

Will Iran's mullahs survive the summer?

by Thierry Lalevéé

Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran is facing what is probably its most serious crisis since its creation in February 1979. Isolated internationally as never before, even during the 1979-80 hostage crisis, Iran now faces serious problems on numerous fronts: the inability to mount a new and successful offensive against Iraq, and an internal economic crisis of disastrous proportions.

At the root of both problems has been Iraq's successful targeting of the Iranian oil terminal in the Kharg Islands, which for several months has prevented any significant exports of Iranian oil. Although a cease-fire between Iraq and Iran was reached on June 12 and is so far being respected, at least in the Gulf, few companies are yet daring to buy Iranian oil. Japan remains the only steady client, but has made no secret of its intent to buy elsewhere as soon as it can. Iran is left with \$5-\$6 billion in rapidly diminishing foreign reserves and \$6-\$10 billion in debts to various governments and companies.

What 'final offensive'?

Iran's troubles are compounded by an effective international boycott on the sale of weapons to Iran which has driven prices of weaponry through the ceiling. Selling weapons to Iran at all has become a very risky business for most dealers. Whatever the price Iran's religious and military officials can offer, they still end up with weapons of lesser quality than the Iraqis have. No one is interested in selling to Iran jet fighters of the Super-Etendard, MiG or Mirage quality, which Iraq has in abundance from France and the Soviet Union. Even the Soviet Union decided recently that its best bet for exercising control over Iran was to tell its East-bloc allies to keep the mullahs on a short leash by not selling them too many weapons. At most, spare parts will be sold to Iran, to maintain its 50 or 60 remaining jet fighters (Iraq has more than 300). With such a limited air cover, even the half-million-man human wave Iran planned to unleash against Iraq has little, if any, chance to break through the Iraqi lines. Iraq has artillery, tanks, jet fighters, as well as bombs—including some 5,000 cluster bombs delivered from Chile, whose effects on a human wave would be horrendous.

The mullahs boasted after the last unsuccessful offensive in March that the next one would be the "final and successful offensive." Certainly they cannot afford another failure, but can they afford to have several hundred thousand increasingly restive volunteers waiting on the southern front, under the increasing heat of summer? To boost the morale of the troops, radio and newspaper accounts daily describe the supposedly joyful throngs of volunteers going to the front. Few, in fact, ever reach it. To lessen the logistical problems of feeding such a massed army during the religious fasting month of Ramadan, most volunteers are sent to training camps all over the country, then paraded from one city to another. President Khomeini's speech on June 20 in front of some 4,000 volunteers gave a hint of the predicament of the leadership; instead of trying to mobilize the troops for battle, he declared that "we do not go around looking for wars. . . . Nobody should think that we want war." He did not omit the ritual call for the overthrow of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, but the spirit of conviction was lacking.

Most of Iran's population is now preoccupied with the economic crisis and particularly the food shortages. The official distribution of meat, according to the latest reports, allocates no more than half a chicken per family per month! This means starvation for many; for those few who still have a job, it means going to the black market controlled by the mullahs and the revolutionary guards to buy food at astronomical prices. The situation may be kept under control for a time, especially during Ramadan, but there is no change in sight.

The crisis has resulted in desperate political infighting among the top layers of the mullaharchy. On one side are the military leaders who think that an attack against Iraq's Kurdistan could be more fruitful than an offensive in the south; opposing them are the mullahs who want to "liberate" the Iraqi Shi'ite city of Kerbala above all other considerations. The Army is also seeking to reestablish the leadership it had over the revolutionary guards (Pasdarans), before the recent creation of a "Ministry of Pasdarans" led by Hojjesislam Hashemi-Rafiqdust. And though none among the military are saying so publicly, some are secretly advocating an end to the war. The anticipated death of Khomeini has become a lively subject of discussion, as the senile dictator is kept alive by Swiss doctors who give him perhaps five hours a week of lucidity. Khomeini's official successor is the equally senile Ayatollah Montazeri, but there are signs that the real successor will be Speaker of the Parliament Hoj. Rafsanjani, a mullah known for his opportunism who has maintained intelligence contacts with both Israel and the United States, through his export/import business.

Rafsanjani is widely viewed as the mullah who could end the war while maintaining the structures of the Islamic Republic. To do so, he will have to act soon. Otherwise, the present crises provides the best ammunition yet to deal the mullahs a final blow—if Iran's true patriotic forces can seize the chance.