

Persian Gulf war expected to widen

by Thierry Lalevée

By early January, Iran is expected to launch another offensive against Iraq, in the central front around the cities of Qasr-e-Shin and Naft-e-Shar, where several hundred thousand soldiers are being massed. This will be the immediate follow up to the Dec. 24 offensive which enabled the Iranians to seize the Umm al Rassas island in the Shatt al Arab waterway for two days, before being driven out by the Iraqis.

This new military onslaught is extraordinary in several ways. It is the first time in the six-year-old Gulf War that such offensives take place in the middle of winter, under adverse atmospheric conditions which previously had frozen any large-scale ground operations from early November to late February. This year, the conditions are said to be exceptionally good, enabling the Iranians to roll their tanks through marshes which had generally been totally flooded. However, good weather is not the only answer. For the Iranians to cross the Shatt al Arab at this time and attempt to repeat their previous victory when they seized the island of Faw, they had to rely on technology and hardware. Just as an intensive several months repair-work by British engineers had set Iranian Hovercraft into motion for the final assault on Faw, Iran's present military capabilities have the Israelis and the Americans to thank. This was bitterly underlined on Dec. 28 by one of Iraq's allies, Egyptian Defense Minister Abu Ghazala.

Beside the hardware, the number of troops deployed has been significant. The Dec. 24 offensive was no "final offensive," but neither was it a "limited" operation. It involved a very large proportion of the 200,000 Iranian soldiers immediately massed at the Shatt al Arab and in particular the 100,000 new recruits who were paraded through the streets of Teheran in early December. It is also acknowledged that Iraq has killed, wounded, or captured some 10,000 Iranians—not perhaps as many as the 60,000 claimed by Baghdad, but over 10,000. This indicates that the Shatt al Arab offensive has been conceived, not as a limited, testing operation, but as the first offensive of a series.

The roots of the new offensives lie in "Irangate" and its

accompanying feature, Iran's internal fight for the succession to Ayatollah Khomeini. Revelations on U.S.-Iranian negotiations have exacerbated internal tensions. An intensification of the Gulf War is an easy way out, made easier because there has been no fundamental divergences between the so-called moderates around Hojatessalam Hashemi Rafsanjani and the so-called hardliners around Khomeini's potential heir, Ayatollah Montazeri. All have argued in favor of a broadening of the war, and all agree on the need to overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and create an "Islamic republic" in Iraq.

According to reports from Iran, the only force apparently opposed to the present offensive is the army—from a purely technical rather than ideological standpoint. Tensions have grown between the regular armed forces and the Pasdaran (revolutionary guards) led by Commander Mohsen Rezaei. This reportedly led to the Dec. 27 explosion at the Pasdaran's Beheshti garrison in Teheran. Several hundred died when the ammunition depots blew up.

Subversion of the Gulf

However, while it deploys its human waves at Iraq's borders, the leadership in Teheran is pondering the timing for an extension of the war into the Gulf generally. The Dec. 25 opening of a four-day conference in "Solidarity with the Iraqi People," chaired by President Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr al Hakeem of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Republic of Iraq (SAIRI), is revealing. With some 400 members of the ad Da'awa (Islamic Call) Iraqi Shi'ite organization, as its main participants, the conference gathered fanatics from the whole region, especially Lebanon. It was the actual backbone of the Islamic Liberation Movement. Until last October, when he was arrested, the Islamic Liberation Movement had been led by Mehdi Hashemi, an assistant to Ayatollah Montazeri.

The arrest of Hashemi, who headed the committee for "export of revolution," and his brother has not halted the operations of Islamic subversion in the Gulf and the region. The arrests, made by the Rafsanjani clan, were more rooted in personal rivalry than in opposing political views. Hashemi's mistake seems to have been the launching of underground operations in Saudi Arabia, at a time when Rafsanjani was otherwise negotiating with Riyadh through Ayatollah Karroubi of the Foundation of the Martyrs. Rafsanjani considered it an unacceptable interference, and moved to take personal control of the ILM, strengthening his position with the Saudis and other Gulf countries.

Not only was Rafsanjani one of the chairmen of the conference, but there is evidence that he personally approved the Dec. 25 hijacking of an Iraqi jetliner, primarily as a warning to Saudi Arabia. A more concrete signal is expected to be delivered in coming weeks to the small island of Bahrain. From political destabilization of its neighbors, to outright military extension of the war to the Gulf nations more generally, is a small step that most expect Iran to take.