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Iran-Iraq: a reactionary war on both sides

The Third World's first total war

The Iran/Iraq war is now into its eighth year. It is a bloody barbarous and reactionary conflict, yet many on the left still hold illusions in Khomeini's reactionary regime and its 'anti-imperialism'. Clive Bradley looks at the issues.

The Gulf War began as long ago as September 1980. It has proved to be one of the most gruesome and barbarous episodes in the history of civilisation.

Recent newspaper headlines focused on skirmishes between American and Iranian military forces, and the cold-blooded American attack on an Iranian oil platform. Less publicity went to the Iraqi Kurds in the area of Halabja who suffered perhaps 4000 deaths as a result of an Iraqi attack that employed chemical weapons. The Kurds are already describing Halabja as 'our Hiroshima'.

The 'war of the cities', in which Iraqi and Iranian governments blitz each other's civilian populations with missile attacks goes on while the governments of foreign great powers have shed their usual crocodile tears. They, of course, supply the missiles.

The huge and growing American naval presence (backed, rather half-heartedly, by other Western governments like the British) adds another reactionary ingredient into the bubbling cauldron of wasted lives, mutilated bodies and devastated homes. That sections of the left internationally, like the British Socialist Workers Party, have as a result recently discovered a progressive element in the abomination of a regime enthroned in Tehran is a measure of the political tasks facing Marxists inside and outside Iran. All parties to this conflict are disgusting monstrosities — the Iraqi and Iranian regimes and their open and covert supporters like the US and the USSR.

The war began as a gambit by the Ba'thist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Believing the Khomeini government to be weak following the revolution of 1979, particularly in the military sphere, Saddam Hussein abrogated a treaty signed with the Shah in 1975 concerning the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and invaded Iran. The objective of the Ba'th was to remove Khomeini, strike a blow at the spreading 'Islamic revolution', establish Iraq as the dominant power in the region, and fulfill some of the dreams of pan-Arab nationalism.

They miscalculated disastrously, and instead of a quick victory produced an eternal bloodthirsty standoff. The Gulf war has been the Third World's first 'total war' — deeply militarising both societies, inculcating ideologies of mind-numbing violence and resulting in terrible suffering. Estimated deaths include 300,000 Iranians and 100,000 Iraqis, perhaps more, with as many wounded. At least one and a half million people have been turned into refugees, mostly from the Iranian cities of Khuzestan.

The Iraqi regime is the indirect product of the 1958 revolution that overthrew the pro-British monarchy. The faction of the Ba'th party that took power in 1968 was the murderous opponent of the radical nationalist government of 1958. But the Iraq they rule over is very much the child of the revolution.

And the 'revolutionary' anti-imperialist

The Islamic revival

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979 Islamic fundamentalism has been on the rise.

Old-style secular nationalists have been challenged and in some cases supplanted by Islamic militants.

Fundamentalists drove Israel out of Lebanon; some reckon it will be fundamentalists who will drive Israel out of the occupied territories. Fundamentalists killed Egypt's president Sadat. Fundamentalists, of course, are the dominant force fighting the USSR in Afghanistan.

But who are they? What do they represent? Are they a force for progress or reaction?

In fact the last decade has seen a *revival* of fundamentalism, rather than a birth, inspired largely by Khomeini. Khomeinism represents, at least in theory, a very definite political project, which is worth looking at.

Most Iranian Muslims are Shi'ites, as opposed to mainstream Sunnis. Often Shi'ism has been the sect adhered to by more dispossessed sections of Middle Eastern societies, and even in Iran where this is not so, Shi'ism is an ideology well tuned to movements of resistance and rebellion.

Shi'ism holds that no earthly government can claim any legitimacy until the return of the hidden 'twelfth Imam'. Therefore, resistance is not only justified, but necessary.

Khomeini in fact performed a neat trick with this ideology in order to justify the formation of an Islamic government. Such a government could rule in the name of God, through the section of society — the top clergy — who understood God's law. Thus the political programme of Khomeini was and is for rule by *theocracy*. In distinction to most political theories elsewhere, the Islamic republic does not vest sovereignty in 'the people' even theoretically.

Power is in the hands of 'God' — i.e. the mullahs. So all of society must be subordinated to God — i.e. the state.

Khomeini's political Shi'ism thus brought his thinking in line with the older tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, or 'Ikhwan', founded in Sunni Egypt in 1928. They too aim for an Islamic government (and holy war, or *jihad*, to achieve it). And their political system too would be 'totalitarian'.

There are differences between militant Sunnism and militant Shi'ism: the latter has more of a tradition of revolt and 'fanaticism' to draw on. But the new fundamentalism seems to represent a convergence between the two.

The Ikhwan is a sizeable force in Egypt and Sudan, and progenitor of various fundamentalist groups in Egypt and Gaza today, has a clearly reactionary programme echoed today by Khomeini.

On women, they had a slogan 'communism equals atheism equals the liberation of women'. Muhammed al-Ghazali, an Ikhwan ideologist, advocated an economic system modelled on "fascist Italy...Nazi Germany, and [that] still in force in Britain, (that is, state intervention)."

Politically opportunist, the Brotherhood supported first King Faruq (who said, with the agreement of the Brotherhood's leader, "since the British will soon leave Egypt, our only enemy now is communism") and then Nasser, although later Nasser repressed them severely,

driving them underground.

Other fundamentalists are less inclined to 'realpolitik'. These words of Mustafa Chukri, a leader of one of Egypt's more prominent groups today, give something of an idea of their ideology.

"God be praised. He will prepare the land for the group of the just by provoking a war between the two great powers, Russia and America...The war is inevitable; they will destroy each other. God will thus have prepared the land for the Islamic state and the society that follows the right path. Following the destruction of the two great powers in the Third World War, the forces of the Muslim nation will be about equal in number to those of its enemies. It is then that the true Jihad will start." (quoted in Ghali Shoukri, 'Portrait of a President', p.296.)

To understand the resurgence of this fundamentalism, it is necessary to understand the failure of secular nationalism.

The post-war period saw a great rise of nationalist movements across the Middle East. Nasser in Egypt, Mossadeg in Iran, represented this new assertiveness of rising bourgeois classes.

In different ways, these movements came to grief. Nasserism, the dominant form of Arab radicalism in the late 'fifties and 'sixties, was smashed to bits in the June war of 1967. A rightward shift was accelerated, leading eventually to Sadat's 'opening' — the warm encouragement of foreign capital and trade.

Mossadeg, of course, was toppled by the CIA. And secular nationalists failed to mount a challenge to the Shah. In particular, the Communist (Tudeh) Party discredited itself by its role in that period.

Disillusionment with the secular nationalist dream was accompanied by huge social and economic changes, exacerbated by the 'oil economy' of the 1970s. Poverty went hand in hand not only with wealth, but with *Western* symbols of it. The 'Coca Cola-isation' of society took place.

The traditional nationalists had no answer at all to the terrible sufferings endured by the masses of the Middle East. Islam seemed to be an answer — a rejection both of the West and of the East ('communism') in the name of a *return to the past*. The symbols of the radical anti-imperialist *recent past* were in tatters. But the symbols of Islam were intact.

Lebanon is the clearest example of this process of Islamisation through despair. Since the mid-'70s, Lebanese society has undergone unbelievable torment, indeed 'society' barely existed for whole periods. Instead there was a kind of social atrophy. The Shi'ite youth have *literally* nothing to lose. Islam — which includes a commitment to martyrdom — gives them hope.

It is worth adding that in some cases — Egypt, the Israeli-occupied territories — the fundamentalists were 'used' by the authorities, in the early stages, and then got out of control: Sadat helped his own assassins on their way. After a period of official patronage as a counterweight to the left, they developed their own dynamic. In the case of Egypt, this has forced the government to introduce more and more 'Islamic laws' — bad news for everyone, but especially the large Christian minority.

posture of Saddam Hussein's regime — expressed through widespread nationalisations, including of the vital oil industry, anti-Americanism and good relations with the USSR — encouraged the Communist Party (who missed their chance in 1958 despite extremely favourable conditions) to join in the government until predictably it turned on them. Like its counterpart across the border, the Iraqi regime draws its legitimacy from a revolution and a revolutionary tradition.

By 1980 the Ba'th had established a totalitarian system of a scale unprecedented in the Third World. One million people, out of a population of 13-15 million, were party members. The whole of society was policed with Stalinist-type ruthlessness. Opposition was all but obliterated — except amongst the viciously persecuted Kurdish minority, and among religious sectors.

It was the threat of Khomeini's revolution influencing the Shi'ite Muslims in Iraq — believed to be a majority of the population — that particularly gave political urgency to Saddam's military gamble.

Iran's recent history is better known. Khomeini came to power in a revolution that had mobilised virtually the whole of society against the Shah. But upon taking power Khomeini and the dominant clerical militants set about creating an 'Islamic republic' through systematic suppression of women, national and religious minorities, the working class, the left and 'counter-revolutionaries' of all stripes. The Islamic republic turned out to be the most barbaric government of recent world history: a government of reactionary clerics whose political theory disclaims *any* rights to popular sovereignty, in the name of the rule of God — through those who understand his law.

For the Mullahs, the Gulf war was a wonderful, indeed God-sent opportunity. It provided further excuses for crushing all opposition, and every escalation in the war has given yet more. Its Revolutionary Guards — swelled by patriotic youth — have been an effective weapon of repression. If the use of chemical weapons has been Iraq's notable contribution to the escalating slaughter, Iran's has been the 'human wave' tactic. 'Volunteers', usually young, sometimes as young as 13, are sent all but defenceless into battle. In the unsuccessful assault on Basra in 1982, for example, Iran lost, in two attempts, 100,000 men and boys.

Yet both regimes have managed to survive seven and a half years of it, at first sight an astonishing achievement.

The Gulf is by far the largest importer of arms in the world. Over the period 1979-85, Iraq imported \$28.2 billion worth of weapons, and Iran \$8.5 billion. According to the American Disarmament and Arms Control Agency, between 1981 and 1985 the Middle East as a whole accounted for 49% of all world arms imports, of which the Gulf accounts for the largest chunk.

Iraq's main supplies have been the USSR and France (especially since 1982),



Iraqi dead. Photo: Kaveh Golestan, Reflex

while Iran's have included China, Israel, India, Czechoslovakia — and so on. Many countries have supplied both sides, including the USSR, China and Britain. Most Iranian arms, incidentally, are US-made, supplied (on the whole) indirectly.

But despite rich pickings from the war itself, foreign profiteers can look forward with enthusiasm to post-war reconstruction. According to one expert, the Iranian import market between now and the year 2000, assuming an end to the war soon, would be \$200,000 million. Both countries are rich in oil, and Iran has many other natural resources and a large population (45 or so million as against Iraq's 13-15 million).

From the point of view of the great powers, therefore, there is a problem. They want the war to end, both to take advantage of future markets and put an end to its potentially destabilising effects on the region. But it is not so easy in practice.

Neither side has proved able to win the war, but neither can afford to lose it. Nor could they easily accept 'status quo ante bellum'. Iraq has proved willing to accept UN Resolution 598 which calls for a comprehensive ceasefire and peace negotiations, and an arms embargo of the party that refuses; Iran has not accepted it, but as an arms embargo is impossible to enforce, nothing has been done about it. Iraq's acceptance of 598 is pretty meaningless under these circumstances, as the people of Halabja — or for that matter

refugees from Tehran and other Iranian cities bombed by Iraq — would bear witness.

Moreover, although the US and other superpowers want the war to end, a peace with victors would cause difficulties, especially if the victor was Khomeini. They are anxious to prevent the Islamic revolution disturbing their friends in the Arab Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. Thus the basic US policy has been *containment*. It is to this end that US ships were dispatched to the Gulf last summer.

The 'tanker war', initiated by Iraq, threatened oil exports in general; when it began to threaten Kuwaiti oil exports, the US decided something had to be done. *Import* trade routes are just as important, it should not be forgotten, as the region currently absorbs \$60,000 million worth of goods a year, of which half comes from the EEC and a third from the United States.

So the presence of the United States fleet in the Gulf is not for the objective of Khomeini's overthrow, as many on the left have believed. Of course Reagan detests Khomeini, but the US is not at present in a position to remove him. Direct colonial conquest or a Vietnam-style war would be unthinkable costly in a country as large, as populated and as relatively advanced as Iran — unthinkable politically and economically. To replace Khomeini, the US needs an alliance with a domestic political force. At the moment there is no one to ally with: *imperialism has no alternative to Khomeini*.

Who are its potential allies? Ali Pahlavi,

nephew of the deceased former Shah told Newsweek magazine (March 16, 1987): "it is in American interests to continue to supply spare parts to Iran — not to get the hostages out of Lebanon, but to support the only institution in Iran that is still on the side of the free world: the Iranian armed forces."

The best option for the US is to woo elements within the *existing* regime. Indeed it has no other option. The most likely alternative to Khomeini at the moment would be worse, for the US point of view — more fundamentalist, more anti-American. The best policy in the meantime is to maintain the stalemate, putting pressure on Iran to accept Resolution 598. This is what is going on now in the Gulf. Anyone who thinks it is now, or is likely to be, an all-out US-Iranian war has completely misunderstood the dynamics of the situation.

Within the policy of containment, the US is — for the moment — giving support to Iraq, and has put pressure on its allies (such as Israel) to do likewise. But the US knows perfectly well that an Iraqi victory is going to require more than that. An Iraqi victory is not Reagan's priority.

Within Iran, 'anti-imperialism' is the rhetoric under cover of which the regime attacks the left — who are identified with such imperialist (i.e., Western) ideas as communism. From the beginning of the revolution this was so: the US embassy 'hostage crisis' that began in late 1979 was an 'anti-imperialist' excuse to arm more

revolutionary guards and *physically* attack various 'pro-imperialist' leftists. Those sections of the left that supported this 'anti-imperialism' didn't escape the noose.

In response to US sabre-rattling, Khomeini called on more young Iranians to join up and be martyrs in the war with Satan. There are severe punishments for draft-dodgers, indicating that draft dodging is a problem. While many Iranian youth continue to be inspired by the Islamic revolution, others are less than enthusiastic. Last October Khomeini called for 500,000 new volunteers and others to the front, but less than half that number turned up.

Iranian society seems war weary. According to one Iranian professor, "The people never talk about politics anymore. They are simply tired. Their energy is drained by waiting in long lines all day to get the simplest things... Whether they are monarchists or leftists or whatever, they are all irrelevant to the day-to-day problems of life in Iran." (Quoted in MERIP no. 148, p.18).

There have been some strikes against the war's effects, nevertheless. In 1984, for example, various factories went on strike against the forced contribution of part of workers' wages to the war. In fact there have been widespread but localised strikes throughout the war period,

sometimes indicating the activity of underground militant workers' committees. This movement was powerful enough to force a government retreat on an anti-labour bill in 1983. May Day 1985 saw so many strikes that half way through the morning the government declared it a holiday.

The national minorities continue to fight, but the Kurdish struggle still suffers from one of its major long-term problems: Iraq's Kurds look to Iran for assistance. The atrocity in Halabja was in retaliation for a successful joint offensive by Iraqi Kurds and Iran.

In Iraq the opposition, aside from the Kurds, is weak. The Communist Party is dead. The Shi-ite movement is difficult to assess.

In 1984, after witnessing the carnage of the battlefields, an Iranian doctor said: "I have seen young boys burned alive. I have seen Iranian and Iraqi boys tearing each other literally with their nails and teeth. It is raging hate against raging hate."

This bitter chauvinism is the fruit of an inhuman war. A socialist policy is one aimed to end it. And the only way to end it meaningfully is to destroy the two regimes who unleashed it. Saddam Hussein and Khomeini must be overthrown.

Of course we must oppose the US force in the Gulf, and call for the withdrawal of it and other imperialist ships. Indeed a

withdrawal of the Great Satan's ships would help Khomeini's victims by removing one of his shibboleths.

But anyone who concludes that as a result of a US naval presence there is grounds for supporting Iran is a traitor to socialism. Our priority must be solidarity with the workers and oppressed masses in Iran and Iraq, not solidarity with their oppressors. And this is not the 'politics of neutrality' as the Socialist Workers Party would have it.

There is a dreadful logic to the SWP's argument. If you support Iran now, how can you justify ever having opposed it? The force of the logic drives Socialist Worker (23 April 1988) to give a list of all the aspects of the war 'started' by Iraq. But as Ramy Nima puts it: "Clausewitz's maxim that war is a continuation of politics by other means is precisely the case here. Therefore, the question as to which of the two reactionary regimes drew the first gun has little significance." (The Wrath of Allah", p.126).

Khomeini's war is as reactionary now as when it started — as reactionary and chauvinistic as Iraq's and as contrary to the interests of socialism.

- US out of the Gulf!
- Overthrow Saddam Hussein and Khomeini!
- Solidarity with the oppressed masses of Iran and Iraq.

The British left and the war

A statement from Iranian socialists

Revolutions are the best test for revolutionary politics and for those claiming to be revolutionaries. The Iranian Revolution of February 1979 was no exception. Many groups on the British Left would rather forget what they said and did in the few years that it took for the "anti-imperialist" regime of the mullahs to crush it.

Let us not forget that there were those who were expecting this regime to transform itself into a workers' and peasants' government, halting its militancy against imperialism, supporting it in the war against Iraq while conveniently covering up the brutal repression against Iranian workers, peasants, national minorities, women, students, and in short, every section of the revolutionary mass movement.

The intervention of American imperialism in the Gulf has once again brought out positions within the British Left which, to say the least, leave a lot to be desired. Basically these centre around an inability to distinguish between the necessary condemnation of imperialism and avoidance of any moral, material or political support to the counter-revolutionary regime of the mullahs in Iran.

The justification for this confusion runs something like this: if imperialism was to get away with this intervention it would damage the cause of revolution internationally and hence despite whatever disagreement we might have with the Iranian regime, we must support it in its conflict with imperialism, and fight for its victory.

Just to give some examples:

Socialist Action wants to prevent the imperialists from "dealing blows against Iran" (against "Iran"!) and would, therefore, "defend Iran against imperialist attacks".

And, of course, this "Iran" turns out to be no other than the Iranian regime, the very same regime which they now belatedly have to admit is "the butcher of the Iranian Revolution" and nothing less than "the main prop of capitalism".

Inside the Iranian Left, this form of reasoning is now a text-book case of the worst kind of opportunism. There were those within the Iranian Left who argued for the strengthening of the Pasdaran Army because it was supposed to be an "anti-imperialist" force while the regular army was considered to be "pro-Western". They even supported the call by the mullahs for "heavy armaments for the Pasdaran Army!" They thought this would weaken the chances for the return of imperialism. It did not occur to them that the Pasdaran Army was the main prop of reaction while the rank and file of the regular army had been recruited to the side of the Revolution.

Socialist Worker, for more or less the same reasons, would thus "be happy if Iran gives the Americans a bloody nose"; because, "every struggle for liberation from Nicaragua to Palestine will see its enemy weakened". They seem to forget that there is also a struggle for liberation in Iran. A "bloody nose" for the Reagans of this world would certainly bring a smile to the faces of us all, but any strengthening of the Iranian regime would doom any chances of progress in the entire region.

There are other examples of such "revolutionary" positions. What they all lack is any regard for the actual and current class struggle in Iran itself. With diatribes such as "we here in Britain must fight the main enemy", the inability to take a proletarian revolutionary stand against Khomeini's regime is theorised. As if imperialism is not everywhere

the main enemy! And as if nobody knows that it is this very same regime which by crushing the Iranian revolution has allowed the imperialists to come to the Gulf. It is thus assumed that because of some mysterious objective logic the very same force which has colluded with imperialism in crushing the Iranian revolution can now be transformed into a force capable of inflicting mortal blows against imperialism.

The fact that the best way to oppose imperialism is to oppose both the Iranian regime and the imperialist intervention seems to be beyond comprehension. According to all such opportunist reasonings, all the toilers and oppressed in Iran must also forget for a while that their exploitation is being organised by this capitalist regime and hope for the situation in which their oppressors have given "a bloody nose" to the "Americans".

It is sufficient for one imperialist gunboat to appear anywhere on the scene for our "internationalists" to forget class struggle.

It does not occur to these groups that the Islamic regime in Iran represents one of the most vicious counter-revolutions seen in recent history, and that the presence of the Western imperialists in the Gulf is also providing it with further pretexts for the suppression of all opposition to itself and its reactionary war with Iran. It is simply forgotten that while any victory scored by the Iranian regime — which in fact cannot go beyond blowing holes in a few tankers — may or may not seriously weaken imperialism, it would certainly strengthen reaction in the entire region. It seems beyond their comprehension that you can have imperialism and reactionary "anti-imperialism". Nothing can strengthen imperialism more than a victory for the reactionary, anti-democratic and thoroughly obscurantist anti-Westernism of Khomeini's regime.

The Supporters of "Socialism & Revolution" in London, the organ of the Regroupment for the Union of Revolutionary Socialists in Iran.