

THE UNITED STATES INVOLVEMENT IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

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ROOTS OF THE IRAN-IRAQ CONFLICT OF 1980-88

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) was not just the longest **conventional** war of this century, but also one of the bloodiest, with more than a million casualties. Furthermore, the cost of conducting the war, as well as indirect and direct damage sustained by both belligerents, has been estimated at an astronomical figure of \$1,190 billion.¹ It was a conflict that dominated the Middle Eastern political scene for nearly a decade and witnessed -even by the standards of this conflict riddled region- unprecedented levels of violence.

BACKGROUND

The roots of conflict between the Arabs of Iraq and the Persians of Iran are as old as they are complex. This animosity dates back to the rivalries between the Ottoman and Persian empires, when Iraq was the easternmost province of the Ottoman Caliphate. In more recent times, another crucial element was introduced to the historic rivalry between Iran and Iraq: leadership of the Gulf region.

Following the decision of Britain to abdicate its historic role as the protector of the status quo in the Gulf by December 1971, the two regional powers aspired to the mantle of leadership of the region. Iran regarded itself as the defender of the region and its monarchical Arab regimes, while Iraq saw itself as the standard-bearer of militant, "republican" Arab nationalism in the Gulf. The conflict between the pro-West, conservative Iran, determined to maintain the status quo, and the pro-Soviet, radical Iraq, committed to revolution, was irreconcilable.

However, the competition was unequal. Iraq was militarily and strategically much weaker than Iran. With its shallow coastline of only 40 miles, Iraq's seaports could not maintain extensive, and reliable, communications with other ports of the region. Therefore, Iraq's claim to be a dominant Gulf power was questionable. On the other hand, Iran's coastline ran the length of the Gulf and also extended into the Arabian sea. Politically too, Iraq was isolated in the region. Because of their support to "revolutionary forces" against the monarchichal regimes, the Iraqi Baathists were much feared and hated by the Gulf's Arab monarchs.

Chosen by both the United States and Britain as the natural successor to Britain, Iran became the new guarantor of the security and safety of the Gulf. During the 70's, the Shah vastly increased his armed forces and military arsenals. He actively tried to destabilize the Iraqi government of Baathist leaders whom he regarded as a "group of crazy, bloodthirsty, savages".² His method: to provide strong military

support to Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party in northern Iraq.

By early 1975 tension between Baghdad and Tehran had reached such high levels that it threatened to lead to full-scale war between the two countries. However, both sides realized the danger, well aware that the outbreak of war would probably lead to significant destruction of their crucial oil installations, a reality neither side could afford. They, therefore, encouraged mediation, first by Turkey, and then by Algeria.

Another important factor which led the Shah to ease pressure on Baghdad was his realization that the activities of the Iraqi Kurds were creating secessionist aspirations among his own Kurdish population. For Iraq, an end to Iranian meddling in its internal affairs had become an important goal in itself since it had suffered great losses in both men and materiel.

This was the background to the conclusion of an accord on March 06, 1975 in Algiers by the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein, the then vice-president of Iraq, during a summit conference of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

The terms of the agreement included recognition of the **thalweg** (middle) line of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway in the south where it forms a common border, and to end "all infiltrations of a subversive nature". A Treaty concerning the Frontier and

Neighboring Relations between Iran and Iraq was signed.

The **Algiers Accord** signified victory for Iran. It incorporated the Iranian demand, first made over 60 years ago when both countries were under royal regimes, that the **thalweg principle** be applied to the frontier along the Shatt-al-Arab. As in 1937, when the weakness of its government had forced Iraq to yield to Iranian pressure to accept this formula for the Abadan port, Baghdad, now harassed and exhausted by the Iranian-backed Kurdish insurgency, once again capitulated. Saddam Hussein agreed to extend the thalweg formula to the rest of the fluvial border. It was a bitter pill for him to swallow, and left the Baathist leadership seriously divided, with military officers among those opposing the accord.

When the anti-Shah movement gathered momentum in 1978 and reached a critical stage in October, with widespread strikes crippling the Iranian economy, the Iranian monarch grew alarmed. The Shah pressed the Iraqi government to honor the Algiers Accord regarding the suppression of subversive activities directed against the fellow-signatory. Saddam Hussein complied and deported Ayatollah Khomeini from the holy Iraqi city of Najaf to France. The expulsion of a revered Shiite leader was strongly resented by Iraqi Shias, not to mention the Ayatollah himself, who never forgave Saddam Hussein for this humiliating act.

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND "EXPORTING THE REVOLUTION"

The Iran-Iraq war has often been regarded as the most recent outbreak of the longstanding Persian-Arab animosity. However, it would be closer to the truth to describe this particular conflict also as a persistent struggle over power and ideology between two hostile regimes. Thus, the seeds of this particular war lay in the so called "Islamic Revolution" in Iran which took place in 1979.

The victory of the revolutionary forces in Iran, led by Khomeini, sent shock waves throughout the Gulf. The overthrow of the seemingly powerful Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, which was enjoying a booming economy, by a clergy-led movement, made the conservative monarchical regimes of the Gulf, and the secular regime of Saddam Hussein, very anxious.

The secular Baathist regime of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian theocracy had absolutely nothing in common, with the noted exception of a strong, mutual, hatred. The Baathist commitment to secularism and the separation of religion and politics was anathema to the conservative ayatollahs in Iran who viewed such a division as antithetical to Islam. The ayatollahs believed that their "example" would inspire oppressed masses in the region to rise up against their unjust and repressive rulers, Iraq included.

The "export of the Islamic Revolution" as advocated by Ayatollah Khomeini was

understandably unnerving to the secular Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

Khomeini defined the aims of this "revolution":

"We will export our revolution throughout the world because it is an Islamic revolution. The struggle will continue until the calls "there is no god but God" and "Muhammad is the messenger of God" are echoed all over the world. The struggle will continue as long as the oppressors subjugate people in every corner of the world"³

Khomeini (as evident in his early writings) believed that the conflict between concepts of state and Islam was an inevitable one. He portrayed the territorial states as "products of man's limited ideas", while the world was "the home of all the masses of people under the law of God".⁴

Khomeini added a Third World element to traditional Islamic thinking which distinguished those parts of the world ruled by Islam from the non-Islamic world and saw the two linked by a state of war. He separated the world into parts where the oppressors (**mustakbirin**) rule over the oppressed (**mostazefin**) and parts where there was no oppression. In Khomeini's thinking, oppression could only be ended through the rule of Islam; the liberation of the oppressed thus required the export of the revolution. In his view the camp of the oppressors consisted of the superpowers and their regional client regimes; his revolution was thus directed

both against external domination and internal suppression.⁵

The concept of the "oppressed", for Khomeini, described not only those who suffered from political and socio-economic deprivation, but, more importantly, those who were prevented from practicing their religious beliefs. The broad use of this concept of "oppression" enabled the Tehran regime to interpret this term as they pleased: "exporting the revolution" could, therefore, define a war to end political/social "oppression" or could refer solely to apolitical missionary work. Interpretation, therefore, depended on the specific political context.

Furthermore, this commitment to "exporting the revolution" was ingrained in Article 154 of the 1979 Constitution of Iran: "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the attainment of independence, freedom and just government to be the right of all people of the world. While scrupulously refraining from all forms of aggressive intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it therefore protects the just struggle of the oppressed and deprived in every corner of the globe."⁶

From the very beginning, the Iranian revolution posed a considerable challenge to other neighboring Gulf countries. The Iranian commitment to "exporting the revolution" led to a significant deterioration of relations with neighboring Gulf countries who interpreted the **Iraqi** aggression of September 23, 1980, as a pre-emptive strike.

THE IRAQI INVASION OF IRAN

The Iraqi invasion of Iran on September 23, 1980 was not an impulsive whim of Saddam Hussein. The sequence of escalatory action, and reaction, which preceded the war was fueled by Tehran's zeal to "export the revolution" and ~~Baghdad's attempts to keep this so-called "revolution" from exposing, and exploiting, the Baathist regime's weaknesses.~~ In addition to the usual propaganda means, Iranian provocation included active financial support to Kurdish rebellion groups in northern Iraq. Such foreign involvement that threatened the very sovereignty of the Iraqi state could not be ignored by any Iraqi leader.

In fact, the Iranian revolution in itself could be considered a provocation of Iraq -for Iraq's leaders also liked to portray themselves as **Arab** "revolutionaries". The Iranian revolution implicitly challenged the Iraqi "revolution" by asserting an alternative way to mobilize the masses for change. Saddam Hussein responded to Iran's revolutionary challenge to his rule by going to war against the Iranian revolution -obviously in the hope that this revolution itself would turn out to be less than solidly established.

Iraq's principal objective was a pre-emptive one: "to defend the revolution". Its key point of reference was the Algiers Agreement of 1975, which on the one hand had established a **modus vivendi** between the two countries on the basis of a mutual recognition of each other's political legitimacy but, on the other hand, was seen by

Saddam Hussein as a humiliating defeat in the face of superior Iranian power.

The essentially negative view formed by the Iraqi leadership about Iranian intentions was further fueled by Iranian actions. These included the renewed encouragement given to the Kurdish opposition groups in northern Iraq. This not only threatened the integrity of the Iraqi state, and posed the growing possibility of an expensive military campaign, as had occurred during the Kurdish rebellion of 1973-5, but it also proved beyond doubt to Baghdad that the new Iranian regime was not interested in observing the modus vivendi struck between the two states in 1975.

The effect of Iranian inspired political violence was also felt in much of the rest of the country, including Baghdad. Thus, in the eyes of the Iraqi government, the revolutionary regime in Tehran had clearly, and repeatedly, violated the Algiers Agreement and thus provided a pretext for its revision.

Another such set of activities was Iranian support for anti-regime activities among the Iraqi Shiites (who make up 60% of the population) culminating in the attempt on the life of Tariq Aziz (the Christian deputy premier of Iraq) by a Shiite of Iranian origin on April 1, 1980.⁷

While it is difficult to determine the extent to which Tehran has been directly

responsible for these activities, what matters is the fact that Shiites throughout the Arab world felt that the example of the Iranian revolution provided them with a way out of their existence as the "underdogs" in the mostly Sunni Arab communities.

Iraq responded to the attempt on Tariq Aziz by the well-established response of expelling some 7000 Iranians and Iraqis of Iranian origin.⁸ Both sides also put their armed forces on alert, and from early 1980 on, border skirmishes between Iran and Iraq occurred at the rate of 10 a month.

If the Iraqis were concerned by Iranian actions, the direction of Iranian rhetoric was no less disturbing. The propaganda war was of course a two-way process. Nevertheless, it was the Iranian mullahs who, perhaps without appreciating the gravity of such demands, eagerly called for the death of the Iraqi leadership and the destruction of the regime. The tenor of such threats increased in the spring of 1980. For example, in the course of three days the **faqih** (Iranian Islamic clergy) called for the overthrow of the Iraqi president, and the Iranian president threatened the invasion of Iraq.⁹

In April of 1980, both sides spelled out their demands for ending the dispute. The demands reflected the sharp differences between the two regimes: Iraq demanded the return of three southern Gulf islands occupied by Iran in 1971 and of territories ceded to Iran under the Algiers Agreement, as well as recognition of the Arab-

speaking Iranian province of Khuzistan as "Arabistan", thus underlining Saddam's broader aspirations.

Iran demanded the destruction of the "Israel supported" Baath regime, an end to Iraqi cooperation with pro-Imperialist and pro-Zionist forces and the liberation of all political prisoners in Iraq - a demand that bore the imprint of ideological, rather than territorial expansionism. From April 1980 onward, war seemed imminent.

In sum, Iran deliberately challenged and provoked the Iraqi regime by meddling in its internal affairs through its support of minority groups, including the Shias in the south, with the objective of ~~inciting an internal revolt~~ which would overthrow the Iraqi Baathist regime. However, it was the internal chaos within Iran -as the mullahs attempted to consolidate their power and crush the **mujaheddin-e-khalq** (people's freedom fighters)- in addition to the (perceived) disarray within the Iranian military which gave the ambitious Saddam Hussein the idea that he could settle old scores with his bigger, and more populous, Persian neighbor by launching a blitzkrieg.

Specifically, Saddam Hussein coveted an absolute control over the Shatt-al-Arab (The Arab River). On a personal level, Saddam Hussein probably believed that, given the internal chaos within Iran, the time was ripe to take advantage of this situation by reversing the effects of the Algiers Agreement, with which he was

intimately associated. While this "connection" had not affected his political position inside Iraq, his Arab credentials had been somewhat jeopardized by the ceding of sovereignty over the eastern half of the Shatt al-Arab. Therefore, the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty over the Shatt was important as a **symbol** of the new power relations in the area. It also represented the restoration of Iraqi, and, more importantly, of Saddam Hussein's **honor**.

Ironically enough, instead of a speedy Iraqi victory he had hoped for, Saddam Hussein provided the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini with a rallying cause that would help legitimize the regime through the consolidation of the "Islamic Revolution".

REGIONAL PLAYERS AND THE BELLIGERENTS

Despite being a primary target of Iran's spiritual hegemonic ambitions, Iraq did not remain the sole target of such a bid: the other, weaker, Gulf monarchies also experienced the Iranian "zeal".

However, given the weak link between the smaller Shiite populations on the Arab side of the Gulf (with the notable exception of Bahrain where they comprise about 70% of the population), and the lack of contiguity of these countries to Iranian territory, both the prospects for internal instability and the possibility of direct military threat from Tehran seemed weaker than they were in the case of Iraq.

This by no means suggested that the conservative Gulf monarchies were not shaken by the huge wave of Islamic fundamentalism that was the core of the Iranian revolution. The pronouncements of the Iranian regime, led by the clerics, isolated the country regionally and fostered a widespread sense that the Iranian revolution had to be contained.

However, while Iran's revolution was a vivid nightmare for every Gulf regime, initially, the Gulf Arab states had made every effort to avoid any friction with the new Islamic Republic. This was due in part to the understandable fear that Shiites -the majority in Bahrain and a significant minority in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and in Kuwait- might form a natural constituency for Iranian influence and rise up against the Sunni rulers of the Gulf Arab states.

But with the open calls for spreading Islamic revolution emanating from Tehran's clerical leaders -one of them even renewed Iran's old claim to Bahrain that the Shah had once made and later renounced- it was logical for the Gulf Arab states to conclude that they were a prime target of the new regime. While the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war had lessened any immediate threat to their sovereignty, and/or legitimacy of the indigenous regime(s), nevertheless, the possibility of an Iranian victory, or the possible spillover of this regional conflict, remained a constant source of anxiety for the ruling elite.

This fear led the smaller states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) to create the **Gulf Cooperation Council** in February of 1981. They made policy changes designed to appease domestic Islamic sentiment while repressing any would-be revolutionaries. Besides their traditional bases of legitimacy, the rulers' substantial oil revenues provided the means - through extensive subsidies and other social welfare programs- to expand these bases.

The Gulf Cooperation Council -while unable to coordinate members defense, intelligence and economic policies- provided a basis for cooperation in other areas which somewhat enhanced their **sense** of security.

Saudi Arabia, a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, played a crucial role in bringing about a rapprochement between Baghdad and Washington, which considerably strengthened Iraq's hand.

In fact, in August of 1980, Saddam Hussein had personally visited the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and discussed his military plans with them. Thus, before Saddam finalized his war plans he had secured the active support of both the Saudi and Kuwaiti rulers. By September of 1980, Iraq enjoyed a prestigious position in the Arab world, following Arab opposition to Egypt's "Land for Peace" agreement with Israel. Its relations with the Gulf monarchies were at their most

cordial.

Thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the Saudis there was a long term arrangement to provide US-Saudi intelligence to Baghdad, which proved invaluable to the Iraqi high command in forging advance plans to blunt the many offensives Tehran mounted.

Furthermore, due to the financial assistance of the United States to Iraq in 1983, and again in 1986, the Iraqis managed to secure additional assistance from other Western countries.¹⁰

The United States had no particular liking or affinity for the Iraqi regime. However, it was primarily its hostility towards the Islamic regime in Iran that drove it to accept the Saudis efforts at rapprochement between Washington and Baghdad.

Kuwait, while historically at loggerheads with Iraq due to its dubious claims on Warba and Bubiyan Islands, actively supported its traditional enemy following the outbreak of war. The direction of the mullahs in Tehran -"towards Islamic theocracies"- was viewed by the ruling elite in Kuwait as a grave threat to their interests. Provision of generous financial assistance to Iraq, therefore, was regarded as a necessary evil in order to keep the "fanatical Persian hordes" from threatening Kuwait's sovereignty.

As early as March 1979, the Iranians had shown aggressive intentions towards the ruling Sunni monarchy in **Bahrain**. The Iranian plan was to overthrow the ruling family by means of volunteers that would be landed in the tiny sheikdom. However, learning of this plot, the British warned the newly established regime to shelve their hegemonic ambitions. Pre-occupied with their efforts to consolidate their hold on the reins of power in Tehran, the Iranian regime abandoned these plans, temporarily. In December 1981, the Bahraini authorities exposed another Iranian plot to overthrow the regime arresting 73 terrorists (all Shiites).¹¹

Support of either Iran or Iraq in the war assumed such importance as the war continued that it became a governing issue in inter-Arab relations. The two rival coalitions that emerged in the Arab world consisted of Syria, Libya and the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen on the one hand, and of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and their allies on the other. The former coalition supported Iran and was hostile to the United States. The latter group was considered pro-American and supported Iraq against Iran.

Not only were the disagreements between the two coalitions sharp and acrimonious but **Syria**, the leader of the radical coalition, was able to prevent an Arab summit from meeting for a period of more than five years. The significance of this was that Syria, a defender of pan-Arab nationalism and the self-styled keeper of the pan-Arab flame, was the active ally of a **non-Arab** state at war with

an Arab one. This would have been inconceivable a decade earlier, and Assad's ability to do so was clearly a product of pan-Arabism's decline. However, the Syrian stance during the war also contributed to speeding up this very decline.

The **Syrian-Iranian** alliance was undoubtably the product of mutual interests defined by a common enemy -Iraq. However, the significance of this alliance between an Arab and a non-Arab entity is that it was more a reflection of the limited appeal of Ayatollah Khomeini's "Islamic Revolution". The Iranian regime failed in its attempts to project its "Revolution" as having a more **universal** Islamic appeal with its failure to rid it of its Shia edge. The continued support for Iran by the **Alawi** (an extreme Shia sub-sect) dominated regime of Assad's Syria was an example of how sectarian association took primacy over the broader bond which Arabism represented.

Israel was in several respects a beneficiary of this conflict. With its most formidable enemy -Iraq- bogged down in a bloody conflict with its eastern neighbor (Iran), Israel could somewhat relax as the possibility of a major Arab-Israeli war was eliminated for the duration of this war. However, the Israeli approach, in an attempt to pick up the pieces following the Shah's downfall and looking for inroads with the new regime, was one of varied support for Iran.

The cooperation between a theocratic **Islamic** regime bent on "exporting its

revolution" and the **Jewish** state, on the surface, seemed ironic and bizarre. In reality, this "cooperation" was the by-product of a mutual, and strong, hatred of the Baathist regime in Baghdad. Therefore, geopolitical realities that included a shared interest in the overthrow of the Saddam regime superceded any ideological convictions held by these two strange bedfellows.

In sum, the Gulf regimes managed through a combination of repressive and reassuring measures, to contain the dangerous wave of Shiite restiveness, thereby pushing the Iranians towards a far more limited target audience -(mainly Shiite) subversive groups. The abortive Bahraini plot of December 1981 was soon followed by a series of terrorist activities in Kuwait. As a result Iran, which had basically enjoyed good relations with the Arab world under the Shah, succeeded in seriously antagonizing many of its Gulf Arab neighbors.

The Gulf Arab states, like Israel, viewed a strategic stalemate as the most desirable outcome of the war. However, given their military weakness and proximity to the theatre of war, their direct stakes in the war were far greater than those of Israel. This reality compelled them to get involved -financially and materially- to ensure the survival of the Iraqi regime.

ENDNOTES:

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3. Quoted in Farang Rajaee, **Islamic Values and World View, Khomeini on Man, the State and International Politics**, New York, University Press of America, 1983.
4. In Kashf al-Asrar ("The Revelations of Secrets"), quoted in R.K. Ramazani, "Khumayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy", in Adeed Dawisha, ed., **Islam in Foreign Policy**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.17.
5. Cf. *ibid.*, p.9.
6. Hamid Alger, **"Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran"**, Mizam Press, Berkeley CA, 1980, p. 82-83.
7. For an analysis of Shiite unrest in Iraq see Hana Batatu, "Shi'i organizations in Iraq: al-Dawa al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahedin", in Juan R.I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, eds, **Shi'ism and Social Protest**, New Haven, Conn, Yale University Press, 1986, pp179-200.
8. See Christine Moses Helms, **Iraq, Eastern Flank of the Arab World**, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution, 1984, p.145.
9. Paul Taylor, "Iran calls for the Iraqi regime's overthrow", **International Herald Tribune**, April 09, 1980, and David Hirst, "Bani-Sadr threatens invasion of Iraq",

Guardian, April 12, 1980.

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U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN THE GULF WAR**THE U.S. SHIFTS GEARS: FROM NEUTRALITY TO TILTING**

The government of the United States had never meant, planned nor wanted to get embroiled in what, in time, came to be known as the "longest war". It was a series of events -tactical Iranian ground victories; adroit diplomatic maneuvers by Gulf Arab allies; Americans held hostage by shady, Iranian controlled, groups in Lebanon; Kuwaiti manipulation of the Irangate scandal and the administration's exaggerated concern with the "Soviet threat" to its Gulf interests that would lead to American entanglement in a bitter conflict.

The U.S. administration's gradual shift from a position of strict neutrality to one of outright siding with Iraq was due in no small part to the administration's antipathy towards the Iranian regime. This antipathy was fueled by the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran by Islamic students fanatically loyal to Khomeini; the aborted Desert One rescue mission; and unending Iranian vitriol directed towards the U.S. and its Gulf allies.

However, specifically, it was the Iranian recapture of lost territory in four major offensives, from September 1981 to May 1982, that would eventually set in motion the process of U.S. reassessment of its policy towards the Gulf war. While these strategic victories -that pushed the invading forces of Iraq back into their own territory- were not of too great concern to watchful eyes in Washington, nonetheless, they were a harbinger of things to come.

To those in Washington it was one matter that the Iranian regime had managed - through tactical means- to recapture lost territory. However, when the Iranians displayed a serious determination to go on the offensive there was reason for concern in Washington: The objective of the clerics in Tehran appeared to be the replacement of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime with one preferably along the same theocratic lines as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Equally disturbing were the Iranian proclamations against the "Great Satan" (the United States) and its Arab allies in the region. Tehran identified "export of the Islamic Revolution" to be one of the pillars of its policy. These antagonistic statements by the Iranians only helped further drive the United States toward siding with the repressive Iraqi regime. The U.S. concern widened to that of the security and stability of the entire Gulf region.

The Iranian decision to go on the offensive and carry the war into Iraq, rather than

to negotiate from a position of strength, would prove to be a major blunder. It led to six more years of bloodshed and misery for both sides, and to superpower support for Iraq, before the Iranian regime would humiliatingly accept the U.N. Ceasefire Resolution 598 on July 20, 1988.

On July 12, 1982, the U.N. Security Council -reflecting the concerns of both superpowers- passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire and a withdrawal of the warring forces to the internationally recognized border. Tehran rejected the resolution.

The very next day, the beginning of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, Iran launched an offensive named Ramadan al Mubarak, (the Blessed Ramadan), on the southern front. This military decision of the Iranian regime inevitably changed the nature of the conflict: Iran had moved from defense of its territory from a foreign invader (Iraq), to become the invader when it launched its offensive to capture Basra, Iraq's second largest city.

By 1983 American policymakers were convinced that there was no possibility of an Iraqi victory on the battlefield. They perceived two possible outcomes to the conflict: an Iranian victory or continued stalemate. It was the latter option, or objective, that led the administration to take a more active role in ensuring that neither side emerged victorious which would upset the precarious balance of

power in the Gulf.¹

The overall conclusion of a study by the U.S. National Security Council staff, in the Fall of 1983, predicted that an Iranian triumph would destabilize the entire Gulf region since it would strengthen the forces within the Iranian regime bent on "exporting the Islamic Revolution" to neighboring countries run by what they perceived to be despotic puppet regimes controlled by the United States. Furthermore, through the establishment of a puppet regime of its own in Baghdad, Iran could engage in meddling in the internal affairs of neighboring Gulf Sheikdoms.

The report visualized a collapse of the pro-Western monarchies in the Gulf as a consequence of an Iranian victory. And though it was not felt that the subsequent "Islamic regimes" in Iraq and elsewhere were likely to side with Moscow, the overthrow of a group of pro-Western rulers in a region that contained more than half of the world's known oil reserves was perceived as an unprecedented, and unacceptable, development. In short, an Iraqi defeat was seen as a major blow to U.S. interests.²

The Iraqi regime -a typical Third World autocracy- was viewed more favorably by the Reagan administration than the mullah-controlled Iranian regime simply because it was a **familiar** entity. Like the rest of the Western world, the idea of

a mullah-led upheaval was so new -and so bizarre- to the people of the United States.

During the Shah's rule, the regular predictions of upheavals/bloody revolutions/coups in Iran by Western analysts involved the military; a popular uprising, probably led by the bazaaris of Tehran; or a left wing takeover orchestrated by the Tudeh party. The possibility of the squabbling Ayatollahs within -and without- the country gaining control of the reins of power seemed implausible. This possibility was overlooked not only by these analysts, but also by the Shah himself and his powerful allies.

Now, this revolutionary regime rhetorically threatened to destabilize the entire region on a long term quest to "cleanse" the world of its evil ways. Thus, to Washington, the ambitions of the Iranian regime had to be contained one way or the other.

A prolonged stalemate between Iran and Iraq suited the United States: Two unpleasant regimes battering away at each other. However, this equation seemed threatened when, in 1982, the Iranians appeared to have gained the tactical advantage in the ground war through four major offensives: Operation Fatah al-Mobin (Clear Victory), March 19, 1982 ; Operation Bait al-Muqqadas (The Sacred House), April 29, 1982 ; Operation Ramadan al-Mubarak (Blessed Ramadan), July

13, 1982; and Operation Muharram al-Harram (Holy Muharram), October 31, 1982.

Therefore, to Washington, the need to counter the more virulent threat that Iran posed to America's larger interests in the region, by supporting the equally distasteful Iraqi regime, prevailed. Plans were formulated to shore up Iraq both morally and materially.

In November 1983, the U.S. National Security Advisor issued a secret directive to this effect that outlined the diplomatic, and military, steps the United States should take to assist Baghdad. The Pentagon prepared contingency plans to provide military assistance to Iraq if such a request was made in order to "stabilize the border" of Iraq or one of its neighboring Arab allies. In such an instance the strategy of the United States would include: A-10 warplanes to attack the Iranian tanks inside Iraq; fragmentation bombs to disperse Iranian troop concentrations; and "air defense weapons" to enable Iraq to retain control of its airspace.³

The first public, or overt, sign of a shift in Iraqi-American relations came in January 1983 when Saddam Hussein published the text of his talks with U.S. Congressman Stephen Solarz during the latter's visit to Baghdad five months earlier.

According to the text, the Iraqi leader declared that Iraq had never been a part of Soviet strategy in the region, and that it was in the interests of Washington to be "present in the region when any other big or superpower is present".⁴ In an

obvious reference to the Soviet Union, Iraq had extended to the United States what can be characterized as an open invitation at Moscow's expense. It was a sharp reversal of a consistent Iraqi policy -of keeping both superpowers out of the Gulf waters- that reflected the seriousness of the threat which Iran posed to the survival of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime.

Washington welcomed this new, friendlier, posture of the Iraqi government, which had severed relations with the United States following the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. U.S. Secretary of State, George Shultz, met his Iraqi counterpart, Tariq Aziz, in Paris in October 1982 and in May of 1983.

In June of 1983, despite the U.S. Department of State's inclusion of Iraq in its list of "nations that support international terrorism", the Reagan administration authorized the sale to Iraq of 60 helicopters for "agricultural use". The significance of this transaction was that these helicopters were capable of being converted to military machines.

This unprecedented move by the Reagan administration was an unusual departure from a consistent U.S. policy of maintaining an economic embargo of sorts on states either engaged in, or supportive of, international terrorism. It reflected a deep anxiety towards the quixotic, clergy-led, Iranian regime.

Even more significantly, the administration authorized provision of \$460 million

credit to Iraq for the purchase of 147,000 tonnes of American rice. This gesture by the United States had important international repercussions for the Iraqis then in the midst of a severe economic crisis: it reassured many European -and Arab- governments, and international banks, of the "solvency" of the Iraqi regime, thereby helping to improve its damaged credit worthiness.

An important public policy decision of the Reagan administration -reflecting the shift, or tilt, in U.S. policy in favor of Baghdad -was announced in late November of 1983, when Washington removed Iraq from its list of "nations that support international terrorism". The importance of this reversal was that, theoretically, it opened up the possibility of U.S. arms sales to Saddam Hussein's regime.

Then, in mid-December of 1983, a special envoy, Donald Rumsfeld, arrived in Baghdad with a letter for Saddam Hussein from President Reagan. This was followed by a U.S. delegation -headed by a deputy assistant secretary of state and a deputy assistant secretary of defense- who visited six Gulf capitals.

The objective of the U.S. delegation was to reassure the jittery Gulf leadership that Washington would regard Iraq's defeat as "contrary to U.S. interests".⁵ Such a public display of its pro-Baghdad tilt was meant not only to convey to the Iraqis, and the Gulf states, the strong commitment of the United States to protect the regional status quo, but was also designed to dissuade Iran from launching its much anticipated offensive against Iraq.

Then, on January 23rd, 1984, -less than two months after Iraq had been removed from the Department of States's list of "nations supporting international terrorism"- Iran was added to the list, with the net result that it was now subject to rigid export controls. This shift in official policy in such a short span of time can be attributed in good part to the "invisible hand" of the Iranians in the tragic October 1983 truck bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks at Beirut airport, which resulted in the death of 259 U.S. servicemen. This Iranian "connection" only further exacerbated a delicate "relationship" -if it can be called that- between the United States and Iran.

The United States now applied stronger diplomatic pressure on Britain, West Germany, Israel, Italy, South Korea and Turkey, among others, to adhere to the U.S. launched Operation Staunch (which was instituted in 1983) to discourage its allies from arms sales to Iran. In fact, Washington had moved from its original position of turning a blind eye to the shipment of weapons and spares originating in the United States to Iran (either directly or through third parties by private companies), to strict implementation of the arms embargo -Operation Staunch- with the objective of stemming the flow of weapons into Iran.

By early 1984, the U.S. policy of "balance" -its neutral stance- had been replaced by a definite tilt toward the Iraqis in the Iran-Iraq war. The resumption of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Iraq in 1984 was one of the most significant indications of this reversal.

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Simultaneously, the United States passed on satellite and high altitude reconnaissance pictures of Iranian troop movements to Riyadh, well aware that the ultimate destination of this sensitive information was Baghdad. The Iraqis were provided access to sensitive information collected by four American AWACs leased by the United States to Saudi Arabia for round-the-clock surveillance of the Gulf, a fact confirmed by Saddam Hussein.⁶

In sum, the U.S. transition from a policy of "strict neutrality", or "balance", to one of outright siding with the Iraqis was a direct consequence of a number of factors including the four, decisive, Iranian ground offensives which threatened to undermine the very survival of the Iraqi regime. Henceforth, the more or less overt U.S. support for the Iraqis would remain consistent for the duration of the war.

ENDNOTES:

1. Hiro, Dilip, **The Longest War**, p119.
2. Richard M. Preece, United States-Iraqi Relations, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., July 1986; **New York Times**, January 11, 1984.
3. **Newsday**, May 22, 1984.
4. **Iraqi News Agency**, January 2, 1983.

5. **Washington Post**, January 4, 1984.
6. **New York Times**, March 29, 1984.

3

THE EROSION OF U.S. CREDIBILITY: THE IRANGATE AFFAIR

The need to contain the Gulf war -which by late 1984 appeared to symbolize a threat to the security of the **entire** Gulf region- and to deter Iran from regional mischief-making could not substitute for a long range U.S. policy of opening up channels to an Iran that -in the future- might moderate its expansionist ("Export of the Islamic Revolution") aims.

Hence, as President Reagan began his second term in January of 1985, his senior advisers were concerned about Iran: they feared the possibility of a Soviet takeover and were also concerned that Iran might defeat Iraq on the battlefield and spread the "Islamic Revolution". Furthermore, the White House was frustrated by its inability to secure the release of American hostages held in Lebanon by forces financed by the Iranians. Nevertheless, the possibilities of either a rapprochement with Iran, or a serious retaliation against it, were not seen as feasible options by the Reagan administration.

Policymakers in Washington realized that the importance of Iran to the strategic interests of the United States in the region could not be denied indefinitely. Iran was a real, and powerful, state that mattered in the geopolitical realities of the regional power equation. The importance of Iran, therefore, had to be acknowledged, and dealt with.

Since mid-1983 the repeated failures of the Iranian forces to breach the strong Iraqi defenses, combined with the improved performance of the Iraqi air strikes, forced the Iranian regime to undertake some serious soul searching as to their long term objectives both as they related to the Iraqis and to the world at large. In October 1984, Khomeini summoned Iran's diplomatic representatives from abroad and instructed them to take a new approach:

"We should act as it was done in early Islam when the Prophet sent ambassadors to all parts of the world to establish proper relations. We cannot sit idle by saying we have nothing to do with governments. This is contrary to intellect and religious law. We should have relations with all governments with the exception of a few with which we have no relations at present."¹

Along the same vein, Iranian Prime Minister, Mir Hoseyn Musavi noted that Iran had experienced problems in obtaining military spare parts and equipment because of U.S. pressure on nations interested in supplying Iran. He offered assurances to the nations of the region who feared Iran's expansionist aims:

"We do not want to export armed revolution to any country. This is a big lie. Our aim is to promote the Islamic Revolution through persuasion and by means of truth and courage. These are Islamic values."²

These conciliatory statements by the Iranian regime, which reflected serious pragmatic considerations -including the very survival of the Islamic Republic- did not go unnoticed in Washington.

By the Spring of 1985, the Iranians were eager to mend their fences with the West: Iranian emissaries approached Israel claiming to be moderates with a desire to move their country toward the West. The Israelis passed these contacts on to Washington.

President Reagan was informed of these initiatives. Michael Ledeen, a National Security Council (NSC) consultant was sent to meet Manuchehr Ghorbanifar, an Iranian arms merchant, and mid-level officials linked to Majlis Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani. The Iranians asked to buy arms and promised to arrange the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon in exchange.³ Thus, the arms deal, that came to be known as "Irangate", was set in motion...

THE IRANIAN ARMS DEAL

Iran received a total of six arms shipments during a fifteen month period, beginning

on August 30, 1985 and ending on November 06, 1986, only three days after the arms sales were disclosed by the Lebanese media. These arms shipments did lead to the release of three American hostages -the Reverend Benjamin Weir, the Reverend Laurence Martin Jenco and David P. Jacobsen.

Despite the arms embargo -Operation Staunch- imposed on Iran, the U.S. administration gave Israel the go-ahead to deliver 504 TOW anti-tank missiles to Iran in August and September of 1985. The next day, the reverend Benjamin Weir was freed in Lebanon.

Hoping to win the release of all the remaining American hostages in Lebanon, the U.S. administration next approved a shipment of 120 HAWK anti-aircraft missiles to Iran. Israel sent the first 18 missiles in November. But the consignment was rejected by the Iranians, who found them unsatisfactory after test-firing a missile, and promptly returned them.

Matters were further complicated, however, because Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North of the National Security Council staff used excess money from Iran's payments to obtain arms for the U.S. backed Nicaraguan guerrillas, the Contras. It was this link between the sale of weapons to a hostile country (Iran) and the illegal supply of weapons to the Contras that proved to have a devastating impact on the American public.

In February 1986, the United States sold an additional thousand TOWs to Iran. Oliver North also supplied the Iranians with intelligence designed to convince Tehran of a Soviet threat. Additional funds were generated and used for the Contras and other covert operations around the world. Again Iran did not fulfil U.S. expectations that it would pressure those holding the Americans hostage in Lebanon for their release.

A third U.S. "contact" was made with Iran at the beginning of May 1986. The understanding was that in exchange for badly needed HAWK missile parts, Iran would effect the release of all American hostages being held in Lebanon.

On May 23rd, the U.S. shipped 508 TOW missiles and HAWK missiles spares to Israel. On May 25th, Robert McFarlane, the former National Security Adviser, flew to Tehran with a fifth of the HAWK spares that the Iranians had requested. There he met with members of the Iranian regime, but they were not the high ranking officials he had hoped to meet.

Then, on July 26th, another American hostage, Father Laurence Jenco, was released in Beirut. His release raised hopes in Washington and the administration decided to ship the remainder of the HAWK spares to Iran.

In September, the NSC began to negotiate with what was termed a "Second Channel" to the Iranian regime. The contact was said to be a "relative" of

Rafsanjani. North and his team met the new Iranian contact in West Germany in early October. The Iranian offer: to help secure the release of one American hostage if the United States would send 500 TOWs to Iran. On October 29th, these weapons were shipped from Israel to Iran through a third country. Four days later, on November 2nd, David Jacobsen was released in Beirut.

AL SHIRAA DISCLOSES THE ARMS DEAL

On November 3rd, 1986, the Al Shiraa (The Sail), a Beirut based Lebanese magazine, disclosed that the United States had secretly sold arms to Iran, and that Robert McFarlane, a former U.S. National Security Adviser, had visited Tehran earlier in the year to meet Iranian officials.⁴

It was a bizarre story which would not have been believed if it had not quickly been confirmed by Rafsanjani. The editor of Al-Shiraa claimed in an interview that he was tipped off by an Iranian friend with whom he had studied.⁵ Later information makes it more likely that this was a post-facto explanation of what had transpired, as a mention of the McFarlane mission to Tehran was given in a small Hizbollah magazine circulated in Baalbek, the eastern Lebanon stronghold of pro-Iranian elements, a week **before** Al Shiraa published.⁶

The news stunned the world. The disclosure of the covert U.S. arms sales to Iran had a devastating effect on the American public, which detested the fundamentalist

Iranian regime. The covert deal was perceived by the American people to be a betrayal of sorts by Washington -which to them appeared to have acted against its professed policy of "no deals" with terrorist individuals or states- and had dramatically weakened the popular standing of President Ronald Reagan. In fact, President Reagan's approval rating plummeted from 67% to 46% from which it never recovered.

More important than Iran's improved air defense and anti-tank capability was the political and psychological impact of the publicity surrounding the disclosure of U.S. arms supplies to Iran. Internationally, the net result was a severe blow to the credibility of the Reagan administration among its Arab and European allies.

However, while on the surface this clandestine arrangement seemed unthinkable, two very significant U.S. concerns were involved: securing the release of the Americans taken hostage by the pro-Tehran groups (such as the Islamic Jihad and Hizbollah) in Lebanon; secondly, the strategic interest of opening up channels with moderate Iranian elements for future influence.

Obtaining the release of the Americans held hostage in Lebanon had become a personal obsession of President Reagan: the bitter memory of the Americans held hostage in Iran was very much alive in the minds of many within the Reagan administration.

However, it was the -March 16, 1984- abduction of William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut, that put tremendous pressure on the administration to effect the release of the Americans held hostage in Lebanon.⁷

With Buckley's kidnapping, the problem of U.S. hostages began to take greater precedence over strategic considerations -a trend that was steadily reinforced by each hostage incident.

William Buckley's kidnapping and subsequent torture -a videotape of which was delivered to Washington- had a powerful effect on viewers at the Langley headquarters of the CIA. The Agency was ready to take any chances to get Buckley out, or to wreak vengeance for the way he had been treated.⁸ It was this deep concern for Buckley and the other hostages that prompted CIA Director William Casey to circumvent the Congressional arm of the U.S. political system and to become involved in the plan to supply Iran with embargoed arms in return for the safety of American hostages, culminating in the Iran-Contra scandal (also known as Irangate).⁹

Strong pressure from Casey and the Israelis led President Reagan to approve the sale of weapons to Iran -direct supply of U.S. arms appears to have included some 2000 TOW (anti-tank missiles) and some 235 HAWK (air defense, SAM) missiles¹⁰- in the hope that this "friendly" gesture might induce the more

moderate elements of the Khomeini regime to resume contact with the United States, as well as to exert its influence on the radical groups in Lebanon that were holding U.S. citizens hostage.

However, the contact with Iran, through covert channels, failed to achieve the purpose of the pro-Iranian policy makers in the Reagan administration since the so-called Iranian "moderates" who accepted the delivery of arms -their sole objective in the deal- ordered the release of only three hostages and their attitude towards the United States did not seem to differ from that of the "extremists".¹¹

While it is now clear that neither President Reagan, nor his senior advisers in the National Security Council, ever really considered the strategic effects of their action on the Iran-Iraq war or the near certainty that these clandestine "deals" would become public, it is important to keep in mind that the hostage issue had become a top priority, especially since it involved people of Buckley's standing. When Syria informed the United States in late 1985 that Buckley had been tortured and killed, the administration was determined to obtain the freedom of the remaining hostages in Lebanon irrespective of the dangers, or costs, involved.¹²

A pattern between the United States and Iran became established: the United States would ship arms directly to Iran. Iran would then release one hostage but keep the others to retain as leverage over the United States. Thus, this pattern

inevitably encouraged pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon -such as the Hizbollah and the Islamic Jihad- to take new hostages in "compensation".

By the time the covert U.S. arms deal became public, pro-Iranian groups had as many hostages as they did before the arms deal despite the release of three people in exchange for arms. This fact reinforced the assertion that **concessions to terrorists only encouraged them to carry out further attacks**. Ironically then, in its very attempts to secure the release of all U.S. hostages, the Reagan administration had encouraged the taking of hostages and had, in a sense, unknowingly abandoned its policy of not capitulating to terrorism.

THE U.S. BEGINS DAMAGE CONTROL

Following the Al-Shiraa disclosure of the arms-for-hostage deal, President Reagan embarked on a damage control strategy. In his televised "Address to the Nation" on November 3rd, 1986, President Reagan justified his action in order to achieve the objectives of an end to the Gulf war and the release of American hostages. However, as quoted below, the President denied any possible linkage between the sale of weapons to Iran and the release of American hostages:

"Our government has a firm policy not to capitulate to terrorist demands. That No-Concessions policy remains in force in spite of some wildly speculative and false stories about arms for hostages and alleged ransom payments. We did not - repeat- did not, trade weapons or anything else for hostages and alleged ransom

payments; nor will we."¹³

It would not be too farfetched to speculate that, given Reagan's popularity, had the President been more forthcoming he might have been able to win the sympathy and understanding of the American people.

The disclosure of the arms deal understandably created consternation in the White House as domestically it had ignited a political crisis that bore some comparison to Watergate. Furthermore, U.S. credibility with the Arab Gulf states sank to its lowest level since the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 because of the perceived U.S. breach of faith in covertly shifting its support to Iran. This led to a sharp reversal in U.S. policy from a position of "neutrality" to the adoption of a more pro-Iraqi position.

In 1987, the United States began to rebuild its damaged relations with the Gulf states by intervening in the Gulf war: it accepted Kuwait's request to reflag half of its oil tanker fleet.

ENDNOTES:

1. **Foreign Broadcasting Information Service** ,10-30-84, p. I-1.
2. **Ibid**, p. I-2.
3. **Daily Report**, November 06, 1986, pp. I1-3.

4. Shahram Chubin, **International Herald Tribune**, Dec 6-7, 1986.
5. Bulloch, John. and Morris, Harvey. **The Gulf War**, p96.
6. Bulloch, John. and Morris, Harvey. **The Gulf War**, p96.
7. Ostrovsky, Victor. **By Way of Deception**, p323.
8. Bulloch, John. and Morris, Harvey. **The Gulf War**, p.95.
9. See Victor Ostrovsky's **By Way of Deception**, p. 326.
10. The figures are the official ones. See **International Herald Tribune**, November 22-23, 1986.
11. See Majid Khadduri's **The Gulf War**, p.167.
12. Cordesman's **The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security**, p.77.
13. President Reagan's "**Address to the Nation**", **Department of State Bulletin**, January 1987, p.65.

4

A RISKY ENDEAVOR: THE U.S REFLAGGING OF ELEVEN KUWAITI TANKERS

Following the revelations of the arms sales to Iran, the U.S. administration was anxious to repair the damage done to its reputation in the Arab world in general, and the Arab Gulf states in particular. It was this concern, or anxiety, on part of the administration that made it -in early 1987- extremely vulnerable to manipulation tactics on part of the Gulf Arabs, particularly the Kuwaitis.

The Kuwaitis -who have always been acknowledged as being the most accomplished politicians of the area- took the view that if Iraq was defeated they would be the next on Iran's list. Therefore, while officially they maintained a policy of strict neutrality during the entire Iran-Iraq war, in reality, and much to the world's knowledge- they had thrown in their lot with their historical enemy -the Iraqis. Hence, they shared Iraq's view of the necessity of "internationalizing" the war through the direct involvement of the superpowers in order to force Iran to accept a ceasefire.

Therefore, the Kuwaitis (and, indirectly, the Iraqis), through shrewd manipulation tactics, achieved their goal: by exaggerating one threat (safe passage of their tankers through the Gulf) they eventually managed to lead the United States to make a commitment it had understandably been wary of making.

However, the Kuwaiti idea to have their oil tankers reflagged originated during the Fall of 1986, when Iran, buoyed by victories at Fao and Mehran earlier in the year, stepped up its pressure on Kuwait, one of Iraq's main financial backers. Iranian attacks on ships trading with Kuwait increased substantially during the 1986-87 period.

On November 1st, 1986, two days before the Lebanese magazine **Al Shiraa** revealed the clandestine U.S.-Iranian arms deal, Kuwait informed its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members that it planned to find international guarantors for protection of its shipping interests in the Gulf.

In December of 1986, just a month after the **Al Shiraa** had spilled the beans to the world on the U.S. arms sales to Iran, Kuwait took a bold step meant to capitalize on the Irangate scandal and the subsequent confusion in the White House. Kuwait quietly approached the U.S. Coast Guard about the procedures for re-registration of its tanker fleet.¹ The U.S. Coast Guards's response was intentionally a discouraging one: a decision to reflag Kuwait's tankers could take up to six

months. However, instead of being discouraged, the Kuwaitis made another bid the very next month when they formally requested that the United States reflag up to eight of their oil tankers.

It is to the credit of the Reagan administration that, despite the negative publicity surrounding the Irangate affair and the subsequent vulnerability of the administration vis-a-vis the Gulf Arabs, it prudently remained reluctant to embroil itself in a war front situation which is what the reflagging operation involved.

However, the situation changed drastically on March 2nd 1987, when Moscow agreed to accept Kuwait's request and lease three of its own tankers to Kuwait. Moscow's acceptance of the Kuwaiti request was perceived in Washington to be a threat to the traditional U.S. role in a region which had, historically, been within the United States sphere of influence.

Kuwait's request -which had the blessing of the Iraqis- to both the superpowers was not a naive action but a well calculated political decision with far reaching political and security implications. It is crucial to keep in mind the **timing** of Kuwait's decision.

In an effort to halt a buildup of a threatening Soviet presence in the Gulf, on March 7th (five days after the Soviet acceptance), Washington informed the Kuwaitis that

it would accept their request for escort of oil tankers once they had been put under the American flag.

A Congressional document linked reflagging to a broader goal:

"to recover from that sorry aberration from a longstanding policy, and through credible and persuasive behavior, to rebuild confidence in the Middle East and elsewhere that the affair (Irangate) was nothing more than a bizarre blunder that will not be repeated".²

Although the embarrassment over the arms deal did influence the reflagging decision, the record reveals that the primary objective of the administration was to preempt a large scale Soviet operation of escorting Kuwaiti vessels, and what might follow from that.

U.S.S. STARK

It can be said that the United States inadvertently entered the **Gulf tanker war** the day its navy frigate, the **U.S.S. Stark**, was struck by two Exocet missiles fired from an Iraqi F-1EQ5 Mirage.³

On May 17th, 1987, at approximately 2:10 p.m., Washington time, the U.S. Navy frigate, the **U.S.S. Stark** was hit by two sea skimming Exocet missiles fired from an Iraqi F-1EQ5 Mirage.⁴ Result: the loss of thirty seven American servicemen

killed by what the Stark's skipper, Glenn Brindel, called a "friendly military plane".⁵

To date, since no solid evidence has emerged to gainsay the Iraqi story -that the attack was "unintentional"- any other explanation must remain in the realm of speculation. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence to suggest that the attack was not an accident but may have been an intentional one. What would be a lot harder to determine is whether this incident was the work of a lone pilot (who fired the Exocet missiles at the U.S.S. Stark) or was a planned move that had been plotted in Baghdad.

show me!!

In fact, the Pentagon, within a matter of days, changed its description of the attack from "inadvertent" (the pilot did not mean to fire his weapon at the U.S. Navy ship) to "indiscriminate" (the pilot did not take the proper precautions necessary to designate his target from all the shipping in the area). The Iraqi F1-EQ5 was not only suspiciously way off course, but the pilot was sent two warnings which went ignored. What is particularly disturbing is the fact that a few days following the U.S.S. Stark incident, Iraqi warplanes twice made threatening gestures at another U.S. Navy ship, the destroyer Waddell.⁶

Expectedly, the Syrians and the Iranians did raise the issue of the U.S.S. Stark attack as being an intentional one. However, the Syrians in their "analysis" went too far when they propose that the "scenario" was drawn up in advance between

the United States and Iraq for their clandestine objectives.⁷ Motives aside, what is interesting about these accusations is the possible intentions cited as having been behind this Iraqi attack.

The Damascus based SANA newspaper reported shortly after the attack: "The Iraqi blow is a camouflage operation aimed at exonerating the Saddam regime of the charge of being a U.S. agent. Also, to improve the image of this regime at the Arab level. The second objective of this operation was to use it as a planned provocation to bring the U.S. forces to the Arab Gulf. The Iraqi regime has desperately fought for a long time to Arabize the war against Iran and then to internationalize it."⁸

An Iranian official described the U.S.S. Stark incident as a "serious and dangerous trap" laid by Baghdad to draw both the superpowers into the war.⁹

Iran seemingly held a permanent military advantage on the ground and neither Iraqi attempt -both through a blockade of Iran and the initiation of the tanker war in 1984- to strangle Iran's supply of hard currency vis-a-vis the sale of its lifeblood (oil) had borne any productive results. Therefore, it would not be too farfetched to speculate as to the possible motives for such an Iraqi action that would force the intervention of the superpowers into the Gulf -and hence the conflict- with the objective of bringing an end to the war.

A case can be made that if the Iraqi regime was capable of planning and executing the coldblooded murder of the entire entourage of the Algerian Foreign Minister Benyahia in May of 1982, then it is quite conceivable that the U.S.S. Stark "accident" may have been masterminded in Baghdad.

Benyahia, whose plane was shot down by a Soviet air-to-air missile fired from an Iraqi MiG-25 on the Iranian -Turkish border, was on his way to Tehran for mediation talks with the Iranian government. According to a captured Iraqi pilot, the Iraqi regime's objective was to frame this on Iran in an attempt to blame Iran for the attack and to, thereby, exacerbate its relations with Algeria, one of the few countries sympathetic towards the Iranian regime.¹⁰

What is a striking similarity between the Algerian incident (in which Iraq denies involvement, accusing Iran instead) and the attack on the U.S.S. Stark is that Baghdad had something to gain from both tragedies: in the Algerian case, a team of experts on Iran-Iraq issues, who were somewhat sympathetic to the Iranians, were wiped out; while in the U.S.S. Stark incident, the United States was indirectly drawn into the Iran-Iraq war.

The attack on the U.S.S. Stark could also be regarded as an Iraqi reprisal for the clandestine U.S.-Israeli-Iranian arms deal exposed only a few months before. It is important to remember that, while the world remarked on the uncharacteristic

display of restraint on the part of the Iraqi regime in its rhetoric, there was certainly no evidence of this "restraint" at home. Domestically, the news of the Iranian arms deal was exploited to the hilt by the regime. The intention was to play on the emotions of the average Iraqi -particularly those in the armed forces.

Timing is important here: on April 22nd, 1987 (less than a month before the attack on the U.S.S. Stark), in an **air force** ceremony to award medals to pilots for bravery during the Iranian offensives, Saddam Hussein left the Iraqi Air Force in no doubt as to those responsible for the heavy losses sustained by the Iraqi Air Force. Saddam acknowledged that anti-aircraft activity had been more intense than before and that it had taken a heavy toll on the lives of fellow comrades. This was due, he stated, to "the Zionists and Americans who supplied the Iranians with these weapons in order to inflict harm on Iraq and on the Iraqi forces."¹¹ He went on to state: "There are thousands of evidences proving this United States conspiracy against Iraq."¹²

It is not hard to imagine the profound effect this speech of Saddam Hussein to the Iraqi Air Force would have had on the Iraqi pilots who had lost their fellow officers to the enemy's anti-aircraft (HAWK) fire. In fact, the revelations concerning the U.S. shipment of HAWK missiles to Iran had already received a good deal of publicity in the Iraqi media.

The speculation that the bitterness and resentment towards the United States (which the secret arms deal revelations had inevitably accentuated) may have played a fundamental part in the motives of the Iraqi pilot (who fired two missiles less than a month later) does carry some weight.

Speculation on motives aside, Saddam Hussein was quick to apologize, and manipulate, the tragedy. Aside from his offer to compensate the victims of the Iraqi attack, Saddam Hussein used the opportunity to convey to the United States that he hoped that the incident would in no way affect the "cordial relationship" between the two countries. What is significant here, is how Saddam Hussein, in his letter of apology to President Reagan, turned this tragic attack to the Iraqi advantage: he cunningly used the incident to illustrate to the United States the "urgent" need for **joint** efforts to end the war and force the Iranian regime to agree to peace in accordance with the principles of international law and the U.N. resolutions.

President Reagan's conciliatory reply to Saddam Hussein's "apology" echoed sentiments similar to those expressed by Saddam Hussein. He stated that the United States would work for a peaceful solution to the war, in cooperation with Iraq and others. President Reagan's message to the Iraqi President received considerable publicity in the Iraqi media.

The irony of this incident, occurring six days after the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Richard Murphy visited Baghdad, was clearly evident in the United States' response. It had responded to the Iraqi attack by virtually declaring war on Iran. On May 19, 1987, President Reagan, apparently as eager to blame Iran as he was to forgive Iraq for the attack, states that "Iran is the real villain in the piece".¹³

In his Presidential Statement, the day after the tragic attack, President Reagan not once mentions the State (Iraq) responsible for the attack by name, given the seriousness of the incident.¹⁴ It can be speculated that this may have been related to the danger of jeopardizing congressional support for the U.S. decision to intervene in the Gulf on behalf of Kuwaiti shipping interests.¹⁵

However, it is important to consider other possible reasons for this glaring omission: namely, President Reagan's determination to paint Iran in this conflict as being the true aggressor and, therefore, to be protective in both speech, and action, of Iraq, particularly when addressing the American people.

The Reagan administration's handling of this tragedy seemed to take the form of absolving Iraq and even "rewarding" it for its aggression by speeding up protection of half of its biggest supporter's (Kuwait) tanker fleet.

The question arises: did anyone in the administration seriously examine possible motives for such an attack in the light of previous Iraqi aggression? It can be surmised that, perhaps, the administration was too busy licking its wounds following the embarrassing revelations of the arms sales fiasco, an event that had seriously undermined the Reagan administration's position among the Arabs of the Gulf. This could explain the administration's inclination to look the other way and to accept Iraq's explanation at face value.

The U.S. administration's reaction to the U.S.S. Stark incident is important in that it illustrates the administration's unbalanced view, or perception, of the Persian Gulf crisis that- it can be speculated- stemmed in part from convictions that evolved from a number of gloomy events: the downfall of the Shah and his replacement by the rule of a theocratic revolutionary regime in Iran, which was inherently hostile to the Shah's biggest supporter, the United States; the U.S. hostage crisis of 1979-81 and the perceived threat that Islamic militarism posed to the more moderate monarchical regimes of the Persian Gulf (led by this revolutionary Islamic entity).

Just days after the attack on the U.S.S. Stark, May 26, 1987, to be precise, President Reagan called Iran "a barbaric country".¹⁶ Such statements do not make for good policy nor for smart diplomacy. In fact, they helped to reinforce the existing anti-American sentiment within Iranian society with the net effect of

strengthening the Khomeini regime. At times it seemed that the administration was as much a victim of passionate sentiments -emanating from the U.S. hostage experience and the harsh anti-American rhetoric of Tehran- as it accused Iran of being.

U.S VITAL INTERESTS

While the U.S.S Stark incident was the event that had led to the firm commitment of the United States to increase its military presence in the Gulf, the United States had already agreed to the reflagging of eleven Kuwaiti oil tankers (half of its fleet). President Reagan had justified this need for an expanded U.S. naval presence in the Gulf when he stated that "the use of the vital sea lanes of the Persian Gulf will not be dictated by the Iranians. These lanes will not be allowed to come under the control of the Soviet Union. The Persian Gulf will remain open to navigation by the nations of the world."¹⁷

Historically, the United States has had a military presence in the Persian Gulf since 1949 to protect the United States vital interests in the Persian Gulf: Prevention of regional domination by powers hostile to the West; promotion of regional stability through quiet diplomacy and security assistance; protection of the flow of oil through the Gulf to the West.¹⁸ The U.S Navy's Middle East Force had, on average, consisted of five or six Navy frigates. However, by the end of 1987- six months after the USS Stark was hit- it had risen to 32 warships.

OBJECTIVES AND REFLAGGING

The objectives involved behind the United States decision to reflag the eleven Kuwaiti oil tankers can be seen as consisting of four essential goals: contain the Soviet threat to carve out a position for itself in a region that was traditionally a Western sphere of influence; guarantee the free movement of oil to respective markets; containment of the Iranian threat to the region; and finally, restoration of U.S. credibility among the Arabs of the Gulf region that had been seriously undermined by the arms-for-hostage deal with Iran.¹⁹

The United States made a military commitment of sorts- which is what the escorting of the eleven Kuwaiti tankers' can essentially be viewed as- that was a risky, hastily calculated and potentially lethal US course of action. Furthermore, each of these objectives that presumably were the motivating force behind this questionable "exercise" are suspect for a variety of reasons.

The first, the decisive factor, was to counter what was seen to be the Soviet threat to intervene in order to protect the Kuwaiti oil supply line against Iranian attacks at the request of the Kuwaitis. There can be no doubt that this decision was also the result of Kuwaiti manipulation of the United States perception of the Soviet threat as evidenced by their shrewd diplomatic maneuvers to obtain Soviet help in the protection of their tanker fleet.

However, even the Kuwaitis were amused by what they called the United States "phobias" of the Soviet Union, leading Majid al-Shahin, Under Secretary at the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry to remark: "The United States' problem is that the mentality of Hollywood tends to influence it sometimes. As for the Soviet tankers, these have been quietly sailing in the Gulf for some time. So what has changed?"²⁰

The administration's fears were well addressed in the, then, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger's statement that a United States refusal to accept the Kuwaiti request "would have created a vacuum in the Gulf into which the Soviet power would shortly have been projected".²¹

What is notable here is that the Reagan administration chose to view Moscow's decision to accept the Kuwaiti offer in leasing it three of its oil tankers as being a potentially hostile Soviet move into the Gulf- a region that was historically a Western sphere of influence. This may have reflected an exaggerated concern with the Soviet threat to U.S. regional interests at a time when the Soviets were bogged down in their own misadventure in Afghanistan.

In evaluation of the Soviet role in the region, it is important to keep in mind that the Soviet decision to lease Kuwait three of its tankers was at the request of the Kuwaitis themselves. This Soviet decision in itself did not threaten U.S. or Western interests in the Gulf. In fact, in some respects, Soviet interests were

parallel with those of the United States: to facilitate the free flow of oil through the Gulf.

Another U.S. objective in its reflagging decision was to guarantee the free flow of oil through the Gulf to its respective markets. The uninterrupted supply of oil from the Gulf has traditionally been of vital interest to the United States. However, as of 1987, despite the tanker war that was being waged in the Gulf, the percentage of ships hit -less than 1 percent of those transiting the Gulf- was small and did not pose any threat to supplies. In fact, at the time this decision was made, there was an oil glut and no sign of any impending shortage.²²

It is significant to note here that the belligerent viewed as the source of this threat - Iran- had absolutely nothing to gain from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz nor from any disruption to the smooth supply of oil through it.

In fact, it was Iraq, the player towards whom the West was sympathetic, that would have desired such an outcome: Iraqi oil was delivered overland through pipelines over Turkish and Saudi Arabian territory. Therefore, Iraq felt free to go on the rampage in the Gulf and it frequently attacked tankers plying Iran's oil to its various markets. Iraq was responsible for over sixty percent of the attacks on shipping traffic for, unlike Iran, it was never held accountable for its actions and, therefore, never had to concern itself with the possibility of severe condemnation.²³ Iraq's

unchallenged aggression was part of a trend that would come to haunt the world- the West in particular- in the not too distant future.

Despite Iran's repeated insistence that it had no desire to close the Strait of Hormuz- the artery of its lifeblood oil- the United States continued to focus on such an eventuality that made no logical, practical or realistic sense. However, Iran's concern to block pro-Iraqi shipping was real.

The third objective of the administration involved the containment of what it saw was the Iranian threat to the security of the conservative, moderate monarchies of the Gulf as evidenced by an increase in what it believed was Iranian sponsored terrorist activities in Kuwait and elsewhere in the region.

The U.S. administration was convinced that the defeat of Iraq at the hands of Iran would automatically result in a rise in Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in the region and elsewhere. The haunting memories of the humiliating U.S. hostage crisis and the aborted Desert One rescue attempt and of the Iranian linked 1983 Beirut suicide bombing of the marine barracks, were very much alive in the minds of many in Washington.

While Iran frequently spewed out all kinds of hostile vernacular in the direction of the leadership of the Gulf Sheikdoms- as it did towards the three "satans": the

United States, Israel and the Soviet Union- it was not unaware of the risks posed by "exporting the Revolution" to the Gulf through military means. However, whatever restraint it exercised in the Gulf could be regarded as due largely in part to the strong U.S. naval presence in the Gulf region.

Finally, following the revelations of the Iran-Contra affair in November of 1986, the administration was well aware of the need to restore credibility with the Arabs of the Gulf. The Gulf Arabs had not only been amazed at what they viewed was a U.S. betrayal to the enemy (Iran), but had felt what little faith they might have had in the United States as a staunch ally quickly evaporate. The net result: U.S. credibility in the strategic Gulf was at an all time low.

The administration believed that its willingness to reflag the Kuwaiti tankers would convince the Gulf Arabs that the United States had good intentions toward them and that it had a commitment to protect the region's geo-strategic balance vis-a-vis the Iranian threat. It assumed that by offering protection to eleven Kuwaiti tankers it would be able to regain at least some lost ground among the Gulf Arabs.

What Washington did not realize, however, was that restoration of "credibility" among the Gulf Sheikdoms would involve much more than the reflagging of eleven Kuwaiti tankers. Its actions would have to be far more persuasive than that to restore the measure of confidence that it enjoyed prior to the Iran-Contra

revelations of late 1986.

BRIDGETON

If the USS Stark "accident" had convinced Washington of the need to speed up its efforts to deploy a U.S. naval escort for the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, then the crippling of the first U.S. naval escort of the Bridgeton by an underwater mine on July 24, 1987, just two days after the indefinite U.S. escort operation began, must have certainly had the effect of dampening this enthusiasm and raising some serious questions as to whether such an operation was worth the serious risks involved.²⁴

Certainly, there was a predictable uproar in the Congress, which had all along been questioning whether the President indeed had the authority to involve the U.S. Navy in a "war zone" situation without the prior approval of the Congress under the 1973 War Powers Resolution. An embarrassing situation became even more so when, after the Bridgeton was hit, the Navy put the 401,000-ton supertanker out front- in essence performing the task of a minesweeper- to protect the three US warships that were supposed to be protecting it. Reason: These sophisticated, high tech warships could not cope with World War II vintage mines, leading the Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd to ask "Who is escorting whom?", and to further remark, "This patently absurd and ridiculous result of this first escort mission is embarrassing to the nation".²⁵

The world was treated to the humiliating sight of the US Navy hiding behind the "apron" of the supertanker they were supposed to be escorting (read: protecting). While the administration tried to skirt the subject, the Iranians declared this a "victory" against the United States. Worse yet, U.S. "credibility ratings" among the Gulf Arabs, already at an all time low, further plummeted, ironically undermined by one of its attempts to restore this very credibility.²⁶

What is significant here is that while Washington was well aware of the fact that the Persian Gulf was littered with mines, it chose to send its very first tanker escort convoy into the area without any minesweeping equipment which was an action that can be almost suicidal in nature. An analogy, albeit a strange one, that comes to mind is the Iranian regime's decision to send in human "waves" over Iraqi mined areas as minesweeping equipment during its land "offensives".

Certainly, the administration had no such intention, but it is seriously puzzling (and questionable) why such an important consideration was not addressed and why its tanker escort mission took off for the first, and not the last, time without such support. Such a blatant absence of necessary minesweeping equipment inevitably brings into question how well thought out the operation was prior to implementation? how heavily were the potential costs of this controversial policy decision weighed?

Indeed, the Reagan administration believed that the greatest danger to American interests was not in the form of tangible mines, or in Iran's newly acquired Chinese Silkworms, but in an Iranian war victory, with its devastating consequences for Iraq, the moderate Gulf states and the rest of the world.

IRAN AJR AND A VOLATILE "CHAIN REACTION"

On September 21, a U.S. Army helicopters attack and incapacitation of the Iranian vessel Iran Ajr- presumably caught laying its deadly cargo: mines- set off a chain of violent retaliatory events that, in retrospect, brought the United States to the brink of involvement in an all out war with Iran. It was a scenario which both Washington and Tehran had wished to avoid. This U.S. action resulted in the first casualties on the Iranian side of its "shadow war" with the United States.

The Iran Ajr incident led to a cautious Iranian response in the form of the first direct attack of a reflagged Kuwaiti tanker- the Sea Isle City- while in Kuwaiti territorial waters on October 16, 1987. While the Iranians most probably had no desire to directly confront the United States in the Gulf, they were certainly willing to test its patience. The Silkworms -fired from Iranian occupied Fao peninsula- that struck the Kuwaiti tanker Sea Isle City tested the extent of the U.S. commitment to protect Kuwaiti shipping interests.

The U.S. response was swift as it was decisive: Three days later-October 19- it

responded by launching **Operation Nimble Archer**. The objective achieved under Operation Nimble Archer was the destruction of the Rashadat platform. This, in turn, raised some serious questions as to the extent of U.S. involvement vis-a-vis its protection of half of the Kuwaiti oil fleet. Had the United States overextended itself by responding to the attack on the reflagged tanker Sea Isle City while it was in Kuwaiti waters and, therefore, out of the jurisdiction of the U.S. escort fleet when it was hit?

The administration did not think so. According to the administration, an American response was deemed as being a political necessity. President Reagan called the eighty-five minute blitz on the Rustam oil rig "a prudent, yet restrained, response to Iranian aggression".²⁷

The administration's perception of its' response to the attack on Sea Isle City is an illustration of its almost reckless view of this potentially volatile situation: the very fact that President Reagan chose to see this U.S. offensive as a **prudent** one is disturbing. One might question how prudent Operation Nimble Archer really was.

Since the Iranians had taken care to avoid striking the reflagged tankers while they plied **international** waters so as to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States, the United States had achieved its primary, overt, objective to protect the eleven Kuwaiti tankers committed to it while they were in international shipping

lanes.

The United States Navy found its commitments in the Gulf becoming more expansive and more vague with the passage of time. These "commitments" placed the U.S. naval fleet in a dangerous, unpredictable, situation increasing the possibility of becoming embroiled in an all out war with Iran in the Gulf.

Predictably, with the exception of Iraq and Kuwait, the launching of Operation Nimble Archer alarmed many other countries. The protective operation of the United States seemed to some less protective and more like an offensive action. Instead of quietly going about the business of protecting the eleven Kuwaiti tankers and keeping them out of harms way, the United States made headline news around the world ever since its escorting operation began with the Kuwaiti tanker Bridgeton. It seemed that the U.S. was headed for a war of its own in the Gulf.

Then, three days after Operation Nimble Archer, on October 22, the Iranians retaliated by striking out at Kuwait's only deep water oil loading facility- **Sea Island** -with Silkworm missiles fired from the Iranian held Fao peninsula. It was a wise decision of both the United States and Iran that following this Iranian attack both agreed on a unworded cessation to this cycle of hostilities that had begun with the Iran Ajr incident.

USS ROBERTS: FINAL SHOWDOWN

When the **U.S.S. Roberts** struck a mine in April of 1988, it came as an embarrassing surprise to the Reagan administration, which had long since concluded that the Gulf shipping traffic was no longer threatened by mines.

Assuming it was Iran, and not Iraq, that had planted this "fresh" bunch of mines, the U.S. Navy was ordered to retaliate by striking two Iranian oil platforms. One of these platforms -Sirri- was responsible for eight percent of Iran's oil exports, while also serving as a Revolutionary Guard Command Center in the Southern Gulf.²⁸

This U.S. military "exercise" set off what can be viewed as the final showdown between Iran's ragtag naval threat and the high tech fleet of the United States. Following this U.S. exercise of muscle flexing, the Iranian threat to Gulf shipping was effectively reduced.

Furthermore, the incident has been viewed by many as having "pushed" the United States into a final pro-Iraqi shift. This is a questionable view given that it appeared that the "final" U.S shift seemed to have been made the day it commenced its reflagging operation.

The Iranians in their "counter-response" sent two of their frigates out of port at

Bandar Abbas in a counter-retaliation offensive, while the Revolutionary Guard speedboats attacked an offshore oil platform near the United Arab Emirates. The U.S. warships destroyed both the frigates and thereby eliminated the Iranian naval threat. The new Defense Secretary, Frank Carlucci described Iran's abortive counter-retaliation as "foolhardy", and the day's battle was summed up as being a U.S. Naval victory.²⁹

With this U.S. military "exercise", it appeared that the United States warships had now become involved in activities that had previously been exclusive to Iraq. In addition, this U.S. naval attack coincided with Iraq's successful launching of the offensive to regain the Fao Peninsula, leading the Iranians to believe that the U.S. naval strike was ample evidence of the United States embrace of Iraqi policy vis-a-vis the Gulf war.

There was also a clear expansion of the United States mission in the Gulf during the tanker war when, two weeks after this U.S. military "exercise" against the two Iranian oil platforms, President Reagan authorized all U.S. naval captains to come to the assistance of any non-U.S. flagships in their vicinity that appeared to be under threat, or attack, by Iranian forces.³⁰

This risky expansion of authority to U.S. naval captains in the Gulf during the tanker war can be viewed as an outcome of past skirmishes with Iranian forces

leading to the buildup of a dangerous sense of confidence on part of the administration and the conviction that this expansion of its controversial role was a means of moving to a negotiated settlement of the Iran-Iraq war..

Instead of strictly following its initial, outlined, objectives, the administration has substantially expanded its role. This had been controversial to start with, and one might ask if the administration had calculated whether the costs inevitably involved in this decision were worth the risks.

U.S.S. VINCENNES AND THE IRAN AIR FLIGHT

It can be argued that the shooting down of the Iran Air flight by the U.S. Naval Warship -the U.S.S. Vincennes- on July 03,1988 was almost an inevitable consequence of the administration's expansion of U.S. naval captains' powers- particularly with regards to aiding non-U.S. flagships- in the Gulf tanker war.

The tragic irony of this incident was that the U.S.S. Vincennes had reversed course to come to the aid of the Danish supertanker, Karama Maersk, leading Iranian forces to fire at U.S. helicopters. The U.S.S. Vincennes moved to meet this attack, and it has been stated that due to this stressful situation, its crew misidentified the Iranian airbus as a military aircraft and fired two anti-aircraft missiles towards it.³¹

There can be no question that if the sole responsibility of the U.S. naval fleet had been confined to the protection of U.S. flagships then perhaps such a tragic event might not have occurred. Furthermore, it can be speculated that had such a free "rein" not been given to the U.S. naval fleet in the Gulf then, perhaps, more caution would have been exercised by the Captain of the U.S.S. Vincennes.

The decision of the Reagan administration to commit its naval warships to protect eleven Kuwaiti tankers transitting the Gulf's international shipping lanes was a policy that, in retrospect, does not appear to have been thought through with sufficient care. The necessity of careful calculation of the costs/risks that such an important policy decision entailed was overshadowed not so much by the Soviet threat, as claimed, but rather by the administration's obsession with the "containment" of Iran. Protection of the eleven Kuwaiti tankers from Iranian attacks was intended to convey to the Iranian regime that its' aggression would be contained.

With its acceptance of the responsibility to "escort" the eleven reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, the administration inevitably took on a broad commitment that, in time, became broader and less clear, with the end result that the United States found its reflagging commitment intrinsically linked to the resolution of the Iran-Iraq war.

ENDNOTES:

1. Bulloch, John. and Morris, Harvey. **The Gulf War**, p176-177.
2. Ramazani, R.K. **Iran's Revolution**, p.131.
3. For more descriptive information on the F1EQ5 Mirage refer to an article for the layman in the **Aviation Week and Space Technology**, May 25, 1987, pp23-25.
4. **Department of State Bulletin**, July 1987, p.58.
5. **Washington Post**, May 18, 1987.
6. **Newsweek**, June 01, 1987.
7. **Foreign Broadcasting Information Service, Daily Report, Middle East and Africa**, hereafter cited as FBIS-MEA, May 26, 1987, H-1.
8. **FBIS-MEA**, May 26, 1987, H-1.
9. Hiro, Dilip, **The Longest War**, p.186.
10. **FBIS-NES**, May 22, 1987, PI-3. An Iraqi Mirage pilot, Captain Zuhayr Muhammad Said al-Audisi, was captured by Iran when his plane crashed in Iranian territory. Under interrogation he told the Iranians that, in May of 1982, Lt Col Abdullah Faraj was ordered to shoot down the plane carrying the Algerian entourage.
11. Quoted in Shahram Chubin's *Iran and Iraq at War*, p.66, as reported by the BBC (BBC/SWB/ME, April 24, 1987, (A/12-13).
12. **FBIS-NES**, April 23, 1987, E-1.
13. Keddi, Nikki R. and Gasiorowski, Mark J. **Neither East Nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union and the United States**, (Yale: University Press), 1990, p.37.
14. **Department of State Bulletin**, July 1987, p.58.
15. Refer to Thomas Mc Naugher's article in Efraim Karsh's book, **The Iran-Iraq War**, for more information on the significance of domestic politics on U.S. reflagging policy, pp174 175.
16. **Neither East Nor West**, p.40.

17. Chubin, Shahram. and Tripp, Charles. **Iran and Iraq at War**, p214.
18. **Department of State Bulletin**, October 1987, pp 38-39.
19. Rubin, Barry. "Drowning in the Gulf", **Foreign Policy** (Winter 1987-88), pp 120-134.
20. **FBIS-SA**, June 30 1987, pJ2.
21. Ramazani, R.K., "The Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf Crisis" in **Current History** (February 1988), p63,
22. Ramazani, R.K. **Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East**, p225.
23. **Wall Street Journal**, 22 June 1987.
24. Chubin, Shahram. and Tripp, Charles. **Iran and Iraq at War**, p215.
25. **Newsweek**, August 10,1987, p8.
26. Bulloch, John. and Morris, Harvey. **The Gulf War**, p234.
27. **Time**, November 02,1987, p62.
28. **Washington Post**, April 19,1988, p A22.
29. **Washington Post**, April 19,1988, pA1.
30. Hiro, Dilip, **The Longest War**, p214-225.
31. **Financial Times**, July 04,1988, p.1.

5

RETROSPECTION

Following the outbreak of the war in September of 1980, the United States was, understandably, content to maintain a stance of strict neutrality and let the two ruthless regimes fight it out and exhaust themselves. In Washington the general consensus was that, sapped of their dangerous energy, the two bullies of this vital region, that contained over 60% of the world's known oil reserves, would not be in a position to meddle in the internal affairs of the neighboring Gulf Sheikdoms which were long accustomed to Baghdad and Tehran's bully tactics.

However, what became of grave concern to Washington was the possible "spillover effect" of the war that could threaten to destabilize the entire Gulf region. As events proved -with the advent of the "tanker war" in 1984- this became a real concern for those dependent on oil supply lines via the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

The Reagan administration was well aware that the stalemate of sorts, which the ongoing Iran-Iraq hostilities represented, was an extremely fragile one and could give way to a far less appealing alternative: a victory by one of the belligerents that would make everyone else in the region -the Israelis and Syrians included- very nervous.

It was Iran though that, led by the quixotic, zealous mullahs, was perceived to be a graver threat to the interests of the United States and its regional Arab allies than the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. The Iranian regime, with its threatening proclamations ("export of the Islamic Revolution") and brutal ways, had not endeared itself to the new administration in the White House. Iran, following the Shah's ouster, was ruled by the **only** clergy-led government in the world. This form of government was a new experience, for nothing comparable had existed in recent history. Hence, the Iranian regime, with its fiery threats, made many uncomfortable.

Iraq, on the other hand, was ruled by a government that, while no less brutal, was a familiar Middle Eastern phenomenon. Analysts at the State Department believed they "understood" Saddam Hussein and his team.

Therefore, when the Iranian regime decided to launch its **Ramadan al Mubarak** (the blessed Ramadan) offensive on the southern front with the ultimate objective

of capturing Basra, Iraq's second largest city and its major port, the Reagan administration began to shift from its policy of strict neutrality. The shift -in favor of the Iraqis- was a reflection of the administration's deep-seated fear of a strategic Iranian ground victory that could threaten the very survival of the Iraqi regime and, more importantly, destabilize the entire Gulf region.

The most obvious signs of this shift, or tilt, were the resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iraq in 1984, and the removal of Iraq, in late November of 1983, from the Department of States's list of nations that support international terrorism.

It can be said that the United States got more **directly** involved in the Iran-Iraq war with the initiation of the clandestine U.S.-Iranian arms-for-hostages affair in 1985. Prior to this, U.S. involvement in the war had been limited to provision of satellite and high altitude reconnaissance pictures to the Iraqis via the Saudis.

The U.S. decision to secretly supply the Iranians with badly needed military equipment and spare parts in 1985 -that culminated in what came to be known as the "**Iran-Contra affair**"- was a desperate attempt to obtain the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon by Iranian financed terrorist groups. It was also a move to establish contacts with the more "moderate" elements within the Iranian establishment.

However, the revelations of the Reagan administration's secretive dealings with the Iranian regime brought into question President Reagan's commitment to his own "no concessions" policy. Given the passionate statements of the President ("the United States would not negotiate with states that are linked to, or support, terrorists") this clandestine "bargaining" was -to put it mildly- disturbing to the American people.

The repercussions -following the disclosure of the arms-for-hostages transaction in November, 1986- were severe for the Reagan administration at home and abroad. In the Gulf, there was amazement and dismay at what was seen by the Gulf rulers to be a U.S. betrayal of its allies -the Arabs- in favor of the enemy. As a result, U.S. credibility in the region dropped sharply. The scandal made an extremely embarrassed administration vulnerable to Arab manipulation in the Gulf.

The Kuwaitis -historically acknowledged as the most skillful diplomats of the region- did not waste much time in trying to manipulate the administration's apparent vulnerability vis-a-vis its relations with its Gulf allies.

In December -a month after the U.S.-Iranian arms deal disclosure- they discreetly approached the U.S. Coast Guard to inquire about procedures for re-registration of its tanker fleet. The U.S. Coast Guard's discouraging response did not stop them. They then formally presented their request to the U.S. Government to reflag eight of their oil tankers. To the credit of the administration, despite the negative

publicity surrounding the Irangate affair, Kuwait's request was politely turned down.

Failure to benefit from the embarrassment caused by the Irangate scandal did not discourage the determined Kuwaitis. They used a much more formidable card when they approached the Soviets to take on the job. It was in effect a well calculated move: for they were aware that an invitation to the U.S's nemesis would not go unnoticed in Washington.

The Kuwaiti ploy did lead to the U.S. decision to reflag, and escort, half the Kuwaiti fleet. This was primarily perceived in Washington to be a necessary mission in order to contain the Soviet presence in the strategic Gulf. However, critics argue that the United States perception of its' interest in containing the Soviet presence in the Gulf was exaggerated and out of proportion to the existing realities of the situation.

In fact, since the Soviets had had relations with the Kuwaitis for over two decades, and their role in the Gulf at times seemed to be to **protect** the existing status quo, and not to disrupt it, one might argue that the United States should not have been too concerned with this Soviet "exercise". Indeed, in some respects, Soviet interests coincided with those of the United States in this immediate situation.

Even an expansion of this Soviet commitment (leasing of three of its tankers to

Kuwait) could be (after careful consideration) viewed somewhat as a **feasible** outcome for several reasons: Any hostile attack by Iran on one of these Soviet tankers would only further exacerbate any possibility of an alignment between Iran and the Soviet Union; the Soviets could address the U.S./Gulf concern over the Iranian threat by bearing the (potential) human and (given) economic costs of escorting the Kuwaiti tankers; lastly, a greater Soviet involvement in the Gulf's tanker traffic vis-a-vis an extended protection commitment to Kuwait would, given its influence over Baghdad, lead it to pressure the Iraqis- responsible for over sixty percent of the attacks on tankers plying the Gulf- to restrain themselves.

It was this broad commitment (to protect an insignificant portion of Gulf shipping) that **directly** involved the U.S. Navy in the Iran-Iraq conflict. Furthermore, **linkage** of the U.S. reflagging operation to the resolution of the Iran-Iraq war was somewhat inevitable given the nature of its reflagging mission: The United States could not withdraw its escort of the eleven Kuwaiti tankers until hostile attacks in the Gulf waters (the second war front of the Iran-Iraq war) ceased. Any attempt to pull out, or withdraw, from this hasty commitment would have resulted in the loss of what little credibility it had left with the Gulf Arabs.

The administration's preoccupation with the means (military) it employed and the emergence of a pseudo-confidence in its abilities vis-a-vis the use of these means (military) led to the distortion of what the ultimate objectives of this specific

commitment i.e protection of eleven Kuwaiti tankers.

Nevertheless, the reflagging operation can be judged a **success** as the United States stayed the course in its commitment to protect the reflagged tankers. Notwithstanding the tragic **U.S.S. Stark** and the **Iranian Airbus** incidents, U.S. military operations were generally run with an impressive degree of political sensitivity. They effectively combined U.S. military action with a strong understanding for regional political dynamics. Furthermore, the reflagging maneuvers provided the U.S. Navy with valuable operational experience.

However, the United States "exercise" of protecting eleven Kuwaiti tankers from Iranian attacks ultimately expanded to include offensive maneuvers that effectively destroyed the ragtag naval force of the Iranians. The expansion of this limited (and specific) U.S. role in a volatile situation to a much broader, and vaguer, role of coming to the aid of other tankers in the vicinity of the U.S. naval warships (spring of 1988) that might be threatened by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, was fraught with real dangers.

Furthermore, the pro-Iraqi tilt of the Reagan administration gave Iraq a relatively free hand in pursuit of its aggressive policies in the Gulf with respect to shipping. Iraqi violations of international law were virtually ignored by the United States and led it (Iraq) to believe that it could get away with other, and more devastating,

forms of aggression, such as the use of chemical weapons on its own Kurdish population. A pattern was established by Iraq that would later threaten the entire region with destabilization.

Finally, the U.S. decision to protect the eleven Kuwaiti tankers committed the U.S. to a policy that could not deal with another key problem: the overall security of international shipping in the Gulf waters from hostile attacks by **both** belligerents (Iran and Iraq). This commitment increased the possibility of an all-out confrontation between the U.S. and one of the belligerent's.

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