

**The Iran-Iraq war has been going on for three and a half years. Once it looked as if Iran might win. Now there is little chance of this.**

Patrick Cockburn

# The Unbridgeable Gulf

IN THE MARSHLANDS to the east of the city of Basra the Iraqi army is waiting to see if the half million men the Iranians have massed on the long frontier are going to attack. They have threatened to do so ever since assaults by Iranian revolutionary guards and regulars were repelled in heavy fighting in February and March.

For the Iranians too these are crucial weeks. In three and half years of fighting their strategy of wearing the Iraqis down through economic and military attrition has failed despite their larger population and greater oil exports. Tehran has paid a heavy price for its diplomatic isolation and Iraq's ability to get arms and credit from East and West has enabled it to counterbalance Iranian strength.

There is no sign, however, of the Iranians scaling down their demand for the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Whatever the losses — and even for the Iranians casualties have not been on anything like the scale of the British army in Flanders in World War I

despite the use of unsupported infantry units against dug in opposition — Ayatollah Khomeini is committed to continuing the war.

To Khomeini the war has always been more than a defence of the national territory. It is the key test for the Islamic revolution. Since the Iraqis first attacked in September 1980 Khomeini has always denounced Iranians who want to end the war as nationalists and not true adherents

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## To Khomeini the war . . . is the key test for the Islamic revolution

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of revolutionary Islam. While he lives it will be extremely difficult for Tehran to modify this stance.

### Military pressure

Khomeini's frustration that the war has not been won is understandable. Having

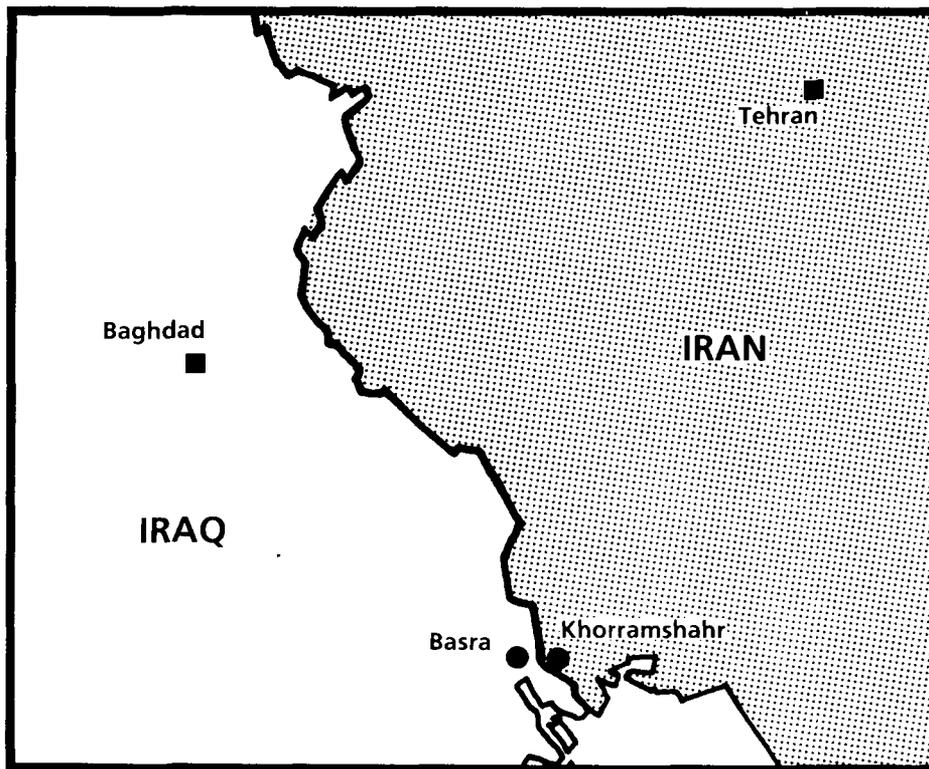
brought the first Iraqi assault to a halt at the end of 1980 Iran launched a limited counter attack the following year. It drove the Iraqis from Khorvamsahr, the one substantial town captured by the Iraqi army, in the summer of 1982 and captured 30,000 prisoners. It was possible that Basra, Iraq's second city, would fall.

This did not happen. The Iraqi army held off five main assaults on Basra and the Iranians have won few victories in the last two years. Their military strategy has been to make a series of limited stabs up and down the battlefield to stretch the Iraqi army out between the Gulf and the Kurdish mountains.

In this way the Iranians hoped to wear down the Iraqis and inflict a continual dribble of casualties. The Iranians could benefit from their superiority in infantry and conserve their more limited stocks of armour and artillery. The hope was that Iraq would crumble under the weight of this attrition; Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would be overthrown.

*Abadan, the key Iranian oil refinery and largest in the world, in flames following heavy bombardment by Iraqi artillery*





There are 43 million Iranians to 14 million Iraqis so the attrition policy, though never worked out as a coherent strategy, appeared attractive. The regime in Tehran, even if its popularity had obviously dropped from the days of the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, could still raise genuine volunteers for the revolutionary guard and other militia units sent to the front. Heavy casualties fitted in with the emphasis the Shiah Moslem faith places on martyrdom.

### The Iranians have lost their chance. The balance of power has swung against them

#### Economic attrition

The Iranians also hoped that economic attrition would break the back of the Iraqi regime. In 1980 the Iraqis enjoyed an oil income of \$25 billion. Their next biggest export was dates for which they got some \$60 million. Three months into the war the Iranian navy attacked and destroyed the two main oil terminals on the Gulf through which most of Iraq's crude exports flowed to the tankers.

In Baghdad the blow was all the more damaging because Saddam Hussein, who had begun to talk of a negotiated peace a month after the fighting started, was betting on a short war. He had launched an enormous expansion of the development

programme. In two years contracts worth \$36 billion were signed for new projects.

The whole of Baghdad looked like a building site. Guns and butter would both be provided. Iraqis were compensated for war losses with a flood of consumer goods. Supplies in the shops in Baghdad were well above prewar levels.

The problem was that unless the war ended and Iraq could resume its full oil exports there was no way that it could pay for all this. By the end of 1982 Iraq's own financial reserves were exhausted and some \$22 billion in aid from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates had all been spent on financing the war and the boom in civilian projects. As Opec oil revenues suddenly fell precipitately Baghdad could not expect Arab aid at this level ever again.

The Iranians had also succeeded in turning the screw on the Iraqis by persuading the Syrians to close down vital pipeline from Kirkuk in Iraq to the Mediterranean. This left Iraq with only a single pipeline 1,000 kilometres long across Turkey.

Given these economic and military pressures it seemed possible that Iraq would eventually crack, worn down by attrition like Germany in 1918.

#### Failure to influence

The Iranian failure so far stems from two main causes: inability to gain support within Iraq and diplomatic isolation. During its victories in 1982 many of the Iraqi

army who were Shiah Moslems voted with their feet. In one case an entire battalion surrendered headed by its commanding officer. Iran is entirely Shiah and so are 60% of Iraqis. Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership are mostly Sunni Moslems from the town of Takrit on the Euphrates.

Fear that the appeal of the Iranian revolution and Shiah fundamentalism would have an impact in Iraq was one of the reasons Saddam Hussein had started the war in the first place. The original invasion was largely a pre-emptive strike against Khomeini even if Saddam Hussein claimed he wanted the return of some minor chunks of territory ceded to the Shah in 1975.

Khomeini's appeal to Islamic solidarity clearly had an impact in the first two years of the war. It is much less now. The ruling Baath party in Baghdad has emphasised its secular policies and economic development. Guerrilla attacks on its members by members of al-Dawa party, a group long backed by Iran, have died away. Iraq has always been a more secular country than Iran and the Shiah clergy do not have the power they possess in Iranian society. The ideological offensive launched by Khomeini and so feared in Iraq has failed.

#### Khomeini's narrowing base

Khomeini and the clerical leadership in Iran are also paying a price for the narrowing of their own base. In 1978-79 Khomeini came to power as the central focus of an extraordinarily incoherent coalition of those opposed to the Shah. Liberal middle class combined with up-country clergy and leftwing students. In the years since then all but the most intransigent clergy have left or been evicted from this coalition. This narrowed the appeal of what had happened in Tehran to large sections of the Iraqi population. Tehran has shown that it will not back any opposition in Baghdad which is not in its own image.

In Iraq Saddam Hussein and the Baath party he leads have been quick to take advantage of this. The Baath came to power in 1968 through a military coup. Their support was limited but by 1975 Saddam Hussein and the then President Bakr liquidated their enemies in the rest of the Baath, nationalised the oil industry and defeated the Kurdish rebellion in the north of Iraq.

Unlike Syria, where the Baath party also rules, the Iraqi Baath is essentially civilian and completely dominated by Saddam Hussein. He alone exercises control having shot part of his own cabinet in 1979. His

portrait covers every wall in Baghdad and the rest of Iraq. The unpopularity of the Baath party and its tight control over every tactical move by the army helped Iran in the first two years of the war, but the narrowness of the regime in Tehran has made it look a very unsatisfactory alternative to the Baath in Iraq.

### Diplomatic isolation

The ideological failure of Khomeini's version of revolutionary Islam to make any headway in Iraq has been compounded by the diplomatic isolation of Iran. This matters because it makes it difficult for Iran to get the same quantity or quality of weapons as Iraq and it allows Baghdad to buttress itself with massive support from both East and West.

Iran has clearly been hostile to the US since the fall of the Shah, but even at the height of the hostage crisis in 1980 relations between Tehran and Moscow were no more than lukewarm. They rapidly deteriorated thereafter. In 1982 the Soviet Union resumed full supply of arms and ammunition to Iraq. This was crucial since the Iraqi army got almost all its basic equipment from the Soviet Union during the 1970s.

The motto of Iran is 'neither East nor

West' and this made it difficult for the Iranians to get full backing from any quarter. Most weapons imports come from China and North Korea on a strictly commercial basis. Japan and the West European countries are all major exporters to Iran but are nervous of disrupting their commercial relations in either Baghdad or Tehran.

The only real success Iran has had is in establishing an alliance with Syria — always hostile to the rival Baath regime in Baghdad. Equally significant, revolutionary Islam has become a major influence among the impoverished Shiah Moslems of Lebanon. In the Moslem parts of Beirut, two thirds of the whole city, Khomeini's poster is everywhere. Many of the fighters belonging to the Shiah organisation Amal wear little portraits of Khomeini around their neck.

But the key to the spread of Khomeini's revolution, which he sees as following the same lines as the first Moslem expansion in the seventh century, is Iraq and here he has failed. In the rest of the Gulf the rulers of the small oil states quake at the thought of an Iranian victory in the war, but there is not a great deal they can do about it. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are giving aid in oil and cash at the rate of about \$8 billion a year.

Even without support within Iraq there is, of course, a chance that the Iranians will be able to carry the Islamic revolution west at the point of a bayonette.

### At the point of a bayonette

Much of the recent fighting has involved the revolutionary guards and other militia groups. They have been able to infiltrate between heavy concentrations of Iraqi armour and infantry but have then suffered very heavy casualties from Iraqi counter-attacks and helicopter gunships. The regular Iranian army has played a more limited role but in this year's fighting three Iranian regular divisions suffered very heavy casualties.

The problem is that the revolutionary authorities and the regular army are ill coordinated. They have been unable to coordinate their offensive well enough to hold off Iraqi counter attacks. Similarly in Tehran Ayatollah Khomeini's total authority does not translate into coherent military and political policies.

Iran may now find that it has no option except to renew the ground offensive because the policy of attrition against Iraq has failed. The Iraqis have suffered no defeats of the dimensions of 1982. They have been able to borrow enough money in



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The day the cuts were announced the London *Standard* commented that among the companies affected was . . . "the 7:84 (England) Company which frequently receives excellent reviews

*BUT has a strong left-wing bias". "Strong left-wing bias" simply refers to our links with the labour movement (eg Neil Kinnock's long standing directorship of the company) and our commitment to provide entertainment for that movement. Its comments do however support our contention that the Arts Council's cut is "a directly political decision" (Norman Buchan, MP Shadow Arts Minister).*

We are deeply disturbed by recent events; not only is the future bleak for 7:84 and political theatre generally but also for the Arts Council itself. "If the Arts Council effectively abandons enterprises like 7:84 it will have abandoned its central purpose. In the process it will encourage the idea that 'culture' is an exotic island that can only be inhabited by the affluent and the elevated. That would impoverish and retard our whole society" (Neil Kinnock, MP).

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the West, get enough weapons from the Soviet Union and cut back economic development sufficiently to sustain the war effort.

More important the Iraqis are planning to expand their oil exports by building two new pipelines through Saudi Arabia and Jordan. This will allow them to export another one million barrels a day of oil in 1986. They are also expanding the capacity of their single pipeline through Turkey.

### Stalemate in the Middle East

Once these pipelines are complete the economic stranglehold the Iraqis have

had over Iraq since 1982 will be broken and Iraq will be in as good a position to wage a prolonged war as the Iraqis. The Iraqis might be able to intimidate Saudi Arabia and Jordan against allowing their territory to be used for these pipelines if they succeed in winning some quick military victories. So far there is no sign of this happening.

The likelihood for the moment is that the stalemate will continue. The Iraqis should be able to rupture the Iraqi front if they launch an offensive but it is doubtful if they have the strength to turn this into a complete victory on the battlefield.

But the stalemated war will continue to dominate the balance of power in the Middle East. The eastern Arab states, the Arab countries to the east of Egypt, have a combined population which is still less than that of Iran. A combination of Syria allied to Iraq will balance Iraq allied to the Saudis and the Gulf states. Neither side will be able to impose their policies.

The Iraqis have lost their chance. The balance of power has swung against them. It is unlikely that they will end the war but the conflict may well subside into bloody border skirmishing but without periodic offensives. □

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**The dominant tradition of socialism in Britain is highly centralised and statist. It is time for that tradition to be challenged.**

Geoff Hodgson

# Overstating - the State -

THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT in Britain has been in a precarious position since the mid-1970s. Years of uninspiring Labour government have been followed by the ravages of Thatcherism in the 1980s. There are a number of possible responses to this predicament. One is to hold fast to the faith that everything on offer from the Left is basically sound and in good order (if only it were implemented in practice). Another, in contrast, is to ask some serious questions about what the Left is actually promoting as an alternative kind of society to that which is being advanced by the New Right.

This journal has a deserved reputation for constructive debate and questioning, rather than blind faith. Here and elsewhere a number of major advances have been made in socialist thought, laying the basis of fresh thinking and creative practice on the British Left. The contribution of the feminists is perhaps the most remarkable and important, challenging some cherished assumptions about goals and practices which too often have been taken for granted. Wide-ranging issues, from work to welfare, and party to patriarchy, have been touched upon, altering unpredictably the patterns and assumptions of political discourse and intervention.

Other recent contributions come from the ecology and peace movements, and there have been important influences from abroad: notably 'Eurocommunism'. A common theme with all these and feminism alike, is the belief that much traditional fare from the Left is unsound in political terms and unattractive to the public at large. Consequently, the process of renewal, and the reversal of the rightward drift,

must in part involve rethinking socialist strategy and refining the idea of what a socialist society in Britain would be like.

However, despite a substantial degree of variety and vitality on the British Left there is much serious and creative thinking still to be done. There is much familiar ideological baggage that needs to be re-examined. One serious problem about the public image of socialism in Britain overshadows the others. It is the almost universal popular identification of socialism with an extension of central state ownership and control. Socialism is generally seen as the nationalisation of industry, rather than other forms of common ownership, and as central state control, rather than decentralisation and local autonomy. The focus of the socialist project is widely and almost exclusively identified as the central state.

Clearly, the Thatcherite Tory Party has exploited the statist image of socialism in Britain to its great advantage. The Tory rebuttal of socialism has been led by a chorus of 'free market' slogans against public expenditure, nationalisation and the welfare state. However, close examination from the Left of the statist traits in much of British socialism is rare. Perhaps here the assumptions are too deeply ingrained to be frequently examined. Arguably, however, this cannot and should not be postponed if the New Right tide is to be reversed.

## STATIST SOCIALISM

The first industrial nation has inherited a social culture strongly affected by nineteenth-century rationalism and science. The ferment of industrial revolution and scientific progress led to the common recognition that nature and its mysteries

could eventually be understood and controlled by human beings; it was simply a matter of time before the natural environment was placed under the knowledgeable direction of our species.

Optimism in the natural sciences rested uneasily alongside the poverty and squalor of the Victorian age. Malnutrition and destitution were all the more unacceptable in a society that was capable of industrial expansion and economic growth. If human affairs could be ordered in some rational way, then inequality could be reduced and basic needs could be met.

With this in mind, the Victorian socialist matched the optimism of the natural scientist with an assertion of the 'obviousness' of socialism as a solution to the problems of human society. Thus the formative socialism of the last century was strongly imbued with the rationalism of its time. The application of reason to human affairs meant the coordination of resources under a central authority. On this basis, the market and private property were rejected. Instead, the state would become the instrument of reason and of rational planning of the economy:

This view was expressed most clearly by the Fabians. They believed that major social problems could be solved by the attention of appointed experts acting at the government's behest. They were suspi-

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socialist politics is too  
readily reduced to a contest  
of being 'more left than  
thou'

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cious of the devolution of state power — a potential limit to the reach of global reason. Thus they strongly opposed any large-scale extension of democracy to the running of industry and the decentralisation of political decision-making. They inverted the prevailing laissez-faire ideology of the Victorian era by suggesting that all could be rationally ordered within the compass of the state.

There always have been non-statist tendencies within the socialist movement since its foundation. Clearly an important example from the last century is William Morris, who was highly suspicious of the dominant socialist emphasis on the granting of greater and greater powers to the central state. Even earlier, the utopianism of Robert Owen and his followers was based on the community rather than the central state. However, events in the first few decades of the twentieth century