

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Iran prepares an offensive

The tension is building as Teheran mobilizes—and the superpowers negotiate over the region.

Since the Nov. 4 celebrations of the anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Teheran, the war fever in Iran has reached a peak. The ceremonies surrounding the eighth anniversary of the embassy takeover have been the starting point of a nation-wide military mobilization. Officially, this mood is to culminate in a large-scale military offensive against Iraq, of the kind witnessed last winter with the siege of Basrah.

Military intelligence reports indicate that the offensive will involve a four-pronged offensive from the north to the Gulf. The main focal points of attack will again be around the southern Iraqi city of Basrah, and the Kuwaiti island of Bubiyan, which the Iranians suspect is being used by the Iraqis.

On the northern and central fronts, special new units will be deployed; they will be a combination of irregular Kurdish guerrilla forces, and of the newly created "Badr 6 Unit," made up of Iraqi Shi'ites belonging to the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI), and Iraqi prisoners of war forcibly enlisted.

On Nov. 17, SAIRI's chief, Baqr Hakim, announced that his unit would soon include some 100,000 soldiers.

To boost the morale of the population, Iran's daily newspapers are filled with extensive reports of large-scale maneuvers, which are always attended by leading members of the clergy or the government. However, in the case of the "Mohammad" army

corps unit, doubts are growing over whether they are real.

For example, in the space of 48 hours, the press reported maneuvers of that army corps in northern Iran and southeast Iran; no mean achievement considering that this would involve 100,000 soldiers in each case.

Notwithstanding, the military mobilization is there. From Nov. 26 to Dec. 1, a "Baseej" week was organized throughout the country, and several thousand additional training bases were created. In early December, it was announced that, since the Nov. 13 call by Ayatollah Khomeini for a total mobilization, more than 5 million Iranians had volunteered. (That is an admission of failure for those boasted that Iran could gather up to 20 million!

Thus, students as well as schoolchildren have been rounded up once again, and the Iranian media have proudly announced that "mobile school units" in trucks have been sent to the war front. While external intelligence reports confirmed the massing of large armies at Iraq's borders, there are no precise estimates; some are now talking of some 265,000 in southern Iran.

There is no contradiction in the fact that the tension is building at a time of superpower negotiations over the Gulf. The Iranian leadership is itself divided over the question. On Dec. 9, Teheran hailed the U.S.-Soviet negotiations over the region, thinking that it would mean a decrease of the

American military presence in the Gulf. However, on Dec. 1, the daily *Risalat*, which represents the more conservative layers of the clergy, had denounced the Washington negotiations as a "plot against the Iranian revolution," warning that both superpowers would come to an agreement at Iran's expense.

However, all factions are united on the need for a show of strength. How far it will go is a matter of internal debate. While those who hail the summit negotiations will want such an offensive to give Iran a stronger bargaining position before accepting a framework for negotiations, others will want to use it to upset the superpower agreement on the region.

Indicative of that internal debate was the Iranian decision on Nov. 30 to make the kind of deal with France on Lebanese hostages that it has refused to make with either the United States or Britain. Intelligence sources reported that Iran decided to play its "French card," both to break Iran's diplomatic isolation, as well as to develop another entry into the Western world, only weeks before the visit of Iranian Parliament speaker Hashemi-Rafsanjani to Moscow.

Aware of these discussions, Moscow will want to hold careful negotiations with the Iranians. Ready to accept Washington's proposal for a new security council resolution imposing economic and military sanctions against Teheran, Moscow does not want to burn the bridges it has carefully built over the recent period.

In discussions with American officials, Soviet spokesmen have hinted that they could consider getting rid of Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, as a gesture of good will. On the one side, this could be acceptable to the Iranians to begin negotiating. On the other, it would consolidate relations between the Soviet Union and Iran.