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Special Analysis

IRAQ:

Prospects for Instability

Discontent in Iraq will intensify if Iran scores a major victory in its expected offensive. Only a major Iranian defeat would be able to revive Iraqi morale.

The Iraqis are weary of the war. They can see no end to the fighting that has cost approximately 450,000 casualties in six years—40,000 so far this year. The losses are starting to strain the ability of Iraq to keep its forces at fighting strength.

Iran's capture of the Iraqi port of Al Faw in February and recapture of the Iranian town of Mehran in July have caused the Iraqis' morale to decline, although the success of Iraq's recent air campaign against Iranian economic targets may have taken some of the sting out of these defeats.

Austerity measures stemming from lower oil revenues are compounding the burden on Iraqi citizens. Rising prices, shortages of consumer goods, and reduced public services have made it more difficult for the regime to sustain support for the war.

These setbacks have led to sharply increased grumbling among civilians and military personnel about President Saddam Husayn's management of the war.

Saddam's firm control of the ruthless security services has nevertheless discouraged direct challenges to his rule.

If Iraq experiences another major battlefield defeat like Al Faw, however, Saddam will face mounting opposition from senior civilian and military officials. At an extraordinary Ba'thist Party congress last summer, critics wrested from him some economic and military decision making powers.

Assassination attempts are also likely to increase if Iraq suffers heavy losses or if Saddam's grip on power is perceived to be weakening.

A significant battlefield victory would raise Iraqi spirits sharply, particularly if it cost few Iraqi lives. If there were no subsequent Iranian preparations for another major offensive, Iraqi enthusiasm would probably last for several weeks or months. Nonetheless, without some sign that the war will end, continuing casualties will eventually take their toll and increase the likelihood of internal instability.

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