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*Article Content*

THREATS AND RESPONSES; Iraq Official Says Nation Is Armed for War

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Iraq is preparing for war and has distributed ''hundreds of thousands, if not millions'' of guns to its people to fend off an American-led attack, the country's deputy prime minister said today.

Tariq Aziz, who is one of Saddam Hussein's closest advisers, said that while Baghdad hopes to avoid a war, ''we are taking all necessary precautions to defend our country.''

In an interview with Ted Koppel broadcast on the ABC News program ''Nightline,'' Mr. Aziz asserted that virtually every Iraqi household had weapons to use against an invading force. The government's decision to arm ordinary citizens, he said, demonstrated its popular support.

''We are the only country in the world, the only government in the world, who gives weapons to its people,'' Mr. Aziz said. ''And that's because we are sure of the attitude of our people. You can find a gun in every house in Iraq.''

Mr. Aziz, who served as his country's chief diplomat during the Persian Gulf war in 1991, asserted that American officials were mistaken if they thought Iraqis would welcome an invasion.

''All these guns will be used against any invasion of Iraq -- not against the leadership and the government of Iraq,'' he said.

Asked whether war was inevitable, Mr. Aziz said it would take a ''miracle'' to avert an attack.