack of spare parts. Should Washington agree to allow such deliveries, and remain entirely neutral, Teheran would not attempt any destabilizations of the Gulf sheikhdoms.

The May 13 incident was the Pentagon's answer, notwithstanding what State Department officials may have

told Yazdi. Yazdi's message, reportedly drafted by Hojatessalaam Hashemi-Rafsanjani, speaker of the parliament, former Prime Minister Madhavi-Kani, had no credibility in any case. In late March, Hojatessalaam Mohammed Reyshahri, minister for security, had announced the establishment of an "Information and Security College" in Shiraz to train students from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and other Arab countries in intelligence and sabotage warfare.

Intelligence and sabotage warfare may be within Teheran's reach, but it was forced to allow Baghdad's repeated bombardment of Teheran and its suburbs to go unanswered—except for an attempt on an Iraqi oil refinery around Kirkuk.

Iran's spare parts and materiel situation was hit hard by the arrest of Israeli Gen. Avraham Bar-Am and 16 gun-running associates in Bermuda last April. Perhaps as a direct consequence, the Iranian army has been rocked by much unrest, according to several reports.

On a higher level, the officers are opposing the mullahs on strategy. They consider Faw a lost cause—the Pasdarans will be decimated as soon as the ground is dry enough to support Iraqi tanks—and are demanding a central-front offensive targeting Baghdad. The mullahs are concentrating on the south, targeting the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala.

Iran's only good news were unconfirmed reports that Kurdish separatists under the Barzani brothers had scored a victory in northern Iraq—not much compared to the blows inflicted on the Iranians by the Kurdish forces of Ghassemlou. As Iran enters the month of prayer and fast of Ramadan, the mullahs will have time to reflect on their uncertain future. The summer could be full of surprises.