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Near East and South Asia Review

31 October 1980

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CONTENTS

Iraq: Stuck in Iran [Redacted] i

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The war with Iran is proving more difficult and protracted than Iraq expected. [Redacted]

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IRAQ: STUCK IN IRAN [redacted]

The war with Iran is proving more difficult and protracted than Iraq expected. Iraqi leaders appear to be redefining victory in a more modest way to help ensure a politically defensible "success," to demonstrate flexibility in contrast to Iran's refusal to negotiate, and to stimulate a political settlement. [redacted]

Iraq's efforts over the last few weeks to strengthen international support for its position have included demarches to countries such as Turkey and India to explore the possibilities for mediation. [redacted]

[redacted] Foreign Minister Hammadi has been less categorical in his recent remarks on ending the fighting. He has denied that Iraq has "conditions"--it is just looking for its "basic rights": restoration of lost territory and freedom from outside interference. [redacted]

[redacted] A protracted war probably was not the original Iraqi plan. It seems to have been forced upon them by miscalculations about Iran's military capability and the willingness of anti-Khomeini forces in Iran to revolt. [redacted]

Dangers of Long War

Despite its superior battlefield position, Baghdad sees several disadvantages in a long war with Iran.

-- Iraq's invasion has initially strengthened, not weakened, Iran's leaders. Iranian exiles have been discredited by their ties to Iraq.

31 October 1980

1
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- Iraq's President Saddam Hussein has failed to win solid Arab backing and has instead split the Arab world along radical-conservative lines. Arabs in both camps see "Saddam's war" as hurting the Palestinian cause. Many of Iraq's conservative supporters do not want an Iraqi victory but simply an end to the fighting. Their support for Iraq will weaken over time, and they will exert pressure on Baghdad to relax its terms for a cease-fire.
- The war has stimulated a larger US presence in the Persian Gulf and a greater willingness of Gulf monarchies to accept a US security role, developments that prewar Iraqi policy had sought to combat.
- Both superpowers appear to be leaning toward support of Iran. Iran's international isolation will be reduced if sanctions are lifted following the release of the hostages. Iraq can expect increased external pressure to settle the conflict as world oil stocks are depleted and oil prices rise.
- The perception of Iraq as the aggressor is likely to intensify over time, damaging Iraq's position in the nonaligned movement.
- Domestically, a prolonged war will disrupt the economy, stimulate plotting against Saddam, set Sunni against Shia, and at a minimum usher in more repression. The political payoff of the conflict seems remote, and the Iraqi military will be tied down in Khuzestan.

In the absence of a dramatic weakening of the government in Iran or its acknowledgment of Iraq's control over the Shatt-al-Arab estuary, Saddam Hussein's options to protracted war will be to soften his terms for settlement or intensify the war in the hope of bringing down the Khomeini government or forcing its capitulation. Mediation and more modest demands appear more attractive, given the uneven performance of the Iraqi military.

31 October 1980

Importance of the Shatt-al-Arab

Iraq, we believe, is flexible on all points except control of the Shatt-al-Arab. The Shatt is the core issue, the crucial variable in judging victory or defeat, and the principal reason for Iraq's launching the war. [redacted]

Two essentially geographic factors undermine Iraqi claims to primacy in the Gulf and leadership of the Arabs. Iraq has no defensible maritime access from the Gulf to its largest port at Basrah, and it cannot protect its access to the Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran can block both, as the current war demonstrates. Iraq's border on the Gulf is about 30 miles wide. It has had to share administration of access to Basrah with Iran, while to the west, Kuwaiti territory dominates the approach to Iraq's other port and naval base at Umm Qasr. Saddam's war was intended to correct this strategic deficiency at Iran's expense while Iran was presumed to be militarily weak and politically isolated. [redacted]

Minimal Demands

Iraq is not likely to negotiate seriously until it takes control of Khorramshahr, Abadan, and thereby, the Shatt-al-Arab. When this occurs, a diplomatic peace offensive is likely--if only to shift diplomatic pressure to Iran. Iraq can repeat its offer to trade Iraqi withdrawal for acknowledgment of its control of the Shatt. [redacted]

We cannot be certain if "control" in Iraq's eyes requires continued occupation of a border strip along the Shatt that includes Khorramshahr and Abadan. [redacted]

[redacted] Baghdad might accept UN supervision of a buffer zone in the Shatt area. Virtually all remaining territory seized by Iraq would be used as bargaining chips. [redacted]

Withdrawal from the area along the Shatt is possible if Saddam sees the international situation turn against him, and if Iran agrees to return the border in the Shatt to the low water mark on the Iranian side. He could ask for UN supervision of a buffer zone. This would wipe out

31 October 1980

SECRET

the provisions of the 1975 accord and is, we believe, Iraq's minimal demand. Saddam has been careful to link Iraqi goals to that accord. Such a compromise would not solve Iraq's basic strategic problem because it would not enlarge Iraq's land access to the Gulf and the Shatt would remain highly vulnerable to Iranian interdiction. [redacted]

Iraqi thinking is not static on the subject of Khuzestan. Baghdad's strategy will be influenced by Iranian behavior. Intransigence could convince Saddam that he has no alternative to long-term occupation of Khuzestan and a war of attrition. [redacted]

31 October 1980

4

SECRET