

Iran's instability after Shah paved the way for Iraqi attack

by Paul Malone

The clash of arms between Iran and Iraq which escalated in September from prolonged border skirmishing added an ominous new dimension to the Middle Eastern complexities. The destructive warfare on land, air and sea threatens production and delivery of 40 per cent of the non-Communist world's petroleum supplies from the Persian Gulf region. New divisions and tensions were created swiftly in Arabic and Islamic worlds. Although international concern over the presence of Soviet military forces in Afghanistan and the seemingly insoluble Palestinian problem was distracted by fighting in the Persian Gulf, there is concern over the indirect involvement of the super powers providing logistical supplies for the combatants. Meanwhile, the shifting of Iranian military units from the frontier with the Soviet Union to points of confrontation with the Iraqi invaders were reported to have weakened Iranian northern defences.

Inroads into Iranian territory (Iraq established forces on both sides of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway and penetrated several miles into Iranian territory) jeopardized Iranian control of their most important petroleum production facilities. Ground and air attacks on Iranian oil installations and distribution facilities (Abadan and the port city of Khorramshahr) were reported to have inflicted heavy damage in an area vital to Iran's economy. Counter blows on Iraqi territory by Iranian aircraft and saboteurs have been less effective because Iraqi planning ensured major land battles would be fought, at least initially, on Iranian soil.

Efforts by the United Nations, Arabic and other Islamic intermediaries to halt hostilities had been ineffective at the time of writing. Declarations by Iranian leaders of determination to continue fighting as long as Iraqi troops remain on Iranian soil discourage optimism concerning an early cessation of hostilities.

Uncertainty concerning the objective of Iraq in resorting to open warfare underlines the danger of hostil-

ities spreading throughout the Gulf with the consequent interruption of oil exports from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the smaller Emirates, in addition to Iran and Iraq. Downfall of the erratic Khomeini regime in Tehran is undoubtedly one goal. This is a development that would be welcomed by the Gulf states who view the revolutionary turmoil gripping Iran as a contagious threat to their own stability.

The ruthless purges of the Iranian armed forces and the summary executions of officers suspected of loyalty to the regime of the late Shah evidently persuaded Iraqi leaders that the military balance had swung in their favour. The unquestioned superiority enjoyed by Iran under the Shah no longer prevailed. The military domination of the Gulf achieved by Iran following withdrawal of British forces in 1971 came into question with the decline in the efficiency of the Iranian defence establishment. Under these circumstances the Iraqi decision to resort to arms to settle escalating differences with Tehran and to broaden Iraqi influence throughout the Gulf area appear to be understandable if reckless.

Iraqi renunciation of the territorial agreement negotiated with the Shah in 1975 accompanied the outbreak of hostilities. Concentration of the Iraqi invading forces on Iran's Khuzestan province suggests Iraq may intend to deprive Iran of its main oil resources by establishing a separatist government on the basis of the predominantly Arab population in the province. Loss of Khuzestan would deal a crippling blow to the Iranian economy and undermine remaining Iranian influence in the Gulf. Such a disaster would encourage other dissident Iranian minority groups, including those residing in Kurdistan province, to seek independence or autonomy. If Iran is defeated in the war, it would alleviate the difficulties the Iraqi government encounters with its Moslem Shi'ite population who consider Iran the main champion of their faith. Efforts by the revolutionary regime in Iran to export its ideology to the Shi'a faithful incensed the rulers of Iraq who traditionally have been members of the Sunni branch of Islam.

Although the emergence of Iraq as an influential power in the Middle East in contemporary times has

Recently retired after a 37 year career in the Canadian foreign service, Mr. Malone was ambassador to Iran from 1962 until 1967. He was also accredited concurrently as non-resident ambassador to Iraq and Kuwait.