



On the Iranian frontline.

Sa'id Sadeghi

# Checkmate in the Gulf War

Ghassan Salameh

**T**he war between Iraq and Iran has let loose a flood of commentary and upset many predictions since it began nearly four years ago. Those who expected another oil crisis were relieved to find an oil glut. Those who anticipated a quick Iraqi victory are now facing the possibility of new Iranian offensives into Iraqi territory. Those who feared an immediate globalization of the conflict have had to revise their prognostications.

To the extent that it began as a religious war, it was gradually transformed into a conventional war between two neighboring states. While there was reason to fear a regionalization or even an internationalization of the conflict, it has proven to be a typical limited war, for

neither side has mobilized all its resources and the involvement of other countries has not been extensive. Finally, though it was launched as a pre-emptive strike, it has become a war of position—even a war of attrition. One state tries to take advantage of the stalemate to bring about the early collapse of its adversary, while the other tries to end the stand-off by provoking outside intervention.

The Iran-Iraq war began as a kind of religious war, in the sense that Iran under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the bearer of a fundamentalist reform that sought the allegiance of all Shi'is—if not all Muslims—starting with the majority Shi'i population of neighboring Iraq. Like many revolutions in their early stages, the Iranian revo-



lution was inclined to go beyond the borders of the state where it began as a means of consolidating its position at home. Tehran, moreover, was not averse to challenging the established states or regimes in the area. This ideological dimension was intensified by two factors: first, the Iranian revolution was essentially led by men of religion rather than by military men or professional politicians; second, Iran could be expected to maintain (by different means, of course) the hegemony it had established in the Gulf region under previous dynasties.

In Iraq as well as Iran, ideology is used to legitimize a despotic or authoritarian regime founded on a revolution or a *coup d'état*. In Iraq, the Ba'athist regime manipulates socialist, modernist and secular concepts like a religion, with its institutions, its pan-Arabist utopia and its "theology." Behind the modernist facade, the pan-Arabist nationalism invoked in Baghdad is heavily influenced by structures like those of any state religion.

### "Trotskyites of Islam"

An intense ideological battle ensued after the fall of the shah. There were daily provocations from the Iranian side. "We are the Trotskyites of Islam," said Ibrahim Yazdi, the first foreign minister of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini put his finger on the Iraqi sin: when Saddam Hussein says "We are Arabs," he means "not Muslims." Bani-Sadr enthusiastically joined the chorus before his fall from grace: "Arab nationalism, like Zionism, is a form of racism." The Iranian media labeled the Iraqi president *kefir*—atheist—or worse, "aflaqi"—after Michel Aflaq, the (Christian) founder of the Ba'ath Party. The Iraqi regime was faithful to its nationalist ideology, portraying the conflict with its neighbor as a new round in the age-old battle between the secular, Persian, Zoroastrian, etc., enemy and the Arab nation as represented by Baghdad, sure to prevail this time. Khomeini was nothing but a "turbanned shah" pursuing Iranian expansionism under the cover of religion.

Baghdad gave varying degrees of support to Iranian groups opposing the "mullahcracy." More importantly, it was counting on the support of the two million Arabs who live in the southern Iranian province of Khuzistan, hoping they would rally to the Iraqi cause in the name of Arabism. Tehran, meanwhile, supported various Iraqi opposition groups, but was primarily interested in the Iraqi Shi'i community, which Tehran expected to revolt against the "artificial state borders" and join the Islamic revolution.

The tension between the two states was aggravated by various assassination attempts, acts of sabotage, border skirmishes and hostile propaganda. This was the situation on the eve of the war and during its first days. The political-ideological conflict clearly overshadowed the territorial question. Despite several ill-considered statements from Baghdad (hastily retracted, often by the same official who made them), neither party was apparently planning to acquire territory by force, as in the Horn of Africa or the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Shatt al-Arab is less a real subject of dispute than a fixation left over from the Ottoman-Persian rivalry, which had taken on a religious coloring in the early sixteenth

century when Iran adopted Twelver Shi'ism. Safavid Iran had weakened the Ottoman position through successive incidents. In 1747, Nadir Shah forcefully annexed the area not long after having recognized Ottoman sovereignty over it. The second Treaty of Erzerum [1847] guaranteed Persian navigation rights and gave Iran the east bank of the Shatt, but the shah at the time claimed the whole of Iraq as an Iranian province. The European powers intervened here, as elsewhere, in the interest of maintaining the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. After the empire was broken up they continued to intervene in favor of the territorial integrity of the states that were carved out of it, particularly the Hashemite monarchies. The Iraqi position was more or less encoded in a 1937 border treaty between the two states, but this did not prevent Iraq from denouncing it in 1959, just when the shah was beginning the process of building his country into the "policeman of the Gulf." Applying pressure on Baghdad by aiding the Kurdish rebels, Tehran obtained the demarcation of the frontier along the *thalweg* line\* in 1975 through the Algiers agreement.

Despite the gradual improvement in the Iranian position, the Shatt was more a matter of symbolic than geostrategic importance. In fact, Tehran had traditionally measured its strength in terms of the balance of power with its Iraqi neighbor. Every additional square kilometer acquired on the Shatt meant an improvement in this balance that could enhance the regime's domestic standing.

Nevertheless, the Shatt and other border territories will in all likelihood be central to any solution. One of the lessons this war has driven home is that in the contemporary international system, nation-states are too well entrenched to be easily displaced by pan-nationalist or religious "transnational" forces. The state generally prevails over the nation, as reality conquers utopia.

### Ideology Succumbs

While the first weeks of the war brought Iraq some success, a number of disturbing facts soon became apparent. The Arab world did not embrace this war as its own. The Gulf states offered financial and logistic support, but wasted no time in forming a closed club, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which did not include Iraq. Syria, Libya, South Yemen and, to a lesser extent, Algeria appeared to lean toward the Iranian side. Morocco offered Iraq verbal support, Sudan and North Yemen promised to send troops, while Jordan actually sent several hundred "volunteers." Egypt was isolated by its treaty with Israel, and its statements in support of Iraq were so obviously motivated by the desire to break out of this isolation that they could not inspire a genuine current of pro-Iraqi sentiment in the Arab world. Despite a certain discreet sympathy, Arab public opinion failed to take up the Iraqi war as a sacred cause like that of the Palestinians. Meanwhile, in Khorramshahr, Arabs of Iranian nationality didn't wait to receive the Iraqi troops as "liberators" but fled the war zone along with the rest of the population.

\*Mid-channel, or the line of greatest depth.



Iran was similarly disappointed, to the extent that the Iraqi Shi'is were seen as a source of potential support. A number of factors worked to frustrate the hopes of the Khomeini regime, including the traditional loyalty of the Iraqi Shi'is, the overwhelming majority of whom are ethnic Arabs. Another factor was Baghdad's skillful combination of bloody repression (the assassination of Ayatollah Bakr al-Sadr) and religious concessions (the renovation of holy places, the distribution of government-produced anti-atheist pamphlets). The Iraqi regime even found more than one Shi'i dignitary to defend it. Also, the Islamic revolution was largely discredited by the bloody power struggle and the fierce repression then taking place in Iran. Finally, Iraqi military setbacks favored the rebirth of patriotic sentiment. An Iraqi dissident described his predicament in these terms: "I would love to see Saddam fall, but it would be a disaster if Iran were to use this to force its own people on Baghdad."

These developments demonstrate the collapse of the ideological factor. In fact, ideology was one of the first victims of the war, along with the simplistic explanations offered by orientalists and apologists for both sides who flatly rejected a political analysis of the conflict in favor of factors peculiar to "the specificity of Shiism." By lasting as long as it has, the war has become "mundane." It now preoccupies specialists in war and politics much more than the "faithful masses." If a militant tone is still being sounded in Iran, it is not coming from the people. Peace and bread are the major concerns of the person in the street. Nowadays the war signifies the failure (and yet the survival) of two regimes facing problems of legitimacy. With the military stalemate, the Iran-Iraq war has gradually come to seem like "a war over nothing."

## Revised Scenarios

When the war began, several observers had predicted the inevitable escalation of the conflict to include other countries in the region or even the intervention of the two superpowers. Both belligerents encouraged this view but it, too, had to be substantially revised.

Such dire expectations were understandable when the war broke out on September 22, 1980. Iran had been occupying three islands since 1971 (the Greater and Lesser Tumbs and Abu Musa) that had belonged to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The new Iranian leaders, beginning with Bani-Sadr, had categorically refused to return them to the UAE. Abetted by certain UAE leaders, notably the shaikh of Ras al-Khaimah, Iraq had made the "recapture" of these islands one of its objectives. According to sources in Abu Dhabi, Iraq was contemplating a helicopter mission staged from UAE territory. But the Saudi "big brother" and Shaikh Zaid, president of the UAE, successfully opposed such close collaboration.

Put on the defensive, Iran could consider several tactics to increase the pressure on the Gulf monarchies, which it criticized for providing Iraq with facilities and condemned as *taghout* (corrupt and unjust). Iran had even threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if it found itself backed into a corner militarily.



Effigies of Saddam Hussein in Tehran.

Randy Goodman

Iran already had many disagreements with the individual GCC states. Oman was supporting Sadat's Egypt and offering bases to the United States. From Iran's point of view, Bahrain was its "fourteenth province." Had it not acquired its independence as a result of international pressure, and did its Sunni *emir* not treat the Shi'i majority like second-class citizens? Dubai and Sharjah were discreet but important transit points for goods being smuggled to the Iranian black market. Half of the merchandise Iraq imported passed through Kuwait. And finally, Saudi Arabia was nothing but a forward base for the American "Great Satan." Apart from all this, could a revolution so confident in its divine inspiration see itself confined to the borders of Iran? Like the October Revolution in the USSR, the young Iranian Revolution apparently needed time before it became resigned to the idea of "Islam in one country."

Iran definitely did not play a passive role. Several times it threatened the Gulf states with retaliation should they get more actively involved in supporting Baghdad. The AWACs dispatched to Saudi Arabia from Washington a few days after the fighting began detected Iranian jets heading for Saudi territory on more than one occasion, notably in January 1983. Much more serious were the Iranian airborne attacks on Kuwaiti territory: goods destined for Iraq were targeted on November 12 and 16, 1980, and June 13,



1981, and the Kuwaiti petroleum installations at Umm al-Aish were attacked on October 1, 1981.

Nevertheless, Tehran could not ignore the American presence in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman, and wanted to maintain its unofficial but longstanding contacts with most of the GCC capitals, in particular Kuwait and Abu Dhabi. Tehran was disturbed by the prospect of increased Arab hostility, and the effect an escalation in the fighting might have on its relations with Pakistan, Turkey and, of course, the West. For these reasons, as well as the need to concentrate its military effort on the Iraqi front, Tehran avoided a confrontation with the GCC states. After the first Iranian success in late 1981, followed by another in June 1982, these states could well begin to fear for their own future. They took a low profile while making diplomatic and possibly even financial overtures to Iran. This tendency toward disengagement has persisted.

## In Iraq's Camp

Several Middle Eastern states outside the Gulf region took a position on the conflict but kept their support within certain bounds. Jordan has been the most open in its support of Iraq, granting it unconditional right of transit through the Red Sea port of Aqaba, sending hundreds of "volunteers" to the front and providing unfailing diplomatic support. But this is not Amman's war, and it is unlikely that Jordan could involve its own troops, even symbolically, without an Israeli or Syrian reaction. The tension along the Syrian-Jordanian border during the first weeks of the war was a clear demonstration of this limitation. Nevertheless, Jordan gained considerably from this war, especially the first phases, when its industry and re-export trade boomed. Later on, Iraq's problems hurt Jordan, reversing many of the earlier benefits.

Egypt at first seemed inhibited by the Camp David agreements and its resulting isolation within the Arab world. As the situation on the ground shifted in favor of Iran, however, Cairo could no longer afford to ignore Baghdad's unofficial appeals. Riyadh was urging Cairo to share the burden: it was a golden opportunity to rejoin the Arab fold. Thus the traffic in Soviet-model (if not Soviet-made) arms, spare parts and ammunition expanded, just when Moscow was reassessing its aid to Iraq prior to the July 1982 turning point. Egyptian strategic interests dictated this move, given that Israel was providing the Iranians with the same service. Cairo also turned a blind eye to the participation of several thousand Egyptian "volunteers" (17,000 according to an Arab diplomatic source in February 1983). Immigrant workers already present in Iraq were sent to the front while Egyptian officers were drawn by a salary seven or eight times what they would receive from their own government. On the diplomatic level, the damage done by Sadat's support for the shah was "repaired" by Mubarak's support for the "threatened Arab brother." Despite numerous "leaks," Egypt probably never considered sending its own troops, although there have been several precedents for this, including the 1961 Kuwait affair and the 1962-67 Yemen war. North Yemen, Sudan, Tunisia and Morocco seem to be allowing their "volunteers" to join the Iraqi ranks.

## Neighbors and Rivals

There were few countries prepared to support Iran. South Yemen leaned in this direction, but not so far as to commit itself. Algeria, despite initial support for Iran, thought better to cultivate its role as a future mediator in the conflict. Far from the battlefield, Libya gave fervent vocal support to Tehran, but it too subsequently moderated its rhetoric.

Two countries have rather unexpectedly found themselves together in the pro-Tehran camp. Since Syria is a neighbor and rival of Iraq, its support for Iran has influenced the progress of the war. The exceptional Baghdad-Damascus honeymoon after the November 1978 Baghdad summit had barely lasted a few months. Preparing for the war and drawing closer to the Saudis, Saddam Hussein put an end to the rapprochement in July 1979. Iraqi-Syrian relations deteriorated to the point that when the war broke out Damascus unequivocally sided with Tehran. In October 1981, without offering any proof, Iraq accused Syria of allowing the Iranians to attack Iraq from Syrian airfields. In April 1982, Damascus closed down the Mosul-Mediterranean oil pipeline. In the spring of 1982 it was revealed that Syria was supplying Iran with substantial quantities of arms, probably including Soviet-made radar. In late January 1983, Iran, Syria and Libya joined in a tripartite declaration of support for Iran and "the progressive Iraqi forces struggling to rid their country of Saddam Hussein." All these provocations could have led to open hostilities, but Iraq knew it could not respond without the risk of opening a Syrian front, while Syria refrained from taking more direct action for fear of provoking a hostile reaction from the Gulf states and the West.\* Damascus seems content to support certain Iraqi opposition groups and to sell Soviet arms to Iran.

Israel has been the main supplier of American-made spare parts to Iran. Only extreme opposition to Arab interests and the adventurism of the Begin-Sharon government can explain Israel's continued support of a country that would theoretically like to see it vanish from the map. Iran's reticence on the question of Israeli assistance was easily challenged by the accumulating details of press reports.\*\* But Israel was also bound by certain limitations. This was not its war, and any intervention would risk dividing the Israeli public and provoking the ire of Washington. Also, Sharon was preparing his own war on targets north of Israel.

## Moscow and Washington

International polarization of the conflict has been much less clear-cut than it has been portrayed. Two extreme interpretations were soon invalidated. According to the first, Moscow was supporting Iraq and therefore

\*Syria was also facing Israel in Lebanon and substantial Muslim Brotherhood opposition at home.

\*\*See *Afrique-Asie*, October 20, 1980; *The Observer*, November 2, 1980; *Die Welt*, November 2, 1980; *The Sunday Times*, July 26, 1981; *Le Figaro*, July 27, 1981; *Haaretz*, August 23, 1981; etc.



Washington would be forced to support Iran in spite of the serious disagreements between them. It was said that Baghdad had been tied to Moscow by a treaty since 1972; that Moscow sought closer relations with the Arab camp, particularly with the Gulf states; that Iran was beyond reach since its leaders knew they couldn't get any closer to the Soviet Union without being swallowed up in its empire; that Moscow feared the repercussions of religious fundamentalism in Soviet Central Asia; that it needed Arab neutrality in the Afghan affair. But this interpretation didn't correspond to the facts: the pro-Soviet countries in the region (Syria, Libya, South Yemen) were siding with Iran; Soviet arms shipments to Iraq had fallen off during the first months of the war, and official Soviet statements seemed restrained.

Neither did the opposite interpretation line up with the facts. The two superpowers were said to have gradually exchanged positions, as had happened in the Horn of Africa, with Washington now supporting Iraq and Moscow supporting Iran. On the Iranian side there were the Arab communist parties and countries friendly to the USSR, and on the Iraqi side there were the pro-Western states like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and of course France, not to mention the consequences of the hostage crisis. But statements from Washington indicate that it has never written off Iran, the most important state in the Gulf. Washington has said it would oppose any partition of Iran or any change in the territorial *status quo*. While American-Iraqi relations have improved somewhat, they could not be called warm. At the same time, Moscow no longer feels threatened by "Iranian reactionary circles with some influence on the Ayatollah."

The Iraqis have asserted from time to time that both superpowers are supporting Iran. The speaker of the Iranian Majlis, Ali Akhbar Hashimi Rafsanjani, claims that the exact opposite is true. What is the true state of affairs? In fact, both are typical non-aligned regimes, founded on a specific, indigenous ideology (Arab or Islamic), circumspect toward the Soviets, intolerant of local communist parties yet ready to condemn American imperialism. Fidel Castro would find little in common with either Saddam Hussein or the Ayatollah, both of whom roundly opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and King Fahd might find it difficult to choose between the religious fanatic and the somber republican. Clearly, the East-West axis does not line up with the Shatt al-Arab.

The conflict would appear to be a no-win situation for the two superpowers, yet both actively seek to benefit from it by improving their positions. Unfortunately for Saddam Hussein, they seem to consider Iran the key state in the region—like Ethiopia in the Horn—by virtue of its size, resources and a strategic position on the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, not to mention its long border with the USSR. At the same time, neither superpower wants to lose access to Iraq or risk offending the "oil monarchies." They would like to avoid a geographic expansion of the conflict and, above all, a clear victory on either side. The undeniable weakening of both Iran and Iraq has not necessarily had negative consequences for the superpowers, since Washington is preoccupied with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, while Moscow may see the situation as ultimately providing better opportunities for local communist parties.



In late 1981, President Seyyid Ali Khamenei and Ground Forces Commander Seyyid Shirazi review military cadets bound for war.

Randy Goodman

One would not want to suggest collusion, but it appears that the conflict has not brought the superpowers into confrontation. The US and USSR seem less interested in the war than in the political trajectory of the two regimes, particularly that of the Iranian regime: closer alignment with either of the two blocs as well as major strategic interests depend on this much more than on the outcome of the war itself. And if the attitude of each regime toward its own communist party is any indication, Iran and Iraq would appear to have gradually resumed their pre-war relationships with the USSR. The dissolution of the Iranian communist party and the arrest of its leaders would seem to reflect a deterioration in Soviet-Iranian relations, while renewed contacts between the Baghdad regime and the leaders of the Iraqi Communist Party would indicate Iraqi acknowledgement of the USSR.

## Strategies Checked

If third parties are reluctant to enter this war, the two adversaries seem incapable of ending it. Iraq's 1980 objectives have been forgotten and Iran's 1982 goals have been compromised. The would-be lightning war was launched in spectacular style, but was followed by an Iranian counteroffensive that threatened to bring Khomeini's troops to the gates of Baghdad. Now the conflict has bogged down into a dreary, static war of position in which victory appears nearly impossible.

It is difficult now to understand Iraqi strategy during the first few weeks of the war. It attacked four targets along a 600-kilometer stretch of the border. Baghdad had attempted to repeat Israel's June 1967 feat by destroying the Iranian Air Force on the ground, but the aircraft had already been moved to underground hangars a few weeks



before the strike. The army and Revolutionary Guards had increased preparedness on the ground, especially after the September 4, 1980 border incidents. Iraqi troop movement was clumsy, hampered by Iranian airborne attacks and held up by the lack of spare parts as much as by the determined resistance in the cities. Advances in the northern sector (Khanaqin) and in the area around Dizful were especially costly.

Baghdad apparently decided to focus its effort on the southern sector in the second week of the war. It made no attempt to move from al-Amarah to Susangard, which would have put it in a position to cut Iran's principal north-south artery and eventually neutralize the Iranian air base at Dizful to the northeast or occupy the major transport center of Ahwaz to the southeast. Instead, it opted for the southern sector where the two cities of Khorramshahr and Abadan lie closer together, and whose petroleum and port installations are extremely important. It was hoping that Iranian Arabs concentrated in the south would cooperate with its invading forces. Baghdad thus exposed a weak point in its strategy: rather than strike at Iran's military capability, Iraq sought to capture valuable bargaining chips for use in future negotiations. This amounted to an Iraqi misperception of Khomeini's temperament and a disregard for the inevitable reinforcement of any revolution faced with external aggression. It took five long weeks to capture Khorramshahr, and the Iraqi offensive did not penetrate Abadan at all. The Iranians put up a fierce fight in the cities: Qasr-i-Shirin in the North, Susangard in the central sector and Khorramshahr in the south checked the Iraqi advance, which couldn't move beyond a line approximately 20 kilometers inside Iranian territory. Having concentrated its efforts on the cities, the Iraqi north-south penetration now came to a halt. Troop performance was mediocre. Moreover, it is incomprehensible why only three or four of Iraq's thirteen divisions were committed to the battle.

The Iranian response was one of determined resistance within and around the border towns, and extensive air strikes mostly against economic targets. With the power struggle at its height in Tehran, the hastily planned Iranian counterattack of January 1981 ended in failure. Almost a year would pass before there was any significant change at the front. In early September 1981, the Iranian 16th and 92nd armored divisions forced the Iraqis to retreat from a number of desert positions. Toward the middle of September, Iraq was forced to pull back its troops west of the Karun River, thus ending its fruitless encirclement of Abadan.

The Iranians continued to mount counteroffensives. Bustan in the central sector was recaptured with the late November 1981 onslaught, while the battle in the north (Sumer and Shah-i-pol) was less decisive. Iran concentrated its efforts in the southern sector during the second half of March 1982, forcing the Iraqi Army to redeploy along a line more or less coinciding with the border. At the end of April it launched a "holy war," retaking Khorramshahr without much difficulty on May 24. In late June 1982 Iraq withdrew from most of the positions it still held in Iranian territory.

The war entered a new stalemate, with offensive and defensive roles reversed. Iran's July 1982 offensive in the

south was inconclusive. Another one in the north in October 1982 improved the Iranian position but failed to break through Iraqi defense lines around Mandali. Weakened by losses in its airforce and artillery, Iran no longer appeared capable of sustaining its effort. It continued to mount impressive "human waves," but they seemed to include fewer and fewer adults. Its only armored infantry division was blocked east of Basra. Troop morale had declined since the recapture of Khorramshahr six months earlier.

The "Muharram" offensive of November 1982, launched in the middle of the rainy season, was intended to interfere with Iraqi troop movement in the al-Amarah area (Maysan) and, if successful, proceed to cut the Baghdad-Basra highway, some 50 kilometers from the Iranian positions. A 300-square kilometer pocket of Iraqi territory was occupied, but Iraq managed to resist the Iranian assault by calling in its Gazelle helicopters. The new Iraqi air superiority was forcing Iran to launch its attacks before dawn. On the ground, Baghdad's arsenal now included some 400 new T-55 tanks and 250 new Polish- and Soviet-made T-72s, Soviet deliveries most likely having resumed four or five months earlier.

The fourth major Iranian offensive, launched in February 1983, was supposed to be "the final and fatal blow to Iraq." Iranian troops were massed on the plains between Dizful and al-Amarah, facing the Iraqi 4th Army under the command of General Hussein Fakhri. This offensive was no more decisive than the preceding ones. Iran managed to occupy a few additional square kilometers at the cost of thousands of casualties.

Despite enormous losses on both sides, Iran's four major offensives did not substantially improve its position. . . . Nevertheless, it has several advantages to counterbalance Iraq's political and financial ability to resupply and even expand its arsenal. Iran has a lengthy coastline on the Gulf and the Arabian Sea, while the Iraqi port of Basra has been closed since the first days of the war. Tehran is hundreds of kilometers from the frontier, while Baghdad is much closer to it. Iran has a 2.5 to 1 advantage in population and, in spite of the bloody power struggle in Tehran, the Iranian regime appears to be more firmly established than its rival, more representative of its people and in a better position to mobilize them.

At the same time, Iranian ascendancy over Iraq would threaten the entire regional *status quo*, something no regional or Western power would be willing to accept. First Iran and now Iraq benefitted from the tendency of the great powers to preserve the territorial integrity of both. Iran's immense size is added protection. Iraq has improved its defense capabilities over the course of the war, but its trump may be the disastrous implications an Iraqi defeat would have for the Arabian Peninsula, the region and the world as a whole.

Right now this deadlock can only be broken if the Iranian regime should feel secure enough to stop using the war as a major factor in mobilizing support for the revolution, and if Iraq can make concessions that will satisfy Iran. Neither seems likely in the near future. The death of Khomeini could trigger a new power struggle in Iran, while the Iraqis seem prepared to make some concessions but not to accept a change in the regime.



## Death Treated Differently

The political deadlock is compounded by a military stalemate, now a war of attrition in which men, materiel, economic potential and foreign reserves are being depleted. Here again Iran has an important advantage: while Tehran assumes full responsibility for the war against the "infidel" and the sacrifices this demands, Baghdad has sought to disguise the cost of the war by doing everything possible to keep the population from feeling its effects on a day to day level. With little confidence in popular support for "Saddam's Qadisiyya," the Iraqi regime attempts to maintain an absurdly normal atmosphere. Even death is treated differently. If Iran's fallen soldiers more or less successfully transcend it through Shi'i martyrdom, in Iraq the family of the deceased is compensated with "gifts" from the government.

This war is all the more tragic because of the abundant resources available to the protagonists to continue it. Somalia and Ethiopia, for example, could never have sustained such an effort. . . .

"All conflicts must eventually come to an end," says the Iraqi president. "This war will end on the day the Iranians understand they will never reach Baghdad." Saddam Hussein is probably right. The way the war is going, the stalemate could be broken if the Iraqi army continues to repel Iranian attacks and refrains from taking any new risks, forcing the Iranian effort to wind down and exhaust itself. Even without an official cease-fire, the situation might then return to the pre-war level, border incidents, sabotage and propaganda wars, with both sides unwilling to risk a new escalation. Attention could then be directed to repairing the enormous devastation of the war and

reinstating development projects. This is one possible direction that does not require any outside intervention.

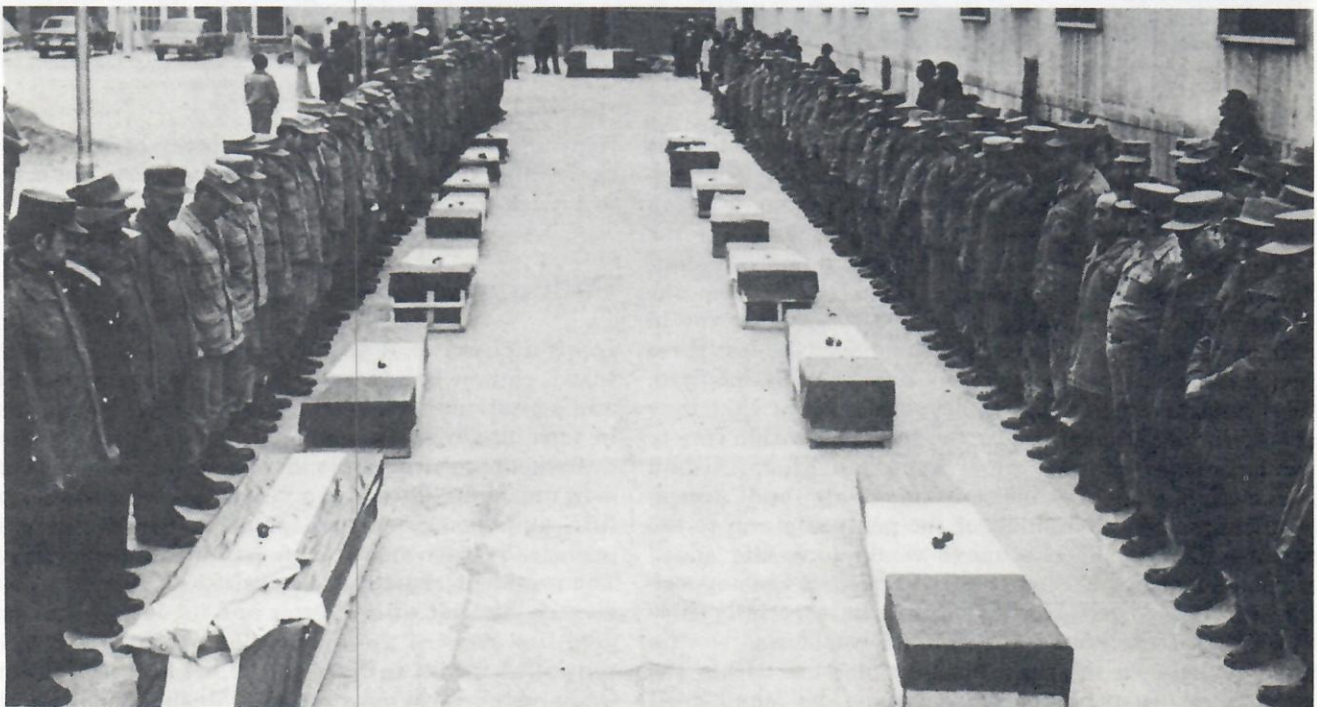
In any case, no solution is likely to be found outside the region, with or without Algerian mediation, with or without a Security Council resolution. A temporary solution would require several things: international observers along the border; possibly some financial compensation to both parties or at least affording them some advantage (such as production quotas or pricing) in an overstocked oil market; and full recognition by both sides that a military victory is impossible in the next two or three years. Aside from this, chances for a solution would be greatly improved if those responsible for this war on both sides were removed from power. But in order for this to succeed, the deposed individual or regime would have to be indirect victims of the war—that is, they would have to be replaced by their fellow citizens and not by foreigners.

For the time being then, Baghdad has clear air superiority and probably naval superiority as well, while Iran still holds the initiative on the ground. It is possible that this delicate balance will lead to a military stalemate and then perhaps to a political solution. This would require the strengthening of both regimes so that they could make peace without losing power. The leaders of both countries would also have to downplay their regional ambitions. If Iraq appears to have made this sacrifice, the same cannot be said for Iran. Western capitals cannot be expected to facilitate this process. The combination of ignorance, indifference, cynicism and opportunism that has frequently characterized their attitude toward the war is not conducive to a political solution, nor will it help to reestablish their own influence in the region. ■

—Translated by Diane James

Funeral in Tehran.

Ibrahim Shateri







**O**stensibly, the war between Iraq and Iran is about boundaries, about freeing the Shatt al-Arab from Persian occupation, about restoring the two Tumb islands and Abu Musa in the Gulf to the Arab nation, and—admittedly always a more distant prospect—liberating Khuzistan (“Arabistan”) from the alien yoke. In fact, Iraq’s decision to start the war in September 1980 was a gamble which, over the last three and a half years, has tragically and horribly misfired. Saddam Hussein and his colleagues thought that they could take advantage of the apparent chaos within Iran to overthrow the government of Ayatollah Khomeini and install in its place a regime more “moderate” and “acceptable” to the ruling families of the peninsula and to the Western powers. Such a move would have the added purpose of stifling the potentially dangerous Shi’i opposition which had been growing within Iraq, especially since the Iranian revolution of 1978-79. It would also elevate Saddam Hussein to a position of leadership within the Arab world. Instead, the Iraqi regime has found itself

fighting an apparently interminable war of attrition which the Iranians seem to have no obvious interest in bringing to a quick end.

## Saddam’s War

Iraq’s decision to go to war, and the course the war has taken, cannot be separated from the political ambitions and limitations of Saddam Hussein. Hussein’s presidency, in turn, has been shaped and defined by the war to an overwhelming degree. Saddam Hussein had been president of Iraq for little over a year when the war began; his fifth anniversary as undisputed leader of the republic precedes by just a month the fourth anniversary of the war. The president, moreover, has seized every opportunity to identify himself with the war and its outcome. From the very first days of the fighting he encouraged the state-controlled media to refer to the conflict as “Saddam’s Qadisiyya,” invoking the Arab Muslim victories of the