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Published by-
Tropvale Limited
55 Banner Street,
London EC1 8PX
Tel 01 253 4726.
Telex 262028
ISSN 0266-2701

**Afkār/Inquiry is published
monthly for \$30 per annum.**
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COMMENT

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

THE eight year old Gulf conflict, which started with Saddam Hussein's bid to take the place of the deposed Shah of Iran as the gendarme of the region, has now entered a critical stage. Initially, most countries professed neutrality in the conflict.

As events unfolded it became evident that the United Nations was only prepared to ask for a ceasefire once Iraq's hopes of a swift victory were dashed and its own survival threatened. The Persian Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, began to transfer massive funds to Iraq as its own reserves were gobbled up. Egypt capitalised on Saddam Hussein's discomfiture and recouped almost all its losses in the Arab world resulting from the signing of the Camp David Accords. France, followed by the US and Britain also began to shed their espoused neutrality and now have become ardent supporters of Iraq. The Soviet Union and France have supplied sophisticated armaments, even extending credit for these, and the US has funded the bulk of the food requirements of Iraq since 1984. In addition, the US, through Saudi Arabia, has also supplied key intelligence information to the Iraqis. In sum, the professed neutrality of all these states has all but disappeared. Indeed, some like Kuwait have become virtual conduits for war supplies reaching Iraq.

It is thus not surprising that all these 'neutral' parties have been calling for an unconditional ceasefire in the Gulf war. However, as the conflict has progressed it began to dawn upon most of Iraq's friends that while Iran could not loose the war, given time and application it could actually defeat Iraq. In that event, the whole strategy of containment of the Islamic revolution within its borders would flounder with unpredictable consequences for the geography of the region.

This is why Iraq's indiscriminate use of chemical weapons and initiation of the 'tanker war' was tolerated without much adverse comment. However, when these failed either to deter Iran from pursuing its struggle for justice or stifle its oil exports, than more had to be done.

As a result, the United Nations was put into motion and clauses were inserted into a new resolution accepting the principle of identifying the aggressor and payment of reparations. Instead of turning the resolution down, as expected, Iran turned it on its head and indicated that an *ad hoc* ceasefire could be arranged whilst the process of identifying the aggressor was carried out.

Whilst this was going on the US had ceased upon Iraq's 'mistaken' attack upon its warship to enter the Gulf in full force. It quickly made an about-turn on reflagging Kuwaiti tankers, and used the opportunity to station over 40 warships in the Persian Gulf. Iran's shrewd handling of the latest UN resolution has disrupted US plans to enter the region by the back door. Subsequent US attempts to intimidate Iran seem designed to legitimise this new role by provoking a confrontation.

Now that the US has entered the war on the side of Iraq, it is difficult to see a peaceful solution to the conflict.

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