

Developments in the Gulf*

PROF A H H ABIDI

INTRODUCTION

Prof. A.H.H. Abidi of the Jawaharlal Nehru University who had recently visited Iran delivered a lecture for the USI of India in Room 129 D, South Block on 19 May 1988. The function was chaired by VCOAS and was attended by a number of serving and retired officers of the three Services.

Prof. Abidi commenced his lecture by expressing his gratitude to the USI of India for giving him a chance once again to address its distinguished members. Prof. Abidi said that the Services may hold a particular view point on a conflict such as the one raging between Iran and Iraq. He stated at the outset that if he is not able to analyse the problem purely from a military or strategic point of view, he may be pardoned, because although these dimensions are important, there are other equally important angles to it.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Prof. Abidi said that the ongoing Iran-Iraq war which is also referred to as the Tanker War in the recent months has had an aggregation of military forces assembled at the instance of the United States. Attacks on merchant and oil carrying ships in the region and the use of missiles of all kinds have set in motion a new kind of warfare. The developments in the Gulf are the outcome of a deep-rooted conflict for which more than one nation, particularly the Super Powers, are responsible.

FACTORS BEHIND THE CONFLICT

Basically, two important milestones in recent history have led to the present state of affairs in the Gulf, namely, the British decision to withdraw from East of the Suez by the end of 1971, and the revolution in Iran in 1979.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

The total body of waters in the Persian Gulf covers an area of 97,000 square miles. Its length is approximately 500 miles whereas the width varies between 180 miles where it is the widest and 21 miles where it is the narrowest. The depth of water is not more than 40 meters.

The eight littoral states, including Iran and Iraq, produce 2/3rd of the non-Comunist world's oil while 3/4th of the world's proven oil reserves are believed to lie underneath in this region. The Gulf thus naturally becomes the world's potentially explosive point.

* Being a talk delivered by Prof. A.H.H. Abidi to the members of the U.S.I. on 19 May, 1988.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

The situation obtaining in the Gulf in the wake of the British declaration to withdraw from East of the Suez, in singular terms, amounted to the grant of independence to the erstwhile Protectorates in the Gulf. Simultaneously, there was an element of nervousness in terms of security. There was also jockeying for position and influence by the three relatively ambitious and powerful governments of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Finally, the Super Powers too had their strategic and political stakes and interests in the Gulf. All these variables created a complex situation.

While the above was happening, the Shah of Iran embarked upon an ambitious programme of building up his country. Belonging to an ancient civilisation, he naturally had a superiority complex in comparison to that of the other Gulf States. Iran is undoubtedly the most important country in the region in terms of its location, size, population, resources and infrastructure. The Shah spelt out his policy that after the British withdrew, the security of the countries in the region should be looked after by themselves. For this purpose, he was duly armed and equipped by the US. Consequently, for most part of 1970's, the American interests in the region were looked after by Iran. The new policy of American involvement in the region, better known as the Nixon Doctrine, envisaged the decentralisation of American control in which the American influence would be looked after by its surrogates.

SAUDI ARABIA - THE SECOND FIDDLE

The other aspirant, Saudi Arabia, was also in the good books of the United States. The Saudi kings had all along carried a sort of suspicion towards the Shah. However, as long as the Shah was there, the Saudis had to play the second fiddle.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAQ

After the July 1958 revolution, Iraq was transformed from a moderate monarchical to a radical republican state. Along with this qualitative change, its pro-Western stance also showed a shift towards a pro-Soviet policy. The Ba'athist regime adopted a strong anti-imperialist, radical and socialist posture. It thus found itself at odds with other littoral states of the Gulf.

Ever since the 16th century, there has been a traditional rivalry between Iran and the rulers of the area which was formally constituted into the state of Iraq in the Post-World War I settlement. The pendulum of power has often swung from one side to the other. The main reasons for this have been the geographical factors, demographic realities, existing regimes, external linkages and the Shi'i-Sunni divide in the two countries. After the 1958 revolution, when a systemic shift from monarchy occurred in Baghdad, Iran

felt threatened by the radicalism in its neighbourhood. So, in order to buttress and safeguard itself, Iran increasingly clung to the United States.

THE SHI'I-SUNNI DIVIDE

The Shi'i-Sunni divide should, however, not be mistaken as being the root cause for this conflict. It is on record that the sizeable Shi'i population in the Gulf countries is not monolithically attached to the Iranian cause. The following statistics are important and relevant:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Percentage of Shi'i</i>
(a) Kuwait	30 - 40%
(b) Bahrain	75%
(c) Abu Dhabi	20%
(d) Dubai	30%
(e) Qatar	20%
(f) Oman	50%

(10% of the Indian Muslims are Shi'is who are divided into two groups. The majority group, however, is believed to be averse to Khomeini).

REVOLUTION IN IRAN

The above fluid condition continued to prevail upto the second milestone, i.e., upto 1978-79 when the revolution in Iran reached its crescendo. It erupted on a certain platform as a result of certain mundane factors, but it deviated because of certain specific factors within Iran which brought it to its present form, that is, the transformation of the revolution from the Iranian to the Islamic. This is the crux of the problem. It is fiercely anti-imperialist, anti-US, and anti-Soviet. An interesting feature of this revolution is that, unlike all the revolutions in recent history, Iran stands out as the lone example wherein the new regime adopted a hostile posture towards both the Super Powers at the same time.

The regime in Iran is fanatically religious, anti-exploitationist, anti-imperialist and anti-Communist. In spite of this, there has been a constant effort and competition among the Western and Eastern Powers to woo the regime in Iran. Very recently, President Mitterand directed his new Prime Minister to normalize France's relations with Iran. In spite of rupture in diplomatic relations, the United States maintained its surreptitious links with the Iranian leadership and that was exposed during the recent arms deal. In a low profile, the United Kingdom was keen to keep up its precarious relations with Iran. The Soviet Union, although repeatedly snubbed, maintained equanimity in cultivating the Iranians.

The regime of the mullahs has belied the forecast and expectations of the political analyst and observers by turning out to be not merely men from the

mosque, but also being extremely pragmatic and increasingly aware of the importance of subtle diplomacy. During my recent visit to Mashhad, I was myself surprised to find in an Institute's library meant for the religious scholars, books on subjects such as international law, psychology, military science and principles of diplomacy. Apart from religious discipline, the clerics are taught courses in the above subjects. They have thus succeeded in showing their determination to deal with the United States and the Soviet Union on their terms. Along with enmity, they have indulged in serious diplomacy, trade and commerce with the same countries. Iran is playing the same game with the Big Powers which they had played with the developing countries during their hey days of imperialism.

THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The Iran-Iraq war has caused intense debate within Iran and it has lingered. The present orientation towards Islamisation could have been arrested by the Iranians themselves had the debate on it continued. It was interrupted by the Iraqi invasion in September 1980. On the Iraqi side, President Saddam Husain under-estimated the Iranian capacity and capability to fight a sustained war. Iran, on the other hand, has maintained high morale throughout this conflict. Last year, in the midst of the attacks on each other, I myself saw no curfews and no restrictions on movement in the Iranian cities. One can move about freely even late at night. The shops were full of consumer goods and edibles, and obviously, the Iranian morale has remained steady throughout. Shortly after the passage of the Resolution 598 by the Security Council on 20 July last year, although the US built up its Sixth Fleet and began to pressurise Iran, the Iranians could not be cowed down.

Having failed in their military adventure, the Iraqis thought of different devices - one of them was to strangulate Iran by involving the other countries in the region and outside. The US fell prey to this and actively assisted Iraq which resorted to bombing of ships and tankers. It is to Iran's credit that though the war has been raging for nearly eight years, whereas the Iraqi economy is in a mess and it is sustained on external subventions, Iran has not asked for a single loan from any country. The Iranians have fought all by themselves and have not had to recruit mercenaries from outside to assist them. It only goes to prove that Iran has had the will to fight and has maintained its high morale. This high morale is evident when the recruiting teams visit villages from time to time - both the young and the old alike volunteer for service on the front. However, one could decipher traces of war weariness in a considerable segment of population.

The concept of 'Shahadat' (martyrdom) which prevails in every mind in Iran is somewhat difficult to explain. In a way, it may be considered irrational. It is the craving and love for death in pursuance of an emotional attach-

ment to a spiritual cause. Thus killed the person attains immortality!

It is very much in our interest to see that the Iranian regime continues to stay although in a moderate form and is able to withstand the American pressure. If Iran completely falls under the US pressure, it is likely to have a fall-out effect on India.

SUPER POWER RIVALRY

Both the Super Powers want to befriend Iran. From November 1979 onwards if we compare the respective positions of the two Super Powers in Iran, one can clearly say that the Soviet Union has an apparent edge over the United States in the sense that whereas the former has continued to have its diplomatic presence in Tehran, the latter is directly absent but its interests are taken care of by the Swiss Embassy. Whereas the trade with the Soviet Union is open and direct, it is indirect through third parties with the United States.

Moreover, in Iran one can find a group of leadership which is pro-American and another pro-Soviet. Though publicly the Iranian leaders may call names to the Americans, they have been carrying out effective behind-the-scene negotiations with them on a variety of subjects. The pro-Soviet lobby consists of the President and the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of the Majlis (Parliament) is widely believed to be moderate and inclined towards the United States. This polarisation has added an interesting dimension to the leadership provided by Khomeini who has on occasions tilted towards the Speaker.

Though normal relations can be established between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran in no time, the main hitch has been the nature of such relationship and the **quid pro quo**. The US has not been prepared to relent on certain demands that Iran has been putting forth.

POLARISATION IN THE GULF

If the British military withdrawal in 1971 made the Persian Gulf a new focal point in international relations, the revolution in Iran in 1979 precipitated a new situation. Polarisation took place mainly because of the revolutionary Islamic thrust emanating from Tehran. It was perceived as a major threat to the existing socio-political systems in all the neighbouring states of Iran. The reactions of their governments varied. The Ba'athist government of Iraq found itself in a direct ideological confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The pendulum of power had swung in favour of Iraq and it decided to settle its unresolved problem of a segment of its border with Iran as well as to challenge, and if possible to topple, the clerical regime in Tehran. That triggered off the protracted war between the two countries.

As for the reactions of the lower Arab states of the Gulf to the twin problems - revolution in Iran, and the Iran-Iraq war - one could find a cautious wariness of varying shades. Although sceptical of the religious-revolutionary thrust of Iran, the governments of these states hesitated to antagonise Iran beyond a certain point. They were equally wary, rather fearful of the Ba'athist radicalism of Iraq. As war progressed, this radicalism was considerably watered down and Iraq made friendly gestures in the name of Arabism for the sake of confronting the commonly perceived threat from Iran. The responses of the Gulf regimes were, by and large, equivocal although Saudi Arabia and Kuwait offered considerable political and material support to Iraq. Over a period of time, other Arab Littoral states except the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became more pronounced in their backing to Iraq. However, this switch did not obliterate their latent fear of Ba'athist Iraq. This was evident in their regional defensive grouping in 1981 into the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) from which Iraq was kept out. It was their common endeavour to meet the immediate threat which was perceived to come from Iran and it took care of Iraq as well. The GCC also made its infructuous bids to mediate between Iran and Iraq.

Ever since its military offensive in September 1980 Iraq tried to involve other states in its conflict with Iran. It finally succeeded in its objective in the recent couple of years particularly in the wake of the 'Tanker War'. Thereafter, relations between Iran on the one hand and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia on the other soured and the Kuwaiti and Saudi support to Iraq became total. In the meanwhile, the US also got involved more directly. Thus, at the moment, Iran is under unprecedented pressure and finds herself isolated in the region.

West Asian countries, particularly those of the Gulf, have bought more than half of the arms ever bought by the Third World countries. The defence spending in the eight Gulf states which was estimated at worth 84 million dollars in 1971 shot up to 838 billion dollars in 1981. The latest position is that Iran and Iraq are spending over 10 billion dollars per years on arms purchases. Iran alone has been receiving arms from as many 48 different countries. This is big business and a very clever way of re-cycling the petrodollars. Therefore, why should any country involved in the business be really interested in stopping this lucrative war?

CONCLUSION

How long will this war continue? This is a legitimate and perennial question. In spite of heavy losses suffered by both the combating countries the present stance of the two governments does not give any hope of early cooling off. Iran is more sanguine and that is evident in its slogan: "**Jang, Jang, ta Piroozi**" (War, War, till Victory). Pessimism is caused by two factors:

(a) *Domestic*: On both sides, the two regimes have taken extreme positions and they have raised the expectations of the people to such a high pitch that unless they clearly demonstrate something approaching the declared objective they find it difficult to terminate the war.

(b) *External*: Owing to immense profits from arms sales none of the major Powers who are also the arms suppliers seem really interested in bringing about a peaceful settlement.

However, at the domestic level, pressure may build up due to war weariness caused by economic difficulties and a realisation in a segment of the population, particularly in Iran, of the futility of continuing the war which it can not win outright. The expatriate Iranians have pressed it for years but a significant development in this respect came to the surface in late 1986 when a political party, the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI) refuted on religious grounds Khomeini's thesis for continuing the war and it spearheaded the movement within Iran to stop the war. This seemed to have made an impact on the leadership.*

* Iran and Iraq accepted an immediate cease-fire on July 20.