

# Marathon to the Death

## The Iraq-Iran War

At the end of 1986, the ongoing blood-sucking tragedy, known as the Iran-Iraq war, entered a dangerous phase manifested by Iran's new offensives: Kerbala-4, directed against the Iraqi positions east of Basra, and Kerbala-5 against fortified Iraqi positions west of Fish Lake, along the Dual Canal and west of the Jasim River, also east of Basra.

Iran's Kerbala-4 offensive was aborted in fierce fighting that lasted over 36 hours. Then Iraq declared that it had pushed back the Iranian offensive and regained control of the strategic Um Al Rasas island and three other small islands in the Shatt Al Arab waterway.

As it has been throughout six and a half bloody years of war, the two sides issued conflicting reports of casualties. After the obvious failure of Kerbala-4, Iran said it had been a «limited operation» and that «less than 6,000 soldiers had participated in it,» in the words of the spokesman for the Iranian war information center, who strongly denied reports that tens of thousands of Iranians had been killed. The Iraqi regime, for its part, exaggerated the Iranian casualty toll and the intensity of the offensive.

However, Iran's attempt to play down the level of the offensive did not hide the real goals it was seeking to achieve, politically and militarily. The Iranians' success at the start of Kerbala-4, in penetrating the massive Iraqi defenses and occupying Um Al Rasas and other islands, proves the broad scope of the operation which demanded huge numbers of soldiers and weaponry - not 6,000 soldiers. Iran's attempt to station its troops on the western bank of the Shatt Al Arab waterway indicates the strategic nature of Kerbala-4. Had the operation been successful, it would have paved the way for the Iranians to break through the Iraqi defense lines around Basra, occupy the city, cut Iraq in two, and ultimately isolate it from the Gulf states.

Thus it is clear that Kerbala-4 had strategic objectives. This was evidenced by Iranian officials' statements just 48 hours before the offensive began. Iranian President Ali Khamenei said that «the Iranian forces are concluding preparations for the final and decisive attack»!

On the other hand, the Iraqi regime's attempt to exaggerate the intensity and bulk of the Iranian offensive was aimed at convincing the Gulf states that Iraq is capable of aborting Iranian attacks. Thus, the Iraqi regime sought to eliminate the fears of the Gulf states as a result of the growing Iranian force, and to abort any attempts on their part to reestablish relations with Iran. Such attempts had been apparent during the latest OPEC meeting.

The Iraqi exaggerations may also have been a final attempt to convince the Saudi government, which was paid a sudden visit by Saddam Hussein, to continue its support of the Iraqi regime against Iran, in particular after the disclosure of the Saudi role in 'Iran/contragate'.

Two weeks after the failure of the Kerbala-4 offensive, Iran staged another Kerbala, this time no. 5, on January 8th, in a three-pronged attack east of Basra. A Pasadaran (Revolutionary Guards) commander hinted that «Iran's Kerbala-5 attack was made from the northeast through flooded areas, using small boats and light pontoon bridges» (*Financial Times*,

January 27th). «A feature of the latest offensive,» reported the *Financial Times*, was that Iran's airforce «has been in evidence.» The Iranians infiltrated Iraqi territories, controlling more than four kilometers, while some units managed to infiltrate into areas less than 15 kilometers away from Basra, the second largest city in Iraq. However, Iran still has to overcome Iraqi defense obstacles before it can reach the outskirts of Basra.

By most accounts, Kerbala-5 has already cost the Iranians some 30,000 dead and wounded, and the Iraqis about 10,000. These tragic casualty figures, added to previous ones, bring the total of dead, wounded and handicapped to the hundreds of thousands, as a result of this senseless and 'Israel-the-victor' war. As long as cannon fodder is available on both sides, the war will go on.

On February 1st, Iraq said that its forces had pushed back Iranian troops at Fish Lake and at the Jasim River on the southern front of the war, reporting as usual - tremendous Iranian casualties. At the same time, Iraqi air raids against Iranian cities, and Iran's surface-to-surface missiles against Baghdad, Iraq's capital, add to the human tragedy of this pointless war.

Regardless of whether or not Iraq is successful in aborting this new Iranian offensive, Iranian leaders still insist that Kerbala-5 does not mark the beginning of the final offensive. At the ▶

