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U.S.-Iranian Deal Could Tilt Balance in Persian Gulf War

Talks Come at Critical Point in Stalemate

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BAGHDAD, Iraq—Recent diplomatic overtures by the United States toward Tehran have coincided with a crucial phase in the grueling six-year-old Persian Gulf war between Iran and Iraq, in the view of analysts here.

As White House envoys reportedly shuttled between Washington and Tehran, the pace of the world's bloodiest and most expensive ongoing war has been speeding up. Strapped for men, money and war materiel, both sides have been forced to make some hard decisions that could affect the outcome of the conflict.

Important developments over the past few months have included the capture by Iran of a significant chunk of Iraqi territory, more aggressive tactics by the Iraqi Air Force, and an unprecedented degree of military mobilization. All this has taken place against a background of political and economic strains on both sides.

"Both Iraq and Iran seem to have reached the conclusion that time is running against them," commented an independent military analyst in Baghdad. "The war cannot be sustained at its present pace indefinitely, so the key question now is which side is going to run out of energy first."

Added a senior western diplomat, "When historians look back and analyze this war, I think they will view the year 1986 as an important turning point."

The make-or-break quality of the present phase of the war makes Washington's reported contacts with Tehran particularly sensitive. American arms supplies to Iran, whose armed forces were equipped with U.S. weaponry under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, could alter the strategic balance of the conflict in Tehran's favor.

Begun in September 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran, the war has pitted the political forces of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism against each other. It has also developed into a personal clash of wills between two very different dictators. Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has vowed to continue the war until Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, is overthrown and put on trial.

After a series of military setbacks, Iraq is now conducting a largely defensive war. The best that Iraqi leaders can realistically hope for is an honorable draw. An Iranian victory, on the other hand, remains a possibility. Such an outcome could help destabilize and ultimately bring down moderate Arab states from Kuwait to Egypt.

The present, more intensive phase of the war dates back to last February, when Iran seized the Faw Peninsula in southern Iraq. The amphibious assault across the Shatt al Arab waterway caught the Iraqi Army by surprise and was a major blow to Iraqi morale. In reply, the Iraqis seized the central Iranian border town of Mehran on May 17 but were forced to give it up less than two months later.

Western analysts here believe that, combined with a growing economic crisis, the losses of Faw and Mehran prompted the Iraqi leadership to rethink its approach to the war. It became clear that it was no longer possible for Iraq to wage a war that sheltered the civilian population from the conflict.

According to Iraqi figures, which are accepted as accurate by western military analysts here, the size of the Iraqi Army has been increased by at least 275,000 soldiers over the past 10 months. This means that well over 1 million Iraqis—60 percent of the eligible male population—are now in active military service.

A similar surge in military manpower has occurred in Iran. Iranian leaders claim to have trained 500

new battalions—roughly 250,000 men—in preparation for their much-vaunted "final offensive." Iran's population of 45 million is three times the size of Iraq's, reflecting a much lower degree of mobilization.

The population difference may be one reason why Iran is more willing than Iraq to put its soldiers into highly dangerous situations. The willingness of poorly educated Iranian Shiite Moslems to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Islamic revolution is also the one clear strategic advantage enjoyed by Tehran. It also may explain why Iraqi leaders appear frightened of incurring large numbers of casualties.

"To put it crudely, the death of an Iranian is not the same in military terms as the death of an Iraqi," said a western military attache in Baghdad. "The Iraqi soldier is better equipped and less easily replaced. The Iraqis cannot afford a kill rate of anything less than 3 to 1."

In order to offset Iran's population advantage, Iraq has been compelled to use its technological superiority. In the past few months Iraq has followed a much more intensive pattern of bombing raids against Iranian military and economic targets. As a result, Iranian oil production is estimated to have plummeted in September and October to below 1 million barrels a day. Some analysts believe the 1-million mark is the level necessary to sustain the Iranian war effort.

"Iraq is paying a heavy price for maintaining a constant state of readiness to withstand a large-scale Iranian attack. It is trying to alter the picture by increasing the economic price of the war for the Iraqis," said a western diplomat here.

The fighting has extended into the Persian Gulf, the outlet for 20 percent of the oil exports to the noncommunist world. Iraq is enforcing an exclusion zone around Kharg Island, Iran's main oil terminal. Iran, for its part, has stepped up its gunboat attacks on tankers headed for Kuwait and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. According to western shipping sources here, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find crews prepared to enter the gulf these days.

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Although the highly publicized Iranian offensive has not yet materialized, both Iraqi and western analysts are convinced that a large-scale Iranian ground attack is inevitable. In order to be effective, the Iranians are being careful about using their ultimate weapon: surprise. Because it is impossible to hide large numbers of soldiers at the front, the Iranians must wait until the enemy relaxes his guard.

Both western and Iraqi military analysts in Baghdad have been expecting an Iranian ground attack since last September. The conventional wisdom until recently was that the offensive would come before the rainy season, which is just beginning. Muddy terrain and heavy cloud cover could, however, favor the Iranians by making it more difficult for the Iraqis to use their tanks and airplanes effectively in the battle.

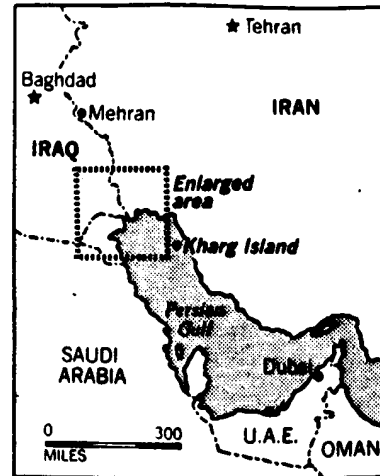
Many observers believe that the Iranians could gain some ground if they launched a large-scale offensive. A major breakthrough, however, seems unlikely given the strength of Iraqi defenses.

Opinions are divided over which country is better placed to sustain a long, drawn-out war. Iraq has huge debts—estimated at about \$50 billion—but it also has vast oil reserves and wealthy friends. Iran has little debt, few friends and a significantly reduced capacity to pump oil.

Iran also has a population that seems more willing than its Iraqi counterpart to endure economic hardship. Gasoline and heating oil rationing, recently introduced in Tehran, is a long way off in Baghdad, however.

The Iraqi hope is that, if an Iranian offensive fails to achieve the desired results, the war will gradually wind down. But Iraqi officials concede that it is likely to drag on in one form or another as long as Khomeini is alive.

"It has become a kind of personal thing with Khomeini," said one well-placed official. "He has toppled the shah. He has humiliated America. That leaves Iraq as his last enemy."



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