

Iran's Victory

[Tease]

ROBERT MacNEIL [voice-over]: Victorious Iranian troops display captured Iraqi prisoners while crowds in Tehran celebrate a major victory by the forces of the Ayatollah Khomeini.

[Titles]

MacNEIL: Good evening. Iraq claimed still to be fighting Iranian troops near the city of Khurramshahr today, but did not dispute Iran's claim that it had recaptured the key port yesterday. Iraq's military command said its planes had attacked Iranian positions north of the city, and claimed that its troops had killed 238 Iranians. At the United Nations here in New York, Secretary General Perez de Cuellar made a new appeal to Iraq and Iran to end their 20-month-old war. That war appeared to take a decisive turn yesterday when Iran said it had taken back Khurramshahr, captured by Iraq early in the fighting. The success of the Ayatollah's troops has raised fears of new instability in the Gulf region. Conservative oil-producing Gulf states are reported to fear that Iran might press on into Iraq and open the way for Iran's Shiite Muslims to spread their militancy. But the new twist in the fighting also has broader implications touching the United States and the Soviet Union. Tonight, the impact of Iran's victory. Jim?

JIM LEHRER: Robin, who is on whose side in this war has been a tangled, confused web since the beginning; since Iraqi artillery opened fire on an Iranian-held border town in September, 1980. The U.S. position has been mostly one of neutrality, although then-President Carter did deplore Iraq's aggression, despite the fact that Iran was still holding 53 American hostages at the time. A formal position of neutrality has been maintained by the Reagan administration. But the pressure to take sides has been great. From Israel, which considers both Iran and Iraq enemies, but Iraq the worst of the two. Thus, has reportedly been providing arms to Iran and, in doing so, finding itself in company with one of Israel's other arch enemies, Syria. Syria is virtually alone among Arab states in supporting Iran. All of the rest are on Iraq's side, particularly Jordan and Saudi Arabia. They have been urging the United States to support Iraq, too. And, finally, just to complicate things more, there's the Soviet Union. It has been supplying arms to both sides. It had an arms agreement with Iraq when the war started, but it also didn't want to alienate Iran. In other words, nothing's simple for anyone concerning this war. Robin?

MacNEIL: First, this evening, Iran's point of view. The senior Iranian diplomat in the United States is their ambassador to the United Nations, Said Radjai. Mr. Ambassador, first of all, do you have late news of the situation in Khurramshahr? Is there still fighting around it, do you know?

Amb. SAID RADJAI: I think there is no fighting around Khurramshahr. I believe some of the people have already returned back to Khurramshahr, and the city is under complete control. The police station is set up already, and it's going to be very active soon, by the grace of God.

MacNEIL: Will Iran's troops, now that they have made such a tremendous recovery of the land, will they now stop at Iraq's border, or are they going to push further in?

Amb. RADJAI: I wish every audience of mine could put himself in the shoes of all the Iranians. I wish they in here could think of a foreign enemy who might have just attacked the United States and occupied an important part of the country, and then the people of the United States, after a lot of austerities and hardship, would have been able to push the enemy back. Then what would they do at the borders? Would they say, "Well, welcome, thank you very much"? Or they would have further arguments to be settled?

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MacNEIL: Will those further arguments involve pushing on and invading Iraq?

Amb. RADJAI: These arguments are basically satisfaction of the conditions we produced at the beginning of the war, and we have been abiding by them and sticking to them constantly. We said that the Iraqi troops must withdraw without any condition. This condition can no more be satisfied because they were expelled from the country by force, or some of them are already captives inside the country. So this condition is—

MacNEIL: They can't withdraw voluntarily anymore?

Amb. RADJAI: They can't withdraw voluntarily anymore. The second condition was reparation of the war. We believe that we have been aggressed by the Iraqi forces. We believe that the imperialist forces inside the area, and particularly outside the area — at the top of which you know who he is—

MacNEIL: No, I don't. Who are you referring to?

Amb. RADJAI: We believe that the United States is responsible for all the tension and problems and casualties and what is happening to us and to the Iraqi people because Saddam Hussein started this war under the instigation of the United States.

MacNEIL: Can I stop you there and ask you a couple of questions. The reparations. Will you demand those only of Iraq or other countries you believe involved?

Amb. RADJAI: We believe some other countries also have been involved in the war, but we take it from Iraq. Of course, others can assist Iraq in peace as they have been in war.

MacNEIL: Others could help her pay the reparations.

Amb. RADJAI: Yes.

MacNEIL: Those reparations— I have seen huge sums mentioned; figures like \$150 billion. Are you talking of sums of that magnitude?

Amb. RADJAI: I do not have an exact number to give you, but I can assure you that some of the losses are just priceless. For instance, there was a dome in Basra— you may already know that the city of Basra is totally exploded by the rocket troops before they evacuate from the city. Now, in the city there was a dome, a very ancient dome known to the people as the Dome of Ishmael. It is exploded. It is a great historical monument. It was a great religious place. You cannot replace it no matter how many billions of dollars. Many old mosques have been destroyed. A great hospital in the area has been destroyed. Hospitals, schools, libraries, departments of the—

MacNEIL: So you're going to make Iraq pay, in other words?

Amb. RADJAI: These things can be replaced, but some of the monumental, let's say, monumental, historical sites cannot be replaced at all. So we believe that Iraq and particularly Saddam Hussein of Iraq, not the people of Iraq, is responsible for all these losses.

MacNEIL: Are you going to insist that he be removed from power before you will make a peace treaty with Iraq?

Amb. RADJAI: This is also a very good question which can be put to the American people. They have to think that a foreign enemy has attacked their country and now the foreign enemy has inflicted so many losses in life and in material upon them, and now he is going to go just beyond the border. Well, what would they do? They would shake hands with him and say thank you? I think he must go.

MacNEIL: He must go. Jim?

LEHRER: And your country will not stop and will not be satisfied until he is in fact gone. Is that correct, sir?

Amb. RADJAI: Oh, I think we have a better choice in front of us with regard to very reliable

Sulaimaniya and other cities are demonstrating. There have been shootings. Two ladies have been killed and so many have been wounded. Therefore, the people of Iraq are quite in a position to handle the matter, and overthrow the regime which has been imposed upon them.

LEHRER: So you might not have to do it yourself? You think the people of Iraq will do it themselves.

Amb. RADJAI: We don't need to do it. Exactly. There is another thing which is to be taken into consideration. We have more than 100,000 Iraqi refugees in Iran, and I think they have to go back. They have properties confiscated by the government, and they have a lot to say to Mr. Saddam Hussein.

LEHRER: Mr. Ambassador, the American people of course are used to having people from Iran blame everything on the United States. But let me ask you, what is your evidence to your claim that the United States is responsible for Iraq's invasion of your country?

Amb. RADJAI: Oh, it's very simple. You look at the papers today. When Saddam Hussein started his war against us everybody was foreseeing that the Islamic Republic of Iran will collapse in the very near future — in a day or so, probably, they would say. It was a very wishful thinking, which fortunately never happened. But now when Saddam Hussein is falling, everybody has got so much concern for him, and they want stability and peace. What is that peace that they never remembered when the war started?

LEHRER: Well, my question, though, is what is your evidence that the United States was responsible for the initial military action taken by Iraq, sir?

Amb. RADJAI: Well, some of the information we have we cannot— we just can't tell the people. We cannot produce evidence at this table here to them, but we have reliable information that Saddam Hussein started this war after consultation with authorities of the United States. Second, we know that all the pro-American regimes in the area have been actively participating in the war and assisting Saddam Hussein. We know some of the regimes cannot eat, drink water without the permission of the United States, and they have been very active in the war. Their soldiers are now captives. We have their tanks. We have their military hardware, some of them undamaged. So we know where they're coming from.

LEHRER: Is it true, though, that one of the United States' major, if not the major ally in the Middle East, Israel, has in fact been supplying your country with arms to fight Iraq?

Amb. RADJAI: I think this is sort of allegation which is produced in order to instigate the good feeling of the Arabs and turn it into bad feelings against us. They know that Israel— everybody knows that Israel is the greatest enemy of Islam and the greatest enemy of Arabs. So by accusing us of this, they have been doing their best in order to distort and destroy our relations with our neighbors, and they are doing it now. They are threatening the Muslim people of the area from Islam. I think it is the imperialism and Zionism that all the people in the area must be afraid of, not Islam, because they are already Moslems and very good observant Moslems, I believe.

LEHRER: Mr. Ambassador, to again repeat my question, has Israel in fact supplied arms to your country in this war against Iraq?

Amb. RADJAI: No.

LEHRER: What support have you received from Syria? Syria is one of the one countries that has supported you publicly, is that correct?

Amb. RADJAI: We are an independent country, and we have been under economic sanctions — different kind of sanctions. We have done our best to get whatever we needed from the free market, but we have not had any relations in this time with South Africa, with Israel, with Egypt, and with the United States.

LEHRER: What about the Soviet Union, sir?

from the side of the Soviet Union. Fortunately enough, plenty of Soviet arms have been taken from the Iraqis. If you remember, when we liberated the city of Bhutan, there we had access to enough tanks, lorries and other military hardware and ammunitions— enough for three complete months of the war all along the borders. And we still have them and we are using them.

LEHRER: Mr. Ambassador, thank you. Robin?

Amb. RADJAI: Thank you.

MacNEIL: Now, another perspective. We were unable to obtain an Iraqi spokesman for this program. We get another perspective from Karen Elliott House, diplomatic correspondent of the *Wall Street Journal*. Ms. House has covered Arab politics extensively, and returned only last week from a trip to Iraq. Ms. House, what are the worries of the states around Iran now?

KAREN ELLIOTT HOUSE: Well, precisely what you alluded to earlier, that even if the Iranians don't physically move into Iraq, that the enthusiasm of this victory is going to encourage them to try to spread their revolutionary view of Islam into Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, other countries in the Gulf.

MacNEIL: Which countries are most worried? The ones you just mentioned or—

Ms. HOUSE: Yes, and obviously, we're most worried about the Saudis.

MacNEIL: Are other Arab states committed to the survival of Saddam Hussein of Iraq?

Ms. HOUSE: I don't think there is a whole lot of personal commitment to Saddam Hussein necessarily. I think he is viewed as at least as a figure of stability, and thus to see him go, there is a fear that that would only encourage the Kurds in Iraq, the Shias versus the Sunnis—I mean, all of the ethnic and religious tensions in that country to expand.

MacNEIL: If Iran, which has the most powerful military forces in the area, at least except for Israel—if it presses for reparations from Iraq, are other states in the region likely to try to help Iraq meet them?

Ms. HOUSE: I think—

MacNEIL: You heard what the Ambassador said earlier.

Ms. HOUSE: Yes. There's been talk about that even before the war reached this critical point. The Saudis, among others, are apparently willing to help Iraq pay reparations, and there have been rumors all over here in the last couple of days that Abu Dhabi has already transferred money to Iran. And these are the sorts of things that it's very difficult to prove, but I think there is definitely a willingness; if money is all that stands in the way of a settlement that stops the Iranians, then the Saudis will be happy to pay.

MacNEIL: You heard the Ambassador say that there were signs of unrest in Iraq against Saddam Hussein. Does he appear secure to you? You were just in that country.

Ms. HOUSE: Well, it's obviously extremely difficult to know. I don't think—I mean, he's been a rather efficient leader at maintaining control and at eliminating his enemies, some of whom were once his friends. So I think that it would be premature to assume that in the next few days we're going to see Saddam Hussein out in the street. But clearly this is not a happy day for him because he has been so personally identified with the war, and it must be a bit like Jimmy Carter the morning after the failure of the hostage rescue mission in Iran.

MacNEIL: If Saddam—you say people are talking of stability. If Saddam Hussein falls, in what way is his survival important to the United States?

Ms. HOUSE: I think only for the same reason that some of the Arabs feel that it's important— simply because if you have a change of leadership, it's likely to encourage and unleash other ambitions and efforts, and— for instance, the Kurds in Iraq. It could encourage their

the country; and that, in a time when there is enough instability, is not what you want.

MacNEIL: Well, thank you. Jim?

LEHRER: Let's look at the so called Big Power stake in all this now. We get the perspective of William Olson of the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies here in Washington. His specialty is the international politics and strategies concerning the Persian Gulf region. If Iran does in fact end up winning this war, as it looks like it's going to, what would that mean for the United States and its interests?

WILLIAM OLSON: Well, the whole situation in the Middle East, as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, has been a nettle for the United States because it has been put in the position of, after the fall of the Shah, of losing whatever influence it had in Iran, and of having virtually no influence in Iraq. And as the result, the United States is now in the position of two countries at war in an area of vital concern to the United States, but has no leverage to exercise its influence in the area. This is of course very worrying to deal with because of the threat to the Saudis and of oil.

LEHRER: You heard what the Ambassador said, his charge that the United States actually precipitated this whole thing on the part of Iraq. Does that have a ring of truth to you?

Mr. OLSON: From an Iranian perspective, probably so. I don't think that it's a very realistic one, no. The United States has nothing to gain from this kind of promotion of Iraq, and the United States did not have this kind of influence in Iraq. The Soviet Union had the influence, and the treaty of friendship with Iraq, and they might have restrained Iraq, but I don't think that even they could have stopped the Iraqis from moving. This was something that was done purely for local motives, and there is very little that can be done by a superpower in this kind of situation.

LEHRER: Well, there's nothing the United States could have done to influence events in this, you're saying? Even the course of the last 20 months of the war?

Mr. OLSON: Well, that's been one of the real problems with the United States, is that we have had few levers of power in the area. We have no military forces to influence the region. Our inability to do anything about the hostage situation, I think, is a key of how low the American ability has sunk to affect interests or events in the area.

LEHRER: So just in terms of the region, you agree with Karen, then, that the main threat to U.S. interests is the instability that this will cause, right?

Mr. OLSON: That's one of the principal sources of concern.

LEHRER: Let's talk about the Soviet Union now. What are the potential wins and losses that it could get from this?

Mr. OLSON: Well, the principal gain at the moment for the Soviet Union is the fact of the destruction of American interests in Iran. This was a real plus for the Soviet Union, and it gives them an opportunity to inject their interest into the area by helping, in this case, the Iranians, because I believe the Soviet Union sees Iran as the strategic key to the area, and by providing what services they can to Iran, they can hope to increase their influence. Now, there are some chances that this might cost them in the area because of alienating the Arab states, but the problem at the moment is that the Arabs themselves are divided over the issue of the Iran-Iraq war. And you have the regional states, of course, supporting Iraq, but you have Syria, Libya, Algeria, the PLO and Yemen all supporting the Iranians in this situation. So it has divided the Arab community as well. And this means the Soviet Union can try to then sail between these interests and increase its total influence in the area by relations with Iran.

LEHRER: But most likely by siding more firmly with Iran rather than Iraq?

Mr. OLSON: Oh, absolutely. I mean, they have a treaty of friendship with Iraq, which they

have not lived up to. They have not provided the kind of facilities to Iraq that one would have expected of a loyal ally, and there were over the years—the last few years has been a deterioration in the Soviet-Iraqi relationship, and with the fall of the Shah the Soviets, I believe, saw an opportunity. This was a target of opportunity, and similar to the incidents in the Horn of Africa in the relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia, the Soviets shifted ground and went to the power they thought was more influential in the region.

LEHRER: I know this is a very difficult question, but I'm going to ask it anyhow. Looking ahead, with all the considered if's that you want to add into it, do you see, as a result of what's happened in this Iran-Iraqi war and the conclusion that it looks like it's headed for, causing some kind of major confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union?

Mr. OLSON: It certainly has this potential. One is concerned that this might be our Balkan situation—

LEHRER: Meaning what?

Mr. OLSON: The prelude to the First World War sort of situation; the confrontation of the two powers over extremely important strategic interests to both sides in a situation in which they cannot back down. The problem at the moment for the United States in the region is that it has very little with which to uphold its power.

LEHRER: So the Soviet Union's in better shape [unintelligible] than we are?

Mr. OLSON: Much better shape. The Soviet Union is a regional power, and it has something on the order of 20 divisions martialled in the region — of Central Asia and Afghanistan — and the United States has a nascent RDF, which is not particularly an impressive force.

LEHRER: Rapid Deployment Force.

Mr. OLSON: Or, as I heard it described, a rapidly deplorable force.

LEHRER: Okay. Well, we'll leave that alone. Thank you, Robin?

MacNEIL: Mr. Ambassador, you heard Karen Elliott House say that the states neighboring Iraq — the Gulf states, and she named them — fear that this is going to mean the spread of your revolution into their — or at least the militant Shiite Muslim spirit into their countries. Are they right to fear that? I mean, is that what you will now attempt to do?

Amb. RADJAI: No. I think most of the interpretations presented by the gentleman are not correct. The problem is that you have got access to a lot of information, but when you come to the interpretation the whole issue changes. I am sure you remember that all what you have foreseen about the future of Iran, even before the revolution, around the time of the collapse of the Shah's regime [unintelligible] — all of those things happened to be false. This is simply because those who interpret the information, they do not have access to some of the clues—

MacNEIL: What is the correct interpretation?

Amb. RADJAI: The correct interpretation is reference to Islam and to the Holy Koran, which is very difficult for some of the learned scholars in this part of the world. For instance, they put their fingers upon the Sunni-Shiite issue. It is absolutely irrelevant. We have a good number of Sunni brothers inside Iran who are defending their own land—

MacNEIL: That is the other—the major sect in the world of the Muslim faith.

Amb. RADJAI: You see, it is not a sectarian issue. We believe, and we think it is quite justified to believe so, that even raising up this issue, flaring up this issue, is in itself an instigation and probably a sort of, you know, conspiracy.

MacNEIL: Let me ask Mr. Olson—

Amb. RADJAI: We have Shiites and Sunnis in Iran. They have both members in the Parliament, and they are working hand in hand. We speak in terms of Islam, neither Shiite

nor Sunni, and mind you, the Sunni brothers inside the other countries around us are very happy to practice their Islam, and they are looking forward to that. If the impact of the revolution has resulted in a sort of political awareness or religious awareness or both in the area, it is inevitable. Religion is something innate. People want it. They have been Moslems for years, and they want to be Moslems. We cannot be blamed for that.

MacNEIL: Well, let me ask Ms. House whether the states she has been visiting recently see it that way. How do they see it?

Ms. HOUSE: Well, the Iraqis would make the same point he does in defense of their own very sharp division between numbers of Shias and Sunnis that whatever they are, whether Shia or Sunni, that they are Iraqi first. Now, that's not exactly the way the Saudis look at it. They're much more concerned, and their Shia population is very small — about 250,000 out of 4 million, 4½ million Saudis. But they're still very concerned about that, and they're very concerned about the Shia population in Bahrain, the appeal of the Iranian effort to try to stir up these minorities, which was going on. It's one of the reasons that we're—

MacNEIL: Excuse me, which they fear might result in the overthrow of their rather conservative regimes? Is that what you mean?

Ms. HOUSE: Yes. That you could generate something that spins out of control.

MacNEIL: Are you not interested in subverting and exporting your revolution to those countries?

Amb. RADJAI: We are not interested in any intervention, overt or covert, in the affairs of our neighbors — our brothers and sisters in the Persian Gulf area.

MacNEIL: So they don't have anything to worry about in your view?

Amb. RADJAI: They have something to worry about.

MacNEIL: What is that?

Amb. RADJAI: That is that they know what they have done to President Saddam Hussein in terms of supporting him in the war against us. If this war worries them, this is not very significant. We have always extended our hand to them for friendship. They can always shake it. We are ready. We are not going to have any territorial ambition, any aggression against any of these states. We are Moslems. We speak in the language of the Holy Koran. They have the same language, and we can communicate very easily. If some of the regimes are worried by what their own people might wish to do against them or for them, that is their own business.

MacNEIL: Let me ask Mr. Olson. Would that kind of declaration from Iran, Mr. Olson, relieve the anxieties of U.S. policymakers concerned with the area?

Mr. OLSON: I don't think so. I mean, what we're dealing with here is an excellent case of revolutionary double talk in that you assure people that you don't intend to interfere in their country but promote a transnational idea that is guaranteed to stir up local populations. And the Iranians at the moment are in the process of building a number of radio stations — I think the number is somewhere over 150 — with facilities to broadcast throughout the Middle East in a variety of languages, which they are in the process of doing, spreading the Islamic revolution, or their idea of the Islamic revolution; and any number of the leaders of the country have talked about the fact that you cannot contain the revolution. It's like spring weather; it spreads abroad as it is. And the states in the region, of course, are going to view this as interference in their affairs, as the Iranians would regard it as interference in their affairs if the local regimes broadcast into Iran to threaten—

MacNEIL: Let's get the Ambassador's comment on that.

Amb. RADJAI: I think the impact of the revolution—

MacNEIL: I mean, are you in fact installing all these radio stations to do this?

many languages.

MacNEIL: No, but I mean are you, to answer Mr. Olson's point.

Amb. RADJAI: Yes, we have different languages on our radio, and we preach. We have press. We have TV and people are quite free to listen to us. The problem is, what we are teaching or preaching in our radio stations and through our media is not something contrary to the principles of the belief of the people. We don't want them to overthrow their regimes. We just teach them the principles of the Holy Koran.

MacNEIL: We have to leave it there, Mr. Ambassador. Thank you very much for joining us. That's the end of our time tonight. Karen Elliott House, Mr. Olson, thank you for joining us. Good night, Jim.

LEHRER: Good night, Robin.

MacNEIL: That's all for tonight. We will be back tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.