

"The War Can Only Hurt American Interests"

The balance of power is shifting in the Persian Gulf, says this authority on politics in the Moslem world, and the U.S. is on the losing end. Who wins? Iraq—emerging as the region's new kingpin—and its backer, Russia.

Q. Dr. Pipes, will the Iranian-Iraqi war benefit or endanger American interests in the Middle East?

A. The war can only hurt American interests.

Any increase in Iraqi power is detrimental to us, in that Iraq is a state with territorial ambitions which will destabilize the area. It has ideas of getting increased oil reserves by taking Khuzestan province. It is determined to bring down the Camp David accords. And it has, I think, long-term hopes of establishing hegemony over the Persian Gulf. So that's one danger: The increase in Iraqi power.

Q. What are the other dangers?

A. A second danger is that the shipment of oil out of the gulf from other countries will be endangered—although this seems to be diminishing. It hasn't happened so far.

There's a danger that the Soviet Union, which is the sponsor of Iraq, will gain prestige internationally in backing the winning side and gain power locally: That is, the Soviet Union would have control over the power that is pre-eminent in the gulf.

Q. Have the Russians made notable gains so far?

A. The Russians now have more leverage over Iraq than they used to. The Iraqis are quickly running out of spare parts and out of ammunition, and the Soviet Union is now in the position either to provide them with replacements or not. Should it choose to do so, the Iraqis will be ever more in the Soviet debt than they were before.

Remember, Iraq has been attempting to leave the Soviet orbit. It voted against the Soviet Union in the U.N. on the Afghan question. It has been trying to buy more and more of its arms and industrial goods from the West. Obviously, no Western country is going to be sending in arms at this point. So if the Soviet Union does supply more weapons, it increases its influence in Iraq.

Q. Longer range, the Soviet Union also improves its position in the area, doesn't it?

A. One can view this as a pincer movement toward the gulf. Last year, we saw the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan. Now a



PAUL NATKIN—PHOTORESERVE

Pipes, 31, a specialist in Middle Eastern and Islamic affairs at the University of Chicago, has studied and traveled extensively in the Middle East. He is writing a book on the role of Islam in global politics and on aftereffects of the '70s oil boom.

Soviet quasi client—Iraq—is expanding territorially and acquiring ever greater military control of the northern part of the gulf; that can only help the Soviet Union.

It threatens our interests. After all, we are the status quo power in the gulf; we can only lose. We—the United States and the Western World—are getting virtually all of the oil

from the gulf. Any change there hurts our interests.

Q. What is the Soviets' long-term goal in that region—to control the gulf?

A. It must be. If the Soviet Union controls the gulf, it has virtual control over the foreign policies of Japan and Western Europe. Should the Soviets want to take control of Western Europe, they probably will not attack it directly. It's much easier for them to get control of the oil. It is—in a way—painless.

The U.S. doesn't need the oil that much; we can survive without it. But Japan and Western Europe are quite dependent on it. They have shown in the past that they're ready to change their policies in order to suit the Arabs who control the oil. So there's every reason to think that they would change their policies for the Russians if the Russians control that oil. Dismemberment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would be one of the first things the Soviets would call for, and this would lead to international isolation of the United States. The stakes are very, very high.

Q. Do you see any way that this war might help to bring the American hostages home any sooner?

A. Anything about the hostages is unpredictable, but I think it will hurt the chances of the hostages being released.

Q. Why?

A. There's a power struggle in Iran between two factions: What we might call the nationalists and the activist Moslems—between Bani-Sadr, who is a Western-educated Iranian nationalist, and Mohammad Beheshti, leader of the Islamic Republican Party.

The hostages are an ace in the hole for the IRP; it's very important in their struggle for control of Iran. If anything, the challenges of the war have made it less likely that the hostages will be freed quickly.

Q. How will the conflict in the area affect the balance of power among the Arabs? Is Iraq about to become the new policeman of the Persian Gulf?

A. The balance of power among the Arabs is up for grabs. Since Egypt signed the Camp David accords and the peace treaty with Israel, it has lost political leverage in the Middle East. It's an open question whether Egypt will continue to be ostracized from Arab politics, but in the meantime, so long as it is, Baghdad has probably the best qualifications to take over: It has the strongest Arab army. It has one of the strongest economies. The country no longer has severe internal problems. It has a fairly substantial population.

As far as becoming policeman of the gulf, that seems quite credible. After the collapse of Iranian military power, there really is nobody else. I don't believe that

the Saudi Arabians have credible military strength. They are spending incredible amounts of money to build up their Army and Air Force. But I'm very skeptical that the Air Force would prove effective, and the Army's not much better. So that leaves the Iraqis, who have the manpower, the money, the ambition.

Q. What effect will the war have on the chances for an Arab-Israeli peace?

A. It's bad for Israel, in that the greater power of Iraq is going to harm the Camp David ac-

cords—the Egyptian-Israeli peace—and will make further steps along that path more difficult for other countries, particularly Syria and Jordan.

Q How will the other Arab countries, especially the conservative regimes in the gulf—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain—accept Iraq's new role? Are they worried about Soviet influence in Baghdad?

A I'm sure they are. As fellow Arabs, they have a preference for the Iraqis over the Iranians. As status quo powers, they favor Iraq over revolutionary Iran.

On the other hand, they are very scared of the Russian presence in Iraq. They are wary of what the Iraqis might do next. After all, Iraq has, on several occasions, threatened to take over Kuwait. Now, if Iraq took Khuzestan and its oil from Iran and then took over Kuwait, it would become the power of the area. Iraq would have a considerable portion of the oil reserves in the gulf, it would have a long shoreline on the gulf, and it would be in a position to dominate the northern half in a way that nobody has until now.

Q Will Iraq become the power in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries that Saudi Arabia has been?

A Part of Saudi Arabia's strength in OPEC is that it has reserves of production; it can always produce more than it has done. That gives the Saudis leverage no other country has. As far as I know, the Iraqis can't do that. Iraqi production, even if it reaches its prewar levels quite quickly, is considerably below Saudi Arabia's—with no room to spare.

Q Will the Saudi Arabians have to make accommodations now because of Iraq's strength?

A I think so. A lot more attention is going to be paid to what the Iraqis want—by the Saudi Arabians, by the Kuwaitis and by all the other small states of the gulf. This will probably be a turning point in the balance of power in the gulf. Perhaps we should see it as one major event lasting from 1978 till about now: A two-year-long transfer of power from Iran to Iraq and, in a sense, from the United States to the Soviet Union.

Q Does Iran have any friends left in the Middle East?

A Yes, it does. Iraq and Syria have been at each other's throats for years. So if Iraq is fighting Iran, then Syria becomes friendly to Iran. And now that Syria is in a so-called union with Libya, the Libyans have to be on the same side as the Syrians.

Certainly, too, many pious, activist Moslems around the world have a great deal of concern for what happens to the revolution in Iran. The Iraqis, to them, are anathema. But these Moslems are not rulers in their countries.

Q Is the regime in Baghdad in any danger at home because of this kind of sympathy for Iran?

A There is some sympathy for Iran, particularly among Iraqis who are Shiite Moslems, which is the sect that rules Iran. But I don't think the opposition is terribly well organized. The Baghdad regime is quite safe from it.

Q Does the war strengthen the hand of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq at home? Or could a failure to score a quick victory and the burning of some Iraqi oil wells trigger a backlash and stir up such groups as the Communists and the Kurds?

A Saddam Hussein's improved standing with the Army will be his major benefit. Hussein is the first Iraqi ruler in some time not to come from the military, and his position has been shaky with the Army. Now, by going to war and presumably winning, he will increase his stature with the armed forces and gain a more secure control over them.

I assume that the Iraqis will think that they won the war with glory. If that's the case, then the destruction of some of their oil-production facilities will seem like a fairly minor sacrifice.

The Communists don't pose enough of a threat to Hussein to make much of any setback. The same thing applies



Abadan, Iran, after a bombing raid. "The Iraqis have the manpower, money, ambition to become policeman of the gulf."

to the Kurds. If this is a military victory over Iran, who are the Kurds now to challenge the Iraqi Army? But so long as the war continues, they can exploit it to make moves of their own.

Q In Iran, does the conflict weaken Khomeini's position?

A The government in Iran is quite solid. It came to power with huge support. Dissent is increasing but apparently still quite minor.

Again, the main struggle is between the two parties that came to power with the revolution. Now, which of them is going to take over is not really a question up to Khomeini. He has opted out of that. He's very old and quite sick at this moment. He can die anytime. He is leaving it to them to fight it out. The future of Iran over the next years will be determined by who wins this struggle.

Q Will Iran's military setbacks start a new round of rebellions by autonomy-seeking minorities, then, such as the Kurds and the Baluchis?

A That seems very likely, yes. This is a severe blow against the central government. It would look like an invitation for these minority groups to assert their own autonomy or possibly even independence.

This is a magnificent opportunity for the Soviet Union to make trouble, too—to agitate, to send arms, to beam radio broadcasts. Iran is right on the Soviet border.

Q Will Iran's military forces be able to deal with any kind of internal problem?

A That depends in part on the resolution of the struggle over power. So far they've done a fairly adequate job. Should they make peace soon with Iraq, even though the Iranian forces have been defeated they still probably can beat the Kurds. But if there are several rebellions at once, it seems unlikely that the Iranian Army would be sufficient to hold on. This could be the beginning of the unraveling of Iran.

Q If you were President of the United States, how would you deal with the Moslem and the Arab worlds in the future?

A The most important thing we could do would be to establish a truly credible military option—to build up either the rapid-deployment force or some other military arm that could truly be counted on in a crisis. We hear a lot of bombast from the President about the Persian Gulf being a critical area, but we have no military strength with which to back that up.

We have to become much more consistent, too. Our signals are not getting across, especially in the gulf. Iraq and Iran don't really know what to make of the United States, and they tend not to pay us much attention.

Q What do you see happening next in the gulf?

A We are learning how terribly volatile this region is. I expect it to become yet more unstable in the future. There are too many arms, too many border disputes and too many detrimental effects of the vast oil wealth. It looks like trouble. □