

Middle East Report by Judith Wyer

Iraq challenges U.S. role

Washington's support for Iran in the Gulf war—and its intermediary—have been publicly named.

Iraq has broken its silence on U.S. support of Iran in the 20-month old Iran-Iraq war, support which includes direct and Israeli-mediated shipments of arms to the Khomeini dictatorship. A Baghdad government spokesman has not only chastised the hypocrisy of the State Department's profession that the United States is neutral in the war, but for the first time has revealed the name of a top Iranian arms dealer in the United States who is under the protection of the same State Department which brokers U.S.-Iran arms transactions.

In a public statement delivered April 30, Iraq's United Nations Press Counselor, Saleh Mukhtar, identified Iranian arms merchant Cyrus Hashemi: "Hashemi established a phony bank as a cover for illegal shipments of heavy weapons being smuggled to Iran . . . and we suspect that he has ties to certain American intelligence agencies."

Mukhtar also issued the strongest statement to date from Iraq condemning the flagrant bias of the U.S. media in favor of Iran. "We have witnessed the news media in the U.S. taking upon itself the task of publishing Iranian stories on the course of the Iran-Iraq war without any scrutinizing of the wild exaggeration and fallacies which have distinguished them." Persistent tales of Iranian victories permeating the U.S. press, Mukhtar charged, are "victories made by the American media." He singled out

the reportage of *New York Times* military reporter Drew Middleton as "calling into question the credibility of his writing as well as the credibility of the *Times*."

On the day Mukhtar issued these statements, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz met in Baghdad with representatives of the Kuwaiti press. He repeated the accusation regarding U.S. sales of American-made arms and spare parts to Iran through Israel.

Aziz went on to announce an improvement in Iraqi-Soviet relations, which had cooled during the war as Moscow opportunistically courted the Khomeini regime. Iraq had hoped that traditionally chilly ties between Iraq and the United States would improve, but the flagrant U.S.-Iran alliance has reduced such hopes.

Aziz outlined the terms of an Iraqi peace plan which his government is prepared to offer to Iran in order to reach a truce in the fighting and negotiate a solution to the conflict. Baghdad says it is willing to accept an Islamic peacekeeping force, make a complete withdrawal from occupied Iranian territories once peace talks begin, and set up an "Islamic committee" to determine the cause of the war.

But the mysterious downing of a jetliner carrying Algerian Foreign Minister Mohammed Ben Yahia on the Iranian-Turkish border May 4 suggests that Iran remains uninterested in peacefully ending the war.

Yahia was carrying a new set of Iraqi proposals for peace talks including details of the plan Aziz had announced. Since Algeria negotiated a solution to the Iran-Iraq conflict over the Shatt al Arab waterway in 1975 and later helped mediate the hostage crisis, it has maintained substantial influence in Iran. Lebanese sources say that the downing of Yahia's jet, which claimed his life and the lives of 12 other top Algerian officials, "could only have been the work of hardliners around Khomeini who want the war to go on." Baghdad dismissed Iran's accusation that Iraq shot down Ben Yahia's plane as "too stupid to respond to," and affirmed the Algerian mediation would continue.

Iraq's peaceful gestures over the last month have been matched by a strong military posture. On April 11, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein announced that the People's Militia on which Iraq has depended would be replaced by regular troops from the Iraqi army and air force.

The April 30-May 2 decisive Iraqi defeat of the second major Iranian offensive in a month reflects Iraq's strengthened military position. Khomeini is reported to be throwing thousands of ill-trained young fighters into a drive to cross the Karun River, a natural barrier protecting Iraqi forces in the oil-producing region of Khuzistan, and eventually to penetrate Iraqi territory.

And the *Wall Street Journal* reported May 5 that Iran is hiring Libyan terrorists to destroy Iraq's last pipeline through Turkey. *Middle East Reports* says that the United States is preparing another purchase of oil from Iran, a move in fact arranged by Secretary Haig.