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**Covert Relationship: American Foreign Policy, Intelligence,
and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988**

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American Foreign Policy, Intelligence, and
the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988

By
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Table of Contents

Abstract	pg. i
Acknowledgements	pg. ii
Introduction	pg. iv
Chapter One: The War of Subversion	pg. 1
Chapter Two: The Right Reaction	pg. 33
Chapter Three: Strict Neutrality?	pg. 54
Chapter Four: The Tilt	pg. 80
Chapter Five: The Internationalization of the War	pg. 103
Chapter Six: The Iran Imbrolio	pg. 131
Chapter Seven: Forcing an End to the War	pg. 150
Conclusion	pg. 164
Appendix A	pg. 170
Appendix B	pg. 177
Appendix C	pg. 180
List of Works Cited	pg. 183

Abstract

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iraq invaded Iran resulting in a costly war from 1980 to 1988, which threatened American interests in the Persian Gulf. From the outset, the stated official American policy was strict neutrality, but this was not the case. The war had provided the United States with an opportunity to improve relations with Iraq, particularly after Iran reversed the Iraqi invasion in the summer of 1982. Because the Reagan administration could not let Iraq collapse, the United States tilted heavily towards Iraq in defiance of its stated policy. Interestingly, the tilt towards Iraq did not stop the Reagan administration from secretly dealing with Iran in 1985. Consequently, the disclosure of these dealings resulted in the buildup of American naval forces in the region to protect the shipment of oil, and eventually the use of force to end the conflict in 1988.

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Brideau. Jeff always made himself available to debate ideas and arguments, providing excellent insight that might not have become known without his support. Finally, I need to thank Gary Sick for providing valuable advice on the subject, including an important refutation of a number of arguments. In the early stages of this work, Mr. Sick pointed me in the direction of a number of important articles that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. In the end, one cannot thank these five individuals enough for their support for my work.

A number of institutions and libraries were also very helpful. Notably, the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries provided incredible information on my subject. In particular, I recognize the help of Keith Shuler at the Jimmy Carter Library, Jennifer Mandel at the Reagan Library, and James Yancy at the National Archives (NARA). Another incredibly helpful institution was the National Security Archive at George Washington University, which provided me with an early glimpse at the formulation of the American policy towards the war. Particularly helpful at the NSA were Joyce Battle and Malcolm Byrne. I also have to thank the University of Ottawa for providing me the opportunity to engage this important subject. Without the support of the University, I do not believe this work would have been accomplished. Finally, I need to thank Erin Walker at Gale-Thomson for her help locating a number of documents that I used a number of years before deciding to write my thesis. As such, I am indebted to her and cannot thank her enough.

- Bryan Gibson, May 4, 2007.

Introduction

No event since the detonation of a Soviet nuclear weapon in 1949 affected American strategic perceptions more than the Iranian Revolution in 1979. While the Korean War (1950-1953), Cuban Missile Crisis (1963) and the Vietnam War (1954-1975) were very important, at no point did any of these Cold War conflicts alter the strategic balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. The main difference between these events and the Iranian Revolution was that Iran was of great strategic significance to the United States. After all, Iran is the largest state in the Persian Gulf region, it shared a long border with the Soviet Union, possessed the fourth largest oil and second largest natural gas reserves in the world, and was a crucial American ally in the Cold War.

The Islamic Revolution occurred at time when American policymakers had become increasingly concerned about access to foreign oil, thereby amplifying the importance of the petroleum rich Persian Gulf. A decade earlier economist E. Wayne Brown had warned the American government that petroleum producers in the United States would not be able to meet the public demand in the 1970s, leading to the importation of foreign oil.¹ As American demands for access to foreign sources of oil increased, so did the Persian Gulf's strategic importance. In 1973, the Arab States imposed an oil embargo on the United States during the Yom Kipper War. The resulting economic crisis underlined a number of new realities to American policymakers. First, it

¹ John M. Blair, *The Control of Oil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pg. 4.

elevated access to oil as the number two priority of the government next to countering the Soviet Union; second, it convinced Washington that the Arab states were unreliable; and third, it cemented the American relationship with Iran, which did not participate in the embargo.

Throughout the 1970s, the security relationship between the United States and Iran became closely intertwined as Washington increasingly relied upon Iran to 'police' the Persian Gulf. Unfortunately, American policymakers failed to adequately address a significant question: what would happen if Iran collapsed? The Iranian Revolution caught the United States completely off guard, leaving it unable to formulate an effective response to the threat posed by Iran's radical brand of Islamic fundamentalism and the war that ensued between Iran and Iraq. In November 1979, relations between the United States and Iran terminated when Iranian students invaded the American Embassy and kidnapped 62 Americans. This event shattered the American Persian Gulf policy and led to President Jimmy Carter's defeat in the 1980 election. Iraq also suddenly launched an invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980, again catching Carter unprepared. As a result, Carter's administration adopted an official policy of strict neutrality simply because it had no other options available at the time. The diplomatic crisis between Iran and the United States over the hostage crisis meant that Iran was not willing to accept American support in the war. Similarly, a tilt towards Iraq was not feasible because Iraq had severed relations with the United States in 1967 following the Six Day War. But the release of the hostages and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in January 1980 offered the new administration greater flexibility in its approach to the conflict. With the hostage crisis resolved, the war provided Washington with an ideal opportunity to cultivate

relations with Iraq. While the official policy of the United States towards the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was strict neutrality, the Reagan administration subverted its own policy by providing support for the Iraq and – at times – Iran. Nevertheless, the United States was never able to recover from the Iranian Revolution. As a result, the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War was reactionary, lacking the ability to adequately influence the scope and duration of the war.

While numerous scholars have studied various aspects of the Iran-Iraq War, a thorough examination of the American policy towards the conflict is noticeably absent. In light of recent dark developments in Iraq and American efforts to circumscribe Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions, the importance of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War has increased dramatically. The importance rests on the fact that during the last forty years, the only period that the United States and Iraq had substantial relations occurred because of the war. Since the end of the conflict in 1988, American-Iraqi relations deteriorated rapidly. After all, the United States fought against Iraq in 1991, sanctioned and bombed Iraq throughout the 1990s, and then launched an invasion in 2003. In light of these significant developments, it is astonishing that scholars of American foreign policy have ignored the American policy towards the conflict. Thus, the objective of the following study is to analyse the formulation of the American policy during the Iran-Iraq War, with particular emphasis on the gradual development of the American-Iraqi relationship.

Given the absence of a comprehensive secondary study on the subject, the majority of the information used to generate the following analysis comes from primary sources obtained at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, the Ronald Reagan

Presidential Library, and the National Security Archive, a non-profit organization based at George Washington University in Washington D.C. Fortunately, the information obtained at these archival institutions paints an accurate picture of the formulation of policy towards the war. However, primary documents do not always provide complete insight into the character and personality of those who generate the documents. To accommodate for this weakness, this study also makes use of numerous memoirs published by senior government officials. Through these accounts, the achievement of an excellent understanding of the mindset of policymakers in Washington occurred.² Unfortunately, many of these accounts do not focus specifically on the Iran-Iraq War. Some mention significant developments only in passing, when in actuality these events had consumed the administration's attention. In order to supplement the limitations posed by primary sources, a series of helpful secondary studies have been consulted.

The *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, a non-profit, independent research group founded in 1971, is an excellent source of scholarly information on Middle Eastern issues. Each volume, published monthly, contains a number of scholarly articles written by reputable authors that focus on important problems affecting the Middle East. Undoubtedly, significant developments in the Iran-

² With regard to the Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, see Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1995); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle, Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1983); Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (New York: Random House, 1985); Gary Sick, "Moral Choice and the Iran-Iraq Conflict" *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 3, (1989); Gary Sick "Trial by Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal* 43, No. 2 (Spring 1989); and Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983). Similarly, George P. Shultz, *Turmoil & Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993) provides an excellent account of American foreign policy under Reagan and has a detailed chapter on the Iran-Iraq War. In addition, three excellent primary sources for information on the Iran-Contra Affair are George Cave, "Why Secret 1986 U.S.-Iran "Arms for Hostages" Negotiations Failed," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (September/October 1994), Oliver L. North with William Novak, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1991), and John Tower et al, *Report of the President's Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987).

Iraq War caught *MERIP*'s attention from time to time, as did the growing American involvement in the region. For instance, *MERIP*'s May 1982 issue "Reagan Targets Middle East" centered on Washington's growing concern about Lebanon's precarious situation and the Iraqi reversal in its war with Iran. In September 1987, *MERIP* published "Reflagging the Gulf," an issue that studied the deterioration of the war and President Reagan's decision to re-flag Kuwaiti ships with the American flag.³ Thanks to the *MERIP* reports, a historiographical dialogue was able to occur throughout the course of the war.

A number of secondary studies on the Iran-Iraq War proved useful in the writing of the following study. The first major study that focused specifically on the war was Stephen R. Grummon's 1982 book *The Iran-Iraq War: Islam Embattled*. Grummon's short work provided an excellent early analysis of the conflict, examining its root causes, the first two years of hostilities, the role of third party mediators, and superpowers' responses to the war.⁴ Shahram Chubin, an expert in Middle Eastern studies, published *Security in the Persian Gulf 4: The Role of Outside Powers*, a thoughtful analysis of the military-supply relationships between three regional powers – Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia – and the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Written in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Chubin's work is extremely helpful in understanding the driving forces behind American and Soviet policies towards the Persian Gulf. While the focus of his work was on the military relationships between the

³ Five *Middle East Research and Information Project* issues focused specifically on the Iran-Iraq War: "Iraq and the War in the Gulf," No. 97 (June 1981); "Reagan Target's Middle East," No. 105 (May 1982); "Strange War in the Gulf," No. 125/126 (July 1984); "The Future of the Gulf," No. 132 (May 1985); and "Reflagging the Gulf," No. 148 (September 1987).

⁴ Stephen R. Grummon, *The Iran-Iraq War, Islam Embattled* (Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., Praeger Publishers, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1982).

Gulf States and the superpowers, Chubin also offered a useful discussion on the war's impact on Soviet-Iraqi relations and the rapid deterioration of American-Iranian relations.⁵

As the war dragged on, Edgar O'Ballance and Anthony Cordesman published excellent albeit incomplete accounts of the war. As a journalist living in Iran and Iraq throughout most of the conflict, O'Ballance provided excellent insight into events on the ground and in Tehran and Baghdad. But as his monograph was only a narrative of the war, he discussed the United States solely when American involvement was overt. It is unfortunate that O'Ballance ended his detailed account of the conflict in early 1987, for the significant events of late 1987 and 1988, such as the buildup of American naval forces in the Gulf and its subsequent American attacks on Iran, are noticeably absent. Similarly, Cordesman's painstaking military analysis of the war, which concentrates on the events between 1984 and 1987, suffers from the same limitations. Nevertheless, Cordesman's book was the first major study to provide a thorough politico-military analysis of the war's impact on Western security.⁶

A notable flurry of academic analysis on the Iran-Iraq War occurred in 1987. Undoubtedly Reagan's controversial decision to re-flag Kuwaiti tankers and, to a lesser extent, the outbreak of the Iran-Contra Affair in November 1986, was the catalyst that prompted a heightened interest in the subject. Although *MERIP* had already focused a great deal of attention on the war, the increased American presence in the Gulf in 1987 prompted other scholarly journals to follow suit. Subsequently, the spring 1987 issue of

⁵ Shahram Chubin, *Security in the Persian Gulf 4: The Role of Outside Powers* (Totowa, New Jersey: Allanheld, Osmun & Co. Publishers, Inc., 1982).

⁶ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (New York: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988) and Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security, 1984-1987* (London: The Royal United Services Institute, 1987).

Foreign Affairs featured a number of significant articles on the war. Of particular note were Nita M. Renfrew's piece "Who Started the War?" and Shireen T. Hunter's article "After the Ayatollah." While earlier evaluations had labeled Iraq the instigator, Renfrew convincingly argued that Iran had begun the conflict by seeking to subvert Iraq following the Islamic Revolution's success. Hunter's article focused on the precarious political situation in Iran thanks to the declining health of Ayatollah Khomeini and the seemingly endless war with Iraq, while also explaining how these considerations led Reagan to sell weapons to Iran. Then, in its winter 1987 issue, *Foreign Affairs* published Barry Rubin's excellent analysis, "Drowning in the Gulf," which averred that the Kuwaitis had skillfully manipulated Reagan's administration to re-flag its oil tankers by presenting both the United States and the Soviet Union with the same request.⁷ Each of these analyses built significantly upon earlier accounts of the war, particularly on the American role, and provoked considerable debate among academics.

Although the subject of Bob Woodward's *Veil: the Secret Wars of the CIA* was not the Iran-Iraq War, this work provided excellent insight into the workings of the Central Intelligence Agency during the Reagan presidency. While the book mostly focused on CIA operations in Latin America, Woodward also provided detailed information on matters pertaining to the Iran-Iraq War, such as the sharing of tactical intelligence with Iraq and the Iran-Contra scandal. The strength of *Veil* lies in Woodward's incredible access to CIA Director William Casey, who passed away before the book was published. As a result, Woodward was given *carte blanche* to reveal all that he knew, which – as it turned out – was considerable.

⁷ Shireen T. Hunter, "After the Ayatollah," *Foreign Policy*, No. 66 (Spring 1987); Nita M. Renfrew, "Who Started the War?" *Foreign Policy*, No. 66 (Spring, 1987); and Barry Rubin, "Drowning in the Gulf," *Foreign Policy*, No. 69 (Winter 1987-1988).

Perhaps the most comprehensive study on the entirety of the Iran-Iraq War was Shahrām Chubin and Charles Tripp's *Iran and Iraq at War*, which thoughtfully examined the relationship between the war and society. Analyzing the war from an Iraqi, Iranian and Gulf perspective, Chubin and Tripp were the first scholars to comprehensively study the war, including the American role. They refuted the argument that the war was the outcome of escalating international tensions and also downplayed the role of the superpowers. Pointing out that in 1980 Saddam Hussein and Khomeini both faced intense opposition to their rule, Chubin and Tripp argued that the war had provided them with ideal opportunities to consolidate their power and crush opposition. Therefore, the war was the culmination of internal political dynamics in both Iran and Iraq.⁸

Because of the important implications that the Iran-Iraq War had on international relations, Christopher C. Joyner edited *The Persian Gulf War: Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy*.⁹ The articles, written by well-known scholars, cover a wide variety of issues, including two excellent articles that specifically addressed the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War. The first, written by Thomas L. McNagher, examined the major developments in American policy towards the war, such as the creation of CENTCOM, the escalation during 1987-88, and American diplomacy at the United Nations. Essentially, McNagher argued that through the use of force, the United States played an important role in bringing Iran to the negotiation table in 1988. The second article, by Maxwell Orme Johnson, studied the American Navy's significant role in the Iran-Iraq War. Johnson argued that "U.S. involvement in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War, particularly during the so-called "tanker war" following the reflagging of Kuwaiti

⁸ Shahrām Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1988).

⁹ Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990).

tankers, was part of a long-standing continuum of American foreign policy.”¹⁰ In essence, the American objective was to project its military power in the Persian Gulf after Iran had emasculated it during the Iranian Revolution.

Another important study on the military implications of the Iran-Iraq War was *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East* written by Stephen Pelletiere, Douglas V. Johnson II, and Leif R. Rosenberger in 1990. Published by the United States Army War College, the study carefully examined the impact of the Iraqi victory over Iran in 1988 on American security. Starting from the Iranian victory at Al-Fao in 1986, the authors felt that Iraq had created an adaptable army, capable of dominating the region after the war. The authors concluded as well that the American policy towards the war was “fairly benign,” adapting to significant events as they occurred. Essentially, Iraq and the United States were united by the common threat posed by Iran, which led to an American tilt towards Iraq.¹¹

The first major revisionist theory on the Iran-Iraq War surfaced in 1991. The champion of this perspective was Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who argued in *My Turn to Speak* that the United States had played a significant role in instigating the conflict.¹² Around the same time Dilip Hiro, a regular *MERIP* contributor, published *The Longest War, The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, that supported of Bani-Sadr’s theory. As we shall see, considerable evidence casts doubt on Bani-Sadr and Hiro’s conclusions, but their point of view cannot be discounted entirely. For instance, Hiro’s account of the war

¹⁰ Maxwell Orme Johnson, “The Role of U.S. Military Force in the Gulf War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lesson for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 135-136.

¹¹ Stephen C. Pelletiere, Douglas V. Johnson II, Leif R. Rosenberger, *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1990), pg. 51.

¹² Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, *My Turn To Speak* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1991). Bani-Sadr’s arguments will be discussed in greater detail later in this study.

provided valuable information on the war, particularly on the American role, but his notable anti-American bias detracted from his argument.¹³ Following the brief resurgence in interest in 1991, during the Persian Gulf War, academic discussions on the Iran-Iraq War was relegated to picture books on the war for children¹⁴ and general histories on Iraq, Iran and the Middle East,¹⁵ and biographies of important individuals.¹⁶

Perhaps one of the most helpful military analyses of the war was Kenneth M. Pollack's *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness 1948-1991*. In this work, Pollack meticulously examined every major Arab conflict country by country. While a great portion of his discussion on Iraq concentrates on its war with Iran, Pollack unfortunately glossed over a number of significant battles that occurred during the prolonged stalemate from 1982 to 1987. Certainly, this was due to constraints of space because the focus of the study was on Arabs in general. Nevertheless, he provided an excellent examination of the war, including in-depth analyses of the Iraqi defeats in 1981 and its decisive victory in 1988. Ultimately, this analysis was helpful in understanding the dramatic transformation of the Iraqi army throughout the war.¹⁷

¹³ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War, The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1991).

¹⁴ See Edward Willett, *War and conflict in the Middle East: The Iran-Iraq War* (New York: the Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2004) and Efraim Kharsh, *Essential Histories: The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2002). Although Kharsh's work is essentially a picture book, it offers a surprisingly thorough analysis of the war, but in terms that are easily understood. It also includes detailed maps and pictures of important figures, organizations, and battles.

¹⁵ For a general history of the Middle East: William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Westview Press, 2000). For a general history of Iraq: Phebe Marr *A Modern History of Iraq*, (London: Westview Press, Inc., 1985) and Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). For an excellent understanding of American foreign relations see Thomas G. Paterson, et al. *American Foreign Relations: A History: Since 1895, Volume 2*, Sixth Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

¹⁶ On Ronald Reagan: see Lou Cannon, *President Reagan, The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1991, 2000). On Saddam Hussein: see Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2002).

¹⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War, Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, Council on Foreign Relations, 2002).

While this study seeks to provide a thorough examination of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War, it faces a number of limitations. First, in historical terms the Iran-Iraq War was a recent conflict, ending less than twenty years ago. Although a number of scholars have studied the war, very few – if any – have specifically examined the American policy towards the war. As a result, historiographical debates on the subject are not as extensive as one would assume, which has stunted further examination of the American role. Second, in late 1986, when it became apparent that the Iran-Contra scandal would become public, Oliver North, a staff officer for the National Security Council, and John Poindexter, Reagan’s National Security Advisor, had shredded hundreds of documents that pertained to American weapons sales to Iran. Consequently, historians will remain forever in the dark about relevant details of the arms transfers. Finally, the greatest weakness of this study is the limited availability of primary documents on the subject due to classification restrictions. While the vast majority of information utilized in this study is from primary documents, an uncountable number of documents remain classified. Historians and non-profit organizations like the National Security Archive are seeking to have these documents declassified, but the process is incredibly slow – over a seven year wait for current requests.

Chapter One:

The War of Subversion

When Great Britain announced the unilateral withdrawal of its military forces from the Persian Gulf in January 1968, the United States quickly had to determine how to protect that strategically significant oil-rich region from an expansionist Soviet Union.¹ Although America and the Soviet Union had entered an era of détente, Washington believed that Moscow's ultimate goal was to acquire a warm water port in the Indian Ocean, which could shift the Cold War balance of power in its favour. As a result, the United States needed to incorporate its regional allies into a grand strategy designed to check Soviet power.² Unfortunately, "The war [in Vietnam] prevented the Nixon administration from giving any serious consideration to the idea of replacing the British with U.S. forces."³ This led to the formulation of a regional grand strategy designed to create stability while checking Soviet power. According to President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Persian Gulf policy "was seen as resting on two secure pillars, Iran and Saudi Arabia."⁴ While Saudi Arabia was an integral part of the equation, Iran retained the "U.S. designation as the 'strategic prize' of

¹ Richard Schofield, "Position, Function, and Symbol: The Shatt al-Arab Dispute in Perspective," Ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pg. 53.

² I need to distinguish between strategy, grand strategy and tactics. A grand strategy is a premeditated long-term plan that is designed to achieve far off goals; a strategy is a plan of action used to achieve objectives; while a tactic is a short-term action used to achieve immediate objectives.

³ Amitav Acharya, *U.S. Military Strategy in the Gulf* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pg. 21, 23.

⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle, Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1983), pg. 454.

the Near East.”⁵ Iran’s value centered on its size, population, economic resources (oil and natural gas), but most importantly, its strategic location at the Straits of Hormuz which allowed Iran to dominate access to the Persian Gulf. In addition, as a strategic buffer state between the Soviet Union and the Indian Ocean, Iran was an important Cold War ally of the West. Thus, during the 1970s America’s Persian Gulf strategy rested on the twin pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Iran bearing the greater weight of the two and enjoying a close military alliance with the United States. But in hindsight, the American strategy never addressed a fundamental question: What happens if one of the twin pillars collapsed?

The United States was not a new player in the Persian Gulf. In 1953 the CIA had prevented the overthrow of Iran’s monarch, the Shah, when the agency had organized a coup d’etat that had ousted radical constitutionalists intent on nationalizing foreign oil companies. Since the coup, American support for the Iranian monarch had never wavered. Beginning in 1971, when Iran officially emerged as the Persian Gulf’s new policeman, Washington increased its extensive political, economic and military support for the Shah’s repressive regime. Meanwhile, President Carter, a strong advocate of human rights, declared during a speech in Tehran in 1977 that “Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more trouble areas in the world,” which grossly understated the regime’s flagrant violation of human rights.⁶ Yet as Carter spoke those fateful words, there were strong undercurrents of popular unrest opposing the Shah because his ambitious reform programs had alienated many segments

⁵ Amitav Acharya, pg. 3.

⁶ President Jimmy Carter, “Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner,” Tehran, Iran, December 31, 1977, *the American Presidency Project*. Available on the World Wide Web: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7080

of Iranian society. While the reforms sought to modernize and liberalize Iran, the effect was a double-edged sword. Even as the modernization programs created widespread discontent, the liberalization programs provided a conduit for expressing popular discontent. As a result, within twelve months of Carter's statement, the Iranian monarchy had collapsed and been replaced by a radical Islamic regime; policymakers in Washington were shocked.

Because the Carter administration had not anticipated the Iranian Revolution, it had to completely reevaluate its geopolitical strategy for the region while maintaining the regional balance of power with the Soviet Union. Further complicating matters, on November 4, 1979, radical students seized the American embassy in Tehran, taking fifty-two Americans hostage. For the next 444 days, the Carter administration focused all of its attention on this hostage crisis. This dramatic transformation of the regional security situation of the Persian Gulf that was brought on by the Iranian Revolution caught the United States completely off guard. It was unable to formulate an effective grand strategy to respond to the threat posed by Iran's radical brand of Islamic fundamentalism and the subsequent war that ensued between Iran and Iraq.

The United States was not the only nation keenly interested in the events unfolding in Iran; Iraq was very concerned. The history of the enmity between Iraq and Iran is centuries-old. Iraq was an Arab state, ruled by a secular Sunnis elite, whereas Iran was Persian and Shi'ite. The ancestors of both peoples had vied for regional domination for centuries, but Iran had often had used its strength and influence to undermine and force concessions from Iraq. But the Islamic Revolution changed everything. As the new regime in Tehran consolidated its power, it began to viciously purge the military.

Moreover, Iran's sudden instability greatly disrupted the regional balance of power. To make matters worse, as Iran was purging its military, it sought to overthrow Iraq's Ba'athist government. The tactics were reminiscent of those employed by the Shah in the mid-1970s to force territorial concessions from Iraq, but the difference was that the Shah's military had been intact. As Iran waged its war of subversion against Iraq, the Iraqis planned to invade.

The greatest historical source of conflict between Iran and Iraq revolved around the question of the sovereignty over the strategic Shatt al-Arab waterway, which runs for 192 kilometers along the Iran-Iraq border. Traditionally, while Iraq had claimed that the river was solely under its jurisdiction, Iran possessed a geographic advantage over Iraq because of its extensive access to the Persian Gulf coast and its outlet to the Indian Ocean. By comparison, Iraq's geographic location at the head of the Gulf was quite poor, for "[the] head of the Gulf contains the low, swampy delta of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which is formed by the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the Iranian Karun River."⁷ Iraq clearly faced a geo-strategic disadvantage as it had just two ports – Umm Qasr and Basra – and access to only 48 kilometers of the Gulf coastline, which was mostly swamp.⁸ Therefore, thanks to its limited access to the Persian Gulf, Iraqi national interests made it vital that it control the Shatt al-Arab waterway.

Dispute over the sovereignty of this strategic waterway can be traced back to ancient tensions between the Ottoman and Persian governments. For generations both nations had vied for control over the region, but by the nineteenth century a "general

⁷ Christopher C. Joyner, "Introduction: The Geography and Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf," Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

outline for the border had been defined: Land east of the Shatt belonged to Iran, while territory to the west belonged to the Ottomans and to Iraq as the successor state.” This haphazard demarcation had broken down in 1908 when oil was discovered in Iran’s Khuzestan region. “In 1913, a series of negotiations produced the Constantinople Accords. These negotiations drew the boundary at the low water mark of the eastern (Iranian) shore line,”⁹ giving Iraq total sovereignty over the river. Understandably, Iran had been unhappy with this outcome, especially because it needed the Shatt to export Khuzestani oil. Another problem for Iran was that “at any one time an estimated 80 percent of shipping entering the Shatt was bound for one of the Persian ports.”¹⁰ In 1937, Britain had arbitrated a new waterway treaty, giving Iraq sovereignty over the waterway with the exception of the approaches to Abadan and Khorramashar which was set by the *thalweg* principle.¹¹ According to the *thalweg* principle, the river boundary was set down the middle of the deepest channel. But Iran, wanting to share control of the river, had objected to its denial of shared sovereignty. Despite Iranian objections, Iraq had retained sovereignty over the waterway thanks to British concerns “over whether Iran would remain neutral in any future European war.”¹²

The frontier issues remained unchanged until 1969 when Iran unilaterally abrogated the 1937 agreement after Iraq announced in April that “all Iranian ships in the Shatt al-Arab would have to lower their flags” and “all Iranian nationals on board ships in Iraqi waters would have to disembark.” Promptly, Iran’s foreign minister advised

⁹ Stephen R. Grummon, *The Iran-Iraq War, Islam Embattled* (Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., Praeger Publishers, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1982), pg. 7.

¹⁰ Richard Schofield, “Position, Function, and Symbol: The Shatt al-Arab Dispute in Perspective,” Ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pg. 43.

¹¹ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 7.

¹² Richard Schofield, pg. 45.

Baghdad that the waterway treaty was abrogated in favour of the *thalweg* principle. The southern border now would run down middle of the river and that both nations would enjoy equal access. The agreement remained abrogated until 1975 when Iran forced a reluctant Iraq to accept the *thalweg* delimitation. The deal had been a *quid pro quo*. Iraq had conceded to “Iran control over the Shatt al-Arab;” in return “the Iranians agreed to withdraw their support from the Kurds,” fighting for independence from Iraq.¹³ According to former Iraqi Foreign Minister Dr. Saadoun Hammadi, Iraq had agreed to such unfavorable terms was because “it was either that [the Shatt al-Arab] or lose the north of the country” to the Kurds.¹⁴

The Kurds played an important role in the genesis of the Iran-Iraq War. For centuries, the Kurds that inhabit northern Iraq had been fighting for independence from Iraq’s central government, as “the Kurds are an ethnic minority distinct from Arabs. They speak a different language and have different habits and customs.”¹⁵ According to a CIA study prepared in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, “the Kurds are the descendants of Indo-European tribes that settled in the Kurdish areas perhaps up to 4,000 years ago.” Estimates placed their population in the range of 9.65 to 12.4 million people, with 2.8 to 3.5 million living in Iran, a very small proportion of the country’s population when compared to Iran’s majority Persian population. Iraq’s situation was much different given that its 2.5 million Kurds constituted 20 percent of the Iraqi

¹³ Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2002), pg. 119.

¹⁴ Nita M. Renfrew, “Who Started the War?” *Foreign Policy*, No. 66 (Spring, 1987), pg. 100.

¹⁵ Con Coughlin, pg. 82.

population.¹⁶ In sum, the Kurds are “one of the largest non-state nations in the world” and their twentieth-century drive for independence has destabilized the Persian Gulf.¹⁷

It had often served Iran’s purposes to manipulate the desire of Iraq’s Kurdish population for independence. Because Iraq had the second largest military in the region, next to Iran, and was growing economically, it posed a significant threat to Iran. This was particularly the case after 1958 when Iraq opened relations with the Soviet Union and backed out of the Baghdad Pact after undergoing a revolution that brought to power the Ba’ath Party.¹⁸ Needing to counter the growth of Iraq’s military, Iran incited Iraqi Kurds to rebel. Thereafter, “The Iraqi Kurds were a useful tool for Tehran: they kept the Iraqi army occupied and were a thorn in Baghdad’s side that the shah could press whenever he pleased.”¹⁹

Thanks to the Soviet Union’s support for the creation of Kurdistan in the 1940s, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) fell under Soviet influence in the post-war era.²⁰ Given the widespread perception among Kurds that the West had sold them out to the Iranians in 1946, the KDP viewed the Soviets as a natural source of support. Despite the relationship, the Kurds and the Soviets were odd bedfellows. For instance, Soviet puppet states often were submissive to Moscow, whereas KDP leader General Mustafa Barzani, was strongly committed to retaining Kurdish autonomy. After Communists had gained greater influence in the KDP, suspecting a power struggle, in 1959 Barzani had “expelled members of a pro-Communist faction from the party and moved the orientation of the

¹⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, “The Kurdish Problem in Perspective,” PA79-10330D, August 1979, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (herein referred to as JCPL), NLC-8-3-2-3-5, pg. 1.

¹⁷ Amir Hassanpour, *Middle East Report*, No. 189, The Kurdish Experience. (Jul. – Aug., 1994), pg. 3.

¹⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pg. 164.

¹⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War, Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, Council on Foreign Relations, 2002), pg. 179.

party to the right.” This sudden KDP shift prompted Iran to encourage the Kurds to engage in an armed struggle against Iraq from 1961-1970. CIA reports attributed the conflict’s long duration as due to “Iran’s willingness to aid the Kurds and to allow its territory to be used for their supply and support.” Throughout the nine-year conflict, the Kurds inflicted several embarrassing defeats upon the Iraqi army that led Iraq to seek a negotiated peace in March 1970.²¹ Saddam Hussein, as vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, and Barzani agreed to four key points.²² First, “The people of Iraq are made up of two principal nationalities, the Arab and the Kurdish.”²³ This was important because the Kurds now were a recognized minority. Second, the agreement reaffirmed Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights. Third, it provided funds for the “economic rehabilitation and development of the devastated regions of Kurdistan.” The accords’ most important point provided for the establishment of a self-governing, autonomous Kurdish Region within four years.²⁴

Despite the prospect of gaining local autonomy, the agreement was doomed from the start. The Ba’athist government used the 1970 Agreement simply as a stalling tactic to allow it to consolidate its rule. The proximity of the Kurds to the Kurkuk oil fields was a problem, as Kurdish territory housed “65% of Iraq’s oil” and “holds 70% of Iraq’s oil reserve.”²⁵ In an environment of increasing world oil prices, Iraq’s government was concerned about the region’s stability. Further, it was unsurprising that the Kurdish drive

²¹ National Foreign Assessment Center, “The Kurdish Problem in Perspective,” PA79-10330D, August 1979, JCPL, NLC-8-3-2-3-5, pg. 8.

²² For more information on Saddam Hussein see Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2002)

²³ M.R. Izady, “The Gulf’s Ethnic Diversity: An Evolutionary History,” Ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pg. 78.

²⁴ National Foreign Assessment Center, “The Kurdish Problem in Perspective,” PA79-10330D, August 1979, JCPL, NLC-8-3-2-3-5, pg. 8.

²⁵ Letter from Chairman Mustafa Barzani to President Jimmy Carter, February 9, 1977, JCPL, Box CO-33, White House Central File: Subject File, Countries: CO-72, pg. 2.

for autonomy “generated substantially more enthusiasm once the Kurds discovered that the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq around Mosul and Kirkuk... contained some of the world’s most lucrative oil reserves.”²⁶ As the Kurds knew that their land was incredibly valuable, the Ba’athists catered to their greed by offering the dream of autonomy.

Although it appeared that Hussein had “capitulated to the Kurds,” in reality, he had made “a tactical move to allow the Iraqi army to recover from the defeats of 1966 and 1969.”²⁷

As Baghdad desperately wanted to maintain its ambitious social reforms, it could not afford to fight a full-scale war with the Kurds at this point.

But there was opposition to the agreement within the KDP’s politburo. As Barzani had not consulted that body before making the deal, many of its members considered it “humiliating” that Barzani had signed an agreement “with a weak Iraq government.”²⁸ They wanted to continue armed resistance, viewing the Iraqi overture as a sign of weakness and capitulation. Admitting in hindsight that he had been too eager to reach a deal with Hussein, Barzani had not considered that the agreement might have been a tactical ploy to forestall the inevitable war until Iraq had regained its strength. Indeed, Baghdad had no intention of following through with its promises. The KDP first caught onto this when Baghdad initiated a policy of “Arabizing the Kurdish land, especially areas that are rich in oil.”²⁹ Moreover, Barzani also narrowly escaped an assassination attempt on September 29, 1971.³⁰

²⁶ Con Coughlin, pg. 82.

²⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 177.

²⁸ Amir Hassanpour, pg. 5.

²⁹ Letter from Chairman Mustafa Barzani to President Jimmy Carter, February 9, 1977, JCPL, Box CO-33, White House Central File: Subject File, Countries: CO-72, pg. 2.

³⁰ Amir Hassanpour, pg. 5. See also Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 178.

The conflict between the Kurds and Iraq's central government was also drawn into the Cold War vortex. In 1972, Iraq and the Soviet Union signed a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.³¹ The establishment of this formal relationship set back the American containment strategy, prompting Richard Nixon's administration to open contacts with the Kurds via Iran. In turn, the Kurds were happy to accept American support. Tensions increased greatly between 1972-1974 as Barzani established "cordial relations, overt and covert, with the three archenemies of Iraq – Iran, Israel and the United States."³²

A decisive turning point occurred in 1974 when Baghdad stalled on implementing autonomy. The Kurds responded in April with a massive guerrilla attack that caught Iraq's government off guard.³³ But after initial KDP gains, Iraq's army, setting in motion a long-planned offensive, counterattacked that summer. As the Iraqi army had adapted to Kurdish tactics, the course of this new war scarcely reflected the earlier entanglements. As Kenneth M. Pollack has succinctly described, "Kurdish units stood, fought, and were blown to bits." By early 1975, the successive Iraqi gains had positioned itself to "annihilate the Kurdish resistance." Unhappy with these developments, Iran "cranked up its military aid to the Kurds." Tehran also pressured Washington to provide the Kurds with weapons and intelligence, which then ground the war to a stalemate.³⁴

Iran's intervention had the potential to escalate an internal conflict into a far more dangerous regionalized war. While Iran was not prepared to force a full-scale altercation

³¹ Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, "Iraq's Role in the Middle East," National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79, June 21, 1979, MORI DocID: 1115785, pg. 12. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/02.pdf. Although the agreement formally established a military-supply relationship with the Soviets, it did not permit the Soviet Union to station troops in Iraq.

³² M.R. Izady, pg. 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 79.

³⁴ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 179.

with Iraq, aggravated by Iran's interference with its internal affairs, Iraq also did not want a war with Iran as it "recognized that its military was no match for the Shah's armed forces. Iran's army was not only more than twice the size of Iraq's military, it possessed the latest American weaponry."³⁵ Moreover, "fighting in the north was financially costly, sapped resources, occupied Iraq's military forces, contributed to Iraq's instability, and absorbed the attention of Iraq's leaders."³⁶ Iraq's options thus were limited: it could continue fighting the Kurds and risk a regional escalation with Iran; or it could negotiate with Tehran to stop Iranian military aid to the Kurds.

Iraq chose the latter option as Hussein felt that if he could "persuade the Iranians to disengage from the conflict, he was confident that his forces would be able to suppress the Kurdish resistance." But Iran, recognizing Iraq's weak position, was determined to drive a hard bargain. After Saddam made the overture to Iran, the Shah took an opportunity to link the Shatt al-Arab waterway dispute to the Kurdish problem. In return for Iraq conceding partial sovereignty of the Shatt al-Arab, Iran would cease aiding the Kurds if both parties agreed not to interfere with the other's internal affairs. The agreement, mediated by Algeria, was signed in Algiers on March 6, 1975.³⁷ Yet while the accord seemed beneficial for Iran and Iraq, it had dire consequences for the Kurds. "Within hours of the signing of the agreement, Iranian soldiers began taking back the heavy weapons they had provided to the Kurds."³⁸ While the agreement indicated the imminent collapse of Kurdish resistance, it brought Iraqi-Iranian relations to a new high.

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 180.

³⁶ Shaul Bakhash, "Iran and Iraq, 1930-80," *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, Ed. Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pg. 20.

³⁷ Con Coughlin, pg. 118.

³⁸ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 180.

Thereafter both countries settled into an uncomfortable peace, but neither could have predicted an Islamic Revolution in Iran four years later.

Despite the 1972 agreement with the Soviet Union, thereafter Iraq had steadily moved away from the Soviet orbit towards the non-aligned movement. The 1970 Hussein-Barzani agreement and the 1975 deal with Iran temporarily solved the Kurdish problem of the Kurds, allowing Baghdad to focus on the economy. According to historian Shahram Chubin, new oil wealth altered Iraq's perceptions as well as its priorities, leading to "a less doctrinaire and more pragmatic approach to its interests."³⁹ Iraq's desire to remain independent from Soviet influence became evident when Iraq quietly changed its military-supply relationship after a reassessment of its capabilities following successive defeats at the hands of the Kurds in the late 1960s and then Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Those military misadventures had revealed two key points for the Iraqis: first, "that Soviet equipment and methods did not suit their [strategic] needs;" and second, that "Soviet weaponry was inferior to Western equipment."⁴⁰ This pragmatic analysis led to large equipment purchases from the West, particularly France.⁴¹ According to a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), "Since early 1974, France has sold Iraq some \$2.2 billion worth of arms, an amount nearly equal to Iraq's Soviet purchases during the same period."⁴² This shift from the Soviet Union did not go unnoticed in Washington.

³⁹ Shahram Chubin, pg. 77-78.

⁴⁰ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 177

⁴¹ For instance, Chubin (pg. 82) points out that in 1977 Iraq had ordered 36 *Mirage* F-1 aircraft and an additional 24 in 1979.

⁴² Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, "Iraq's Role in the Middle East," National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79, June 21, 1979, MORI DocID: 1115785, pg. D4. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/02.pdf

The Camp David Accords, signed on September 17, 1978 between Israel and Egypt, was a great turning point in the direction of Iraq's foreign policy. Egypt had dominated both the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Arab League since the 1956 Suez Crisis. Once Egypt made peace with Israel, it effectively forfeited its position of influence and was ejected from the Arab League. The schism between Egypt and the Arab League provided Hussein an ideal opportunity to lead the organization. Indicative of this was Hussein's failure to move the League's headquarters to Baghdad.⁴³ Another good example was Hussein's announcement of an Arab National Charter in February 1980, a document that committed Iraq "waging an all-out war against Israel and to call upon all other Arab States to join in that war."⁴⁴ Hussein also wanted to head the NAM. His interest in the movement dated back to 1979 when he had attended the quadrennial conference in Havana, Cuba. At Havana, Hussein had arranged for the 1982 conference to be held in Baghdad in the hope that he would replace Fidel Castro as NAM head in 1982.⁴⁵ But Hussein's ambitious plan never materialized thanks his decision to invade Iran in September 1980.

From an Iraqi perspective, the Shah's demise and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's stunning assumption of power in 1979 had not dramatically altered the dynamic of the region. In the immediate wake of the revolution, Iraqi officials showed no indication that they truly comprehended the profound developments in Iranian politics. As far as they were concerned, an autocratic Ayatollah had replaced a dictatorial Shah; the game's basic

⁴³ Christopher S. Wren, "Arab League Bars Meetings in Cairo; Aide Says an Egyptian-Israeli Pact Will Prompt Group to Weigh Moving its Headquarters," *New York Times*, November 6, 1978, pg. 17. The League ultimately moved its headquarters to Tunis, Tunisia.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the 2203rd Meeting of the United Nations Security Council (S/PV.2203), March 1, 1980: point 50, located on the World Wide Web, at <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/52b7d0e66142a40e85256dc70072b982/cd587ba84d8b3d9b052565440056360a!OpenDocument>

⁴⁵ Con Coughlin, pg. 195.

rules remained unaltered. Thus, Iraq opted to treat Khomeini as a “turbaned Shah” rather than alter its tactics towards Iran. This was a significant mistake because Iraq had not adapted accordingly to the altered political reality caused by the Revolution.⁴⁶ Sharam Chubin and Charles Tripp have best explained the complexity of the change in the relationship:

Radical political change with the competing entity [Iran in relation to Iraq] may alter the rules under which the conflict is prosecuted. However, the probability is that the autocrat who retains power [Saddam Hussein] will simply assume that the collapse of his rival [the Shah] has led not to transformation but simply to weakness. Furthermore, he will continue to operate under the old rules of exchange, permitting the exploitation of misfortune by force if necessary, without realizing that his actions are neither understood nor regarded as moves in a limited game by the opposing party.⁴⁷

But Khomeini certainly was not just a “turbaned Shah” and he did not play by the same rules at all.

Having undergone its own Revolution in 1958, Iraq initially endorsed the Iranian Revolution as a positive step towards the removal of foreign powers from the Persian Gulf. As Hussein noted in a February 1979 speech:

We are keen on cooperation with Iran in a way that will ensure the interests and security of the people in the area as well as preserve the historic ties of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty.... Any system which does not side with our enemy, respects our independence and whose oil policy is consistent with the interests of our two peoples will certainly command our respect and appreciation.⁴⁸

Surprisingly, the speech paid lip service to Khomeini in the hope that he would respect the terms of the 1975 Agreement. Although Hussein viewed that pact as humiliating, it

⁴⁶ Sharam Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1988), pg. 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 24.

⁴⁸ Edmund Ghareed, “The Roots of Crisis, Iraq and Iran,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 30.

was in Iraq's best interests to court Iran's revolutionaries to prevent revolutionary fervor from inflaming Iraq's Shi'ite population. Unfortunately, the diplomatic overtures at the start of the Iranian Revolution were short-lived.

Paradoxically, while Iran's new regime was determined to destabilize Iraq's internal security, it was savagely purging its own armed forces simultaneously. Under the Shah, the military had been the source of state power and had been closely associated with "the Great Satan," America. Upon assuming power, the new regime was determined to use a cycle of chaos to undermine "the structure and morale of its armed forces."⁴⁹ Capitalizing on pervasive fears of a military coup, between February and September 1979 the revolutionary regime executed "some 85 officers" and "hundreds more (including all major-generals and most brigadier-generals) were imprisoned or forced to retire. By September 1980, some 12,000 officers had been purged."⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, the expulsion or execution of such a vast number of officers considerably weakened Iran's ability to defend itself.

Two other factors led to the steady decline of both offensive and defensive military capabilities. In the revolution's immediate aftermath, the United States, through General Robert E. Huyser, had coordinated with Iran's military to prevent "sensitive U.S. military equipment" from falling into revolutionary hands.⁵¹ According to Shahram Chubin, advanced components from *Phoenix* missiles, computerized logistics systems, and F-14 fighter jets "were disassembled and removed by American technicians before

⁴⁹ Gary Sick, "Moral Choice and the Iran-Iraq Conflict," *Ethics and International Affairs* (Vol. 3, 1989), pg. 120.

⁵⁰ Efraim Karsh, pg. 19; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 33.

⁵¹ National Security Council, "The Huyser Mission in Iran: January 4 to February 4, 1979," JCPL, Box 34: Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, "Meetings – Vance/Brown/Brzezinski: 3/80-9/80," document 5A, pg. 1.

their departure from Iran.”⁵² The loss of these components greatly diminished Iran’s ability to fight. Credence was given to this analysis in March 1980 when Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, also the Commander-in-Chief, “asked a group of experts to prepare a report on the state of the armed forces, which proved to be alarming since the army had a combat capability of zero, the navy 10 percent, and the air force 20 percent.”⁵³ Iran’s military was falling apart.

Infighting between the various Iranian factions also weakened the military. The moderate camp, led by Bani-Sadr, who had been elected the first president of the Islamic Republic on January 26, 1980, wanted a democratic system of governance. The objectives of the moderate camp, which were surprisingly consistent with American values, were summed up in the slogan, “The people in the political arena: free, active, critical, involved, responsible.” In retrospect, Washington could have made a more active effort to appeal to this camp. Unfortunately, the second faction, consisting of the radical mullahs that wanted to impose a totalitarian theocracy upon Iran, possessed more power. To achieve their objectives, the radicals utilized a private army, the Revolutionary Guards, to instigate conflict between the two groups. The resulting chaos destabilized Iran’s political system, which, in turn, prevented the organization of adequate defences, leaving Iran vulnerable to attack.

As the rapid decline of Iran’s forces forced a dramatic shift in the regional balance of power in Iraq’s favour, in May 1979 the CIA drew up a National Intelligence Estimate. Entitled “Iraq’s role in the Middle East,” the NIE identified that “the collapse of the Iranian military establishment means that Iraq has a substantial advantage in the size and

⁵² Shahrām Chubin, pg. 22.

⁵³ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, *My Turn To Speak* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1991), pg. 69.

capability of the forces it could deploy against Iran.”⁵⁴ As Iran’s military was in total disarray, “It will take time, measured in years, before the armed forces of the new Iranian regime will, realistically, be able to entertain the idea of large-scale combat with Iraqi forces.”⁵⁵ According to Chubin and Tripp, by the summer of 1979 “Iran proceeded to dismantle the armed forces bequeathed it by the Shah by canceling military orders, cutting the already reduced military budget by one third, halving conscription to one year and seeking to return to the United States the 80 F-14 aircraft together with their *Phoenix* missiles.”⁵⁶

Complimenting Iran’s demilitarization, many senior Iranian civilian and military officials, having decamped to Iraq after the Shah’s departure, had been offered safe-haven by Hussein. The most prominent were former Prime Minister Shahpur Bakhtiar and General Ghoam Ali Oveissi,⁵⁷ who had served as the martial-law administrator for Tehran under the Shah.⁵⁸ Scholars agree that these Iranians manipulated Hussein into believing “the Iranian army would collapse in the face of a determined assault, that the revolutionary government in Tehran could not survive such a defeat, and that the population in Khuzestan would rise up in support of an Iraqi advance.”⁵⁹ As we shall see, the exiled Iranians were quite incorrect.

Tensions began building between the two dominant Gulf powers in Spring 1979. What had started as Iraq’s surprisingly amicable support for Iran’s Revolutionaries soon

⁵⁴ Director of Central Intelligence, “Iraq’s Role in the Middle East, Annex D: Military Forces,” National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79, June 21, 1979, MORI DocID: I115785, pg. D3-D4. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NAEBB/NSAEBB167/02.pdf

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. D4.

⁵⁶ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 33.

⁵⁷ Nita M. Renfrew, pg. 98. See also Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 183.

⁵⁸ Gary Sick, pg. 99.

⁵⁹ Gary Sick, “Moral Choice and the Iran-Iraq Conflict,” *Ethics and International Affairs* (Vol. 3, 1989), pg. 121. See also Kenneth Pollack, pg. 183, Nita M. Renfrew, pg. 98, and Dilip Hiro, pg. 37.

disintegrated into a hostile “war of words.”⁶⁰ Saddam Hussein defended Iraq’s sovereignty and honour, while Khomeini attacked Iraq’s secular government. But the animosity was also personal for in 1978, at the Shah’s request, Hussein had expelled Khomeini from Iraq.

The war of words soon escalated into incidents and military clashes along the border in May 1979.⁶¹ Anti-government riots also swept through the Shi’ite dominated southern Iraq after Iraqi security forces had arrested a prominent Shi’ite cleric, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakir al-Sadr in June 1979. A former colleague of Khomeini, al-Sadr not only had publicly endorsed his assumption of power in Iran, he had planned to lead a delegation of Shi’ite dignitaries to congratulate Khomeini personally for the success of the Islamic revolution.⁶² Al-Sadr’s arrest was not unreasonable for he was an outspoken critic of the Iraqi regime and an active member of an Iranian-backed Shi’ite terrorist organization known as al-Da’wa. Throughout 1979, al-Da’wa had killed “a score of government officials” in Iraq and had conducted numerous terrorist attacks against the Iraqi government.⁶³ But while al-Sadr was a threat to the internal cohesion of Iraq and had to be neutralized, his arrest prompted mass demonstrations in southern Iraq, and Iraq’s army “killed scores” when it opened fire on Shi’ite crowds. Although the riots had not been openly provoked by Iranian actions, the confrontation convinced Iraq’s Sunni-dominated government could not trust its Shi’ite population. The incident thus further

⁶⁰ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 26.

⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 34.

⁶² Dilip Hiro, pg. 28. See also Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 25.

⁶³ Con Coughlin, pg. 186.

alienated Baghdad from Tehran, particularly because Khomeini considered al-Sadr a long-standing friend.⁶⁴ Clearly, Iraq-Iran relations were rapidly deteriorating.

A series of occurrences prompted greater Iraqi concern about Iran's foreign policy. It appeared that Iran entertained "hopes that [the Iraqi] Shi'ite community would emulate the Iranian example and rise against their Sunni 'oppressors.'" In November 1979 and then February 1980 "widespread riots erupted in the Shi'ite towns of the oil-rich Saudi province of Hasa, exacting dozens of casualties." Similar events occurred in Bahrain and Kuwait, as the latter nation "became the target of a sustained terrorist and subversive campaign" aimed at overthrowing Kuwait's monarchy. In all cases, Shi'ites were identified as the source of the disturbances. As many Arabs became convinced that Iran was unwilling to act responsibly in the region, it appeared that Iraq was Iran's prime target. This was because Iran viewed Iraq "as the main obstacle to [its] quest for regional hegemony" because of its large size, vast oil resources, comparable military strength and its booming economy.⁶⁵ It was unsurprising then that one of the fundamental tenets of Iran's new foreign policy was the exportation of its revolution to Iraq and the Gulf States.

Khomeini formally announced the 'exportation of revolution' policy during a speech celebrating the Islamic New Year in March 1980. He triumphantly declared "We will export our revolution throughout the world... until the calls "there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God" are echoed all over the world."⁶⁶ Khomeini's proclamation simply confirmed the suspicions of Iraq and the conservative Gulf monarchies, while further heightening their internal security concerns as the revolution in

⁶⁴ Dilip Hiro, pg. 28.

⁶⁵ Efraim Kharsh, *Essential Histories: The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2002), pg. 12-13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

Iran “posed serious military, economic, ideological, and strategic challenges to the states in the region.”⁶⁷ As Iraq’s Sunni minority dominated a large Shi’ite majority, sixty percent of the national population, which shared religious affiliations with Tehran’s revolutionaries,⁶⁸ Baghdad had justifiable reason to pay close attention to Iranian turmoil; it was easy to believe that “one Shi’ite revolution could encourage another.”⁶⁹

At face value, the hostage crisis appeared to benefit Iran’s revolutionary regime. It undermined international confidence in the United States, prevented American military action against Iran, and stifled any plans for a CIA coup akin to that of 1953. But the subsequent American diplomatic backlash had isolated Iran from the international community. “By refusing to release the American hostages it had invited an economic embargo by Western nations.”⁷⁰ Moreover, the United States was Iran’s primary source of military hardware, thus contributing further to the Iranian military’s decay. Iran’s increasing political and economic isolation gave the impression that Iran was increasingly “incapable of defending its interests and was isolated diplomatically, particularly in the Gulf region” and in the West.⁷¹ The negative affect of the hostage crisis was certainly not lost on Iraq.

Another major development occurred on December 25, 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The invasion was problematic for the United States as it had eliminated a neutral buffer state that had stood between American interests – Pakistan and Iran – and the Soviet Union. The instability in Afghanistan that had prompted the

⁶⁷ Edmund Ghareed, “The Roots of Crisis: Iraq and Iran,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War: Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 29.

⁶⁸ Efraim Kharsh, pg. 13.

⁶⁹ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 9.

⁷⁰ Dilip Hiro, pg. 36-37.

⁷¹ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 9.

Soviet intervention had been caused by coup launched by left-wing radicals in April 1978.⁷² Prior to the Soviet attack, Afghanistan had become embroiled in civil war as opposition to the regime formed in the countryside. As the civil war had escalated, the Soviet Union rapidly had increased its military aid to the leftists. It had become evident that the Soviets were planning an invasion in early December 1979, when American intelligence reported that the Red Army had begun “building up substantial forces on the Afghan border and were deploying some combat units in and around Kabul.” Then, according to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, on “December 20, we received information that elite Soviet paratroops had moved into Afghanistan.” Five days later regular forces poured across the Afghan border.⁷³

The Carter administration believed that a major motivation behind the Soviet action was an historical Russian desire for a warm-water-port on the Indian Ocean; thus, invading Afghanistan was a step closer to this goal. Although Afghanistan was a land-locked nation, the strategic Pakistani region of Baluchistan was situated to its immediate south. Importantly, as Baluchistan shared half the Afghan border and over half of the Pakistani shoreline, Brzezinski believed the Soviets intended to encourage Baluchistan to separate from Pakistan, allowing Soviet forces to surge to the Indian Ocean.⁷⁴ This fear prompted a thorough review of American policy for the region:

Steps were initiated to open a new dialogue with Pakistan, India, Iraq and other nations whose relations with United States were seriously strained but who were now confronted with the new reality of a potentially expansive and militant Soviet presence on, or much closer to, their own

⁷² Cyrus Vance, pg. 384. For a more in-depth investigation see Congressional Research Service, *Afghanistan: Soviet Invasion and U.S. Response* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), pg. 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pg. 386.

⁷⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, pg. 427.

borders.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan altered the tactical framework in which the Carter administration had to operate. Ominously, the “Soviet intervention was the first Soviet use of its own military forces outside its own satellite empire since World War II.”⁷⁵ The invasion had removed Afghanistan from its historical position as a neutral buffer state between the Soviet Union and Pakistan, which was aligned with the United States under the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). By occupying Afghanistan, the Soviets were in an ideal position to exploit the instability of Iran for:

A successful take-over in Afghanistan would give the Soviets a deep penetration between Iran and Pakistan, and pose a threat to the rich oil fields of the Persian Gulf area and to the crucial waterways through which so much of the world’s energy supplies had to pass [the Strait of Hormuz].⁷⁶

Given the Strait’s recognition as the “jugular vein of the West,”⁷⁷ American national security demanded that the Strait had to remain beyond the Soviet Union’s reach. But the invasion had placed powerful Soviet forces within striking distance of this important waterway, thus altering the regional balance of power again.

Meanwhile, according to Gary Sick, the senior-most advisor to the National Security Advisor on Iranian affairs, just as analysts were concentrating on the Soviet build-up near Afghanistan:

...in early December [1979], there were reports from Western observers in Iraq that the Iraqis were planning an invasion of Iran’s oil fields, and the reports were given credence by increasingly frequent guerrilla attacks on oil installations and by the accelerated tempo of military clashes between Iraqi and Iranian forces along their common frontier.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Gary Sick, pg. 247.

⁷⁶ Jimmy Carter, pg. 471-472.

⁷⁷ Cyrus Vance, pg. 391.

⁷⁸ Gary Sick, pg. 246.

On January 9 the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), Stansfield Turner posited three potential ways to positively affect the outcome of the crisis. First, he noted the possibility that “the United States might invade Iran” given the significant pressure from American hardliners upon President Carter to act more forcefully against Iran. Second, the DCI wrote that “ethnic dissidence had risen to the point that solving that issue [the dissidents] was so important as to make it desirable to dispense with the hostage problem.” Lastly but importantly, “Iraq was likely to invade Khuzestan to take advantage of the internal chaos in Iran;” only timing seemed to be in doubt. As Turner concluded, “The perception of all of these possibilities could be encouraged by U.S. actions and propaganda.”⁷⁹

By January 1980, with the collapse of the American two-pillar policy complete, the Carter administration had to address the regional balance of power shift. On January 23, 1980, Carter declared that:

Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.⁸⁰

This so-called “Carter Doctrine” was designed to address all of the security issues that had developed in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Carter did not specifically publicly aim the doctrine at the Soviet Union, but his language left little room for ambiguity. Further, the doctrine was a fundamental shift in American global policy for:

The President’s words represented a formal recognition of a centrally important reality: that America’s security had become interdependent with

⁷⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, “The Hostage Situation,” January 9, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-30-6-3-3, pg. 2.

⁸⁰ Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980. As cited in Amitav Acharya, *U.S. Military Strategy in the Gulf* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pg. 55.

the security of three central and inter-related strategic zones consisting of Western Europe, the Far East, and the Middle-East-Persian Gulf area.⁸¹

An important consideration behind the Carter Doctrine was the creation of the Rapid Deployment Task Force (RDTF or RDF), publicly announced on March 1, 1980. Based at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, the RDTF was designed to increase American capacity to respond to the events unfolding in Afghanistan and Iran. The administration also expanded efforts “to obtain bases in the area and expand U.S. lift capabilities.”⁸² Consequently, the RDTF “became the operational catalyst for facilitating substantially increased U.S. military presence in the Gulf during the height of the Iran-Iraq conflict.”⁸³

Uncertainty in the Persian Gulf prompted Brzezinski to request a CIA study on American relations with the radical Arab states, namely Syria, Libya, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, Algeria and Iraq. On January 25, Brzezinski forwarded the study to the President, but while its details remain classified, a memorandum about the study revealed several conclusions. Most importantly, Iraq’s condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan marked a significant shift in Iraq’s foreign policy. As it provided to the United States “some openings for a quiet dialogue with Iraq,” a American-Iraqi rapprochement could commence.⁸⁴

In March 1980, not long after Khomeini’s expansionist declaration, Iraq responded swiftly and brutally to the accumulating acts of internal subversion. Hussein

⁸¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, pg. 443.

⁸² Robert H. Johnson, “The Persian Gulf in U.S. Strategy: A Skeptical View,” *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 1. (Summer, 1989), pg. 124.

⁸³ Maxwell Orme Johnson, “The Role of U.S. Military Force in the Gulf War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lesson for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 130.

⁸⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski to the President, “U.S. Relations with the Radical Arabs,” January 25, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-51-5-6, pg. 1.

executed “97 civilian and military men, half of them members of” al-Da’wa. Membership [in al-Da’wa] was now punishable by death; and its activists resorted to attacking police stations, Baath Party offices and Popular Army Recruiting centres.”⁸⁵ However, these repressive actions further provoked both the Shi’ite dissidents and Iran, with the latter increasing its subversion against Iraq. To underscore the level of hostilities, on March 8 “Iran announced that it was withdrawing its ambassador from Iraq, and by April 7 its remaining diplomatic staff had been ordered home.”⁸⁶ Tension between the two nations was at a new high.

The escalating hostility between Iran and Iraq culminated with an assassination attempt by al-Da’wa on Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s Deputy Prime Minister, on April 1. Although Aziz was only lightly wounded, the attack killed and wounded many others. Then al-Dawa terrorists assaulted the funeral procession of those killed in the Aziz attack, causing more deaths. Infuriated by these actions, Hussein declared they would not go unpunished.⁸⁷ Further, membership in al-Da’wa “was made retroactively punishable by death,” which resulted in the arrests of thousands of Shi’ites.⁸⁸ Iraq then expelled between 35,000 and 100,000 Iraqi Shi’ites.⁸⁹ Furthermore, resembling the tactics previously employed by the Shah to gain partial sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab in 1975, Iraq began providing support for “separatist Kurdish and Arab elements within

⁸⁵ Dilip Hiro, pg. 35.

⁸⁶ Efraim Kharsh pg. 13-14. See also Edward Willett, pg. 17.

⁸⁷ Edmund Ghareeb, pg. 33. See also Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 26-27.

⁸⁸ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 27.

⁸⁹ There is dispute over the number of Shi’ites who were expelled from Iraq. Efraim Kharsh, *Essential Histories: The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (Great Britain, Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2002), pg. 13 and Edward Willett, *War and Conflict in the Middle East: The Iran-Iraq War* (New York, The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2004), pg. 17, put the figure at 100,000 Shi’ites having been expelled from Iraq. However, Nita M. Renfrew, “Who Started the War?” *Foreign Policy*, (Spring, 1987, No. 66), pg. 101 and Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall*, (Toronto, Harper Perennial, 2002), pg. 186 place the figure at 35,000. See also Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 27.

Iran. These countermeasures, however, failed to impress the ayatollahs.”⁹⁰ Iran responded by offering support to Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. Hussein then decided to hit Khomeini hard:

He dispatched his special forces to Najaf, where they arrested Sadr and his sister. Obeying their orders to shoot to kill, they overwhelmed Sadr’s guards and brought the prisoners back to Baghdad. There is little doubt that the cleric and his sister were tortured by Saddam’s half brother, Barzan al-Tikriti, the head of General Intelligence, before being hanged in secret after a summary trial.

When word of al-Sadr’s execution reached Khomeini, he furiously declared that “The war that the Iraqi Baath wants to ignite is a war against Islam... The people and army of Iraq must turn their backs on the Baath regime and overthrow it... because the regime is attacking Iran, attacking Islam and the Koran.”⁹¹ By calling upon Iraqis to revolt against their government, Khomeini effectively had declared a full-scale war of subversion against Iraq.⁹²

Throughout the spring of 1980, the American Persian Gulf policy focused on the hostage crisis and preparation for a rescue attempt, Operation Eagle Claw. This mission totally preoccupied high-level policy makers such as Brzezinski, Turner and Secretary of Defence Harold Brown. Indeed, the State Department was so engrossed in the hostage crisis that it neglected other regional developments, including Iraq-Iran relations. During the intensive planning period following Carter’s formal approval for a rescue mission on March 22, a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) source reported on April 9 “that there is a fifty percent chance that [Iraq] will attack [Iran].” The source averred that Iraq had “moved large numbers of military personnel and equipment to the [Iraq-Iran] border in

⁹⁰ Efraim Kharsh, pg. 13.

⁹¹ Con Coughlin, pg. 186-187.

⁹² Nita M. Renfrew, pg. 99.

anticipation of such an invasion and is using the dispute over the Shatt and Little Tomb and Abu Massa Islands as an excuse to provoke Iran.”⁹³ Although the document noted that the sub-source of this intelligence was unknown to the DIA, if one takes into consideration the chaotic events of the previous week, notably the attempt on Aziz’s life and Sadr’s subsequent execution, the report appears accurate. Carter provided further credibility to the claim when he stated that around April 10 he had learned that “Iraq was [again] threatening to invade Iran.”⁹⁴

In the aftermath of the failed rescue attempt on the night of April 24-25, 1980, Iran heightened its war of subversion against Iraq. On May 4, Richard Cottam, an American academic who had written *Nationalism in Iran* in 1964, met with Iranian Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotzbadeh to discuss the hostage crisis and the rescue attempt. A memorandum of the conversation, prepared by the head of the Iranian Desk, Henry Precht, reported that “Ghotzbadeh implied he had been building support for Iran against Iraq. He told Cottam that Saddam Hussein would be overthrown quite soon.” Most interestingly, Cottam noted “that Ghotzbadeh did not introduce any conspiracy theory suggesting that the U.S. was manipulating Iraq.”⁹⁵ This was surprising because Iran was convinced the reason why Iraq had not invaded was that Washington had not given it a green light.⁹⁶

⁹³ Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iraq Goads Iran,” April 9, 1980 DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00021, pg. 1-2. See also Phebe Marr, “The Iran-Iraq War: The View from Iraq” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 61. Marr points out that the islands of Little Tomb and Abu Massa had been occupied by the Shah in 1971.

⁹⁴ Jimmy Carter, pg. 506.

⁹⁵ Henry Precht, Iran Working Group, “Cottam/Ghotzbadeh Conversation, 8:00 a.m., May 4, 1980,” May 4, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-33-2-2-5, pg. 1.

⁹⁶ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, pg. 69

In the summer of 1980 Iran began massing its army along the border with Iraq and, on several occasions, fired upon Iraqi oil installations,⁹⁷ as the Iranians believing that Iraq was colluding with the United States to destroy Khomeini's regime. The collusion-theory first became public in 1991 when Abolhassan Bani-Sadr published his memoir, *My Turn to Speak*. He argued that in Ghotzbadeh had purchased incriminating documents from a South American intelligence agent in 1980 "that described a royalist plan to regain power with Iraq's help." Bani-Sadr explained that:

It was later confirmed that this plan... had been formulated in a hotel on the Boulevard Raspail by a group of Israeli generals, Americans, and exiled Iranians. It called for destroying the regime by means of an external war. To get to the bottom of this, I asked our air force to see if there were any troop concentrations in the areas mentioned in the plan. As it turned out, there were – but they were not royalist, they were Iraqis. This confirmed the information obtained by the intelligence section of the Iranian Army that the Iraqis, with U.S. approval, were planning to attack.⁹⁸

The mobilization of Iran's military was a logical move given that Tehran was convinced that the United States and Iraq were colluding to create a war that would overthrow the Ayatollah's regime. The supposed plan was essentially a *quid pro quo*: in return for gaining a large portion of Iran's vast oil reserves and greater access to the Persian Gulf, Iraq forcefully would topple Iran's regime and release the American hostages. After all, a successful invasion of Khuzestan "would have brought Iran's oil reserves under Iraqi control, making it impossible for Iran to fight a war."⁹⁹

After the Revolution, a document created by the second bureau of the Shah's army, a department that had been run by the Americans, was brought to Bani-Sadr's attention. Apparently, the plan:

⁹⁷ Nita Renfrew, pg. 103.

⁹⁸ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, pg. 13.

⁹⁹ Nita M. Renfrew, pg. 103.

...called for preserving the existing structures – especially the administrative, banking, and budgetary structures – and maintaining oil sales at a level of six million barrels a day, the purpose being not only to sustain the national economy but also to keep Iran dependant on foreign powers until the revolutionary fervor subsided. Much of the plan concerned the army, which was to be preserved through the creation of internal and external threats. The internal threat – civil disturbances in the provinces – was clearly identified. The external threat was not specified, but the only logical choice was a hostile neighbor. We had only one.¹⁰⁰

The plan's logic was apparent. So long as Iran kept a high level of oil production, its economy would be dependent on foreign sales. This explains why in October 1978 Brzezinski had pushed the Shah to implement the "iron fist" policy when Iran was experiencing oil strikes.¹⁰¹ More importantly, the plan called for the maintenance of the army by combating a series of internal and external threats. As Bani-Sadr indicated, the internal disturbances were prevalent in Iran throughout 1979 and 1980. For instance, the Kurds and Azerbaijanis had revolted in north-west Iran, while the minority Arabs in Khuzestan and the Baluchs in the south had rebelled too.¹⁰² From an Iranian perspective, the American plan was proceeding as planned.

A third component of Bani-Sadr's theory centered on an alleged meeting that took place between Brzezinski and Saddam Hussein in Jordan in July 1980. Although no evidence exists to verify whether this meeting actually took place, Bani-Sadr pointed out that "Brzezinski never denied this trip to Amman."¹⁰³ However, just because Brzezinski made a trip to Amman does not necessarily mean that he met with Hussein. According to Gary Sick, who accompanied Brzezinski on this trip:

¹⁰⁰ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, pg. 69-70.

¹⁰¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, pg. 362.

¹⁰² Eric Hooglund, "Strategic and Political Objectives in the Gulf War: Iran's View," as cited in *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy*, editor Christopher C. Joyner (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pg. 40.

¹⁰³ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, pg. 70.

I was with him at least 14 hours a day, including a brief visit to Jordan, and I can attest absolutely that (1) Iraq was not on the agenda, and (2) he could not physically have made such a visit -- even if he stayed up all night and got a secret flight to Baghdad. ... If he had wanted to deliver a secret message to Iraq at any point, he would probably have asked me to arrange it (that was my job) or at the very least I would have learned about it.

However, details of Brzezinski's trip to Amman remain classified.¹⁰⁴

Another significant development occurred in August 1980 when Hussein traveled to Saudi Arabia to consult with King Khalid about the Iraqi invasion plans. According to Nita M. Renfrew, King Khalid "reportedly gave his personal blessing to the invasion and promised Saudi backing."¹⁰⁵ This was a very significant gesture, especially in light of the closeness of the American-Saudi relations, for Khalid's approval ostensibly was interpreted as an American green light-by proxy for the Iraqi invasion.¹⁰⁶ Although Baghdad did not immediately act upon the Saudi gesture, it began to implement preparations for war. Hussein needed a *casus belli*. For Iraqi leaders, this desire was met when "Iran shelled the Iraqi towns of Khanaqin, Mandali, Naft Khaneh, and Zarbatiya" on September 4. Why Iran acted so provocatively has yet to be explained. Nevertheless, the Situation Room reported to Brzezinski on September 16 that during "the past two days" fighting had broken out along the Iran-Iraq border and had continued "at a routine level." Still, it was still unclear if the hostilities would escalate further. What was clear, however, was that "a big change" had occurred in the way Iraq was approaching relations with Iran.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Personal Correspondence with Gary Sick, December 26, 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Nita M. Renfrew, pg. 98.

¹⁰⁶ No evidence has surfaced that indicates if Washington had given the Saudis advice on this matter.

¹⁰⁷ The Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Evening Notes," JCPL, NLC-1-16-9-15-8, September 16, 1980, pg. 1.

As far as Iraq was concerned, the Iran-Iraq war had commenced. It immediately petitioned Iran to “review the terms of the Algiers accord” and gave it “a last chance to avoid war and still save face.” Iran responded by escalating the violence along the border, which compelled Iraq moved to secure its frontier against an invasion. Iran then “struck oil installations, attacked Mandali from the air, fired on Iraqi ships in the Shatt al Arab, and shelled Basra.”¹⁰⁸ Unsurprisingly, Iraq abrogated the Algiers agreement on September 17, a deal that Hussein, as Iraq’s chief negotiator in 1975, had regarded as a personal humiliation. Comments made by the Iraqi leader in December 1979 had been surprisingly prophetic:

... the signing of the 1975 accord is the only step I have ever regretted in all my political life... This accord was forced upon me... but I had no other choice... Due to the battle at the northern front our army was in disarray... I had to sign it. But at the very moment I was signing it, I was thinking of a day when I could tear it to pieces and retrieve Arab rights from the marauding Iranians.¹⁰⁹

Three days later, Iran began mobilizing its armed forces to defend against an Iraqi invasion, which occurred on September 22. After months of political jockeying and years of tension, the two most powerful Persian Gulf nations had commenced a war that would last eight long years.

No simple answer exists to explain why Iraq invaded Iran on September 22, 1980. Without a doubt, Iran’s Islamic Revolution had heightened the historical animosity existing between the two countries. At the same time, having attained the presidency of Iraq in 1980, Hussein was unwilling to be forced from power by Iranian subversion. From the outset of its Revolution, Iran had supported terrorist acts against the Ba’athist regime. Therefore, it can be argued that Khomeini’s government had started the Iran-Iraq

¹⁰⁸ Nita M. Renfrew, pg. 103.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Schofield, pg. 54.

War via its war of subversion. Still, the ultimate decision to escalate the conflict into a full-fledged war was Hussein's. It did not help that he had received manipulative advice from former Iranian officials, but the final decision was his. Certainly, there were other factors to consider: the Revolution had completely weakened Iran's militarily; the regional balance of power had shifted in Iraq's favor; and Hussein was determined to revise the embarrassing Algiers Accord that forced Iraq to share sovereignty of the Shatt al-Arab. Further, Hussein, an intense Arab nationalist, likely believed that a short victorious war against Iran would provide a 'Suez Crisis' type event that would propel Iraq to the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Arab League. Instead, Iraq became bogged down in a vicious eight-year war against Iran.

Despite claims the United States directly instigated the war, very little evidence supports this conclusion. Certainly, Iraq's invasion benefited the interests of the United States in two distinct ways. First, Iraq was blocking the spread of radical Islam to the rest of the Middle East. Second, the war increased pressure upon Iran to resolve the seemingly endless hostage crisis. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the Carter administration actively encouraged Iraq to invade Iran. The United States had no diplomatic relations with Iraq, which was a Soviet ally. While it would have been an impressive accomplishment had the Carter administration successfully convinced a Soviet ally to do its bidding, it was simply not the case. Moreover, the administration's preoccupation with the hostage crisis had prevented it from recognizing the rapid deterioration of relations between Iran and Iraq that had made war inevitable.

Chapter Two:

The Right Reaction

Since the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq border had never been particularly stable. By September 1980, shelling between Iran and Iraq had occurred often enough that American officials considered such exchanges routine.¹¹⁰ It was not until Iraq abrogated the 1975 Algiers Agreement that any real concern about the escalation of the border conflict emerged in Washington. In the meantime, the Carter administration had been engaged in intensive diplomacy to attain the release of the fifty-two remaining hostages held in Iran. President Carter's obsession with the hostage crisis had virtually paralyzed his administration. With all of the resources available to the government focused on attaining the hostage's release, the crisis undoubtedly distracted the attention of important regional analysts. Meanwhile, Carter was thoroughly engaged in his bid for re-election against Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan. These factors combined help explain why the administration was caught off-guard when Iraq launched its invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980.

Although anti-American proponents such as Bani-Sadr have alleged the Carter administration was instrumental in bringing about the war between the two countries,¹¹¹ the timing of the conflict suggests otherwise. For instance, Stephen R. Grummon

¹¹⁰ The White House, The Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Evening Notes," September 16, 1980, JCPL, NLC-1-16-9-15-8, pg. 1.

¹¹¹ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, pg 13.

identified that in early September, “the first major break in the hostage affair had occurred when U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher and other U.S. administration officials met in West Germany with Sadiq Tabatabai... and discussed the broad outlines of a hostage settlement.”¹¹² Certainly, the prospect of finally resolving the hostage crisis gripped the administration. Unfortunately, when the Iraqi air force launched its assault on the Tehran airport on September 22, Tabatabai had been scheduled to return to Iran with the proposed agreement. As a result, the Christopher-Tabatabai agreement could not be presented to Iran’s government, a contingency that further delayed the release of the hostages.¹¹³ In light of this development, why would the United States instigate or approve of a war that would commence at a time when it was about to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough in the hostage crisis? In reality, the war’s outbreak could not have been more detrimental to American interests as the invasion altered Iran’s priorities; solving the hostage crisis was distinctly of secondary importance to the embattled Islamic regime.¹¹⁴ Certainly, had Washington given the green light to Iraq to invade Iran, it would have possessed advanced notice about when the war was to start. That being the case, why did members of the National Security Council staff express uncertainty on September 22 about whether or not Iraq formally declared war against Iran?¹¹⁵ While it was highly doubtful that the administration helped instigate the war, a full-scale conflict broke out nonetheless. The question was how would the Carter administration react to this dire state of affairs?

¹¹² Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 58.

¹¹³ Gary Sick, pg. 313.

¹¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Impact of Escalation on Area States,” September 22, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-5-1, pg. 1.

¹¹⁵ The White House, Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from William Odom, “Alleged Iraqi Declaration of War,” September 22, 1980, JCPL, The Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Box 16, Geographic File, “Southwest Asia/Persian Gulf,” Document #15, pg. 1.

Iraq's military strategy intended to accomplish three main goals. First, the Iraqi army would invade across the Shatt al-Arab into Khuzestan province and establish a security zone along the southern frontier, separating the river from the rest of Iran.¹¹⁶ This would return total sovereignty of the waterway to Iraq. Secondly, Iraq wanted to "impress the Iranian leaders with the quality and resolve of Iraq's military strength in order to face them with the choice of escalation or concession."¹¹⁷ Finally, "Hussein saw a limited war against Iran as a way of forcing the Iranian regime to acknowledge that the balance of power had shifted in favour of Iraq." In order to accomplish this, he decided that a dramatic display of force was necessary. The Iraqi leadership also believed that a successful invasion of Khuzestan would score a public relations victory among the Arab states because the majority of Khuzestan's population was Arab.¹¹⁸ Thus, a successful 'liberation' of the province from Persian subjugation would be viewed positively among Arabs, but could Iraq pull it off?

The first major offensive act of war occurred when the Iraqi air force launched a pre-emptive strike in the early morning hours of September 22, 1980. According to various sources, the Iraqi air strikes had been modeled on the Israeli pre-emptive strike in the 1967 war, which had deeply impressed Saddam Hussein.¹¹⁹ The first wave of attacks struck "every major airbase in western Iran, including Mehrabad Air Force Base outside Tehran," followed by a second wave that "struck the five airfields in and around

¹¹⁶ Efraim Kharsh, pg. 22.

¹¹⁷ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 54.

¹¹⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pg. 232.

¹¹⁹ For comparisons to Israel's 1967 attack see Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Council on Foreign Relations, University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pg. 184; Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2002), pg. 22; Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (New York: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), pg. 32; and, Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War, The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1991), pg. 40.

Khuzestan and several key Iranian radars.”¹²⁰ In total, the Iraqis hit ten airfields in order to destroy the key runways, thus inhibiting the retaliatory capacity of the Iranian air force. But the objective was not achieved.¹²¹ Military historian Kenneth M. Pollack has concisely summed up the crux of the problem, “The airstrikes on 22 September were pitiful,” for:

The Iraqis had neglected to study Iranian air force doctrine altogether and simply assumed it was similar to their own, despite the fact that the Shah’s air force had been trained by the United States, whereas the Iraqis had an awkward *mélange* of British and Russian, and even some French doctrine. The Iraqis also were unaware that Iran had built hardened aircraft bunkers (HABS) to protect their combat aircraft from enemy air attack.¹²²

This major oversight by the Iraqi military worked against its favour as the Iranian air force, largely intact, retained the ability to counter-attack.

The morning after the pre-emptive bombings, between six and nine Iraqi divisions surged across the border into Iran in four places.¹²³ The main Iraqi effort, consisting of four divisions, struck the strategic Khuzestan province in south-western Iran. Two divisions laid siege to the cities of Khorramshahr and Abadan, while another two divisions made an enveloping movement intended to secure the Khorramshahr-Ahvaz-Susangerd-Musian line. Two additional divisions invaded Iran, one from the north near Qasr Sherin and a second towards Mehran.¹²⁴ At dawn on September 23, as Iraqi ground forces invaded, Iranian air forces struck “an Iraqi petrochemical installation at Basrah,” hitting “a fuel storage tank and residential housing.” Iran also struck targets in Baghdad, Mosul, Al Tagaddum, and Nasiriya, which killed a number of civilians. As Iran was

¹²⁰ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 185.

¹²¹ On the total number of air strikes, see Efraim Karsh, pg. 22. For discussions on the quality of the Iraqi attack see Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 185; and, Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 54.

¹²² Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 185.

¹²³ There is dispute about how many divisions invaded from Iraq. Efraim Karsh, pg. 22 puts the total number at six, whereas Kenneth M. Pollack: pg. 187 contends that the number was nine.

¹²⁴ Efraim Karsh, pg. 22. See also Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 32-33.

launching attacks against these civilian targets, Iraqi aircraft bombed “Shahroki, Ahvaz, Dezful, Bushehr, Tabriz, and Hamadan areas, as well as Vahdati airfield.”¹²⁵ It was immediately clear that fighting along the Iran-Iraq border was no longer “at a routine level” but had escalated into a full-scale war.¹²⁶

Iraq’s strategy was flawed from the start. Realistically, had Iraq properly used the German blitzkrieg tactics it could have easily defeated Iran. A successful attack on Khuzestan was essential to victory. By September 1980, it was already evident that the sanctions imposed in response to the hostage crisis had resulted in “serious economic problems” for Iran. The war threatened to compound these difficulties because “oil sales provide over 95 percent of hard currency earnings and over 50 percent of total government revenue.” Iranian dependency on oil revenues left it susceptible to economic strangulation. Vulnerability stemmed from the fact that Khuzestan produced “more than 80 percent of Iranian oil” and was within striking distance of the Iraqi border.¹²⁷ If Iraq could capture Khuzestan, it could compel Iran to the negotiating table at an incredible disadvantage.

However, instead of achieving the military objectives that would have compelled negotiations, Iraq relied upon a strategy of intimidation. Pollack explained that unlike Germany’s army in the Second World War, the “Iraqi forces moved at a snail’s pace against meager Iranian resistance” thanks to Iraq’s static tactical doctrine. During the invasion, Iraq relied exclusively “on overwhelming firepower” to annihilate resistance

¹²⁵ Department of State, “SPOT Commentary: Iraq-Iran,” September 23, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-7-9, pg. 1.

¹²⁶ The Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Evening Notes,” September 16, 1980 JCPL, NLC-1-16-9-15-8, pg. 1. The tone of this memorandum to the National Security Advisor is surprisingly not alarmist considering the outbreak of hostilities six days later. It almost appears as if to approach this development with ‘business-as-usual’ attitude.

¹²⁷ Department of State, “SPOT Commentary: Iraq-Iran,” September 23, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-7-9, pg. 4-5.

before engaging Iranian ground forces. Although the Iranians knew that the Iraqis were planning to invade, Iran's political turmoil had prevented it from preparing its defences. Nevertheless, Iraq's military, showing no creativity on the battlefield, made no attempt "to use fast-moving armored columns to penetrate and disrupt Iranian rear areas and to capture key objectives before the Iranians could react." Furthermore, "the Iraqis never tried to seize key terrain to cut off Iranian lines of communication and retreat."¹²⁸ Instead of surrounding key objectives and laying siege, while the rest of the army remained moving forward, Iraq tried to intimidate Iran with an impressive display of firepower. As a result, the Iraqi military, putting far too much emphasis in taking cities, miscalculated the importance of capturing Khuzestan province. Had the Iraqis encircled cities and moved on to take the entire province, it would have deprived Iran of its primary source of revenue, oil. The army did not need to enter the cities; encirclement would have deprived Iranian forces of supplies and forced them to capitulate. Had it not been for the incredible strategic blunders of the Iraqi military in the initial stages of the war, the conflict likely would not have lasted for eight years.

From September 23 to 29, the Carter administration held a series of Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) and mini-SCC meetings to formulate its policy towards the new conflict in the Persian Gulf.¹²⁹ Although the intimate details of these meetings remain secret, declassified documents provide valuable insight into the formulation of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq war. On the morning of September 23, after the intelligence community confirmed that Iraq had indeed invaded Iran, an emergency SCC

¹²⁸ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 187-189.

¹²⁹ The full SCC met on September 23, 24, 28 and 29, 1980. In addition, a min-SCC was held on September 27. It is unfortunate that the details of these meetings remain classified today. The only true insight into what happened is the agenda for the SCC meeting on September 24. Nevertheless, the available documentation clearly identifies the important themes that dominated discussion.

meeting was called even though President Carter was away on an election-campaign stop in Los Angeles. The participants agreed that the best course of action was to declare a policy of strict neutrality, which President Carter formally declared later that day at a meeting with reporters in Los Angeles.¹³⁰

The decision to adopt a policy of strict neutrality was based on a number of considerations, but most importantly it allowed the United States the most room to maneuver. The preceding year had been a very difficult one for the United States: Iran had abducted its citizens; the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan; the attempt to rescue the hostages had failed miserably; and now Iran and Iraq were at war. Taking sides in the conflict was unavailable as an option. Moreover, even if the United States took sides, neither belligerent seemed interested in such support. Iran was still holding fifty-two American hostages and the United States lacked diplomatic relations with Iraq which was aligned with the Soviet Union. Therefore, the only option remaining was strict neutrality.

Over the course of the discussions, the SCC concentrated on four major policy considerations: obtaining the release of the hostages; preventing the exploitation of the war by the Soviet Union; protecting the Gulf States; and maintaining free navigation of the strategic Strait of Hormuz to ensure access to Persian Gulf oil. As these four themes are crucial to understanding the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War, a closer examination is necessary. Because of the tremendous risks that the war posed to the safety of the hostages still held in Iran, Washington had to demonstrate to Iran that it was

¹³⁰ President Jimmy Carter, Los Angeles, California Remarks in an Interview With Reporters From Newscenter 4, KNBC-TV, September 23, 1980 (John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project [online]*, Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45118>

genuinely neutral in the conflict.¹³¹ Although at first it had appeared that the war between Iran and Iraq would adversely effect the hostage crisis, it soon became clear that the conflict provided an unanticipated advantage. While the war had changed Tehran's political priorities and negotiating the release of the hostages did not seem as important, the United States had gained considerable advantage when it "became evident that the Iranian leaders were becoming increasingly concerned about the war with Iraq and the lack of military resupply or availability of parts." Thus the United States could manipulate its military-supply relationship with Iran to attain the release of the hostages.

A major concern for the Carter administration was a possible Soviet entry into the conflict on behalf of either belligerent. Animosity between the United States and the Soviet Union had steadily increased after the Afghanistan invasion. It was not surprising then that the Soviets alleged that "the U.S. instigated the conflict in order to increase tension in the [region] and as a prelude to a possible seizure of the oil resources." Further, Moscow charged that "the U.S. [was] also using the Iran/Iraq war to divert attention from the discredited Camp David Peace Process and the general U.S. military build-up in the Middle Eastern/Persian Gulf area."¹³² Although American officials dismissed these claims as baseless, by claiming that the war had been instigated by the United States, the Soviets had revealed their own limited influence in the region. After all, it would have been a very impressive accomplishment if the United States had convinced a Soviet ally to go to war against its neighbor. Realistically, the Soviets were as unhappy about the war's outbreak as the United States.

¹³¹ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 58.

¹³² Department of State, Briefing Paper, "Soviet Perspective on Iran/Iraq War," September 24, 1980, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00028, pg. 1.

On September 22, immediately after the conflict had commenced, the CIA's National Foreign Assessment Center (NFAC) analysed the Soviet reactions to the Iran-Iraq hostilities. The NFAC thought it unlikely that the Soviets had actively encouraged the conflict. In fact, the Soviets had "long been concerned that a military clash between Iran and Iraq would damage their relations with both countries," and were "worried that such a clash might lead Tehran to reduce its hostility to the US." The Soviets knew that the war would rapidly consume Iran's American-made military hardware, thus providing an ideal avenue for rapprochement. The last thing the Soviets wanted was to force Iraq to look to the West for arms. Therefore, a rapid cessation of hostilities was in the Soviet Union's best interest, but in the meantime it would have "to maintain a balanced position in order to avoid alienating either Baghdad or Tehran."¹³³ A State Department analysis on the Soviet perspectives on the war drew similar conclusions. Asserting that Soviet policy "has been to urge both sides to exercise [sic] restraint while accusing the US of having instigated the hostilities," the briefing paper noted that the war had come "at a particularly inopportune time for Moscow, because the USSR has been trying to improve its relationship with both countries." The Soviet Union was clearly unhappy that Iraq had seemingly instigated hostilities with Iran. Indicative of its attitude was the "very chilly Soviet reception" of an Iraqi delegation dispatched to Moscow on September 22 and 23 for consultations under the 1972 Soviet-Iraq Security Treaty.¹³⁴

An additional CIA analysis identified that the Soviets were "not taken by surprise" by the Iraqi invasion. In fact, they had "reportedly warned the Iraqis in 1979

¹³³ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Soviet Reactions to Iraq-Iran Hostilities," September 22, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-4-2, pg. 1-2.

¹³⁴ Department of State, Briefing Paper, "Soviet Perspective on Iran/Iraq War," September 24, 1980, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00028, pg. 1.

and 1980 against abrogation of the 1975 Iraq-Iran accord and against a military confrontation with Iran.” Therefore, the Soviets were justifiably angry because Iraq had failed to consult them beforehand “as they should have been under the 1972 Friendship Treaty.” According to the CIA, the Soviets were frustrated too for they were actively trying to cultivate a relationship with Iran, which they viewed “as a greater geopolitical prize than Iraq.” Since the collapse of the Shah’s pro-Western regime, Iran had been perceived by the Soviet Union as an ideal “candidate for eventual pro-Soviet transformation.” Thus, the acquisition of such a strategic stronghold would immensely benefit Moscow’s long-term strategic goals, while greatly disrupting American interests in the region. Indeed:

The opportunities for further strategic gain would be broad: a potential base for exerting pressure on Pakistan and Turkey as well as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf oil-producing states; possible oil acquisition at bargain prices; and naval and air facilities that would enhance the Soviets’ capability to threaten an oil cutoff from the Gulf, and lend credibility to the USSR’s demands to participate as a guarantor of security of access to Gulf oil.

Nevertheless, the war also posed challenges to the advancement of Soviet interests in the region. For instance, the only influence the Soviet Union had over Iraq related to its military-supply relationship. But in the mid-1970s, the Soviets lost a significant portion of Iraq’s military sales to France and they could not afford to lose any more. Secondly, Tehran was adamantly anti-Soviet and viewed the military-supply relationship that Moscow had with Baghdad as a major obstacle towards rapprochement.¹³⁵

In many ways, the Soviet Union’s policy objectives were identical to those of the United States. Neither nation had any interest in seeing Iraq emerge as the dominant

¹³⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, “Soviet Interests, Policies, and Prospects With Respect to the Iran-Iraq War,” Special National Intelligence Estimate 11-34/36.2-80, December 24, 1980, DNSA, GWU, Soviet Estimate Collection, SE00539, pg. 6.

regional power, especially if the Iraqis seized Iran's oil producing regions. Secondly, neither country wanted the other superpower to resume good relations with Iran. Thus, the ideal outcome for both superpowers was for the region to return to the *status quo ante*. Quite simply, it was not in the best interests of the United States to allow the Soviet Union to exploit the war to its advantage. Nevertheless, the Carter administration had to approach the situation carefully so as to not escalate the conflict into a wider regional war. Therefore, the American policy was to "not act in a manner that might be seen as provocative to either the Soviets or the Iranians."¹³⁶ Essentially, Carter took the middle ground.

The Iran-Iraq war also threatened the stability of the monarchies of the Persian Gulf for two prime reasons. First, the Gulf States feared that the conflict would "spill over into the gulf," "threaten the flow of oil," possibly leading "to great power intervention and possible confrontation." Second, while Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States offered tacit support for the Iraqi invasion, they had no interest in seeing "Iraq score a decisive military victory." The Saudis privately feared that an Iraqi victory would enhance Iraq's regional ambitions, which in all likelihood would bring it into conflict with Saudi Arabia. The Gulf States also preferred to see "a military stalemate that preserves the present precarious balance of power in the Gulf." That being the case, it was in the best interests of both the United States and the Gulf monarchies to contain the war in order to prevent that outcome.¹³⁷

Perhaps the Carter administration's greatest fear pertained to safe navigation of the Strait of Hormuz. With Iraq invading its territory, the easiest Iranian strategy to

¹³⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, pg. 453.

¹³⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Impact of Escalation on Area States," September 22, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-5-1, pg. 2-3.

counter the attack was to close the Strait as a means of economically starving Iraq and its supporters in the Gulf. Without the means to finance its war, Baghdad would be forced to either adapt or fall back. American fears were given credence on the first day of the conflict when three Iranian frigates began challenging all ships passing through the Strait. Because of the potentially catastrophic consequences of such a closure, the United States explicitly made it clear to both Iran and Iraq that it would not tolerate any impediment to traffic through the Strait. Not only would the closing the Strait directly violate international law, it threatened the national security interests of the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia. In other words, free navigation of the Strait of Hormuz was a central component of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq war.¹³⁸

In the event that access through the Strait was blocked, the consequences would be catastrophic globally as this strategic waterway serves as the sole entrance to the Persian Gulf through which the majority of the region's oil transits. Considering that the revenues generated by the oil that passes through the Strait serve as the primary source of GDP for the region, it was vital to the economies of the Gulf States and Iran that unfettered navigation of the Strait of Hormuz was ensured. On an international level, access to the Strait was extremely important to the French and Japanese economies. For instance, at the start of the war, twenty-one percent of France's oil imports came from Iraq (an additional three percent came from Iran). Twenty percent of Japan's imported oil also passed through the Strait of Hormuz, seven percent from Iraq and thirteen percent from Iran.¹³⁹ Simply put, because of the economic linkage between the Persian Gulf and

¹³⁸ Department of State, "SPOT Commentary: Iraq-Iran," September 23, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-7-9, pg. 2.

¹³⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Impact of Escalation on Area States," September 22, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-5-1, pg. 6, 8.

America's allies, it was not in the best interest of the United States to allow the Strait of Hormuz to be closed.

A second SCC meeting, intended to formalize the decisions of previous day, was held in the Situation Room on September 24, at 9:30am.¹⁴⁰ After a short briefing by the DCI on the current situation, discussion shifted to the efforts being made by the Department of State at the United Nations. After the outbreak of hostilities, Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, who had replaced Cyrus Vance after he had resigned over the failed rescue attempt, engaged in a dialogue with European allies at the UN in order to obtain a ceasefire resolution. A secondary objective of his mission was to coordinate an effective multilateral strategy to resolve the conflict. The group then turned its attention to the "military or diplomatic steps" that the United States should "take in relation to the possible interference with normal traffic through the Strait." The group also recommended undertaking "specific contingency planning" with the British, French, and Italians, all of whom had strong economic interests in the region.¹⁴¹

After the meeting had wrapped up, the principals met with the President to brief him on the situation. Secretary Muskie, Under-Secretary Warren Christopher, and Jody Powell were present for the first half of the meeting and departed just after noon, leaving behind Zbigniew Brzezinski, Stansfield Turner and White House Chief of Staff Jack Watson. At approximately 12:30 p.m., the President retired to the second floor of the White House. After a quick meeting with Brzezinski at 3:12 p.m., Carter made his way

¹⁴⁰ National Security Council, "Agenda for SCC Meeting on Iran/Iraq" September 23, 1980, JCPL, Collection: Staff Offices Counsel Lloyd Cutler, Box 89, "Iran-Iraq War, 9/80," pg. 1. Although the President remained absent, the Vice President, the Secretaries of State, Defense, and Energy, as well as the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were present.

¹⁴¹ National Security Council, "Agenda for SCC Meeting on Iran/Iraq: September 24, 1980, 9:30 a.m.," September 23, 1980, JCPL, Collection: Staff Offices Counsel Lloyd Cutler, Box 89, "Iran-Iraq War, 9/80," pg. 1.

to the press briefing room,¹⁴² where, at 3:16 p.m., the President publicly declared the American policy towards the war. Carter opened his statement by declaring that “the United States is in no way involved in this dispute—and charges to the contrary are obviously and patently false.” He went on to recognize that the war represented an inherent “danger to the peace and stability of the region” and that the “fighting should be promptly terminated.” Addressing concerns about access to oil, Carter pointed out that as the current oil supplies were plentiful, the war would not cause a major disruption to the global economy. However, he did include a major caveat: “a total suspension of oil exports from the other nations who ship through” the Strait of Hormuz “would create a serious threat to the world's oil supplies and consequently a threat to the economic health of all nations.” After including a brief statement on the ensuring the safe and well-being of the hostages still held in Iran, Carter concluded with a firm commitment to the policy of strict neutrality: “Let me repeat that we have not been and we will not become involved in the conflict between Iran and Iraq.”¹⁴³

The next day, as proof of the American commitment to neutrality, the administration announced that it “was holding up the planned shipment of several G.E. turbine engines that were to be used in Iraqi frigates being built [sic] by Italy.”¹⁴⁴ Originally approved by the Commerce Department in January 1980, the controversial deal had received a negative response from Congress. Opponents of the deal had questioned why the administration would “participate in strengthening Iraq’s navy,”

¹⁴² The Daily Diary of President Jimmy Carter, September 24, 1980, JCPL. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/diary/1980/d092480t.pdf>

¹⁴³ President Jimmy Carter, “Situation in Iraq and Iraq Remarks Concerning the Conflict,” September 24, 1980, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project [online]*, Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45129>

¹⁴⁴ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 61-62.

particularly in light of the fact that Iraq had been “labeled a supporter of international terrorism.”¹⁴⁵ It certainly was in the best interests of the administration to delay the deal, but at a cost. On the one hand, the decision resolved the domestic political tensions over the sale; on the other, it had a disruptive effect on American-Italian relations.

As the conflict continued to rage on Iranian territory, Secretary Muskie was fully engaged in a diplomatic offensive at the United Nations, while at the same time coordinating military planning with allies in Europe. On September 26, “an extraordinary session” of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers was held in New York to find a way to mediate between the two warring nations. Although the initiative was taken outside the UN’s auspices, the President of the Security Council openly welcomed the goodwill mission. Meanwhile, Mexico and Norway had requested a formal Security Council meeting in order to draft a resolution intended “to reiterate the Charter’s requirement to settle disputes peacefully, call for a ceasefire and endorse conciliation moves.” On the military side of things, the situation in the Gulf was further complicated when Iran declared that the war zone extended “12 miles out from the Iranian coast and also 12 miles from the two Tumbs islands and Abu Musa.” In response, the Carter administration discussed the possibility of a multi-lateral naval “peace patrol” to ensure, by force if necessary, free navigation of the Strait, in order to deter Iran from taking further provocative actions that could threaten the flow of oil from the region.¹⁴⁶

After considerable delays – thanks to stalling tactics by the Soviet Union and because a Pakistani mission had been sent to Iran in a failed effort to mediate an end to

¹⁴⁵ The White House, Stu Eizenstat to the President, “Naval Engine Sales to Iraq,” March 28, 1980, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00020, pg. 1.

¹⁴⁶ Department of State, Memorandum for Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, The White House, from Peter Tarnoff, Executive Secretary, “The Iran-Iraq Conflict” September 26, 1980, JCPL, NLC-6-34-2-30-4, pg. 3-5.

the conflict¹⁴⁷ – on September 28 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 479 that condemned the outbreak of hostilities between Iran and Iraq. The resolution called on both nations to cease hostilities, to allow third party mediation efforts, and warned other states to refrain from becoming involved in the conflict. The resolution’s language, however, was surprisingly weak. It failed to identify the instigator of hostilities and did not call for the belligerents to return to their internationally recognized borders. Unfortunately, the resolution had more to do with Cold War posturing than resolving the crisis. For instance, calling on other parties to refrain from becoming involved in the conflict was interpreted by Western diplomats to “mean that the Soviet Union should not replenish Iraq’s arms supplies.” At the same time, the Soviets used the same statement as “an argument against any attempt by a Western task force to keep open the Strait of Hormuz.”¹⁴⁸ In no way did the vague language of Resolution 479 help resolve the conflict between Iran and Iraq. According to Anthony Clark Arend, there was:

...a clear reluctance on the part of the [United Nations] to serve as a collective security body. Under the theory of limited collective security that undergirds Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, when there is a threat to the peace, breach of peace, or act of aggression, the Security Council is to investigate the matter, determine the guilty party, and order appropriate enforcement measures.¹⁴⁹

No one at the United Nations actually expected that either of the warring nations would accept Resolution 479. However, on September 29, Saddam Hussein indicated in a letter to the Secretary General that Iraq could accept the terms of the resolution but only if Iran

¹⁴⁷ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 57.

¹⁴⁸ Bernard D. Nossiter, “Security Council on Iran and Iraq to End War; Iran Not Ready, Zia Reports,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1980, pg. 12.

¹⁴⁹ Anthony Clark Arend, “The Role of the United Nations in the Iran-Iraq War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 192.

did so as well. Iran, on the other hand, gave no indication that it was willing to accept the resolution until it had regained lost ground.¹⁵⁰ By offering to accept the UN resolution, Iraq had effectively placed the onus to end the war on Iran.

On October 1, it became evident that Western concerns and threats about the security of the Strait of Hormuz had had an impact in Iran. That day, Iran formally “assured the world that it has no intention of blockading the vital Straits of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf as part of its war effort against Iraq.”¹⁵¹ Seemingly, the Iranian announcement would have had an impact on the policy considerations of the Carter administration, but it did not limit the American desire to cooperate with other major powers to ensure the Strait remained open.

Despite the Security Council Resolution 479, the fighting between Iraq and Iran showed no sign of ending soon. At this stage, Iraq’s slow advance had allowed the Iranians to mount a more organized defence and to make effective use of the advanced American weaponry bestowed upon them by the Shah.¹⁵² Meanwhile, on October 8, the Iraqis launched rocket attacks on Dezful that resulted in “many civilian casualties,” at the same time that it was laying siege of Khorramshahr. The battle had commenced in the first week of the conflict, but had had yet to produce results. According to a situation report produced by the DIA, the longer the war continues, the “military prospects for Iraq and stability of [the] Saddam Hussein [government] grow increasingly uncertain.” Furthermore, “Some Iraqi observers privately fear that Iranian public sentiment is bound to be increasingly disturbed at [the] prospect of losing oil rich Khuzestan and that this

¹⁵⁰ Bernard D. Nossiter, “Iraq to Accept U.N. Call if Iran Does,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1980, pg. A14.

¹⁵¹ Ram Suresh, Reuters News Release, October 1, 1980, JCPL, Box 31, NSA Affairs – Brzezinski Material, President’s Daily CIA Brief, “9/28/80-10/3/80,” pg. 1.

¹⁵² These items included advanced cluster bombs and anti-tank TOW missiles.

will boost [the] stability of the Khomeini [government], and stimulate [the] Iranian war effort.”¹⁵³ In sum, it was evident that the absence of a rapid military victory over Iran was beginning to take its toll in Iraq.

But on October 24 Khorramshahr finally fell after a four-week siege. Typical of Iraqi tactics, at the opening stage of the battle the city had been subjected to seven days of shelling. Despite the horrific barrage, “The Iraqis were shocked and dismayed by the unexpectedly stiff resistance.”¹⁵⁴ Unbeknownst to Iraq, during the course of the shelling, the Iranians had evacuated the city and replaced the inhabitants with Pasdaran (revolutionary militia) companies and regular units:

The fighting... was conducted on a street by street, house by house basis, starting in the northwest quadrant of the city and gradually moving toward the bridge that connects the bazaar area to Abadan island and the town of Abadan; it was through this link that the Iranian forces were reinforced and resupplied.¹⁵⁵

Estimates revealed “that each side suffered about 7,000 killed or seriously wounded; while Iraqis lost over 100 tanks and other armoured vehicles, like self propelled guns.”¹⁵⁶

The immense cost of the Battle of Khorramshahr, in terms of lives, equipment and treasure, was embarrassing for Iraq, particularly because the defending Iranian soldiers were equipped only “with small arms, light anti-tank weapons, and Molotov cocktails.”¹⁵⁷

Despite these details, Iraq had finally securely occupied a major Iranian city.

Starting the third week of November, the regions rainy season set in, turning the southwestern front into a swampy quagmire, making it virtually impossible to fight. This

¹⁵³ Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran/Iraq Conflict: Sitrep Nineteen,” October 11, 1980, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00031, pg. 2-3.

¹⁵⁴ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 37-38.

¹⁵⁵ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 24

¹⁵⁶ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 38.

¹⁵⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 190.

was a major problem for Iraq because, “In most places vehicular movement was largely impossible and Iraqi armoured columns and detachments had to stay more or less where they were, making individual defensive arrangements as best they could and being supplied by helicopter.” Seeking another avenue of attack, on December 24, the Iraqis launched an additional offensive in the north from Pejwin to secure its northern flank against Iranian penetration.¹⁵⁸ The attack in the extremely mountainous northern region was essentially defensive in nature, as the Iraqis could not take the risk of leaving the sector defenseless, especially when they were bogged down in the strategically significant south. The rains greatly benefited Iran, because it bought time to recuperate and build defenses. The result was a military stalemate, at least until Iran could organize itself for a counter-offensive.

As the war between Iran and Iraq slowly slipped into a stalemate, the political environment in Washington took a dramatic turn. On November 4, the American people, frustrated with the lagging economy, record-high inflation, and the never-ending hostage crisis, voted Jimmy Carter out of office. The landslide election of Ronald Reagan as the fortieth President of the United States marked an abrupt shift in the conduct of American foreign policy. To many Americans, the emasculation of the preeminent superpower in the world was unacceptable, particularly by a developing nation in the Persian Gulf. As the Carter administration’s failure to resolve the hostage crisis had left morale at an all-time low, the public demanded change. More importantly, to the Persian Gulf, Reagan’s election marked “the coming of power in the US of a more strategically aware and sensitive group of policymakers, will result in a reassertion of US power which will

¹⁵⁸ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 41-42.

affect the psychological and physical situation in the region.”¹⁵⁹ The people elected Ronald Reagan to restore American power; no longer would the United States sit idly by and be intimidated or threatened by rogue states or terrorists.

Despite losing the election, the Carter administration kept up its efforts to resolve the hostage crisis. On January 19, 1981, the day before Reagan’s inauguration, the American and Iranian governments reached an agreement to release the remaining hostages through the mediation efforts of Algeria. The deal set out four provisions: an American promise of non-interference in Iranian affairs; Washington would release Iranian assets that had been frozen in response to the taking of the hostages; both countries agreed to respectively end litigation and sanctions; and, the United States pledged that American courts would recognize Iranian court decisions pertaining to the Shah’s assets.¹⁶⁰ The next day, only minutes before Reagan’s inauguration, Iran made good on its promise and released the fifty-two remaining hostages.¹⁶¹ An Algerian plane flew the hostages to Germany where the former president met them; their 444-day-hell ended with Jimmy Carter’s presidency.

The Iraqi invasion of Iran had caught the Carter administration totally off-guard, as its attention had concentrated on attaining the release of the fifty-two hostages held in Iran. Nevertheless, Carter took a practical approach to the developments in the region. He quickly identified the major policy considerations – checking the Soviets, the safety

¹⁵⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, “Iranian Situation: An Assessment,” November 12, 1980, pg 5. (See Appendix A)

¹⁶⁰ Iran-United States Claims Tribunal, “Declaration of the Government of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria (General Declaration),” January 19, 1981. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.iusct.org/general-declaration.pdf>

¹⁶¹ See Gary Sick, *October Surprise: Americas hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1991). Sick argued that William Casey and George H. W. Bush – from the Reagan camp – met with Iranian officials and came to an agreement whereby the Iranians would delay the release of the hostages until after the election to ensure Reagan’s victory.

of the hostages, access to oil (Strait of Hormuz), protecting regional allies – and responded with a rational policy of strict neutrality. While the administration immediately feared for the safety of the hostages, its primary concern was preventing the Soviet Union from taking advantage of the crisis. Through its actions at the United Nations, the State Department was able to use Security Council resolution 479 to prevent – or at least slow down – Soviet arms transfers to Iraq. At the same time, the Carter administration also recognized that the conflict threatened the security of close American allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. These states feared that if the conflict were to escalate beyond Iraq and Iran, the security situation would be so unstable that they would be forced to look to either superpower for security. Quickly recognizing their concern, the Carter administration made it clear that containing the war was a fundamental tenet of the American policy. By selecting a policy of strict neutrality, the Carter administration effectively accomplished a number of significant goals. Notably, Carter blocked Soviet efforts to expand its influence, prevented the expansion of the conflict into a regional war, and effectively reassured American allies in the Persian Gulf of American support. This clearly indicates that the Carter administration was very capable of handling major international crises. Nevertheless, by the time Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, the enduring hostage crisis had already ruined Carter's presidency. While the administration did an excellent job managing the first few months of the Iran-Iraq War, the election of Ronald Reagan signaled that there would be a radically new approach to the region.

Chapter Three:

Strict Neutrality?

The outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq was the culmination of more than a year of intense hostility. Iraq had wanted to flex its muscles in order to indicate to the region that the balance of power had shifted in its favor. But because of poor Iraqi execution of the invasion, the war quickly stalemated. Yet the impasse worked out in Iran's favor because it allowed it to build up its defenses and prepare for a counter-offensive. The offensive would come in 1981, but by that time, a new administration would be in Washington. That being the case, what would the Reagan administration's approach to the war be?

Upon taking office in January 1981, Ronald Reagan vowed to revitalize American foreign policy, claiming that the foreign policies of the Carter and Ford administrations had lacked the aggressiveness needed to check the Soviet Union. Members of the Reagan administration held the view that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan underscored the weakness of American policy. As a result, when Ronald Reagan became President, he pledged to restore American power and influence abroad. In order to accomplish this, he selected a national security team that strongly held these views.

An actor by trade, Ronald Reagan's knowledge of foreign affairs was quite limited when he came to office, but he had surrounded himself with talented advisors. Having served as the Governor of California from 1967 to 1975:

Reagan came into office carrying the mental baggage of cabinet government and committed to downgrading the role of the national security adviser.... He believed, and had been encouraged this view by [Richard Allen, Reagan's new national security advisor], that Henry Kissinger under Nixon and Zbigniew Brezinski under Carter had exercised authority as national security advisers that was properly vested in the secretary of state.

While Richard Allen had openly accepted the diminished role of National Security Advisor, it was clear that the Secretary of State would be the dominant figure in the foreign policy decision-making process. To fill the role of Secretary of State, Reagan had selected General Alexander Haig, a former Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Nixon and NATO's Commander from 1974-1979. From the start, Reagan ensured that Haig understood that his role included running American foreign policy. As for the Secretary of Defense, Reagan chose Caspar Weinberger, a staunch conservative who had helped him in the late 1960s as the California State Director of Finance. Finally, Reagan chose William Casey, a former officer of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor to the CIA, as Director of Central Intelligence. Reagan hoped that Casey's OSS experience would revitalize the CIA and help it to overcome its recent intelligence failures in Iran.¹⁶² Through the cumulative experience of his national security team, Reagan hoped to accommodate his weakness on matters of American foreign policy.

Conservative Republicans believed that Carter's conduct of foreign relations had been so weak that it had undermined badly American credibility around the world. The Iranian Revolution had emasculated the Americans and Carter's inconsistent policy towards Soviet Union had emboldened it to invade Afghanistan. As a result, the new

¹⁶² Lou Cannon, *President Reagan, The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1991, 2000), pg. 61-62, and 155.

administration was determined to break with the policies of the past, with one major exception. Upon coming to office, the Reagan administration strongly endorsed the policy of strict neutrality towards the Iran-Iraq War – at least at first. In principle, the policy was the most logical option available to the Reagan administration, but to a new President or Secretary of State what exactly does it mean? What were the all the options available to the administration? What are the implications of these options regionally, internationally? What improvements could be made to the policy?

To answer these questions, on February 3, 1981, the State Department convened the Iran-Iraq Work Group, chaired by Acting Assistant Secretary Peter Constable, to discuss the policy options available to the new administration. The discussion focused on the military, diplomatic, political and economic aspects of the Persian Gulf conflict. Adversely, the war temporarily had interrupted the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. Fortunately, the stalemate throughout the winter temporarily alleviated those fears and both belligerents slowly resumed exporting oil. The end of the hostage crisis had provided the new administration with greater maneuverability in the region, especially in light of the security threat that Iran posed to both the Gulf States. As a display of friendship, the Carter administration had quietly begun negotiations to sell to Saudi Arabia the highly advanced Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), a sale that the Israelis opposed. Interestingly, the Iran-Iraq War also served the interests of Israel, which in turn benefited the United States. After the signing of the Camp David Accords with Egypt, the only two regional powerhouses that could pose a threat to Israel were Iraq and Iran and as long as the war continued the Israelis could act as it saw fit without fear of military retaliation. The final point of the discussion revolved around Iraq's apparent

shift away from the Soviet Union, which offered considerable opportunities for the United States to improve its chilly relationship with Iraq.¹⁶³

The group made five main conclusions. First, as long as Iran and Iraq continued their efforts to export oil, the global oil supply would remain stable. Second, although there were advantages to a continuation of the fighting, a cessation of the conflict was in the best interests of the United States. Third, the likelihood of Iran turning to the Soviet Union for military equipment was remote. Fourth, recognizing that Iraq had accepted resolution 470, the United States should subtly encourage Turkey or Pakistan to supply some equipment to Iran as “It is conceivable that a weapons supply relationship could lead to some Western leverage to encourage Iran to negotiate.” Finally, the United States should offer diplomatic support to the mediation efforts of the United Nations, the Islamic Conference Organization and the Non-Aligned Movement.¹⁶⁴ Although the Iran-Iraq Work Group had identified many significant points, members of the National Security Council felt that its approach needed to be “more forward-looking and conceptual.”¹⁶⁵ It was back to the drawing board.

For the next week, the Iran-Iraq Work Group worked hard to formulate a “forward-looking and conceptual” policy. This was accomplished by February 16, when the State Department sent a cable to all its embassies that affirmed the policy of “not selling, or licensing the export of defense articles and defense services” to Iraq and Iran. The policy included a denial of:

¹⁶³ Department of State, “Iraq-Iran War – Future U.S. Steps,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (herein referred to as RRPL), Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 1-5.

¹⁶⁴ Chris Shoemaker to General Robert Schweitzer, “Iran-Iraq Meeting,” February 4, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 1-2.

¹⁶⁵ General Robert Schweitzer to Richard V. Allen, “Iran-Iraq Conflict,” February 4, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 1.

...all requests for [United States Government] approval to transfer to either Iran or Iraq defense articles and defense services previously sold by or exported from the United States or manufactured abroad under U.S. license [sic]. This extends to U.S.-origin defense articles and services (including technology) incorporated as components into foreign-manufactured equipment.

At the same time, the administration actively promoted that its allies adopt a similar policy, but with limited success. While the administration's policy seemed relatively straightforward, there were ambiguities about what articles could or not be sold to the belligerents.¹⁶⁶

For instance, in late January 1981, a few days after Reagan took office, two individuals who identified themselves "as the heads of two Iraqi interest groups" contacted Richard Allen's office "to make themselves known to the new Administration." The call surprised the NSC regional expert, Gary Sick, who was not familiar with either of these gentlemen. Certain that it was not prudent for the White House to meet with anyone representing Iraqi interests, Sick passed the contact information to the Iraqi Desk Officer at the State Department.¹⁶⁷ In fact, the two Iraqis wished to discuss an agreement by Boeing to license the sale of five civilian aircraft to Iraq that Carter had delayed due to Iraqi support of international terrorism, fear of political fallout in Congress, and the safety of the hostages in Iran. But by delaying the \$148 million contract, the United States had "contributed to decisions by Kuwait and Lebanon to turn to the European Airbus." The loss of these lucrative contracts put pressure on Washington to reconsider, especially in light of the release of the hostages. Thus, the President authorized the State

¹⁶⁶ Secretary of State to All Near Eastern and South Asian Diplomatic Posts, "Military Equipment for Iran and Iraq," State Ref: State 039737, February 16, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 "Iran/Iraq, Jan-Jun 1982," folder 2, pg. 1.

¹⁶⁷ Gary Sick to Richard V. Allen, January 26, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492, folder "Iraq - 1981," pg. 1.

Department to begin consultations with Congress about proceeding with the sale of the Boeing aircraft.¹⁶⁸ While the sale of Boeing's aircraft was legal under the strict neutrality, a similar pre-conflict contract with Iraq, involving the sale of an Italian-built frigate that used engine cores built by General Electric (GE), violated the policy.¹⁶⁹ As it had with Boeing, the Carter administration had decided to delay the GE transaction. Meanwhile, General Electric hoped that it could persuade the Reagan administration, in light of its long-standing relationship with the new president,¹⁷⁰ to reconsider the \$11.2 million contract.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, GE's efforts failed because the Italian-built frigates carried missiles, which violated the transfer of 'technology' clause of the policy. In other words, the Italian frigate contracts were denied by the State Department because the vessels had a military function, whereas the Boeing plane contracts served only civilian purposes. The distinction between the two contracts was minute, but significant.

Meanwhile, the military situation on the ground in the Persian Gulf had not changed significantly since the New Year. The Iraqi troops had dug into their defensive positions and held firm, but on January 5, 1981, Iran launched a disastrous counter-offensive. Since late December, President Bani-Sadr had been preparing for a large-scale spring offensive intended to repel the Iraqi invaders. The decision to counter-attack was not his. Rather, Ayatollah Khomeini had asked for it, a request that went against the President's natural inclination. When the Iranians launched their counter-offensive, their forces crashed head-on into an Iraqi armoured division, leading to the largest tank battle

¹⁶⁸ Department of State, Secretary of State to the President, January 30, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492, folder "Iraq - 1981," pg. 1-2.

¹⁶⁹ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 61-62.

¹⁷⁰ Lou Cannon, pg. 66-67.

¹⁷¹ Letter, Jonathan Bingham, Millicent Fenwick, John Buchanan, Dante Fascell, to the President, House of Representatives, April 30, 1980. (See Appendix B)

fought since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Over the course of the next four days, the Iranian forces were “severely mauled” by the Iraqis, losing perhaps as many as 214 tanks.¹⁷² As a State Department analysis noted, the January campaign “seriously weakened Teheran’s ability to conduct successful large-scale offensive operations for at least the rest of the year.” To compound its problems, “Iran has not been able to acquire quantities of weapons, ammunition, and spare parts sufficient to offset expenditures and losses.”¹⁷³ After Iran’s swift defeat the war settled back into a stalemate as both sides waited out the winter rains.

In mid-February, the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research produced a politico-military analysis of the Iran-Iraq War. The value of the analysis stems from its explanation of the balance of power along the front. By February 13, the ground war divided into two sections, the northern front and Khuzestan. On the northern front, Iraq had 52,000 men and 440 tanks, facing 30,000 Iranians and 110 tanks. The greater concentration of Iraqi firepower, however, was on the Khuzestan front. To take the province, Iraq had deployed 52,000 men and 1,300 tanks in 21 divisions, whereas Iran had 11 divisions, 27,000 troops and 240 tanks defending the area. Yet despite Iraq’s overwhelming initial numerical superiority, it had failed to achieve its military objectives in the first months of the war. It seems that “the main factor seems to have been a conscious decision to minimize casualties, seemingly without regard to its impact on tactical operations.” Based on this assessment, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research concluded that:

¹⁷² Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 59-63. O’Ballance states that the Iraqis claimed that it had captured or destroyed 214 tanks, while the Iranians only admitted to losing 88.

¹⁷³ Secretary of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, “Iraq-Iran Conflict: Update and U.S. Views,” State Ref: State 066174, March 15, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 2.

Iraq can conduct successful offensive operations on a significant scale in Khuzestan once the ground dries out, but is believed to have only limited further objectives. Iran cannot prosecute a major offensive in Khuzestan, although small-scale attacks could achieve some local success.¹⁷⁴

This conclusion appeared to have credence in early March when Iraq resumed air strikes on Iranian economic targets, which prompted Iran to respond in kind. At this point, the war settled into periodic exchanges of rocket and artillery exchanges with the occasional bombing of economic infrastructure. With the rainy season ending, it appeared that Iraq was preparing to push deeper into Khuzestan. If Iraq could take advantage of its numerical and tactical superiority, the stalemate that had lasted since October 1980 could end.

The administration did not view the prospect of a renewed Iraqi offensive with optimism because there were too many questions left unanswered. What would happen if further damage occurred to the oil facilities of both countries? What will happen if the war escalates regionally? How would this effect the global economy? What might occur if the Iranian regime fell? How would the Soviet Union respond to this? What were the chances of a negotiated settlement if Iraq acquired more territory?

After six weeks of review and debate within the State Department, the administration finally formulated its official policy on the Iran-Iraq war. On March 15, Secretary Haig sent a cable to all American embassies and consular posts outlining the parameters of updated guidelines. After six months of fighting, the war looked as if it was about to enter a new phase. The State Department predicted that Iraq would attack once the rains subsided at April's end. Throughout the first phase of the war, the United

¹⁷⁴ Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, *Current Analysis Series: Politico-Military Analyses*, "The Iran-Iraq Conflict: Status and Prospects," February 13, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 "Iran/Iraq, Jan-Jun 1982," folder 2, pg. 1-4.

States had avoided taking sides, which it viewed as the first step towards preventing regional escalation. To achieve this end, the administration announced its support for the territorial integrity of both Iran and Iraq. Remaining neutral seemed the best option for providing support for Iraq could lead Iran to turn to the Soviet's for aid. As the driving force of American foreign policy during the Cold War was to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence, a regional escalation of the conflict could have adverse consequences on the long-term American interests in the region. Thus, the administration believed that by continuing to deny access to weapons to either side was the most effective means to end the conflict. To highlight the importance of this point, the cable reiterated the continuation of America's previously declared policy of not selling military articles to either belligerent, with the objective of bringing the conflict to a honourable and just peace. In order to achieve this, the United States resolved to offer diplomatic and political support for mediation efforts by legitimate third parties.¹⁷⁵

In April, Iranian forces launched an attack in the northern sector near Qasr-e Shirin. "For the first time, Iran employed large numbers of Revolutionary Guards (filled out by the ubiquitous *Basij*, or "mobilization battalions") to spearhead its attacks." The attack was a speedy success, as the Iraqi forces had been caught by surprise. Although the Iranian assault was limited in scale, its success "convinced the mullahs in Tehran that large-scale infantry assaults relying on the Islamic fervor of the Revolutionary Guards and the *Basij* were their ace in the hole"¹⁷⁶ because they were both willing to suffer extremely high casualty rates. Beyond this brief skirmish, "both sides remain dug in

¹⁷⁵ Secretary of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, "Iraq-Iran Conflict: Update and U.S. Views," State Ref: State 066174, March 15, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 "Iran/Iraq, Jan-Jun 1982," folder 2, pg. 1-6.

¹⁷⁶ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 195.

along essentially static lines,” but the “Iraqis still have some time in which to initiate a spring offensive.”¹⁷⁷

The sale of the Boeing aircraft to Iraq was the first step towards an American-Iraqi rapprochement. In early April 1981, arrangements were underway for senior-level contacts between Iraqi and American officials, which was significant because there had been no high-level contacts between the two countries since 1977. The administration selected Morris Draper, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, to lead the mission to Iraq. On April 4, William Eagleton, the Principal Officer of the American Interests Section located in Belgium’s Embassy in Iraq, cabled Draper as part of preparation for the Iraq mission. Essentially, the cable serves as a road map for rapprochement with Iraq (the likely objective of the mission in the first place). As Eagleton explained:

The atmosphere here is excellent following our decision not to sell arms to Iran, the increased Iraqi commerce and contacts with the U.S., mutual upgrading of diplomatic staffs and, most recently, the [sic] go ahead on five Boeing aircraft for Iraq. Although there remain a number of areas of serious disagreement on regional matters, we now have a greater convergence of interest with Iraq than at any time since the Revolution [sic] of 1958.

On the topic of bilateral relations, Eagleton advised Draper to be subtle in his approach, as “Our best tactic now would be not to raise the question of diplomatic relations with the Iraqis, except indirectly in discussing what further steps we might take to improve contacts in the absence of diplomatic ties.” These steps included assisting the Chief of the Iraq’s Interest Section in Washington to cultivate contacts with government officials and by suggesting that a visit by a senior Iraqi official would be received well. The purpose of these contacts was to open channels for future exchanges to “keep the Iraqi

¹⁷⁷ Secretary of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, “Iraq-Iran Conflict Update,” State Ref: State 221025, August 20, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 1-4.

leadership informed of our thinking” on regional issues, like its war with Iran. Eagleton hoped that “Draper’s visit can be presented as the inauguration on such a high level two-way exchange.”¹⁷⁸

On April 13, 1981, Draper met with Foreign Minister Hammadi in Baghdad. At the outset, Hammadi eagerly agreed “to keep an open mind toward U.S. efforts to change positively the *status quo* in the Middle East” and expressed his desire to improve ties with the United States, “including visits, regular meetings and concomitant expansion... of interests sections in Washington and Baghdad.”¹⁷⁹ Draper engaged Hammadi in a frank discussion of regional issues and outlined “the main features of United States policy towards the area as perceived by the new Administration.” Following Eagleton’s suggestion, Draper presented Hammadi with a letter from Secretary Haig that referred to Iraq’s capacity to “influence major trends in the region.” Overall, the Draper mission was a total success and was viewed by both sides as a positive step towards a fruitful relationship.¹⁸⁰

Not long after Draper’s mission, Washington recalled Eagleton for consultations. Upon returning to Baghdad, Eagleton received word from the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) that Tariq Aziz wanted to set up a meeting, an important step on the path towards rapprochement. Significantly:

This is [the] highest level in the Iraqi government our Baghdad mission has met with since the 1967 break in relations. Tariq Aziz has considerably more clout within Iraq’s leadership than Foreign Minister

¹⁷⁸ William Eagleton to Secretary of State, “Prospects for DAS Draper’s Visit to Baghdad,” State Ref: Baghdad 0879, April 4, 1981, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00045, pg. 1-3.

¹⁷⁹ Morris Draper to William Eagleton, “Meeting with IraqInt Chief Al-Omar,” State Ref: State 102457, April 22, 1981, pg. 1-2. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB82/iraq09.pdf

¹⁸⁰ Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Sadoon Hammadi to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, April 15, 1981, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00045, pg. 1.

Hammadi and is the highest level spokesman on foreign policy after Saddam Hussein.

Eagleton met with Aziz for an hour and a half on May 28, 1981. After the usual diplomatic niceties, Eagleton expressed satisfaction about the positive trend in the American-Iraqi relationship and offered suggestions about ways to enhance progress. Shifting the conversation to the war, Eagleton explained the policy of neutrality “which caused us to refrain from selling or licensing arms for either side.” He also specifically mentioned “Iraqi concern over helicopter deliveries from Italy, noting that these licenses had been obtained and payment made prior to the taking of American hostages and the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war.” In response, Aziz emphasized the “supreme importance” of the American attitude to the war. Aziz added that he “did not believe that the U.S. was providing arms to Iran, but somehow the Iranians were getting some U.S. arms and spare parts.” Surprised by the allegation, Eagleton suggested that Aziz provide “any information he had in this regard” since such sales contravened American policy. In his own analysis of the meeting, Eagleton commented that because Aziz was part of the inner-circle of the RCC leadership, the United States was now “in a position to communicate directly with the leadership should we have any sensitive or particularly important message to convey.” Like the Draper-Hammadi exchanges, the Eagleton-Aziz meeting was also a success. Within the first four months of the new administration, an identifiable trend towards conciliation was evident.¹⁸¹

A major development in the American-Iraqi rapprochement occurred in February 1982, when the administration, as required by the Export Administration Act of 1979,

¹⁸¹ William L. Eagleton to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, “Meeting with Tariq Aziz,” State Ref: Baghdad 1446, May 28, 1981, pg. 1-6. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NAE/BB/NSAEBB82/iraq10.pdf

submitted its annual report to Congress on the “countries repeatedly supporting international-terrorism.”¹⁸² Notably absent from the list was Iraq, which caught the attention of the Vice President George H.W. Bush, who requested that his staff prepare an explanation. According to the staff, Iraq had been making considerable strides in “reducing its assistance to terrorist groups and coming closer to moderate Arab nations.” Encouraged by this positive trend, the administration wanted to offer incentives “to encourage Iraq to go further in this direction,” while at the same time making it clear to the Iraqis that “backsliding on their part could reverse this decision.” Firmly, the summary concluded “We still do not intend to establish a military supply relationship with Iraq.”¹⁸³ Taking Iraq off the terrorist list was a significant gesture of goodwill to Iraq from the administration, quite possibly setting the stage for the establishment of official diplomatic relations in the future.

The rapprochement between the United States and Iraq was mutually beneficial. For the United States, establishing contacts with Iraq could help it to achieve its strategic objectives in the war. The Americans were probing to see if Iraq was capable of taking on Iran’s former role in a revived two-pillar policy. While Iran was an enemy, Washington’s objective was to limit Soviet influence in the region; bringing Iraq into the western orbit was a means to that end. Iraq had different motives for contact with the United States. As noted, since the conflict began Iraq had been getting cold responses from Moscow, particularly with respect to its arms-supply relationship. The Soviet

¹⁸² Secretary of State Alexander Haig to United States Interests Section Baghdad, “De-Designation of Iraq as Supporter of International Terrorism,” State Ref: State 053009, February 27, 1982, pg 2. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAE82/iraq13.pdf

¹⁸³ Nancy Bearg Dyke to Vice President George H.W. Bush through Admiral Daniel J. Murphy, “Countries Supporting International Terrorism,” March 25, 1982, DNSA, GWU, Terrorism and U.S. Policy, 1968-2002, TE00689, pg. 1.

Union had terminated military shipments to Iraq in response to the invasion, and had been actively attempting to cultivate contacts in Tehran. From an Iraqi perspective, rapprochement with Washington sent an unveiled signal to Moscow to follow through with its obligations or else Iraq would look elsewhere for support.

In his meeting with Eagleton, Tariq Aziz had raised a significant point when he voiced suspicion that Iran had acquired American military hardware. In order to reassure Iraq, on June 3 Haig ordered American officials in Baghdad to explain that “the U.S. has not approved... military sales to Iraq or Iran;” however, the “U.S. cannot control the activities of U.S. citizens or residents outside the U.S.”¹⁸⁴ Another problem was the extent to which the United States could influence the arms-supply relations between the belligerents and third party nations, such as France, Italy, Egypt, and Israel, even though they were American allies.

In comparison to Iran, Iraq was more successful at attaining weapons. In early 1981, France made its first delivery of four Mirage F-1 fighter jets from an order of thirty-six contracted by Iraq in 1977. While the shipment of the advanced fighter jets did not have an immediate significant impact on the fighting, as it would take quite some time to adequately train Iraqi pilots, it did boost Iraqi morale. Iraq also signed a contract with Italy to acquire four frigates, six corvettes and a support ship. Although the agreement was significant on paper, an order of this size took time to fulfill. Of immediate use were “Franco-German anti-tank missiles” and a large shipment of T-55

¹⁸⁴ Secretary of State to William Eagleton, “U.S. Policy on Arms Sales and Transfers to Iraq and Iran,” State Ref: State 143542, June 3, 1981, pg. 1-2. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NAEBB/NSAEBB82/iraq11.pdf

tanks received from the Soviet Bloc.¹⁸⁵ Iraq also received war materiel from Egypt. At first, the shipments were small, a token of Arab solidarity, but by 1982 the value of military hardware had grown to \$1 billion.¹⁸⁶ It was evident that either the United States was ignoring the weapon sales to Iraq or American efforts to persuade its allies to refrain from providing arms to the belligerents were not working.

Iraq was also receiving help from the Soviet Bloc. By May 1981, the Soviet Union had begun to relax its arms embargo on Iraq, a decision “probably due to Moscow’s concern for the erosion in its relations with Baghdad without any significant gains in its efforts to improve its position with Iran.”¹⁸⁷ It was also possible that the increased contacts between Iraq and the United States had triggered the resumption of Soviet efforts to supply Iraq. In June, reports surfaced that Iraq had signed a military agreement with China to obtain Soviet-origin military hardware and parts.¹⁸⁸

Iran had greater difficulty acquiring the weapons and spare parts needed to replace its battlefield losses. Iran’s problem was that the majority of its equipment was of American origin, while the United States had virtually severed its access to re-supply. By mid-1981, Iran was desperate to acquire American weaponry to prepare for a future offensive against Iraq. For instance, according to Edgar O’Ballance, in October 1981 Iran had sent a team to West Germany to negotiate a deal for spare parts with the United States. But the meeting never occurred as Tehran had to call the initiative off because two

¹⁸⁵ Secretary of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, “Iraq-Iran Conflict: Update and U.S. Views,” State Ref: State 066174, March 15, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 2-3.

¹⁸⁶ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 145.

¹⁸⁷ Secretary of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, “Iraq-Iran Conflict Update,” State Ref: State 141331, May 30, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 3.

¹⁸⁸ Department of State, “China – Iran/Iraq Conflict” June 1980, DNSA, GWU, China and the US Collection, CH00550, pg. 1.

of its agents had defected to the West.¹⁸⁹ But an equally surprising development had occurred a few months earlier when the *New York Times* published an article on July 26 alleging that Israel had supplied Iran with “American-made tank parts and ammunition... [and] had agreed to provide... Tehran with 360 tons of military equipment worth \$15 million.”¹⁹⁰ Certainly, the article offered a reasonable explanation of Tariq Aziz’s earlier suspicion, but why would Israel enter into an agreement with an enemy of its close ally, the United States? Only an examination of Israeli policy towards the Iran-Iraq War can unearth an answer.

After Camp David, the only major threats to Israeli security remained Iraq and Iran. The Israelis viewed the outbreak of war between its two regional enemies as quite advantageous. Interestingly, from the outset Israeli policy had tilted heavily in favour of Iran. “Although both Iran and Iraq were... sworn enemies of Israel, the Israelis recognized that Iraq was a far more dangerous threat – not only to Israel, but to the entire Middle East. Iran, by contrast, was less harmful than its rhetoric implied.” So long as the war continued, the Iraqi threat was neutralized, which allowed Israel to freely pursue its regional objectives, particularly in Lebanon, without fear of a unified Arab retaliation. Another driving factor behind Israel’s tilt towards Iran was its concern about 30,000 Iranian Jews. “Although the Jews of Iran were not locked up and under guard... they were all under the strict control of the Ministry of Internal Security, and their passports included a seal that prohibited them from traveling to ‘occupied Palestine.’” According to Colonel Oliver L. North, a former NSC staff member and the key figure in the Iran-Contra scandal, Israel had been quietly bartering with Iran since the Shah’s fall to attain

¹⁸⁹ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 72.

¹⁹⁰ “Israel Is Said to Supply U.S. Arms to Iranians,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1981, pg. 14.

the release of the Iranian Jews. The deals were simple: in return for releasing the Jews, Israel would provide Iran with much-needed military hardware. When the war started with Iraq, the importance of these exchanges only increased.¹⁹¹ Beyond the release of the captive Jews, Israeli policy “sought to maintain a balance of power [in the war] as a means of prolonging the conflict by denying victory to either party.” If Iran won the war, it would resume its old place as regional powerhouse, threatening the moderate Arab States. If Iraq proved victorious, it would pose a direct military threat to Israel and the region. As Iraq had a considerable advantage over Iran in terms of arms procurement, “Providing arms to Iran was a means of continuing the war to the advantage of Israel.”¹⁹²

On June 7, 1981, Israel surprised the United States and the world when it launched air strikes against the OSIRAK nuclear facility located just outside Baghdad, destroying it. In the late 1970s, France had agreed to sell Iraq an OSIRUS-type research reactor, pursuant to the French-Iraqi Agreement of Cooperation signed on November 18, 1975.¹⁹³ From Israel’s perspective, the prospect of a nuclear Iraq was unacceptable. As a result, “The United States made repeated secret attempts to persuade the French not to ship enriched weapons-grade uranium to Iraq. Even Saudi Arabia and Syria pleaded secretly with the French.”¹⁹⁴ Despite the diplomatic opposition to the sale, France had fulfilled its contract, but not without a few setbacks. By coincidence or not, on April 6, 1979, a French factory that was making components for the OSIRAK reactor suddenly

¹⁹¹ Oliver L. North with William Novak, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1991), pg. 25.

¹⁹² Bernard Reich, “Israel and the Iran-Iraq War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 79.

¹⁹³ Arthur A. Hartman to Secretary of State, “French Research Reactor (OSIRAK) Sale to Iraq,” State Ref: Paris 11683, April 11, 1979, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00016, pg. 1-3.

¹⁹⁴ Undated note, RRPL, Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Box 37 “Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraq Nuclear Facility 6/8/81,” Folder 3, pg. 1.

had exploded. According to the American Embassy in Paris, "The highly professional manner in which the plant was blown up has led to speculation and rumors that the Israelis may have been involved in this sabotage."¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, France had installed the OSIRAK reactor at the Iraqi Nuclear Research Facility in Tuwaitha, just outside of Baghdad, but Israel continued its efforts to derail the project.

In December 1980, "an Israeli F-4 Phantom, operating under the cover of the confusion of the Iran-Iraq war, struck the installation with a bomb," but not damaging the main building.¹⁹⁶ There was great speculation about who had perpetrated the attack. Iran could just as easily have carried out the attack. After all, it was also equipped with Phantom F4s and was at war with Iraq, but a stronger circumstantial case exists against Israel. Under the assumption that the attack on the reactor had come from Iran, Saddam Hussein declared "that the Iranians had attacked the target in vain since it was being constructed against Israel alone." This declaration only further compelled Israeli efforts to prevent the nuclear reactor from becoming operational.

According to a statement released by the Israeli government, "reliable sources" had indicated that the reactor would be complete either at the beginning of July or September 1981. The window of opportunity to destroy the reactor was slowly closing. Once it had become operational and hot:

...no government of Israel could contemplate bombing the reactor. Such an attack would have brought about a massive radioactive lethal fallout over the city of Baghdad, and tens of thousands of its innocent residents would have been hurt. We would thus have been compelled to passively observe the process of atomic bombs in Iraq, whose ruling tyrant would not hesitate to launch them against Israeli cities.... Therefore, the

¹⁹⁵ Arthur A. Hartman to Secretary of State, "French Research Reactor (OSIRAK) Sale to Iraq," State Ref: Paris 11683, April 11, 1979, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00016, pg. 1.

¹⁹⁶ Press Reports, Reuter, June 9, 1981, RRPL, Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Box 37 "Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraq Nuclear Facility 6/8/81," Folder 6, pg. 1.

Government of Israel decided to act without further delay to ensure our people's existence.

When viewed in these terms, the rationale for Israel's attack upon the OSIRAK reactor was justifiable, but its failure to inform Washington of its plan seriously strained American-Israeli relations.¹⁹⁷

As an American ally and recipient of massive amounts of military aid, Israel's failure to inform Washington of its plans had been unacceptable. To add insult to injury, "Israeli Air Force units were equipped with defense articles furnished to Israel by the United States under the Foreign Military Sales Program," of 1952. As part of the agreement, Israel had promised that it would use these articles for defensive purposes and not undertake any act of aggression against any other state. Israel had clearly violated the agreement, but Iraq had never signed a peace agreement and the two nations were officially at a state of war.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Washington was furious that Israel had failed to notify it of the attack in advance. As a result, on June 10 the President decided to suspend a shipment of four F-16s to Israel, "though likely to be short-lived and symbolic."¹⁹⁹ There was not much more that the President could do despite the fact that Israel had violated one of the fundamental principles of a defense relationship with the United States.

There were mixed reactions within the administration to the Israeli attack. While Casey saw the diplomatic necessity of withholding the F-16s, he privately felt that the

¹⁹⁷ Embassy of Israel, "A Special Statement by the Government of Israel," June 8, 1981, RRPL, Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Box 37 "Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraq Nuclear Facility 6/8/81)," Folder 6, pg. 1-2.

¹⁹⁸ "Statement by Walter J. Stoessel before the House of Representatives, Subcommittees on Europe and the Middle East and International and Scientific Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee," June 17, 1981, RRPL, Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Box 37 "Iraq (Israel Strike on Iraq Nuclear Facility 6/8/81)," Folder 3, pg. 1-2.

¹⁹⁹ The White House, Situation Room to Richard V. Allen, "Noon Notes," June 12, 1981, pg. 1. (See Appendix C)

gesture was “bullshit.” Like others, he believed that Israel was justifiably concerned with Iraq’s nuclear weapons program and the strike was a simple solution to what had increasingly become a complex problem. On the other side, Casey’s deputy Bobby Ray Inman, a highly respected career intelligence officer, was furious that Israel had misappropriated American intelligence and equipment. “Under the intelligence-sharing arrangement set up with Casey’s approval, Israel had almost unlimited access to U.S. satellite photography and had used it in planning their raid.” Inman questioned “how the United States could maintain any balanced policy if Israel was permitted to drop bombs all over the Middle East using American intelligence?” Frustrated with the unrestricted access to American intelligence assets, Inman changed the “rules by which Israel could get photos and other sensitive intelligence only for defense.”²⁰⁰ Certainly, Israel was not pleased with the new arrangement, but what did it expect?

Another contentious issue affecting American-Israeli relations that related to the Iran-Iraq War was the \$8 billion sale of five sophisticated AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia on October 29, 1981. The deal had been conceived in February 1980 following the Shah’s fall, as both Saudi Arabia and the Carter administration had been greatly concerned by the threat posed by revolutionary Iran. Because the Saudis were hesitant about allowing American military facilities on its soil, the next best option was the AWACS early warning system. When the proposed sale of the AWACS became a contentious issue in Congress, the Saudis opted to await the results of the Presidential election that fall. “The administration was relieved at the Saudis’ willingness to await the elections. It anticipated problems in Congress and did not expect President Carter to

²⁰⁰ Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1987), pg. 139.

court electoral problems by raising the issue.”²⁰¹ The eruption of the Iran-Iraq war altered the political environment and the election passed the problems of the AWACS deal to the Reagan administration.

Israel adamantly opposed the sale of the AWACS to Saudi Arabia and through its lobby, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), successfully pitted the new administration against Congress. As part of its effort, AIPAC, along with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, depicted the Saudis as “mediaeval, despotic, corrupt and supporters of terrorism,” which stood in stark contrast to Reagan’s view that “the Saudi elite were moderates” and “absolutely invaluable and indispensable in our future efforts” in the region.²⁰²

In September 1981, as the debate in Congress heated up over the sale, Begin paid a state visit to Washington. “In his conversations with Haig and Reagan he left the impression that he would oppose the sale but make no attempt to mount a major public campaign against it.” Then in open contradiction of his assurances, “Begin denounced the AWACS sale in a speech to Congress and in several television interviews.” Begin’s duplicitous actions infuriated Reagan, who took it upon himself to ensure that the sale passed in Congress. On October 1, Reagan bluntly responded to Begin’s meddlesome interference in the deal, charging that “It is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy.” A week later, “Reagan met privately with forty-three Republican senators and put the issue in terms of loyalty to their president vs. loyalty to

²⁰¹ Shahram Chubin, pg. 52.

²⁰² Coral Bell, *The Reagan Paradox: U.S. Foreign Policy in the 1980s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pg. 92 and 96.

Israel.” The effort exerted by Reagan over the AWACS sale proved to be successful. On October 28, the Senate approved the deal “by a four-vote margin;” Israel was furious.²⁰³

From the start of the conflict, the international community made active attempts to mediate a negotiated ceasefire, but several obstacles prevented success. Iraq demanded full sovereignty of the Shatt al-Arab, the return of territories ceded by Iran in the Algiers Agreement of 1975, and Iran to commit to an agreement of non-interference. Essentially, Iraq was hoping to barter Khuzestan for Iranian concessions, as the Shah had successfully achieved in 1975 when he traded the Kurds for shared sovereignty of the Shatt al-Arab. In addition, Iraq was willing to accommodate the efforts of third parties to seek a negotiated ceasefire, as indicated by its acceptance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 479. Meanwhile, Iran based its demands on Khomeini’s religious ideology and his personal hatred towards Saddam Hussein. As a result, Tehran refused to negotiate a ceasefire as long as Hussein remained in power and while Iraqi troops occupied its territory. Further, Iran was boycotting the United Nations and had refused to accept its resolutions because it suspected the UN “was pro-Iraqi and pro-U.S. in outlook.”²⁰⁴ Consequently, these irreconcilable negotiating positions made a negotiated ceasefire to the conflict virtually impossible.

In November 1980, United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim appointed former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme to mediate a peace between the warring parties. Between November 1980 to June 1981 Palme visited the region at least five

²⁰³ Lou Cannon, pg. 342.

²⁰⁴ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 74-75. Iran’s boycott of the UN lasted until the final days of the war.

times, seeking to find a compromise, but his efforts were fruitless.²⁰⁵ Complimenting the efforts of the United Nations were initiatives by Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO) and the Non-Aligned Movement. “[Yasir] Arafat was genuinely appalled by the war because it threatened to divert attention from the Arab-Israeli conflict, split the Arab world, and put pressure on the Palestinian Liberation Organization to choose sides.” As a result, at the start of the conflict, he engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the two belligerents, but his efforts only succeeded “in offending both parties.” Similarly, the ICO attempted to mediate a ceasefire but was unable to convince Iran or Iraq to modify their demands. In 1981, when the war began to stabilize, attempts at mediation “took on a more formalized and structured character and were officially sponsored” separately by the UN, ICO or NAM. The NAM’s efforts were equally unsuccessful, partly because “Iraq refused to meet with any mediation team that included any Arabs.” The Iraqi argument was “designed to prevent Algeria from being included on one of the teams. At the time, Algeria had just successfully shepherded the American hostage negotiations to a conclusion and had access to the various powers in Tehran.” Iraq was concerned about Algeria’s neutrality, fearing that it was too pro-Iranian. Nevertheless, by the end of the summer of 1981, all of the mediation efforts had failed to negotiate a ceasefire. Thereafter, mediation efforts were suspended until March 1982, when the ICO proposed a ceasefire, a withdrawal to the borders specified in the 1975 Algiers Treaty under the supervision of an Islamic peace-keeping force, and the opening the Shatt al-Arab. As it had to earlier proposals,

²⁰⁵ Anthony Clark Arend, “The Role of the United Nations in the Iran-Iraq War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 193.

Iran rejected the ICO plan, signaling the futility of trying to convince Tehran to seek a negotiated end to the war.²⁰⁶

The Iraqi spring offensive that the State Department had predicted in May 1981 never materialized. Instead, throughout the summer, Iran employed the same strategy used at Qasr-e Shirin by launching a series of “attacks in the vicinity of Marivan in the extreme north, as well as in the Susangerd and Abadan sectors in the south.” While these offensives resulted in Iranian victories, they did not significantly alter the military situation. Meanwhile, the Iranians had “significantly increased the size of their forces in Khuzestan.” A central problem for Iraq was that it seemed content to prepare defensive positions while Iran was building its forces for a future offensive. In fact, by the end of August, “There has been little change in [the] overall Iraqi military disposition since the early days of the war.” The failure of the Iraqi regime to pursue further offensives during the summer of 1981, proved to be to its own undoing.²⁰⁷

The series of minor offensives during the summer culminated in a major counter-offensive by Iran on September 26 near Abadan. When the Iranian forces launched their attack in the middle of the night, “The Iraqis were surprised and overwhelmed, and their lines began crumbling almost immediately.” Despite Baghdad’s best efforts to support its units, the Iranians effectively lifted Iraq’s siege on Abadan “while trapping several Iraqi battalions before they could flee.”²⁰⁸ The Battle of Abadan was a tremendous victory for Iran and signaled a turning point in the conflict. The next Iranian attack struck the Iraqi-held town of Bostan, on November 29. For the next 36 hours, amidst pounding

²⁰⁶ Stephen R. Grummon, pg. 74-78.

²⁰⁷ Department of State, cable, Secretary of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, “Iraq-Iran Conflict Update,” State Ref: State 221025, August 20, 1981, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, Jan–Jun 1982,” folder 2, pg. 2.

²⁰⁸ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 195.

winter rains and the accompanying mud, the Iraqi and Iranian forces fought a desperate battle over the town. “By the evening of the 30th, the Iranians were in possession of Bostan and the Iraqis had fallen back about 5 miles to the large village of Sableh..., still blocking the obvious Iranian route westward.” At the Battle of Bostan, for the first time Iran employed “human-wave” tactics, whereby wave upon wave of soldiers attacked Iraqi positions, not unlike the frontal assault tactics used in the First World War. Iran’s victories at the Battles of Abadan and Bostan gave its army a considerable boost in morale as the winter rains set in again.²⁰⁹

During the winter of 1981-82, the Iranian army built up its strength in preparation for a spring offensive to drive the Iraqis from Iran. “Iran’s victory at Bostan left the Iraqi forces around Dezful father north in a salient that both sides recognized as a vulnerable to an offensive.” After for four months of building up forces in the Dezful area, the battle commenced just after midnight on March 22, 1982, when four Iranian divisions attacked north of the Iraqi position. However, as the Iraqi forces reinforced the northern sector, on March 24 Iran unleashed a second offensive from the south, enveloping the Iraqi position after six days of fighting. Its crushing defeat at Dezful had catastrophic implications on Iraq’s war effort. In a six-month timeframe, Iraq had lost three significant battles, giving up considerable territory in each case. The Iraqi military’s inability to defend against the innovative Iranian tactics did not bode well for future entanglements. Recognizing the implications of the Dezful defeat, Hussein ordered the Iraqi military to pull out of Khuzestan except for a small salient in the south containing Khorramshahr. The Iraqi reluctance to completely withdraw from Khuzestan signaled the inevitability of a major battle for Khorramshahr. Following up quickly on the victory at Dezful, Iran attacked

²⁰⁹ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 68.

Khorramshahr on May 22, taking the city in less than 24 hours and killing or capturing 15,000 Iraqi soldiers. Iran had successfully retaken its territory and had forced Iraq to the border. Now, it was only a question of when Iran would invade Iraq.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 196-198.

Chapter Four:

The Tilt

The four successive Iranian victories from September 1981 to May 1982 had a terrifying effect on the entire Gulf region because Iran's newfound military strength tipped the regional balance of power back in its favour. This did not bode well for American policy as Ayatollah Khomeini had "made no secret of his ambition to establish a Shia Islamic government in his life-time for the whole of the Middle East."²¹¹ Further, Iran was poised to invade Iraq, which the Gulf States considered to be the bulwark against the spread of radical Islam. Too many questions required answers. Could Iraq resist a full-scale Iranian invasion? Was a negotiated settlement possible at this juncture? What would happen if Iraq fell to Iran? Would – or rather could – Iran impose an Islamic regime? Would Iran attack the other Gulf States? How would this effect Western access to Persian Gulf oil? The Reagan administration's uncertainty about Iran's intentions led to intensive debates about the ways to prevent an Iranian victory. After an in-depth cost-benefit analysis, the administration came to the same conclusion as the Gulf States. The United States had to tilt towards Iraq in order to prevent the spread of radical Islam.

A central facet of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War had been support for third party mediation efforts. In March 1982, after the attempts by the United Nations and the Islamic Conference Organization had failed to bring about a ceasefire,

²¹¹ Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 95-96.

Algeria offered to seek an accommodation between Iran and Iraq, as it had in 1975. Fresh from mediating the release of the American hostages, the Algerians had considerable influence in Iran, but in Iraq as well. They also possessed a cadre of skilled diplomats who understood the political complexities of Baghdad and Tehran. Using this expertise, the Algerian plan was to gradually secure Iranian and Iraqi agreement to a number of secondary issues, creating dialogue and allowing both sides to save face. At this point, they would introduce more important issues and try to bring about a peace.²¹² By April, the Algerians had convinced a number of Iranian leaders that some Iraqi officials, but not Saddam Hussein, were willing return to status quo ante of 1975 in return for compromises on reparations. But just as a breakthrough seemed possible, on May 3 the plane carrying Algerian Foreign Minister Mohammad Benyahia and his entire team of negotiators suspiciously crashed en route to Tehran from Baghdad.²¹³ The Iranians immediately accused Iraq of bringing down the plane, but after the series of defeats that spring, Iraq seemed interested in ending the conflict. Mystery enveloped the entire event until February 1987 when a captured Iraqi pilot identified a fellow pilot that he said had shot down the Algerian plane. According to Gary Sick:

An Iraqi Mirage pilot, Captain Zuhayr Mohammed Said al-Audisi, was captured by Iran on February 2, 1987, when his plane crashed in Iranian territory. He reportedly told Iranian interrogators that an Iraqi MiG-25 fighter piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Abdullah Faraj was ordered in early May 1982 to fly toward the Iranian-Turkish border, where the Iraqi government knew that Algerian Foreign Minister Benyahia's aircraft would pass. The aircraft was shot down with a Soviet air-to-air missile.²¹⁴

²¹² Eric Hooglund, "Strategic and Political Objectives in the Gulf War," Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York, Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 43. When describing the Algerian mediation strategy, Hooglund does not elaborate on what the secondary issues the Algerians attempted to resolve.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 43. See also Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 104.

²¹⁴ Gary Sick, "Moral Choice and the Iran-Iraq Conflict," *Ethics and International Affairs* (Vol. 3, 1989), pg. 126-127. See also Gary Sick, "Trial by Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*

In either case, the Algerian plane's downing ended the possibility of a negotiated settlement in the conflict in the near future. Coupled with the abrupt demise of the Algerian mission, Iran's victory at Khorramshahr prompted Washington to reassess its policy towards the conflict.

Throughout May and early-June, the CIA analyzed the ever-changing situation on the battleground and its potential consequences for Iraq and Iran, the region, and the United States. Before Iran's Khorramshahr offensive, the CIA Directorate for Intelligence produced an analysis entitled "Possible Outcomes and Implications of the Iran-Iraq War." The analysis discussed the options facing Iran after its victory at Khorramshahr and the implications for American policy. The "most likely immediate outcome" was that Iran, after pushing Iraqi forces from its territory, would continue a border war and refuse to negotiate. "A less likely outcome would be a total Iraqi withdrawal followed by a ceasefire and protracted negotiations." The third option was an Iranian invasion of Iraq with the objective of overthrowing Hussein's regime. While the CIA did not "expect the Iranian military to move in force into Iraq, the temptation will be great and the call is a close one," it feared that Iran "could capture a major city and proclaim a provisional government" in either Kurdistan to the north or in the Shi'ite dominated south. The fourth option largely built upon this idea, but the creation of a provisional government in Iraq would invite Arab intervention, triggering "a more general Arab-Persian war." For instance, the establishment of a Kurdish state could invite the direct intervention of Turkey, or a Shi'ite state in the south could pull Saudi

43, No. 2 (Spring 1989), pg. 26; and Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Near East and South Asia* (FBIS), May 22, 1987.

Arabia, Jordan and possibly Syria into the conflict.²¹⁵ It was less likely that Egypt would become involved. Certainly, a war of this nature would have catastrophic implications for American policy. It could close the Strait of Hormuz, disrupt the global oil supply, spread the conflict throughout the Middle East, and lead to the Gulf States to seek American help. In turn, this could push Iran into the arms of the Soviets, leading to a major superpower conflict.²¹⁶

On June 8, 1982, the CIA produced a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), entitled "Implications of Iran's Victory Over Iraq," that built upon the Directorate of Intelligence's analysis. Having already reviewed the options available to Iran, this discussion will focus on the challenges facing Saddam Hussein, the challenges posed to the Gulf States, and their implications for American interests. Iran's victory at the end of May was a major turning point in the war and the implications for Iraq were dire. As the CIA concluded, "Iraq has essentially lost the war with Iran. Baghdad's main concern now is to prevent an Iranian invasion. There is little the Iraqis can do, alone or in combination with other Arabs, to reverse the military situation." Thanks to the devastating defeats, "Iraq remains desperate for negotiations and is willing to make concessions, but Iran has shown little interest in negotiating as long as Saddam remains in power." The increased pressure on Baghdad due to the war's lack of progress was a major problem, while Iranian demands for Hussein's removal and the payment of

²¹⁵ At this point, it was hard to say how Syria would react to an Iranian invasion. According to a cable from the American Embassy in Damascus, citing close contacts with high-level Syrian officials, "Should Iran's intention be to install an Islamic regime, however, the Syrian reaction would be sharp. Assad would be willing to commit Syrian troops to fight Iran in Iraq to prevent this from taking place." American Embassy Damascus to Secretary of State, "Syrian Perceptions of Iranian Invasion of Iraq," State Ref: Damascus 05049, July 15, 1982, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 "Iran/Iraq, Jan-Jun 1982," folder 2, pg. 2.

²¹⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, "Possible Outcomes and Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," May 17, 1982, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 "Iran/Iraq, Jan-Jun 1982," folder 2, pg. 1-4.

reparations in the range of \$20-150 billion did not help either. Thus, it was highly unlikely that the Ba'athist regime would bow to such grandiose conditions.²¹⁷

Although the series of military defeats posed new challenges to Hussein's rule, for "Saddam's Hussein's total identification with the costly and unpopular war points towards increased challenges to his rule even without Iranian moves against him." For instance, Hussein's micromanagement of the war put him in direct conflict with Iraqi civilian and military leaders who were in a position to plot against him. Perhaps the greatest threat to the regime was an isolated assassination. On a number of occasions since the war's start, Hussein had narrowly avoided a number of assassination attempts. But even if Hussein was killed, Ba'athist rule in Iraq would likely remain entrenched. Another possibility was a coup from within the Ba'ath Party or the military, but Hussein's firm control of Iraq's internal security and intelligence apparatus meant that this option was less likely. Another possible threat was a popular uprising against the regime, but again this too seemed impossible because opposition "seem incapable of fomenting open revolt." Even though the war was putting serious strains on Iraqi society, the CIA concluded that, "given Saddam Hussein's tract record as a survivor, his overthrow is not necessarily imminent."²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Director of Central Intelligence, "Implication's of Iran's Victory Over Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2-82, MORI DocID: 938988, June 8, 1982, pg. 1. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf While the primary source for this section is *SNIE 34/36.2-82*, for a more detailed analysis on the problems facing Saddam Hussein's regime, see Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, "Iraq: Succession Politics," June 1, 1982, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, Box 90492, Folder "Iraq 1982," pg. iii-iv and 1-10; and Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Saddam Hussein and the Question of Succession," December 17, 1982, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, Box 90492, Folder "Iraq 1982," pg. 1-6.

²¹⁸ Director of Central Intelligence, "Implication's of Iran's Victory Over Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2-82, MORI DocID: 938988, June 8, 1982, pg. 1-5. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf

For the CIA, the central question was twofold: would Iran invade Iraq; and if so, how would such an attack affect the region? “The Khomeini regime sees itself as a leader of people “oppressed by imperialism,” particularly in the Gulf States where the United States held considerable influence. Many feared that “An Iranian invasion of Iraq would strain the fragile cohesion of the Saudi dominated Gulf Cooperation Council and possibly further weaken the moderate Arabs’ confidence in the United States.” At this point, the Gulf leaders “are increasingly worried about Iranian military intentions as a result of Iran’s latest gains against Iraq.” Nevertheless, the CIA concluded that “A major Iranian military attack on one or more of the Gulf states appears remote.”²¹⁹

Undoubtedly, American “interests generally would be adversely affected by Iran’s carrying the fight in Iraqi territory.” Not only would an Iranian invasion threaten the Gulf’s stability, leading to further criticism at America’s inability to restrain Iran, but the “war could easily escalate, particularly if the Arabs intervened on the side of Iraq.” At this point, a ceasefire would serve American interests best, but a protracted war of attrition did provide some opportunities, notably alleviating Arab pressure upon Israel. Nevertheless, the United States should still “search for ways to mitigate Iran’s efforts to export its revolution and to prevent Tehran from drifting towards the Soviets.” In sum, “The West – and the United States in particular – has little leverage to affect the course of events in Iran or to advance Western regional interests with Tehran... Even though Iran is willing to deal with some Western nations, it will continue to oppose the West and

²¹⁹ Director of Central Intelligence, “Implication’s of Iran’s Victory Over Iraq,” Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2-82, MORI DocID: 938988, June 8, 1982, pg. 8-10. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf.

particularly the United States.” Beyond a symbolic display of support for the Gulf States, the United States could do little else.²²⁰

On June 6, 1982, two days before the CIA released its estimate on the Iran-Iraq War, Israel suddenly invaded Lebanon, in order to rid the country of the PLO. The details Israel’s invasion of Lebanon are complex and beyond the scope of this study, but its timing is relevant. At the time, the entire Middle East, if not the world, was tensely waiting to see what Iran would do next in its war with Iraq and then Israel attacked Lebanon. Israel understood the situation in the Persian Gulf; in fact, it was taking advantage of it. A few weeks earlier, on May 25, Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon had visited Washington for consultations on the region. During the visit, Israeli officials had dropped strong hints about their frustration with the PLO in Lebanon. As a result, Secretary Haig actively pursued a diplomatic initiative to try to avert war, but “the incoherent NSC system” had blocked his efforts. Over the course of his tenure at the State Department, Haig had found himself increasingly locked in battle with Reagan’s advisors at the White House. He found it perplexing that the NSC would allow Israel to proceed with the invasion, particularly in light of the already precarious Middle Eastern situation. To Haig, it was apparent that he was no longer in control of American foreign policy. A major turning point for Haig occurred on June 19 when Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko confronted him about a sudden shift in the American policy concerning a Soviet-European pipeline. Furious, Gromyko angrily declared that either Haig had purposely misled him or he did not speak for the administration. To this, the defeated Secretary replied, “Mr. Foreign Minister, I am afraid it’s the latter.” On June

²²⁰ Director of Central Intelligence, “Implication’s of Iran’s Victory Over Iraq,” Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2-82, MORI DocID: 938988, June 8, 1982, pg. 14-15. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf.

25, Alexander Haig, Jr. resigned as Secretary of State and the administration quickly replaced him with George Shultz, the former president of Bechtel Corporation. The resignation of Haig signaled an abrupt change in how the United States would conduct its foreign policy.²²¹

Meanwhile, Israel's invasion of Lebanon turned out to be a convenient excuse for an Iraqi withdrawal from Iran. On June 9, Saddam Hussein quietly announced that the Iraqi armed forces would observe a unilateral ceasefire, adding the next day that all Iraq's troops would pull out from Iran "in order to fight the Israelis." Unsurprisingly, Iran scoffed at the excuse.²²²

In the event of an Iranian invasion, the city of Basra was the most likely target. Located only 20 kilometers from the Iranian border, Basra has a large Shi'ite population and is the second largest city in the country. According to a SNIE, "If the Iraqi Army were severely crippled, or Al Basrah occupied, the Ba'thist regime itself would be badly shaken and Saddam's chances for survival would be minimal." Everything came down to Basra.²²³ Iran attacked just after dark on June 13, 1982, launching "human-wave" offensives against the Iraqi defences outside of Basra. "The city of Basra was strongly defended by earth-works in successive arcs in which were set bunker and weapons positions, covered with miles of barbed wire fencing and entanglements, and protected by extensive minefields." Over the course of the next six weeks, Iran sent five "human-wave" attacks against the Iraqi defences, with the youthful Besij leading the charge often. On March 2, Khomeini had announced that "as a special favour," he would allow

²²¹ Lou Cannon, pg. 166 and 169.

²²² Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 86.

²²³ Director of Central Intelligence, "Implication's of Iran's Victory Over Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2-82, MORI DocID: 938988, June 8, 1982, pg. 5. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf

schoolchildren between the ages of twelve and eighteen to join the Besji and fight in the war. During battle, the Besij were often charged with “moving through minefields ahead of ‘human-waves’ of Pasdaran” in order to explode mines and cut wire obstacles.²²⁴

According to an Iraqi officer:

They chant ‘Allahu Akbar’ and they keep coming, and we keep shooting, sweeping our 50 millimeter machine guns around like sickles. My men are eighteen, nineteen, just a few years older than these kids. I’ve seen them crying, and at times the officers have had to kick them back to their guns. Once we had Iranian kids on bikes cycling towards us, and my men all started laughing, and then these kids started lobbing their hand grenades and we stopped laughing and started shooting.²²⁵

The use of children in war was not an Iranian invention; for instance, Germany employed the Hitler Youth in the Second World War. What was novel was that these children were often the first line of attack. Nevertheless, over the course of the battle, Iran hurled 90,000 soldiers against the Iraqi defences, with little effect. At the start of August, the Battle of Basra ended, with Iraq claiming victory. In a sense, the battle was a draw. But because Khomeini had hoped that Iraqi Shi’ites would rise up against Iraq and they had not, Baghdad could claim victory. In the end, Iran had thrown all it had at Basra, but it appeared that the Iranian invasion had stiffened the resolve of the Iraqi forces to defend their homeland, as had happened in Iran two years earlier when Iraq invaded.²²⁶

After the Battle of Basra, the war between Iran and Iraq became a prolonged stalemate until February 1986. As a result, the discussion on the military context of the Iran-Iraq War will focus primarily on battles of great significance, Iraq’s attempts to internationalize the war and the use of chemical weapons. After the Iranian attack at

²²⁴ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 107.

²²⁵ Efraim Kharsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2002), pg. 62.

²²⁶ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 203-205; Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 93-97, 107.

Basra, Iraq changed its tactics significantly, which in large part led to the stalemate.

Unlike the campaigns of 1980-81, Iraq's leadership now was quick to learn battlefield lessons. While the Iraqi army was not particularly good on the offensive, it was quite capable of mounting a strong defence. As a result,

[Iraq built] long, almost continuous defences... from the Shatt al-Arab in the south to Qasr Sherin in the centre. They roughly followed the frontier between the two countries, with minor exceptions, not unlike the trench system of World War I that extended across Europe.

Meanwhile, Iran relied upon its "human-wave" tactics, at great cost of human life, but eventually recognized that this tactic was far too costly and decided that a war of attrition was a more attractive option. Effectively:

The [Iranian] policy was... to exert steady pressure against the whole (now) 650-mile Front, from north of Penjwin, down to the Shatt al-Arab, to stretch the Iraqi resources until they snapped under the strain, by keeping huge formations deployed close to, and along the whole length of the Front.²²⁷

The almost simultaneous shifts in the Iraqi and Iranian strategies left both sides fighting a war of attrition, each hoping the other would collapse first. The only major difference between the two sides was that Iraq was covertly getting help from the United States.

The prospect of Iraq falling to Iran was simply unacceptable to the United States.

On July 20, in the midst of the Battle of Basra, Henry S. Rowen, the Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, wrote a brief addressing the dangers that America faced in the Persian Gulf. Rowen's warning was clear:

...we cannot be at all sanguine that events will develop in a favorable way to [American] interests. We may soon be faced with a situation in which a significant proportion of the oil supplies to the West are heavily

²²⁷ Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 101

influenced by Iran or by political forces hostile to the West or by forces unable or uninterested in maintaining the flow of oil.²²⁸

If the American intelligence community had learned one lesson from its embarrassing failure during the Iranian Revolution, it was that Iran was capable of anything. As such, the United States needed to maximize its efforts to influence an end to hostilities, or at the very least prevent an Iranian victory.

As a result, the administration convened a meeting of the Senior Interagency Group (SIG)²²⁹ to discuss the “possible reasons for tilting U.S. policy towards Iraq in the current Iran-Iraq war.” The group identified two reasons for considering a tilt towards Iraq. “First, some area states have asked [the United States] to do so. Second, if Iran achieves its war objectives, it will harm U.S. regional security, political and economic interests.” Due to the recent developments in the war, the administration had received requests from Egypt and Jordan “for a clear tilt in U.S. policy towards Iraq.” The problem was that the neutrality policy was inadequate to deal with the threat Iran posed to Egyptian and Jordanian security. A further problem related to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, as:

Iranian victories over Iraq gave the fundamentalist cause the cachet of success at a time when traditional Arab societies and governments have been humiliated by their impotence in the face of Israel’s attack on Lebanon. ... This situation would pose a significant threat if a marriage of convenience were to form between the Palestinian radicals and Shiite fundamentalists.²³⁰

²²⁸ Chairman Henry S. Rowen to Geoffrey Kemp, “The Iranian Threat to American Interests in the Persian Gulf,” July 20, 1982, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, July 1982,” pg. 3-4.

²²⁹ The SIG, the Reagan administration’s equivalent to President Carter’s Special Coordinating Committees (SCC), consisted of the senior foreign policy advisors to the President from State, Defense and the CIA.

²³⁰ National Security Council, Senior Interagency Group, “Discussion Paper for SIG on Policy Options for Dealing with Iran-Iraq War,” no date, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 “Iran/Iraq, July 1982,” pg. 1-2. There is no date on the document. However, we can extrapolate an approximate date from the following statement, “Iraq having stopped the Iranian invasion thus far.” By July 15, Iraq had stopped the Iranian advance and presumably, this was around when the Senior Interagency Group met.

The problem with tilting towards Iraq was that it had not been particularly successful on the battlefield. As such, in the event that the United States openly sided with Iraq and it lost, the consequences could be irreparable. That aside, the SIG identified five options available to the United States that were less visible and potentially effective.

The first option was to provide political support for Iraq. Despite the beneficial psychological effect this option posed, the SIG doubted that political support, “if taken in the absence of military measures,” would not have a positive impact on the war and was “likely to highlight U.S. impotency.” The next option, mounting clandestine operations against Khomeini, was intriguing. But as the Khomeini regime, “bolstered by military victories and increased oil exports,” appeared firmly entrenched, “the efficacy of a clandestine operation does not appear to justify the political costs.” A third option was to provide military equipment to Iraq directly or indirectly through third parties such as South Korea, Jordan and Egypt. This option was quite possible, after all “Iraq [had] recently... queried U.S. manufacturers about purchases of military trucks and helicopter gunships,” which the administration had denied. But even if the administration wanted to sell American military equipment, all transfers above \$7 million were subject to Congressional approval which, in Iraq’s case, seemed unlikely. Thus, Washington’s only feasible alternative was to quietly encourage the Egyptians or French to “step up their supply of non-U.S. equipment.” The fourth option was to provide military support to Iraq in indirect ways, such as “airlifting Egyptian or Jordanian troops” to the Iraqi front. However, the SIG felt that it was unlikely that enough Egyptian or Jordanian forces could be “deployed to make a significant difference on the battlefield.” Furthermore, the administration would encounter Congressional opposition to such efforts because they

would violate the policy of strict neutrality. The final option, providing intelligence support to Iraq, was indeed the most intriguing:

Baghdad's most basic need is for accurate and timely intelligence on Iranian unit and equipment dispositions and Iranian intentions. [Excised] Providing real-time or near real time intelligence on order of battle, (the information which would have the greatest impact on tactical situation) is virtually impossible without overriding risks. [Excised] Nevertheless, even strategic intelligence can play a significant role. [Excised] Our role might be identifiable and might have a negative impact in the Iranian military. [Nevertheless,] Of all the options reviewed by the [Interagency Group], this option has the greatest attraction. It could have an immediate impact on the war and it maintains at least some degree of deniability.²³¹

According to Bob Woodward's book, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987*, the United States had provided Iraq with classified, tactical intelligence on Iranian troop movements as early as August 1982. Woodward alleged that:

...the CIA... established a direct top-secret Washington-Baghdad link to provide the Iraqis with better and faster intelligence from U.S. satellites. Casey had met with senior Iraqis to make sure the new channel was functioning and to encourage more attacks on Iran, especially against economic targets.²³²

It appears that the SIG had decided to act upon the fifth recommendation. Certainly, Woodward's privileged access to CIA Director Casey provided some credence to his claims. It was not a coincidence that Eagleton and Aziz had discussed Iraqi approval of the installation of the radio transmitter in May 1981.²³³ The fact that discussions on the radio transmitter occurred at a high-level meeting between American and Iraqi officials indicates that Woodward may have not been too far off the mark. In a little over the year,

²³¹ National Security Council, Senior Interagency Group, "Discussion Paper for SIG on Policy Options for Dealing with Iran-Iraq War," no date, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492 "Iran/Iraq, July 1982," pg. 3-7.

²³² Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1987), pg. 487.

²³³ William L. Eagleton to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, "Meeting with Tariq Aziz," State Ref: Baghdad 1446, May 28, 1981, pg. 5. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NAEBB/NSAEBB82/iraq10.pdf

the relations had gone from being non-existent to the point that Washington was providing intelligence to Baghdad. Certainly, this was a significant step forward in the budding relationship between Baghdad and Washington.

On October 5, Secretary of State George Shultz met with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hammadi for over an hour at the United Nations in New York. Hammadi engaged Shultz in a frank discussion on a variety of issues, in particular, the status of the Iran-Iraq War, the Middle East peace process and Iraqi links to terrorism. Essentially, the Iraqis viewed the most recent Iranian offensives to be the last “before a state of no-war, no-peace sets in.” Hammadi requested that Washington “stop Israel’s alleged continuing supply of military equipment to Iran but was unable to provide evidence of the Israeli-Iranian link.” The conversation turned to Soviet views of the war, with Shultz noting that the Soviet “actions are not necessarily consistent with their stated policy,” an ironic statement as the CIA was providing tactical intelligence to Iraq in violation of the strict neutrality policy. Hammadi “categorically denied support for international terrorism,” stating that “Iraq is itself a victim of terrorism and condemns it.” Overall, the meeting was an ideal opportunity for Shultz to become familiar with Iraq’s perceptions of its war with Iran. The encounter also was the first official meeting between a Secretary of State and the Iraqi Foreign Minister since the process of rapprochement had begun in April 1981.²³⁴

In mid-December, press reports surfaced about the American sale of sixty helicopters, manufactured by Hughes Helicopter Corporation, to Iraq, twelve of which were already en route. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations admonished the President on December 23, for approving the transaction as the sale violated the

²³⁴ United States Delegation Secretary in New York to Secretary of State, “Secretary’s Meeting with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hammadi, October 5, 1982-Memcon,” State Ref: Secto 13070, October 7, 1982, RRPL, Geoffrey Kemp Files, box 90492, Folder “Iraq1982,” pg. 1-9.

American policy of neutrality in the war and had not been subjected to Congressional review. When the Committee demanded to know why it had not been permitted to review the sale, Commerce Department officials explained that “the Iraqi sale went through without a review because the helicopters weigh less than 10,000 pounds each and, therefore, are classified as “civilian,” not requiring an export license.” Unhappy with this explanation, the Committee “strongly urged” the President to halt the shipment of the remaining helicopters, arguing that “It is only reasonable to assume that the Iraqi Government will employ this large number of helicopters in its war with Iran, whether for artillery spotting or otherwise.” The administration knew that it could not obtain Congressional approval for the helicopter gunships that Iraq wanted, so instead it had authorized the sale of helicopters that were not subject to review; Congress was not impressed.²³⁵

Two major issues, however, stood in the way of an American-Iraqi rapprochement: American support for Israel and Iraqi support of terrorism. While there was little room for accommodating Iraq’s concerns about Israel, throughout the spring of 1983 significant strides were made on the latter issue. On December 29, Eagleton and Aziz met to discuss Iraq’s support for terrorism. While Baghdad had largely ceased its financial backing for Palestinian terrorist organizations, it did not oppose terrorists residing within Iraq. In particular, Eagleton alleged that Iraq openly harboured notorious terrorist Abu Nidal. Aziz categorically denied any affiliation with Abu Nidal or Iraqi support for his activities, but promised to examine the matter closely. It was evident that

²³⁵ United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Charles H. Percy, Alan J. Dixon, Rudy Boschwitz, Larry Pressler to the President, December 23, 1982, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Office of the NSC: Records Country File, Box 37 “Iraq 1/20/91-12/31/83,” Folder 4, pg. 1-2.

Iraq had responded to American pressure when Shultz, at a meeting with Hammadi in February 1983, commented that Iraq had significantly reduced its support for terrorists.²³⁶

Perhaps the most in-depth discussion on Iraqi support for terrorism occurred between Eagleton and Barzan Ibrahim il-Tikriti, Saddam's half-brother and the head of the Iraqi General Intelligence Services (Mukhabarat), on or around May 4. Eagleton opened the discussion by explaining American concerns about Abu Nidal's presence within Iraq. "[It] was a mistake to consider [Abu Nidal] a tool of the Iraqi government," Barzan responded, but he also added that "Iraq can exert some influence [sic] on him." As an example of Iraqi influence, Barzan explained, "after the [Israeli] massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon, he was planning revenge against Jews in Europe and we convinced him there was no benefit in this. However, sometimes he has plans which we do not know about." Furthermore, Abu Nidal did not permanently reside in Iraq, although "he has an office here with a director and a staff." Barzan questioned American concerns about Iraqi contacts with Nidal, commenting that "There is a thread between [Iraq] and Abu Nidal. Does the U.S. believe that this is beneficial or is it better to cut the thread?" He went on to explain his analogy:

Through this thread we can have some effect. Cutting it might cause him to act against us and against the U.S. If we send him out he might come under the influence [sic] of Syria which would help him choose his targets and assist him in acts against the U.S or Iraq. While he remains in Iraq we can prevent certain things. He is prepared to go to Syria or Libya. They might push him to act against Arafat or King Hussein. If one of these were killed, the U.S. Middle East Peace Plan would fail, so is it beneficial to cut this thread?

²³⁶ United States Interests Section Baghdad to Secretary of State, "Continued Iraqi Support for Terrorism," State Ref: Baghdad 0629, March 8, 1983, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Office of the NSC, Box 90583 "Iraq 1983," Folder 2, pg. 1.

Despite Barzan's analysis, Eagleton explained that if Iraq did not sever these contacts, there was little room for improvement in relations.²³⁷

In early February, Iran launched a spring offensive in an attempt to seize the "more accessible target of Al Amarah." Known as Operation Wal Fajr, the Iranian offensive was consistent with its policy of maintaining steady pressure along the front. While a war of attrition was indeed the best strategy to defeat Iraq, Iranian tactics had not improved since the Battle of Basra as Iran again resorted to throwing wave upon wave of infantry against the firmly entrenched Iraqi defences. According to a DIA analysis, the Iranian attack was "a complete failure." Yet despite the loss, Iran continued to launch a series of minor offensives against Iraq throughout 1983, and suffering considerable casualties in the process.²³⁸

During the spring of 1983, American policy in the Middle East imploded. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 had disastrous implications for American efforts to negotiate a ceasefire. Problematically, Israel's attack had drawn Syria into the foray, which further complicated the situation. As the situation in the Middle East deteriorated, Reagan authorized on April 1, 1983, the transformation and expansion of the Rapid Deployment Task Force into the Central Command (CENTCOM). Essentially, "CENTCOM was established to plan and coordinate U.S. military operations throughout Southwest Asia and to demonstrate America's commitment to stability in the region." The creation of CENTCOM set the stage for an expanded American presence and role in

²³⁷ United States Interest Section Baghdad to Secretary of State, "Meeting with [excised]," State Ref: Baghdad 1204, May 4, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 "Iraq 1983," Folder 2, pg. 1-4. Interestingly, in the subject section of the first page of the cable the name Barzan Ibrahim il-Tikriti was excised, but later in the document his name appears unexcised.

²³⁸ Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Appraisal, "Iran-Iraq: Spring Offensive," May 3, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 "Iraq 1983," Folder 2, pg. 1.

the region, which would prove useful later in the Iran-Iraq conflict.²³⁹ Nevertheless, by July, the precarious state of affairs had led to Reagan's decision to send American troops into Lebanon as part of an international peacekeeping mission. On August 25, the first Marine contingent arrived in Beirut, optimistically hoping to put an end to the carnage.²⁴⁰ But American involvement in Lebanon was met with staunch resistance, reaching its climax on April 18, 1983, when a truck filled with explosives detonated on the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing sixty-three, including seventeen Americans, among them the CIA Station Chief, the Deputy Station Chief and Robert C. Ames, the Agency's chief Middle Eastern analyst.²⁴¹ The loss of Ames, as well as eight other CIA officials, had irreversible consequences on the American policy towards the region.²⁴²

Meanwhile, the State Department, under the astute leadership of George Shultz, finally unveiled its new strategy to contain the Iran-Iran War. Since the war's start, a major aspect of the American policy, whether under Carter or Reagan, had been to reduce the ability of both combatants to acquire American weaponry. Thus, in the spring of 1983, the State Department launched Operation Staunch, which intended to curb the flow of American weaponry to Iran. According to Shultz, the "only tactic [available to the United States]... was to work to dry up the sources of weaponry that enabled both Iran and Iraq to render death and destruction in this seemingly endless war."²⁴³ Because Iraq received the majority of its weapons from the Soviet Union, Eastern-bloc countries, and France, "Operation Staunch was a boon to Iraq." The administration felt that targeting

²³⁹ Maxwell Orme Johnson, pg. 130.

²⁴⁰ Lou Cannon, pg. 347-349.

²⁴¹ Bob Woodward, pg. 230-231.

²⁴² Lou Cannon, pg. 358.

²⁴³ George Shultz, *Turmoil P. Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), pg. 236.

Iran specifically could force it to negotiate. For a more than a year Iraq and the United Nations had consistently been calling for an end to the conflict, but Iran had rejected all of these efforts. In the eyes of the Americans, the uncompromising stance of Khomeini's regime was the real problem, not Iraq. At the same time, Operation Staunch conveniently provided an avenue to improve American relations with Iraq.²⁴⁴

Towards the end of May 1983, Iran shocked regional analysts when it suddenly requested that the United Nations send a mission to region to inspect the civilian areas damaged by the war, a suggestion that Iraq subsequently supported. Over the course of its two-week long inspection, the mission visited twelve Iranian and seven Iraqi civilian areas. The mandate of the mission had three components. First, "to determine whether civilian areas had been subject to damage or destruction by military means;" second, "to assess the extent of such damage and destruction as far as possible;" and third, "to indicate, where possible, the types of munitions used." The inspector's report found that Iran had sustained greater physical damage than Iraq. For instance, the Iraqis had completely destroyed Abadan and Khorramshahr, displacing the large civilian populations from both cities. Furthermore, "During the evacuation of the population several thousand civilians had been killed, and thousands more wounded." By contrast, the damage inflicted upon Iraq was mostly superficial.²⁴⁵ What was most interesting about the mission report was that it had stemmed from an Iranian request, even though Iran had not previously regarded the United Nations as an objective body. Furthermore,

²⁴⁴ Lou Cannon, pg. 531.

²⁴⁵ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary General, "Mission to Inspect Civilian Areas in Iran and Iraq Which have been Subject to Military Attack," Document S/15834, June 20, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 36 "Iran-Iraq War 1983-4/31/84," Folder 7, pg. 1-27. The UN report provided in-depth detail on the extent of the damage caused to both cities.

the Iraqis supported the mission's conclusions despite the report's negative implications.²⁴⁶

Then on June 8, the Hughes Helicopter issue resurfaced when the American Interests Section in Baghdad reported that Iraq had been soliciting a third party state to "militarize" helicopters, specifically "the installation of missile [sic] launchers." Fortunately, the nation in question denied the request, but there was little to stop Iraq from approaching other countries with the same request. The Senators on the Committee on Foreign Relations were correct when they assumed that Iraq would use the helicopters for military purposes. However, the sale of "civilian" helicopters to Iraq was considered legal despite later Iraqi attempts to "militarize" them.²⁴⁷

By July 1983, it appeared that the Iran-Iraq War was about to enter a new phase because the Iraqi economy was on the verge of collapse, which affected its ability to prosecute the war. Although the Iraqis had rebuffed numerous Iranian offensives, particularly at Basra, Iran's attrition strategy was beginning to damage Iraq's economy. Because the Iraqi economy was based upon oil sales, Iran was doing everything it could to undermine Iraq's ability to export. For instance, in April 1982 Iran convinced Syria to close Iraq's major oil pipeline –which traversed Syrian territory – to the Mediterranean. Consequently, the loss of revenue forced Iraq to dip into its estimated \$35 billion in foreign-exchange reserves. Meanwhile, Iraq lacked the capability to attack Iran's

²⁴⁶ Patrick A. Putignano to William P. Clark, "U.N. Mission To Inspect Damaged Areas In Iran and Iraq," July 29, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 36 "Iran-Iraq War 1983-4/31/84," Folder 7, pg. 1.

²⁴⁷ United States Interest Section Baghdad to Secretary of State, "Militarization of Hughes Helicopters," State Ref: Baghdad 1487, June 8, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00124, pg. 1. The document does not indicate which state Iraq had approached about the militarization of the Hughes helicopters. However, a State Department analysis strongly hints that the nation approached was South Korea. See State Department, Information Memorandum, Nicholas A. Veliotes, Jonathan Howe, "Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality," October 8, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00139, pg. 5.

economic infrastructure.²⁴⁸ As a result, on July 1, 1983, Aziz declared that Iraq would escalate its attacks upon Iranian economic targets, particularly in the Gulf where Iran was exporting oil virtually unimpeded. Essentially, the deteriorating economic situation that faced Iraq in the summer of 1983 forced the regime to take significant measures to even out the military and economic balance of the war.²⁴⁹

Iraq's declaration prompted the CIA to produce a Special National Intelligence Estimate on July 19, entitled the "Prospects for Iraq." The CIA noted that since its retreat from Iran in May 1982, the performance of the Iraqi military had significantly improved thanks to more effective use of intelligence, air power and defensive doctrine. For instance, Iraqi commanders almost always had foreknowledge of Iranian troop movements and offensives. Although the CIA did not openly mention its provision of tactical intelligence, one can assume this was in fact the case. Despite these significant improvements, Iraq's defensive military strategy meant that it had forfeited "the ability to control the scope, direction and duration of the war." As a result, Iraq was "locked in a war of attrition, the duration of which depends on a regime in Tehran that espouses Saddam's overthrow as a religious duty." Meanwhile, its economy was on the brink of collapse.²⁵⁰

Before the war, high oil revenues had fueled the unprecedented growth of Iraq's economy. Because Baghdad had expected to win quickly, it had continued to finance large development projects and social programs, thanks in part to the considerable financial support the Gulf States had provided Iraq. But as the war dragged on, Iraq dug

²⁴⁸ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 110.

²⁴⁹ Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 127.

²⁵⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, "Prospects for Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-83, MORI DocID: 1115990, July 19, 1983, pg. 7. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf

deeper into its foreign exchange reserves to purchase vast quantities of weaponry, while relying upon its oil revenues and foreign loans to artificially inflate the Iraqi economy. In July 1982, not long after Syria closed Iraq's oil pipeline, the financial aid from the Gulf States dried up, which nearly collapsed the Iraqi economy. Because of the war's incredible costs and the inflated economy, Iraqi foreign exchange reserves "plunged to less than \$8 billion from about \$35 billion before the war." At this point, there was little doubt that "The critical weapon in Iran's arsenal has been its ability to severely damage Iraq's economy by closing its oil export terminals in the Gulf."²⁵¹

By July 1983, Iraq was facing both a war of attrition and an economic crisis. As a result, "Baghdad's goal is to convince Tehran that it cannot win the war militarily and that continuation of the war, even at reduced levels, is not in Iran's interest." More problematically, "Iraq also wants to convince the major powers that the war must be stopped and that outside parties must work for a cease-fire." In other words, Iraq wanted to internationalize the war. The CIA pointed out that Iraq had two options to force a dramatic change in the war. The first was to continue to attack "Iranian oil installations, cities, and civilian targets with surface-to-surface missiles." The second option was to initiate "air attacks on Iranian oil facilities and tankers in the Persian Gulf," which had terrible implications for American policy. Attacks on shipping would dramatically escalate the war, and potentially could lead to a superpower confrontation. At this point, a number of attacks had occurred in the Gulf, but none had been of great significance. If Iraq were to choose this option, Iran likely would retaliate by closing the Strait of Hormuz or, even worse, attack the Gulf States. In the event that Iran cut access to the

²⁵¹ Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, "Prospects for Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-83, MORI DocID: 1115990, July 19, 1983, pg. 10-14. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf

Persian Gulf, a direct American or multinational intervention was highly likely. For the first time since the war began, it appeared that American and Iraqi interests faced a great divergence.²⁵²

²⁵² Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, "Prospects for Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-83, MORI DocID: 1115990, July 19, 1983, pg. 9-10. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf

Chapter Five:

The Internationalization of the War

Iraq's economic crisis in the summer of 1983 prompted it to change its war strategy. The new strategy had two interrelated aspects. First, Iraq would attack Iranian economic targets in the Gulf to convince Tehran that the war of attrition should be discontinued. But Iran was not willing to end the war until it removed Saddam Hussein from power. Not unlike Iraq during 1980-1981, Iran would not readily agree to end a war that it seemed to be winning. The second aspect of the Iraqi policy was to internationalize the war. Unable on its own to force a quick end to the conflict, Iraq thought that attacks in the Gulf would prompt a sharp international response, quite possibly in the form of a Western intervention. In that event, Iran would face two options: agree to a ceasefire or face a military confrontation with the West.

Most problematically, in late June 1983, France agreed to lease to Iraq five Super Etendard jets, equipped with anti-ship Exocet missiles. The French decision to provide the planes explains Tariq Aziz's announcement that Iraq was changing its war strategy to include attacks on economic targets in the Gulf. Previous Iraqi attacks on Gulf shipping had been unsuccessful because Iraq's military had lacked the capability to inflict considerable damage. The addition of "the Super Etendard aircraft... would make it feasible Iraqi attacks against shipping nearly as far south as Bandar-e Abbas," located in

the Strait of Hormuz.²⁵³ When word of the French sale leaked to the press on July 20,

Iran threatened to close the Strait to international shipping, listing three options:

The first was to create a 'Wall of Fire' from 120 mm guns on Qesham and Larak Islands, through which... ships could not pass unnoticed. ...The second was to fire on ships passing through the Straits with missiles from aircraft... and the third method was to sink a large super-tanker in the Straits.²⁵⁴

Quickly following through with its threats Iran deployed approximately 600 troops to Sirri Island, within the Strait of Hormuz. On August 12, Hussein declared the creation of a "Naval Exclusion Zone," covering the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab and extending south into the Gulf to include Kharg Island, Iran's major Gulf oil terminal. Moreover, on October 15, Khomeini confirmed American fears about an escalation in the Gulf when he announced that "any Iraqi aggression in the Gulf would be met by closing it to all shipping, destroying all Western oil interests and facilities in the region and by attacks on the Iraqi Kirkuk oilfields." In sum, France's decision to lease the Super Etendard aircraft to Iraq had served as a major catalyst, initiating the so-called Tanker War.²⁵⁵

The Reagan administration, recognizing the disastrous implications of the Super Etendard deal, resolved to approach the precarious situation on both diplomatic and military fronts. Diplomatically, Washington was determined to convince France to either delay or preferably cancel the lease of the aircraft. But as it turned out, the deal between France and Iraq did not involve the "lease" of the Super Etendards, rather the "sale" of the aircraft in question. On September 3, Shultz proposed a three-track approach "to try

²⁵³ Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, "Prospects for Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-83, MORI DocID: 1115990, July 19, 1983, pg. 10. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NAE/BB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf

²⁵⁴ Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 127.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 127-128.

to head off a situation that could escalate into a threat to international navigation in the Gulf.” The first track consisted of urging France to suspend or delay the sale of the aircraft to Iraq. If that failed, France could “at least consider imposing on Iraq the condition that [the aircraft] not be used against oil shipping or export facilities.” In addition, the State Department “will ask the British to support this demarche to the French with a high-level approach of their own.” The second track was to consult with the Iraqis about the issue, while the third track involved discussions with the Gulf States “about ways in which they could try to dissuade Iraq from [a] potentially dangerous escalation of military activity in the Gulf, including further measures to ease the economic burden of the [Syrian] pipeline closure on Iraq.” While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreed at the end of August to approach Syria about the Iraqi pipeline, there was no indication that President Assad would compromise on this issue. In addition, the Gulf States could also use their influence to convince France to put off the sale. Through these efforts the administration believed that it could exert enough pressure on France to reconsider the sale. However, should these efforts fail, the administration needed a military contingency plan.²⁵⁶

In late September, due to intense diplomatic and internal pressure, Francois Mitterand’s government agreed to postpone the Etendard delivery. On October 6, the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research noted that the French decision to delay the delivery of the Etendards was very calculated:

In the wake of Iran’s recent threats of retaliation, there probably was a recognition in Paris that France would be regarded as partly responsible for any deterioration of the situation in the Persian Gulf.... The French

²⁵⁶ Secretary of State to American Embassy Abu Dhabi, Doha, Jidda, Kuwait, Riyadh, “Iran-Iraq War: Next Steps with Gulf States on Deterring Escalation in the Gulf,” State Ref: State 252861, September 3, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 “Iran-Iraq 1983,” Folder 1, pg. 1-6.

probably held up delivery hoping that the domestic and international clamor would subside.

The plan was to wait for the publicity surrounding the sale of the jets to subside and then proceed with the transaction. Meanwhile, “the French... convinced the Iraqis that the US was primarily responsible for Paris’ decision to postpone the delivery of five Super Etendard aircraft to Iraq.” Unsurprisingly, a furious Iraq expressed its displeasure with Washington through its Interest Section in Washington and at the United Nations. Why did the French purposely injure American efforts to prevent an escalation in the Gulf? While the sale of the jets to Iraq had outraged the French public, the Reagan administration’s intense opposition the sale made it the perfect scapegoat, allowing the Mitterand government to deflect blame. Nevertheless, despite France’s attempts to scuttle the growing American-Iraqi relationship, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research noted that:

...the impact on US-Iraqi relations probably will be short-lived: the French are likely to deliver the Etendards to Iraq at some point and the whole affair may serve as a useful reminder to the Iraqi regime that US concerns cannot be totally disregarded in Baghdad’s strategic calculations.²⁵⁷

Although the situation had an immediate chilling effect of the relationship between Baghdad and Washington, in the long term, its overall impact was not particularly significant.

The next day, October 7, Nicholas Veliotis, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and Jonathan Howe, the State Department Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, produced an important analysis for Deputy Secretary of State

²⁵⁷ Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Current Analysis Series, Arab-Israeli Highlights, “Iraq-US: Bilateral Chill Over Super Etendard Delay,” October 6, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 “Iraq 1983,” Folder 1, pg. 1-2.

for Political Affairs, Lawrence Eagleburger, on the validity of the American policy of strict neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war. The analysis opened with a discussion on the benefits derived from the strict neutrality policy. After four years of conflict, the policy had helped to avoid a direct great power conflict, had prevented the spread of the war, had contributed to the current stalemate, and had preserved the possibility of a future US-Iran rapprochement while undermining Soviet influence in the region. Overall, this policy had been a remarkable success, particularly in light of the poor state of American relations with both belligerents when the conflict commenced. Since that time, however, two major changes had occurred that had raised the issue of whether the policy was still best serving American regional objectives. First, American-Iraqi relations had improved significantly since the war's start. Second, Iran's strategies of military attrition and economic strangulation were starting to damage the Iraqi economy. In response, Iraq was pursuing options that could escalate the war by attacking Iranian economic targets in the Persian Gulf, which ran contrary to American interests in the region. With these factors in mind, Velitoe and Howe analysed the economic, diplomatic and military options available to the United States.²⁵⁸

Financially, the United States faced two options. First, it could directly provide cash assistance to Iraq, but this option was not feasible in light of the considerable legal and policy constraints. Without doubt, Congressional supporters of Israel would block this measure. The second option, providing support to Iraq to allow it to export more oil, seemed more promising but the United States could not do much directly. Iraq's pipeline through Turkey was already being expanded by twenty-five percent, but this project

²⁵⁸ Department of State, Nicolas A. Velitoe, Jonathan Howe, "Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality," October 7, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00139, pg. 1-2.

would not be finished until late spring 1984. There was also the prospect of installing an American-built pipeline through Saudi Arabia that would connect to the Red Sea, but again this job would not be completed until the end of 1984. The best solution to Iraq's financial problems was to reopen the Iraqi-Syrian pipeline. But unfortunately, beyond encouraging the GCC to talk to Syria, Washington could do little economically.²⁵⁹

Diplomatically, Washington had had already improved dialogue with Baghdad. At this point, the Etendard issue had chilled American-Iraqi relations, but the State Department believed it would only be temporary. Meanwhile, the United States was seeking a resolution at the United Nations that would discourage "attacks on oil-related facilities in the Gulf," enabling "Iraq to meet its financial needs by increasing oil exports" through the Gulf. The administration hoped that this resolution would vitiate "Iran's strategy of economic strangulation" and reduce "the motivation of Iraq to escalate the war."²⁶⁰ It appeared that American efforts at the United Nations were the best avenue for helping Iraq during its financial crisis.

The analysis also discussed additional diplomatic options, such as political support and preventing arms from reaching either belligerent. In terms of military options, preventing Iran from acquiring American arms was the most promising, but this strategy was already the centerpiece of the policy of neutrality. Another potential option was to permit Iraq to buy American weaponry directly or through third parties, an avenue that faced considerable obstacles. First, Congress would never permit this to occur; second, that policy would undermine the American efforts at the United Nations; and

²⁵⁹ Department of State, Nicolas A. Veliotis, Jonathan Howe, "Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality," October 7, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00139, pg. 2-3.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 4-5.

finally, Iraq did not use American weaponry. The worst-case scenario was to commit American troops to protect Iraqi oil exports, but as this option could lead to war with Iran and would undoubtedly face intense Congressional opposition. In sum, Veliotes and Howe concluded that “the military or quasi-military options” available to the United States “have far more disadvantages than advantages.”²⁶¹

After reviewing the various financial, diplomatic and military options available to the United States, Veliotes and Howe made several important conclusions. As the United States could do little to help Iraq militarily, the most productive measure was to prevent Iranian acquisition of American-made weaponry. Financially and diplomatically, the best option in the near-term for the United States was to continue to pursue its initiative at the United Nations. In the long-term, the construction of the Saudi pipeline and a reopening of the Syrian pipeline held the most promise for Iraq’s prospects. For our purposes, the most important aspect of the Veliotes-Howe analysis relates to its open discussion about America’s tilt towards Iraq:

[The American] policy of strict neutrality has already been modified, except for arms sales, since Iran’s forces crossed into Iraq in the summer of 1982. The steps we have taken toward the conflict since then have progressively favored Iraq. (We assume that other actions not discussed here, such as providing tactical intelligence, would continue as necessary.)

They also offered words of caution, arguing that:

We need to continue to be cautious about tilting so far towards Iraq that either Iraq is able to force a level of U.S. support we may not wish to provide... or that we become identified with a regime whose longer-term prospects remain uncertain.... In addition, the qualified tilt which we have in fact practiced for over a year is again being ratcheted [sic] one notch higher through the UN approach we are pursuing to assist Iraq to resume oil exports through the Gulf. It balances our interest in seeing that Iraq is

²⁶¹ Department of State, Nicolas A. Veliotes, Jonathan Howe, “Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality,” October 7, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00139, pg. 5-7.

not defeated with our interest in avoiding an escalation which could draw us directly into the conflict – while doing nothing to worsen our position with respect to Iran.

In the final analysis, they concluded that, “we see significant advantage in maintaining an overall posture of neutrality.” Produced by two high-level American officials, an analysis of this nature had considerable impact on the policy towards the war.²⁶²

Around the same time that Veliotes and Howe produced their analysis, the National Security Planning Group (NSPG), an interagency body, met to devise a set of policy guidelines (known as Terms of Reference) for the President that outlined what diplomatic and military responses the United States could offer if the war escalated in the Persian Gulf. At first, the United States would increase its naval presence in the region, expand intelligence sharing with the Gulf States, commence planning and preparations for a multinational force to protect shipping in the Gulf, and recommend an increase in Gulf States’ air defense readiness. Should this not deter the belligerents, the military would intervene directly “to counter minelaying or conduct mine-clearing operations in international and non-belligerent territorial waters.” Next, the American Navy would organize a convoy system to protect shipping in the Gulf. Addressing its ever-present concern about Persian Gulf oil, the United States would “defend against an attack on [a] non-belligerent’s territory or oil facilities.” Finally, “Provided the US obtained a reliable warning, the US would... initiate direct military action against Iran, either before or in response to overt Iranian military actions.” In the last step, an attack against Iran would require Presidential authorization. Ideally, a multilateral military response to escalation in the Gulf would best serve American interests, but the United States “would be

²⁶² Department of State, Nicolas A. Veliotes, Jonathan Howe, “Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality,” October 7, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00139, pg. 7-8.

prepared to act alone if our Allies declined to participate.”²⁶³ To coordinate the American military response, the NSPG created the Iran-Iraq Conflict Escalation Containment Military Planning Group under the direction of the Department of Defense. The group’s principle objective was to engage in a series of bilateral military discussion with nations “that have an interest in or benefit from continued access to Persian Gulf oil,” with the purpose of formulating “combined military plans or coordinated actions to contain an escalation of the Iran-Iraq conflict.” Overall, the depth of the military response to the escalating situation in the Persian Gulf underlined the vital importance of the region to American interests.²⁶⁴

The prospect of an escalation in the Persian Gulf legitimized fears of an impending oil crisis. As a result, the administration tasked the preparation of domestic contingency plans to the Department of Energy. On November 17, the National Security Council staff prepared a one-page brief on the subject for the new National Security Advisor, Robert “Bud” McFarlane. The brief listed three possible disruptions to the flow of oil: limited disruption in the Persian Gulf; closure of the Straits of Hormuz; and complete Persian Gulf disruption. It then set out a “crisis plan” that included an early speech by the President to calm the American public, the release of Strategic Petroleum Reserve oil if market prices increased dramatically, meetings with allies to devise a collective response, and consultations with Congress and the activation of a public

²⁶³ Department of State, “Terms of Reference, Political Consultations with US Allies and Friends on Escalation of the Iran-Iraq War,” no date, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 “Iran-Iraq 1983,” Folder 1, pg. 1-9. Although the document is undated, the Veliotes-Howe analysis clearly refers to this group when it states on page 9, “This paper only reviews the issue of tilting towards Iraq. An inter-agency group is currently reviewing U.S. response options should Iran threaten an attempt to close the Gulf and near-term measures which might be take to deter such events.” That being the case, one can extrapolate that this document was generated sometime shortly after October 7, 1983.

²⁶⁴ Department of Defense, “Terms of Reference for the US Representative to Combined Military Discussions on Containment of an Escalation of the Iran-Iraq Conflict,” no date, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 “Iran-Iraq 1983,” Folder 1, pg. 1-12.

information program. The brief's underlying importance was its recognition that the threat to American interests in the Persian Gulf was real and that it was vital that the administration prepare to defend those interests.²⁶⁵

The escalation in the Persian Gulf culminated in President Reagan signing National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 114 on November 26, 1983, which became the basis for the official American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War. Essentially, NSDD 114 gave official presidential endorsement to the Terms of Reference provided by the State Department and Department of Defense. Outlining the necessity for political and military consultations with key allies and the Gulf States in order to prepare for contingencies in the event of a disruption of oil from the Persian Gulf, NSDD 114 boldly declared that:

It is present United States policy to undertake whatever measures may be necessary to keep the Strait of Hormuz open to international shipping. Accordingly, U.S. military forces will attempt to deter and, if that fails, to defeat any hostile efforts to close the Strait to international shipping. Because of the real and psychological impact of a curtailment in the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf on the international economic system, we must assure our readiness to deal promptly with actions aimed at disrupting that traffic.

As the war between Iran and Iraq widened into the vital Persian Gulf sea-lanes, NSDD 114 served as the basis for a more active American involvement in the region for the war's duration.²⁶⁶

In late October, as Washington was scrambling to readjust its policy towards the Iran-Iraq War, a development occurred on the battlefield that had great potential to

²⁶⁵ William F. Martin to Robert C. McFarlane, "Energy Issues for Iran-Iraq Meeting, Friday, November 18," November 17, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 "Iran-Iraq 1983," Folder 1, pg. 1.

²⁶⁶ The White House, National Security Decision Directive 114, "U.S. Policy Towards the Iran-Iraq War," November 26, 1983, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 90583 "Iran-Iraq 1983," Folder 1, pg. 1.

disrupt American-Iraqi relations. On October 22, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported that “the Iraqi regime has used chemical weapons against the Islamic forces in order to stop their advance in the Val-Fajr operational region.” The use of chemical weapons was illegal as the Geneva Convention of 1925, to which both Iraq and Iran were signatories, prohibited the use of lethal gases, bacteria and chemicals in warfare. IRNA also pointed out that this was not the first instance that Iraq had used chemical weapons in the war. “In one instance on August 9, more than 50 Iranian combatants suffered severe injuries as a result of chemical bombs dropped by Iraqi planes.”²⁶⁷ Iran reported these allegations to the United Nations on August 18, but Iraq dismissed these claims as propaganda.²⁶⁸ This was not, however, the case. Earlier that summer the CIA had warned in a SNIE that:

Baghdad for many months has boasted that it possesses a secret weapon that can inflict massive casualties and ensure victory. Iraq is trying to develop a chemical warfare capability, but the program is still in the experimental stage. Iraq reportedly has at least 1,000 artillery shells filled with mustard agent but has not used them so far in the fighting. The Iraqis have used tear gas in the fighting but no lethal or incapacitating agents against the Iranians. While the use of mustard would inflict heavy casualties on Iran’s largely infantry forces, it would not force Iran to end the war.²⁶⁹

The DIA confirmed that Iraq had used chemical weapons and had identified that the agent as mustard gas. The DIA also noted that Iraq had attempted to use CS gas in July

²⁶⁷ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “IRNA reports Iraqi regime using Chemical Weapons to Stop Val-Fajr IV,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 22, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00144, pg. 1.

²⁶⁸ R.P.H. King, *The United Nations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1986* (New York: The Ford Foundation, August 1987), pg. 19.

²⁶⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence, “Prospects for Iraq,” Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-83, MORI DocID: 1115990, July 19, 1983, footnote 1, pg. 9. Available on the World Wide Web: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NASEBB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf

1982 during the Battle of Basra but to little effect.²⁷⁰ Significantly, Iraq's employment of chemical weapons in its war with Iran marked the first confirmed time that lethal gas had been used on a battlefield since the First World War, which posed a very serious problem to the Reagan administration.

Beyond the moral dilemma posed by the Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction, the means by which Iraq had obtained its chemical weapons capability was worrisome. On November 1, Jonathan Howe sent an urgent message to Secretary Shultz confirming Iraq's "almost daily" use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces.

Regarding Iraqi acquisition of the banned weapons, Howe explained that, "We also know that Iraq... acquired a [chemical weapon] production capability, primarily from Western firms, including possibly a U.S. foreign subsidiary."²⁷¹ Iraq's acquisition of chemical weapons deserves further explanation. On February 24, 1976, Iraq had "signed a \$1.1 billion contract with the American firm Lummus, a subsidiary of Combustion Engineering, Inc., and the West German Firm, Thyssen Rheinstahl Technik GMBH." While the Lummas contract was not designed to produce chemical weapons, Baghdad obviously had different intentions after the facility's construction. The use of chemical weapons by Iraq was a very serious issue and became a topic of discussion for the Senior Interagency Group, unfortunately details of these deliberations remains classified.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Department of Defense, Defense Research Reference Series, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reference Aid," DDB-2600-5954-88, 1988, RRPL, William J. Burns, Box 91852 "Gulf War," Folder 2. This document is a reference aid created by the Department of Defense after the war between Iran and Iraq had ended. There are no page numbers on this document because it is a large poster. Included is a list of every major instance of chemical weapon use in the war by both sides.

²⁷¹ Jonathan T. Howe to the Secretary of State, "Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons," November 1, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00145 or IG00147, pg. 1.

²⁷² United States Interest Section Baghdad to Secretary of State, "U.S.-West German Consortium Wins Major Petrochemicals Project," State Ref: Baghdad 0272, February 28, 1976, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00005, pg. 1.

Meanwhile, two major developments occurred at the United Nations. On October 31, the Security Council passed Resolution 540 which condemned both nations in the conflict and called “for the immediate cessation of all military operations against civilian targets, including city and residential areas” as well as a return to internationally recognized borders. In reference to threats of escalation in the Gulf, Resolution 540 called upon both Iran and Iraq “to exercise the utmost restraint and to refrain from any act which may lead to a further escalation and widening of the conflict and, thus, to facilitate the implementation of the present resolution.” Resolution 540 was important because it set out an identifiable framework for the conflict’s cessation. But like all previous Security Council resolutions, while Iraq accepted its terms, Iran rejected it outright and continued its boycott of the United Nations, which it did not view as impartial.²⁷³ The second development occurred on November 8, when the Iranians formally complained to the Security Council about Iraq’s alleged use of chemical weapons and asked for a UN Commission of Experts to investigate the matter. Again, Iraq dismissed the claims as propaganda and the matter failed to proceed further due to a lack of interest and physical evidence.²⁷⁴

Despite Iraq’s use of chemical weapons, Washington continued to pursue its rapprochement with Iraq. The economic crisis facing Iraq meant that political necessity would eventually triumph over trivial conflicts of interest. Meanwhile, the State Department’s earlier prediction that the “chill” in the American-Iraqi relationship would be short-lived proved correct. On December 20, the President’s Special Envoy, Donald Rumsfeld, met for 90 minutes with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad to discuss the state of

²⁷³ United Nations, Security Council Resolution 540, October 31, 1983.

²⁷⁴ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 149.

American-Iraqi relations, means to improve economic stability, and regional security issues such as Lebanon's deteriorating situation and its war with Iran. Viewed as a "positive milestone in [the] development of U.S.-Iraqi relations," the meeting marked the first time a high-level American official had met with Hussein. From the outset, Rumsfeld effectively "removed whatever obstacles remained in the way of resuming diplomatic relations." Although relations did not resume at this point, there were several indications that it was likely in the near future. According to Hussein, "before the war, [the] Iraqi leadership had examined [the] circumstances of severance of relations and possible resumption," but the conflict with Iran had prevented this from occurring. He felt that not being able to conduct relations at a full diplomatic level with the United States was "unnatural." Moreover, as an "independent and non-aligned country... it was incorrect and unbalanced to have relations with the Soviet Union and not with [the United States]." Statements of this nature clearly indicated Iraqi interest in resuming diplomatic relations.²⁷⁵

Turning to the war with Iran, Rumsfeld pointed out that it was not in the interest of the region or the West for the conflict to create greater instability or to produce an outcome that "weakened Iraq's role or enhanced [the] interests and ambitions of Iran." Further, he stressed that an escalation of the war into the Persian Gulf would be detrimental to the interests of the region as a whole. Retorting that the "patience of Iraq should not be misunderstood," Hussein explained:

While concerned with [the] security of the Gulf, Iraq could not dispense with its national interest. With Iran exporting oil and Iraq not able to do so through the Gulf or the Syrian pipeline, it was not for Iraq to look after

²⁷⁵ United States Embassy London to Secretary of State, "Rumsfeld Mission: December 20 Meeting with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein," State Ref: London 27572, December 21, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00156, pg. 1-5.

the world's interests before its own. What was needed was to stop the war, or put the Gulf in a balanced situation for the belligerents.

Hussein had raised a significant point, for Iraq was at an economic disadvantage in the war. This led to a discussion about American support for the construction of a pipeline through Jordan to the Red Sea. Hussein explained that in the past Iraq had been hesitant about such a venture because of Israel's proximity. But because of the involvement of American companies, he now would consider the project. Overall, Rumsfeld's mission to Iraq had been a success. It had set the stage for further improvements in the American-Iraqi relations and had presented viable ways improve Iraq's economic problems. The mission's objective was clearly to improve relations in the aftermath of the Etendard crisis, which explains why at no point in Rumsfeld's 90-minute conversation with Hussein was the issue of the "almost daily" use of chemical weapons mentioned. Clearly, the moral implications of Iraq's use of chemical weapons did not stand in the way of rapprochement, a stance which underlined the realist elements of American policy.²⁷⁶

Upon returning from the Middle East, Rumsfeld told Shultz that the Carter Doctrine posed a serious problem to American policy towards the Persian Gulf as "The Gulf Arabs think the Carter Doctrine means we save their regimes and keep the oil flowing." As a consequence, Rumsfeld warned:

The president is out on a limb with this [Carter's] holdover commitment, but our defense orientation can't match it. The Gulf could cave in to Iran – a collapse. It would be Lebanon all over again, but on a huge scale. Lebanon is a sideshow.... The Gulf is crucial, and we are neither organized nor ready to face a crisis there.... [and if things got out of control there]... it could make Lebanon look like a taffy pull.

²⁷⁶ United States Embassy London to Secretary of State, "Rumsfeld Mission: December 20 Meeting with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein," State Ref: London 27572, December 21, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00156, pg. 11-18.

Shultz agreed with Rumsfeld's warning, noting that "If Iraq collapsed, that could not only intimidate but inundate our friends in the Gulf and be a strategic disaster for the United States." In sum, the deteriorating situation in the Persian Gulf forecast an increased American military presence in the region.²⁷⁷

On December 22, quickly following up on the successful Rumsfeld mission, the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) recommended that Iraq receive approval for financing from the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) which would allow it to purchase American goods. In the past, EXIM had opposed loans to Iraq because there was no "reasonable expectation of payment" thanks the rescheduling of commercial contract payments, large transfers of funds from the Gulf States, decreases in oil production, considerable war damage, and a drop in Iraqi foreign exchange reserves. Despite these obvious problems, extending EXIM credits could produce considerable benefits. For instance, "The U.S.-Iraqi political relationship could be advanced by EXIM financing which had previously not been possible for political reasons," such as its support for terrorism. It also could help to "secure a U.S. foothold in a potentially large export market," which would bolster the American economy. More importantly, providing EXIM credits would signal "support for Iraq in a practical, neutral context." The administration could then use its enhanced influence to persuade Iraq not to extend the war into the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the State Department noted that Iraq had managed to alleviate the "crisis situation" that had faced its economy in 1983. With these factors in mind, the administration urged EXIM to reconsider its providing

²⁷⁷ George P. Shultz, pg. 235.

credits to Iraq.²⁷⁸ Subsequently, on February 1984, EXIM agreed to “consider requests for small amounts of essential imports on a case-by-case basis,” despite its recognition that Iraq was a bad credit risk.²⁷⁹

An underlying element of the policy of strict neutrality was the hope that the United States could eventually resume – or at the very least improve – relations with Iran. At the start of 1984, Iran’s strident refusal to seek a negotiated peace with Iraq greatly frustrated the administration, had hardened the American position. “On January 13, 1984, Geoffrey Kemp, NSC director for Near East and South Asian affairs, sent McFarlane a memo describing the Khomeini government as a menace and calling for resumption of covert activity against it.”²⁸⁰ There was nothing new about Kemp’s suggestion. For example, in July 1982 the SIG had discounted the use of covert action against the firmly entrenched Khomeini only because the political costs outweighed the net benefits. Meanwhile, other more attractive options were available to the administration, including an easing of export restrictions on dual use (having both civilian and military purposes) equipment to Iraq, and placing Iran on the terrorism list, a response to Iranian support for the devastating acts of terrorism against the American interests in Lebanon.²⁸¹ Subsequently, Shultz designated Iran as a sponsor of international terrorism on January 20. In light of these decisions, there was no doubt that the administration’s frustration with Iran had led to a hardening of its position.

²⁷⁸ Richard W. Murphy to Lawrence Eagleburger, “EXIM Bank Financing for Iraq,” December 22, 1983, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00159, pg. 1.

²⁷⁹ Export-Import Bank of the United States, Memorandum to the Board of Directors, Africa and Middle East Division, “Country review and recommendations for Eximbank’s programs,” February 21, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00174, pg. 4.

²⁸⁰ Lou Cannon, pg. 531.

²⁸¹ Secretary of State to American Consulate Jerusalem, “Follow-up Steps on Iraq-Iran,” State Ref: State 012251, January 14, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00160, pg. 2-3.

Building upon the foundation of friendship that the Rumsfeld mission had generated, on January 30 the NEA recommended selling 2,000 “dual use” heavy transport trucks to Iraq. In 1982 when Iraq originally proposed the purchase, the State Department had blocked the sale because of heavy trucks were subject to the regional stability controls of the Export Administration Act. The State Department considered the trucks of military value, but after the successful Hughes helicopter deal, how could the United States sell helicopters of clear military value but not heavy transport trucks? Thus, the NEA argued:

In blocking the truck exports to Iraq, apart from dissatisfying Iraq and the exporters, we have sacrificed U.S. employment opportunities and foreign exchange earnings amounting to several hundred million dollars over the past three years in order to maintain a strict and inactive neutrality.

The NEA hit the nail on the head; it had underlined the political value of the sale to the administration, particularly in light of the fact that 1984 was an election year. As a result, on February 13, the administration approved the heavy truck sale.²⁸²

In the first two months of 1984, an identifiable trend was evident. As the administration’s relations towards Iraq were steadily improving, the exact opposite was occurring with Iran. Undoubtedly, the Rumsfeld mission was an instrumental element behind the improvement of relations with Iraq. His visit to Baghdad had paved the way for the provision of EXIM credits and the sale of 2,000 heavy trucks to Iraq. Conversely, Iran’s support for the deadly acts of terrorism in Lebanon, directed specifically at American targets, had been a major factor as well. Immediately thereafter, the attitude of the administration hardened. Further bolstering this trend was Iran’s uncompromising

²⁸² David T. Schneider and Jonathan T. Howe to the Secretary of State, “Easing Restrictions on Exports to Iraq,” January 30, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00168, pg. 1-6.

stance towards its war with Iraq. Consequently, the anger within Reagan's administration pushed it to further embrace Iraq.

Meanwhile, after months of launching inconclusive offensives against strong Iraqi defences, Iran mounted its largest attack to date in February 1984. Unlike its earlier attempts that had focused on attacking weaknesses in the Iraqi lines, Iran took a more innovative approach. Making use of a flotilla of small boats, Iranian forces slowly made its way through the Haweizeh Marshes, north of Basra. Iraq was well aware that Iran was preparing a massive spring offensive, as it had every spring since the start of the war. Indicative of Iraq's knowledge of a pending Iranian offensive, on February 21, Baghdad chillingly declared that "The invaders should know that for every harmful insect there is an insecticide capable of annihilating it whatever their number and [that] Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide."²⁸³ The next day, the Iranians launched Operation Kheiber, a three-prong attack, catching the unsuspecting Iraqis on the western edge of the marsh by surprise. Although possessing foreknowledge of the offensive, Iraq had not devoted significant resources for that region's defence, as it had not expected an attack through the "impassable" marshes. The first prong of the attack struck the town of Beida, where Iran established a bridgehead on the marsh's western edge. Iraq quickly responded in full force, using the full extent of its military capabilities, including chemical weapons, to push Iran back after three days of vicious fighting and considerable casualties. The second prong hit against the town of Ghuzail, about 40 kilometers north of Basra, where Iran launched successive "human-wave" attacks against meager Iraqi defences. Iraq gave up some territory, but prevented a major breakthrough. Iran directed the third prong of

²⁸³ United States Interest Section Baghdad to Secretary of State, "Iraqi Warning Re: Iranian Offensive," State Ref: Baghdad 0382, February 22, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00175, pg. 1.

its offensive against the Manjoon Island complex, located two miles into Iraqi territory, amidst the marsh. The Manjoon Island complex was important to Iraq. In the 1970s, a Brazilian oil-prospecting company had discovered oil there in quantity, “estimated to exceed 7 billion barrels, almost one-quarter of Iraq’s known oil reserves.” Iran took the island and held it. Overall, Operation Kheiber was the first successful Iranian offensive since pushing out Iraq from its territory in 1982, but Iraq could no longer hide its extensive use of chemical weapons from the public eye.

Following the end of Operation Kheiber in March, Iran sent troops exposed to chemical weapons to “Britain, France, Austria and Sweden” for advanced medical treatment and took the matter to the United Nations.²⁸⁴ Despite the recent improvements in American-Iraqi relations, Washington could not ignore the arrival of exposed troops in European hospitals. As a result, on March 5, the State Department strongly condemned Iraq and its “use of prohibited chemical weapons.”²⁸⁵ This sudden condemnation caught Iraq’s senior leadership completely off-guard, especially in light of the improving state of its relations with the United States. Shocked by the “hypocritical” American comments, Iraq recalled the American “use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities” in the Second World War “to shorten the war and reduce casualties,” arguing that the United States was the “last country with the right to speak about the ethics of war.”²⁸⁶ Iraq’s stunned reaction raises important questions about its relations with the United States. Certainly, it indicated that Iraq did not expect that the use of chemical weapons would provoke Washington’s public condemnation, particularly after its “almost daily” use in November

²⁸⁴ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 143-149.

²⁸⁵ Charles Hill to Robert C. McFarlane, “Condemning Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons,” March 2, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00176, pg 3.

²⁸⁶ United States Interest Section to Secretary of State, “Iraq Reacts Angrily to US Condemnation of CW Use,” State Ref: Baghdad 0521, March 7, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00179, pg. 1.

1983 had produced little or no negative reaction. In fact, one could argue that Iraq expected the opposite. After all, the Reagan administration had sent a high-level envoy to Iraq and had approved EXIM credits and the sale of 2,000 heavy trucks immediately afterwards. In all likelihood, political factors provoked Washington's harsh condemnation of Iraq. When the American media picked up on the dispatch to Europe of Iranian soldiers exposed to chemical weapons, the issue became impossible to ignore.

Interestingly, some members of the administration were upset about the State Department's condemnation of Iraq's use of CW. According to Shultz, on March 7, two days after the statement was issued, he read an intelligence analysis stating that "we have demolished a budding relationship [with Iraq] by taking a tough position in opposition to chemical weapons." Shultz was dismayed by this point of view, because he believed that "the United States had to speak the truth and speak out forcefully" about clear violations of international law, despite setbacks to the American-Iraqi relationship.²⁸⁷

Western condemnation of Iraqi use of chemical weapons finally prompted the UN to respond to Iran's allegations. On March 8, a few days after the Iranian troops exposed to chemical weapons had arrived in Europe, "the Secretary-General decided to send a mission [to Iran] under his own authority to investigate the charges."²⁸⁸ In the meantime, on March 14, doctors in Vienna presented definitive evidence of the Iraqi use of chemical weapons. After examining ten Iranian soldiers, three of whom had succumbed to their injuries, the Austrian physicians concluded:

Blood and urine samples of two of the Iranians were sent to the Institute of Toxicology at the University of Ghent (Belgium). Analyses of the samples showed that they contained residual amounts of toxic substances

²⁸⁷ George P. Shultz, pg. 239.

²⁸⁸ R.P.H. King, pg. 19.

allegedly used by Iraq in the Gulf War. The experts specifically found evidence of poisoning by Mustard Gas and Mycotoxin (Yellow Rain).²⁸⁹

The results were conclusive; Iraq was in clear violation of the Geneva Convention of 1925. This finding prompted Iran to increase its efforts to pursue a Security Council resolution condemning Iraq for using chemical weapons in direct violation of international law.

On March 14, Shultz informed the American delegation to the UN that “The United States has concluded that the available evidence indicates that Iraq has used lethal chemical weapons.” Meanwhile, the Security Council was meeting to discuss the Iranian resolution condemning Iraq. In relation to this resolution, Shultz advised the American delegation to “develop [a] general Western position in support of a motion to take “No Decision” on Iranian draft resolution on use of chemical weapons by Iraq. ...Failing Western support for “No Decision” [the U.S. delegation] should abstain.”²⁹⁰ In the face of such overwhelming evidence of Iraq’s actions, why did the United States take this stance? According to a Ford Foundation study by R.P.H. King on the role of the UN during the Iran-Iraq war:

...there existed a general feeling among Council members – a feeling Iraqi diplomacy no doubt strove to exploit – that, despite the importance of the issue, a condemnation of chemical weapons should occur in the context of a more general resolution urging an end to the fighting, since Iranian intransigence was largely responsible for the war’s continuation.²⁹¹

Since Iraq’s withdrawal from Iran in the summer of 1982, Iraq had accepted every Security Council resolution relating to the war, while Iran had rejected them outright.

²⁸⁹ United States Embassy Vienna to Secretary of State, “Iranian War Wounded in Vienna,” State Ref: Vienna 03407, March 14, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00180, pg 1.

²⁹⁰ Secretary of State to United Nations Delegation New York, “U.N. Human Rights Commission: Item 12: Iranian Resolution on Use of Chemical Weapons by Iraq,” State Ref: State 074411, March 14, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00181, pg. 2.

²⁹¹ R.P.H. King, pg. 20-21.

Iraq was willing to end the war; Iran was not. Until Iran put forward efforts to end the war, why would the United States even consider supporting a resolution to condemn Iraq? Nevertheless, this did not mean that the United States was not going to take measures to prevent the further use of chemical weapons.

Despite the absence of American support for a UN Resolution condemning Iraq, on March 30 the administration convened a NSPG meeting “to address Iraq’s use of chemical weapons and the need to move forward with a U.S. draft treaty on the prohibition of these weapons.”²⁹² Consequently, the Secretaries of State and Commerce decided to “institute foreign policy controls for the export to Iran and Iraq of certain compounds which could be used in the manufacture of chemical weapons.” In addition, the administration had consulted with its allies, particularly West Germany, to urge them to take similar actions. In this regard, Shultz indicated that he had “discussed with German authorities reports that facilities capable of producing nerve gas may have been shipped to Iraq by a German company,” adding that “The German Government has been investigating the matter on an urgent basis.” In response to a question concerning what the United States had done to prevent the use of chemical weapons, Shultz provided an excellent summary:

[We have] continued to raise the issue in high-level diplomatic channels since late last year. In our 1984 report to the U.N. Secretary General on chemical weapons [sic] use, we alerted the U.N. of our grave concern over reports the Iraq had used chemical weapons. We took note of the Iranian allegations in our 1983 Human Rights report on Iraq. We forcefully drew the attention of other governments to the problem through out public condemnation on March 3 and through previous diplomatic discussions. We have supported U.N. efforts to investigate and favor a Security Council statement on the report. We are instituting... special licensing requirements for export to Iran and Iraq certain compounds which could be used in the manufacture of chemical weapons. We have urged other

²⁹² George P. Shultz, pg. 239.

countries to do likewise. We continue to support efforts to try to induce Iran to accept a cease-fire, because stopping hostilities is the most effective and practical way to prevent further use of chemical weapons, and in humanitarian terms, we cannot and should not limit attention to the victims of chemical weapons. Instead, we must also work to stop the tragedy of the tens of thousands of lives – many of them belonging to children – which are needlessly being lost because of the Iranian regime’s continued attempts to spread its revolution through the region.²⁹³

While Shultz’s statement openly had identified a number of important initiatives to prevent the use of chemical weapons in the war, his reference to support for a Security Council statement starkly contrasted with the direction he had given the American delegation to the United Nations. Nevertheless, the administration had responded effectively as soon as irrefutable evidence surfaced indicating Iraq’s violation of international law.

Due to the recent developments in the Iran-Iraq War, specifically Iran’s increased support for terrorist actions directed against the United States and Iraq’s flagrant use of chemical weapons, President Reagan signed NSDD 139 on April 5, 1984. In large part, NSDD 139 built upon the measures outlined in NSDD 114. In the new directive, Reagan agreed to dispatch a political-military mission to the Gulf to undertake consultations relating to “obtain agreement for contingent access to Gulf facilities on warning of likely escalation” in the war. NSDD 139 also implemented measures to improve the CIA’s collection of intelligence in the region and ordered the Secretary of Defense to enhance “our near-term readiness to respond to sudden attacks on U.S. interests in the region in a timely, effective, and forceful manner.” In response to “the growing threat of Iranian-sponsored terrorism, the Secretary of Defense will direct the enhancement of the anti-terrorist posture of the U.S. military activities... in the Persian Gulf... [and] the Director

²⁹³ Secretary of State to American Embassy Beirut, et al., “Department Press Briefing March 30, 1984,” State Ref: State 093714, March 31, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00192, pg. 1-3.

of Central Intelligence... should examine additional counter-terrorist measures... with regional states.” Reagan also directed the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Director of Central Intelligence to “prepare a plan of action designed to avert an Iraqi collapse.” Finally:

The Secretary of State will ensure that the policy of the United States government condemning the use of chemical warfare (CW) munitions in the Iran-Iraq war is unambiguous and consistent with the 1925 Geneva protocol. Our condemnation of the use of CW munitions by the belligerents should place equal stress on the urgent need to dissuade Iran from continuing the ruthless and inhumane tactics which have characterized recent offensives.²⁹⁴

While NSDD 139 further enhanced the ability of the American government to rapidly respond to the increasing escalation of the war, it focused primarily on the recent developments with Iran, albeit vaguely mentioning Iraq’s use of chemical weapons in passing. In sum, NSDD 139 was an official endorsement of the hardening of the American policy towards Iran.

By early 1984, France had delivered the Super Etendards to Iraq. As predicted, Iraq stepped up its attacks on ships navigating the Persian Gulf in a concerted effort to hurt Iran economically. According to Anthony H. Cordesman, “On March 27, 1984, Iraq launched the first of a long series of Super Etendards strikes using Exocet missiles. Iraqi fighters hit two tankers southwest of Kharg.” The Iraqi attack provoked Iran to respond in kind. On May 13, Iranian forces fired on a Kuwaiti tanker near Bahrain, constituting “the first major Iranian attack on commercial shipping.” Over the next five weeks, both

²⁹⁴ National Security Decision Directive 139, “Measures to Improve U.S. Posture and Readiness to Respond to Developments in the Iran-Iraq War,” April 5, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Presidential Directives Collection, Part II, PR01528, pg. 1-3.

sides escalated their attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf, resulting in strikes on eleven ships, ten of which were oil tankers.²⁹⁵ The situation in the Gulf was clearly escalating.

A surprising development occurred on May 14, when Saddam Hussein claimed in an interview with Kuwaiti reporters that Iraq had “benefited from the [Saudi] AWACS.”²⁹⁶ While we have already established that since 1982 United States had been providing Iraq with intelligence, this was the first instance that an Iraqi official – let alone Saddam Hussein – had publicly acknowledged the relationship, particularly Saudi Arabia’s role in the conflict. Throughout the war, Saudi Arabia had played a relatively quiet role. Although it had actively financed Iraq’s war effort, it had done so covertly in order to avoid a head-on confrontation with Iran. The circumstances changed, however, on June 5, when the AWACS identified Iranian jets entering Saudi air space. In response, the Royal Saudi Air Force shot down an Iranian F-4 fighter over its territorial waters. The incident constituted the first direct involvement of Saudi Arabia in the Iran-Iraq War and threatened to dramatically escalate the conflict into a regional war. Fortunately, following the confrontation, Iran quickly conciliated Saudi Arabia, thus preventing further escalation.²⁹⁷

Although the war continued to worsen in the Persian Gulf, the military situation on the ground remained a stalemate. On September 25, the DIA’s new Defense Estimative Brief on the “Prospects for Iraq” came to a number of significant conclusions. Like earlier estimates, the DIA believed that “Saddam Husayn will likely remain in

²⁹⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security, 1984-1987* (London: The Royal United Services Institute, 1987), pg. 66.

²⁹⁶ United States Embassy London to Secretary of State, “Saddam Hussein Claims AWACS Help Iraqi War Efforts,” State Ref: London 10856, May 14, 1984, RRPL, Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC, Box 91689 “Iraq 1984,” Folder “05/02/1984-07/24/84,” pg. 1.

²⁹⁷ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 167.

power for the next two years.” Noting the worsening Tanker War, “Iraq will most likely continue to escalate its attacks against targets in the Gulf.” Explaining that “Husayn believes that increased international condemnation of Iranian retaliatory strikes against third parties, restriction of arms sales to Iran, and the reduction of Iranian oil sales serve his goal of ending the war on terms favorable to Iraq.” In relation to Iraq’s economy, the DIA noted that the economic crisis of 1983 had passed and that the “regime has obtained a fragile economic equilibrium,” but the construction of oil pipelines has improved “international confidence in Iraq’s future.” Militarily, “Iraq perceives that a drastic reduction of Iran’s income is a key to ending the conflict.” This explains the stepped-up attacks on Iranian economic interests in the Gulf. On the battleground, the Iraqi regime recognized “that it has little chance of a decisive military victory over Iran” and, as a result, Iraq’s tactics will continued to:

...rely upon strong defensive positions, especially physical barriers, and the threat to use all weapons in its arsenal, to include chemicals, to dissuade any Iranian attack. In the event [that] Tehran does launch an offensive, Baghdad will carry through with its threats to extract maximum Iranian casualties while attempting to keep its own losses to a minimum.

In the end, the DIA concluded that the continued stalemate in the Iran-Iraq war had positive implications for the United States, because continued American “assistance [to Iraq] could allow for additional inroads and possibly a resumption of full diplomatic relations.”²⁹⁸

On November 4, 1984, Ronald Reagan won his second-term as President, beating Democratic candidate Walter Mondale in the largest electoral victory in American history. Reagan, with 59 percent of the popular vote, took 49 states and won 525

²⁹⁸ Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency, “Defensive Estimate Brief: Prospects for Iraq,” September 25, 1984, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00221, pg 1-5.

electoral votes. Having won the election, the administration believed it had received a mandate to continue pursuing its domestic and foreign policies as it saw fit. During an election year, politically sensitive decisions are often put on hold because they could effect the re-election of the President. One such issue was the resumption of diplomatic relations with Iraq. Throughout Reagan's first term, the administration had actively pursue a rapprochement with Iraq. But announcing the resumption of diplomatic relations with a known dictator who had recently used chemical weapons was not an issue that the American public would have accepted lightly, even in the case of a popular president like Reagan. Nevertheless, three weeks after the election, the United States and Iraq resumed full diplomatic relations after a seventeen-year break on November 26; the administration had successfully replaced Iran as its second pillar.

Chapter Six:

The Iran Imbrolio

The beginning of 1985 marked the start of a new phase in the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War. Up to this point, the policy had tilted heavily in favour of Iraq, to the point where the United States had resumed diplomatic relations with Iraq. At the same time, the administration's position towards Iran had hardened as a result of Tehran's support for terrorist attacks against American interests, specifically in Lebanon. The situation, however, changed dramatically during 1985 when Iranian-backed terrorist groups in Lebanon took a number of American citizens hostage. Like Jimmy Carter before him, President Reagan became fixated on attaining their release, which ultimately led to an unfocused, contradictory policy towards the Iran-Iraq War.

The second hostage crisis began on March 16, 1984, when Islamic Jihad kidnapped William F. Buckley, the CIA Station Chief in Lebanon. The kidnapping of such a senior CIA official consumed Director Casey, who pushed the Directorate of Operations everyday to locate Buckley. Indeed, the CIA legitimately feared that Buckley was being tortured into revealing CIA agents throughout the Middle East. As a result, Casey took extraordinary measures to rescue Buckley, such as authorizing money to pay informants, ordering the stepping up of communication interceptions, and establishing a "special hostage-rescue task force."²⁹⁹ Although the Reagan administration's efforts to

²⁹⁹ Bob Woodward, pg. 395.

attain Buckley's release were intense, between February 10, 1984 and May 28, 1985, terrorists kidnapped an additional six Americans in Lebanon, thus increasing the political pressure for a response.³⁰⁰

Throughout 1985, Iran's political situation was growing increasingly unstable. Because of Khomeini's declining health, many American officials were anxious about ways to influence a post-Khomeini Iran. Who would come to power in Iran? How could the United States influence the succession process? Could the United States prevent the Soviets from shaping the outcome? While the administration could pose a plethora of questions, as Bob Woodward astutely noted, the problem was that "Nobody [had] any brilliant ideas about how to get [the United States] back into Tehran."³⁰¹ Even more problematic was that the only avenue, supplying weapons to Iran, contrasted heavily with the administration's efforts to prevent Iranian acquisition of American weaponry (i.e. Operation Staunch). Iran's precarious situation thus prompted the CIA to prepare a SNIE on May 25, 1985 that assessed American prospects for influencing the power struggle that would ensue after Khomeini's death. The estimate contended that the United States likely could do little to influence Iran's growing political turmoil, while pointing out that the Soviets were far better situated to shape events. Further, the CIA, noting that American allies in Europe could "provide a valuable presence to help protect Western

³⁰⁰ The other hostages, chronologically ordered, were Frank Reiger (February 10, 1984), Jeremy Levin (March 7), Benjamin F. Weir (May 8), Peter Kilburn (December 3), Reverend Lawrence Jenco (January 8, 1985), and David Jacobson (May 28). In addition, terrorist also took 24 additional hostages of Western origin. A list of the hostages is available on the World Wide Web:

http://www.english.schule.de/state_of_the_union/group7/project/timeline.htm#list_hostages

³⁰¹ Bob Woodward, pg. 408.

interests,” concluded that the degree to which these allies could “fill a military gap for Iran will be a critical measure of the West’s ability to blunt Soviet influence.”³⁰²

Not long after the CIA put forth this dire prediction, a draft NSDD circulated amongst senior administration officials. The document averred that “The dynamic political situation in Iran and the consequences for U.S. interests of growing Soviet and radical influence, compel the U.S. [to] undertake a range of short-term and long-term initiatives that will enhance our leverage in Tehran, and, if possible minimize that of the Soviets.” To counter the growing Soviet influence, the NSDD proposed (among other recommendations) to sell small amounts of “selected military equipment” to Iran “on a case-by-case basis.” This was a dramatic departure from the hardened American stance towards Iran, especially in light of the earlier bombings of the American Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, and Iran’s support for the kidnapping of seven American citizens.³⁰³

Reactions to the draft NSDD were mixed. On the one side, Director Casey told McFarlane that “I strongly endorse the thrust of the draft NSDD on U.S. Policy Toward Iran, particularly its emphasis on the need to take concrete and timely steps to enhance U.S. leverage in order to ensure that the USSR is not the primary beneficiary of change and turmoil in this critical country.” Casey understood the situation’s severity and appreciated the prospect of gaining contacts within Iran, particularly if leverage gained through these contacts could help attain Buckley’s release.³⁰⁴ In contrast, Secretary

³⁰² John Tower et al, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987), pg. III-3-4.

³⁰³ Donald R. Fortier and Howard J. Teicher to Robert C. McFarlane, National Security Decision Directive (Draft), “U.S. Policy Towards Iran,” June 1985, DNSA, GWU, Collection Iraq-Gate, IG00254, pg. 1, 6. According to the DNSA, this document can be located in the “Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair,” Vol. 1. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988), Appendix A, pg. 977.

³⁰⁴ Bob Woodward, pg. 409.

Shultz felt the draft exaggerated the “current anti-regime sentiment and [the] Soviet advantages over [the United States] in gaining influence.” He also opined that to “permit or encourage a flow of Western arms to Iran is contrary to our interest both in containing Khomeinism and in ending the excesses of [the Iranian] regime.” Shultz also disagreed with the suggestion that American “efforts to reduce arms flows to Iran should be ended,” adding that “The steady decline of Iran’s military capability is in [American] interest[s], and we should not facilitate the supply of weapons from Western Europe that would revive that military capacity.”³⁰⁵ After all, Iran’s refusal to accept a ceasefire was the primary reason that the Iran-Iraq War continued. Agreeing with Shultz’s point of view, Secretary Weinberger wrote “Absurd” on his copy, adding that any suggestion of selling weapons to Iran “was as ridiculous as inviting Qaddafi over for a cozy lunch.” Such objections effectively killed the draft NSDD, but “Casey knew that [their] rejection... was not necessarily fatal to the idea.”³⁰⁶ As the Tower Commission pointed out, “The abandonment of the draft NSDD marked the end of efforts by Mr. McFarlane and the NSC staff to use the formal interagency policy process to obtain an explicit change in U.S. policy toward Iran. From this point on, the matter moved along a different track.”³⁰⁷

In June 1985, Israel proposed an interesting solution to two major problems facing the Reagan administration: the hostages in Lebanon and the absence of influence in Iran. Israel suggested an arms-for-hostage deal, whereby the United States would supply small amounts of weaponry to Iranian “moderates” in exchange for the release of the hostages in Lebanon, very much like how Israel had obtained the release of hundreds

³⁰⁵ Department of State, George Shultz to Robert McFarlane, “U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Comment on Draft NSDD,” June 29, 1985, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00261, pg 2.

³⁰⁶ Bob Woodward, pg. 409.

³⁰⁷ John Tower et al, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987), pg. III-4.

of Iranian Jews after the Revolution. When McFarlane pitched the idea to Reagan, it received the same response as the draft NSDD; Shultz and Weinberger opposed the proposal, while Casey was supportive. Nevertheless, the President felt that it was worthwhile to “explore” the proposition.³⁰⁸

The administration’s exploration of the proposal ultimately prompted the delivery of 508 TOW missiles to Iran between August 30 and September 14, which led in turn to Reverend Benjamin Weir’s release on September 15, 1985. After this success, the administration continued to “explore” further initiatives to obtain the release of the remaining hostages. This led to two additional operations. The second occurred in November, when Colonel Oliver North, a NSC staff member charged with the initiatives, arranged the shipment of 18 HAWK missiles to Iran. However, unlike the earlier transfer, no hostages were released. In other words, the mission was a disaster.³⁰⁹ Not long afterwards, Robert McFarlane, “exhausted and on the verge of a nervous breakdown,” resigned as National Security Advisor and was replaced by Vice Admiral John Poindexter on December 4.³¹⁰ Poindexter’s appointment marked a further shift in the direction of American foreign policy. From this point onwards, the NSC took a more active role in the ‘arms-for-hostages’ initiative. Indicative of this, on December 5, North and Poindexter discussed a third mission involving “the transfer of 3,300 Israeli TOWs and 50 Israeli HAWKs in exchange for release of all the hostages.” The administration rejected the proposal, which was quickly replaced by a scheme to “exchange of certain Hezbollah prisoners held by Israeli-supported Lebanese Christian forces, together with

³⁰⁸ John Tower et al, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987), pg. III-6.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. III-8-9.

³¹⁰ Bob Woodward, pg. 430.

3000 Israeli TOWs, for the release of the U.S. citizens held hostage in Beirut.”³¹¹ After signing the finding on January 17, 1986, President Reagan wrote in his diary, “I agreed to sell TOWs to Iran.”³¹²

Beyond the sale of TOW missiles, the Finding also implied that the administration would share intelligence with Iran. According to the Finding:

The [United States Government] will act to facilitate efforts by third parties and third countries to establish contact with moderate elements within and outside the Government of Iran by providing these elements with arms, equipment and related material in order to enhance the credibility of these elements in their efforts to achieve a more pro-U.S. government in Iran by demonstrating their ability to obtain requisite resources to defend their country against Iraq and intervention by the Soviet Union.³¹³

Although the Finding does not plainly state that the United States would provide Iran with intelligence, senior CIA officials clearly understood what this statement implied. For instance, an irate Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, John McMahon voiced objections to Director Casey on January 25. McMahon argued that the Finding was a mistake and that giving Iran strategic intelligence “could give [the Iranians] a definite offensive edge... [That] could have cataclysmic results” in its war with Iraq, especially in light of the fact that the CIA “already had an operation in place providing the Iraqis with intelligence on the front.”³¹⁴ Why would the administration provide intelligence to Iran? McMahon was right; selling weapons to Iran in exchange for hostages was one thing, but

³¹¹ John Tower et al, *Report of the President's Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987), pg. III-10

³¹² John Tower et al, *Report of the President's Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987), pg. III-12.

³¹³ Ronald Reagan, “Finding Pursuant to Section 662 of The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 As Amended, Concerning Operations Undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency in Foreign Countries, Other Than Those Intended Solely for the Purpose of Intelligence Collection,” January 17, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00301, pg. 1.

³¹⁴ Bob Woodward, pg. 438-439.

providing intelligence was quite another. In sum, McMahon correctly argued that giving Iran intelligence was a bad idea that could have devastating consequences.

Nevertheless, from May 25 to 28, Robert McFarlane, as a private citizen, along with Oliver North and George Cave, traveled to Tehran to meet with high-level Iranian officials to arrange the release of American hostages in Beirut. The mission failed. According to Cave, a former CIA official who served as the mission's translator, after arriving in Tehran the delegation immediately faced a number of obstacles. When the American delegation met with Iranian officials on May 25, the Iranians simply enumerated America's sins. As it turned out, the Iranians were unprepared for the meeting because they did not believe that the delegation would actually come to Iran. "As a result, they had only sent someone to Lebanon on the evening of May 25th, after our arrival in Tehran, to negotiate with the actual hostage holders." On May 27, frustrated by the continuous delays, McFarlane issued an ultimatum. "If the hostages were released before early morning, he would order the rest of the Hawk spares flown in. If not, the American party would break off negotiations and depart Tehran." The next morning, the Iranians failed to produce the hostages and the mission departed. The failure of both sides to find a compromise doomed any chances for a successful resolution to the crisis in the future.³¹⁵

Meanwhile, throughout 1985, the conflict between Iran and Iraq was locked into a seemingly endless war of attrition. In March, Iran launched a major offensive against Iraq, modeled on Operation Kheiber. Again, the Iranian forces made territorial gains in the offensive's first days only to be pushed back again by Iraq's overwhelming firepower.

³¹⁵ George Cave, "Why Secret 1986 U.S.-Iran "Arms for Hostages" Negotiations Failed," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (September/October 1994), pg. 8, 89. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/0994/9409008.htm>

Interestingly, “The Iranians complained bitterly that Americans had passed instant battlefield intelligence about Iranian forces and movements to the Iraqis obtained from their AWACS surveillance and their (now hourly) pictures from their [satellite intelligence].” Iran’s recognition that Washington was providing tactical intelligence to Iraq was an important development. The Iranians promptly altered their tactics and methods of communication, which had a significant effect upon later offensives. Additional attacks occurred throughout 1985, but their impact was insignificant.³¹⁶

Despite UN attempts to force the belligerents to stop attacking civilian targets, there had been a dramatic upsurge in the number of attacks by both sides against civilians, the so-called “War of the Cities,” in early 1984. Frustrated by this mutual callous disregard for civilians, on June 9 the Secretary-General brokered an agreement which began three days later between Iran and Iraq to cease attacks upon civilian populations. Soon thereafter, “Observer teams were sent to Baghdad and Tehran to monitor compliance with the agreement.” In early 1985, Iraq breached the agreement when it attacked Hushehr and Ahvaz, which prompted Iran to shell Basra in early March. The Secretary-General appealed to both sides to adhere to the moratorium, but with little effect.³¹⁷

After the mutual breach of the moratorium, both sides increased their attacks against civilians. Unlike earlier attacks on cities that had consisted primarily of shelling and air raids, Iran and Iraq were now firing surface-to-surface missiles, mostly Soviet – or Chinese – made SCUD-B rockets. After Iran’s shelling of Basra, there was a seven-week pause from late March to mid-June, but on May 26 Iraq resumed its attacks on

³¹⁶ Edgar O’Ballance, pg. 164.

³¹⁷ R.P.H. King, pg. 19.

cities. By June 13, Iraq had “made its 50th air raid on Tehran since March.” While attacks on cities continued throughout the rest of the war, they became less frequent, followed often by reprisals.³¹⁸

For nearly four years, from May 1982 to February 1986, the conflict between Iran and Iraq was locked in a bloody war of attrition. The only major developments were the expansion of the conflict into the Persian Gulf and the War of the Cities. Neither side had made significant gains on the battlefield, largely because Iraq relied on a static defence strategy, employing strong defensive positions in order to hold off Iranian attacks, while avoiding costly offensives. “This strategy had considerable appeal for the Iraqi public since implicit in it was the aim of keeping casualties down.”³¹⁹ However, Iraq’s refusal to mount an offensive forfeited its ability to control the duration of the conflict, but there was a practical reason for this:

The regime did everything that it could to eradicate all thought of the war from the [Iraqi] public’s consciousness. In the first 5 years of the fighting it promoted guns and butter, a policy whereby the living standards were kept artificially high. This defused much popular resentment against the regime for having initiated the war, and... caused enormous debts.³²⁰

Iran’s strategy, on the other hand, consisted of maintaining continuous pressure on the Iraqi defences while engaging in a policy of economic strangulation to force Iraq to capitulate to its outrageous demands. Nevertheless, after four years, neither strategy had produced tangible results; only a major breakthrough in the stalemate by either side could end the war.

³¹⁸ R.P.H. King, pg. 19.

³¹⁹ Stephen C. Pelletiere, Douglas V. Johnson II, Leif R. Rosenberger, *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1990), pg. 9.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 18.

Shortly after Reagan decided to supply Iran with weapons and intelligence, a major military breakthrough did occur. On February 10, Iranian forces, under the cover of an intense winter rainstorm, skillfully mounted an amphibious assault on the al-Fao (or al-Faw) peninsula at Iraq's south-easternmost tip. The offensive was a perfect example of Iranian ingenuity. As "The Iraqis had assumed that Iran lacked the amphibious equipment to cross the Shatt at al-Faw, one of the widest parts of the river," they were caught completely off-guard when Iranian forces suddenly swarmed into the virtually undefended peninsula over hastily constructed pontoon bridges. Within days, over 30,000 Iranian troops had begun to advance towards Umm Qasr, Iraq's only port, although stiff Iraqi resistance managed to halt the offensive just shy of its objective.³²¹

The Iranian assault had surprised both Iraq and the United States. Since the summer of 1982, Iraq had been regularly receiving tactical intelligence from the United States which was continuously monitoring Iranian troop movements and radio communications. That being the case, how did American intelligence fail to predict the Iranian invasion? Dilip Hiro provides the best explanation for the Iranian breakthrough. He argued that when Iran was preparing for the al-Fao offensive, it took incredible precautions to prevent the United States and Iraq from learning of the attack in advance. During the previous year, Iranian forces had "perfected their amphibious tactics... with practice runs in the mountain lakes and rivers in northern Iran," where large troop concentrations would have largely gone unnoticed. Hiro explained that a major factor behind Iraq's surprise stemmed from its reliance on American intelligence:

The American documents and analysis... showed concentrations of Iranian troops north of Basra, and only there. But Washington, it seemed, had not deliberately withheld information from Baghdad. It was simply

³²¹ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 217.

that foul weather conditions in the Fao peninsula militated against the US satellites gathering information on the ground. Moreover, the Iranians employed certain means to deceive and circumvent the American intelligence-gathering equipment. For instance, they used open trucks to transport troops: the intelligence analysts concluded that these vehicles were carrying goods rather than men. Also Iranian field headquarters sent messages to field commanders by couriers using motorcycles, and not by coded messages over radio telephone, thus depriving the American and Iraqi monitoring devices the opportunity to pick up these messages.³²²

The Iranians had undoubtedly learned significant lessons from their past offensives. Well aware that Iraq was receiving intelligence from Washington, they had instituted precautions intended to overcome these challenges. Consequently, Iran was able to achieve the first significant breakthrough after years of bloodletting.

Recognizing the significance of the Iranian breakthrough at al-Fao, Iraq's army quickly responded by sending its forces south to prevent further loss of territory. The impact of the loss of al-Foa was not as significant militarily as "Al Faw occupies dead space in the Gulf," because during the winter it was mostly under water. Therefore, "as long as the Iranians could be kept penned up there, their military effectiveness would be nil."³²³ But its psychological effect had been staggering. From the war's start, Iraq had managed to avoid losing significant amounts of territory to Iran, but Iran's capture of 512 square kilometers was a disaster for Iraq's leadership. But while Saddam Hussein personally ordered General Rashid on February 23 to expel the Iranian invaders from Iraqi territory, but after three weeks of unrelenting battle the Iranians remained firmly entrenched.³²⁴

³²² Dilip Hiro, pg. 167, 170.

³²³ Stephen C. Pelletiere, et al, pg. 9.

³²⁴ Dilip Hiro, pg. 166. Hiro states that Iran took 320 square miles of Iraqi territory, which when calculated into the metric system is 512 square kilometers.

The Iraqi military's failure to retake the al-Fao peninsula greatly concerned Washington. For years, American policy had urged a return to the *status quo ante* in the region, with no territorial acquisition for either belligerent. As such, Iran's occupation of a large portion of southern Iraq greatly reduced the prospects of such an outcome. Iraq also could no longer export oil through the Persian Gulf, threatening its recent economic stability. Further, the occupation of the al-Fao peninsula placed Iranian forces within easy striking distance of Kuwait and its vast oil reserves. Understandably, Iran's victory was a major reason for worry among the Gulf States, which translated to anxiety in Washington. Consequently, the State Department recommended on February 27 that Vice President George H.W. Bush visit the Middle East to offer assurances of American protection to the Gulf States and the free flow of oil from the region.³²⁵ Subsequently, the Vice President toured the region, visiting Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and the Gulf States at the end of July 1986.³²⁶

Understandably, the Iraqi army's inability to retake the al-Fao peninsula prompted Baghdad to alter its military strategy. On May 14, Iraq launched its first major offensive since 1980 against the Iranian border town of Mehran. After taking the town, Iraq proposed a trade, al-Fao for Mehran, but Iran refused to negotiate. Instead, on June 20, Iran launched a counter-offensive against Mehran, expelling the Iraqis. The two

³²⁵ Nicholas Platt to Donald P. Gregg, "Proposed Vice Presidential Trip to the Middle East," February 27, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00310, pg. 1-2.

³²⁶ Flora Lewis, "No Mideast Glimmer; Do Peace Terms Exist?" *New York Times*, July 27, 1986, pg. E23. Unfortunately, the details of the Vice President's mission to the Middle East remain classified, with the exception of short briefs outlining key American officials and places to visit in each of the countries visited. Joyce Battle of the National Security Archive and I have both put forward FOIA requests for the declassification of documents pertaining to the mission.

consecutive losses at al-Fao and Mehran prompted Iraq's leadership to rapidly reassess its static defence strategy that was clearly not working.³²⁷

To further compound Iraq's problems in the wake of its defeat on the al-Fao peninsula defeat, it faced a new financial crisis. Due to the prolonged war of attrition, Iraq had fallen into arrears on its payments to EXIM by approximately \$3.5 million. Iraq's inability to pay its EXIM debt resulted in EXIM's refusal to extend further credit for Iraqi purchases of American goods, which injured Iraq's ability to keep fighting the war. Essentially, Iraq had to make the difficult choice between weapons or food for its population.³²⁸ These dire economic and military conditions prompted the Ba'ath Party to convene an "Extraordinary Congress" on July 10 in Baghdad. Concluding that its financial problems were secondary to the military crisis that it faced, the regime's only solution was to force a quick end to the war. The regime recognized that a major problem was a strict adherence to its static defence strategy and its inability to mobilize more troops. The failed Mehran offensive underlined that the Iraqi strategy had conditioned commanders and troops to avoid taking risks on the battlefield. To solve both problems, the "Extraordinary Congress" opted to draft college students and to specially train them in offensive tactics for a future assault.³²⁹ In light of its battlefield failures, Iraq also announced on September 3 that "all Iranian ports and oil-terminals were now considered to be within its Naval Exclusion Zone." This resulted in a further

³²⁷ Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 179-180.

³²⁸ Richard W. Murphy to Michael Armacost, Bureau of Near-Eastern Affairs, "Iraq: CPPG Meeting of Wednesday, July 23," July 23, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00346, pg. 5.

³²⁹ Stephen C. Pelletiere et al, pg. 14-18.

escalation of the Tanker War, much to Iran's chagrin, which maintained continuous pressure on the ground.³³⁰

The economic and military crises that faced Iraq during the latter half of 1986 prompted Washington to reevaluate its policies. Part of the problem was that both Iran and Iraq were both interested in obtaining American intelligence. For instance, on October 2, Poindexter and Casey met to discuss Iranian and Iraqi requests for intelligence. Earlier that day, Oliver North had sent Poindexter a note indicating that Iran "wanted intelligence assistance" including:

1:50,000 scale maps, Location of Iraqi Army Corps and Division [Head Quarters] 30-45km behind the front, Location of Logistical Centres Main Supply Routes to the front, Info on Iraqi troop movements, Reserve units and tank concentrations, Where the Iraqis believe that the main Iranian attack will occur and where diversionary attacks will occur.

Essentially, Iran sought any information that could give it an advantage over Iraq. But in the same communiqué, North pointed out that "we DO NOT have to tell the truth about all of this."³³¹ Also discussed at the meeting were Iraqi requests for intelligence about Iran, "specifically, on electrical power plants and kerosene manufacturing [sic] plants."³³² After Poindexter's discussion with Casey, he suggested to North that "I need a thoughtful piece that lays out a rational scheme for [sic] providing [intelligence] to both sides. The Iraqis are asking for the same sort of thing – location of economic targets behind the lines."³³³ Undoubtedly, the Poindexter-Casey meeting at the beginning of October 1986 underlined that the administration would continue its tilt towards Iraq.

³³⁰ Edgar O'Ballance, pg. 182-184.

³³¹ Oliver North to John Poindexter, "Iran," October 2, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00361, pg. 1.

³³² Robert W. Pearson to John Poindexter and Atton G. Keel, "Expanding Intelligence Provided to Iraq," October 3, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00363, pg. 1.

³³³ John Poindexter to Oliver North, "Iran," October 2, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00362, pg. 1.

On October 9, the National Security Council produced a study on the war. According to George Cave's notes, the assessment made a number of conclusions. Most significantly, "Iran now concludes that it can not win a war with Iraq," because its "economic infrastructure [sic] can no longer support the effective waging of the war against Iraq." The estimation further explained that:

The Iranian government wants to conclude peace with Iraq, but has a problem in that it must be able to present the end of the war as a "victory" for Iran. ...In order to present the Iranian people with a "victory," the Iranians have planned one last offensive. The purpose of this offensive is to gain enough territory to give [sic] the Iranians a strong bargaining [sic] position.

It was quite evident that as the war entered its sixth year, Iran, increasingly war weary, for the first time was interested in finding an "honorable peace."³³⁴

Interestingly, in late October Iranian authorities had quietly contacted the administration, "indicating that they want secret – but officially structured – discussions on improving relations." Most importantly, the Iranians did not pose "any preconditions (e.g., arms sales) for such talks." The absence of preconditions on these talks, the State Department concluded, underscored the fact that "Iran needs us," as it faced many obstacles: "the war, a devastated economy, the Soviets in Afghanistan, [and] domestic unrest." This meant that eventually Iran would turn to the United States for support, not to mention that its military relied almost exclusively on American military hardware. The stage was set for an improved relationship with Iran, but the American media and

³³⁴ George Cave, "Notes on [Dissemination] Concerning Iran's Possible Loss of War with Iraq. Their Need for an "Honorable Peace," and Their Fear that the Upcoming Offensive May Not Be Successful," October 9, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iran-Contra Affair Collection, IC03564, pg. 1025.

public were becoming increasingly aware that the administration had secretly traded arms for hostages with Iran.³³⁵

Shultz had never supported selling weaponry to Iran because that policy contradicted the official policy of neutrality and negated Operation Staunch's purpose. The State Department admonished the transfer of all weaponry to Iran, defensive or not, and argued that by exchanging arms for hostages, the administration effectively had "hurt our efforts to build a constructive strategic relationship with Iran." Further, all of the administration's "policies and official statements – on the Gulf war, on Israeli deliveries, on AWAKS, on terrorism – have just been turned upside down." In other words, the shortsighted objectives of a select group of officials had eclipsed all of the positive elements of the policy towards the Iran-Iraq War and effectively ruined American credibility in the region. Nevertheless, the State Department offered its best advice to the administration on how to deal with the impending crisis:

The facts of what has happened are coming out fast. There is a real danger of spinning a web of misleading if not incorrect statements that won't stand up to press and Congressional investigation. If there is not full and swift disclosure – to the public and intelligence committees, as appropriate – this affair is going to go on and on in an agonizing and terribly corrosive way.³³⁶

Unfortunately, despite the timely plea of the State Department to disclose the facts to the public, the administration's response was not swift enough.

On November 3, a pro-Syrian Lebanese publication, *Al Shiraa*, reported that Reagan's administration had secretly sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of

³³⁵ Department of State, "State Department Summation of the Problems Generated by Exposure of the Iran Initiative," Exhibit GPS-40, November 1, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00367, pg. 1.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 2-5.

hostages held in Lebanon.³³⁷ The Syrian story immediately caught the attention of the Western media, resulting in a political firestorm in Washington. On November 13, recognizing there was little that could be done to contain the scandal, President Reagan addressed the American public. Reagan's speech set out to explain the administration's rationale behind the Iran initiative. Since the Iranian Revolution, the United States had engaged in continuous efforts to "renew a relationship with Iran," in the hopes of achieving an "honorable" end to the Iran-Iraq War, eliminating Iran's ties to terrorism, and attaining the release of the hostages in Lebanon. Reagan decried the media's allegations, particularly about the trading of hostages for arms, stating that they were "utterly false." But Reagan admitted he had "authorized the transfer of small amounts of defensive weapons and spare parts for defensive systems to Iran" in order to "convince Tehran that our negotiators were acting with [his] authority, [and] to send a signal that the United States was prepared to replace the animosity between us with a new relationship." Ultimately, it was "because of Iran's strategic importance and its influence in the Islamic world that [the administration] chose to probe for a better relationship between our countries."³³⁸ While Reagan effectively outlined a rational explanation for the affair, in retrospect, it raised significant questions about how much he actually knew about the operation.

The controversy that surrounded the "Iran-Gate" scandal focused largely on the use of the NSC as a base for covert operations. When planning the operation, Casey and Poindexter had understood that Congress would not approve the sale of weapons to Iran or the subsequent diversion of funds to Nicaraguan rebels. Bob Woodward had explained

³³⁷ Shireen T. Hunter, "After the Ayatollah," *Foreign Policy*, No. 66 (Spring 1987), pg. 77.

³³⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Iran-United States Relations: Address to the Nation," November 13, 1986, DNSA, GWU, Iran-Contra Affair Collection, IC03766, pg. 1559-1561.

that the decision to use the NSC was due to Casey's anxious desire to "cut out the [congressional oversight] committee," because "a leak would scuttle the operation." Thus, the CIA's direct involvement in the operation was not feasible because the agency was subject to Congressional review. The NSC, on the other hand, as part of the executive office did not have to report to Congress which minimized the possibility of damaging leaks. By undermining Congress's legal right to provide intelligence oversight, members of the administration had violated the law, particularly Casey, North and Poindexter.³³⁹

On November 25, after coming under intensive criticism, John Poindexter resigned as National Security Advisor and was replaced by Frank Carlucci. A week later, Reagan, who wanted "all the facts [to] come out," signed Executive Order 12575 that formally established the President's Special Review Board led by John Tower.³⁴⁰ The Tower Commission's mandate was to investigate all the scandal and report to the President. But from the outset, the Tower Commission faced considerable obstacles. First, in late October and early November, when it had become apparent that the scandal would break, North and Poindexter had shredded hundreds of pertinent documents.³⁴¹ The second major obstacle was that Director Casey suffered a sudden seizure while in "his seventh floor office at Langley" on December 15, completely incapacitating him until his death on May 6, 1987.³⁴² "Because of his illness and subsequent death," Reagan

³³⁹ Bob Woodward, pg. 425.

³⁴⁰ John Tower et al, *Report of the President's Special Review Board*, (New York: Bantam Books, February 26, 1987), pg. 1-1.

³⁴¹ Oliver North with William Novak, pg. 298, 323. Because North shredded so many documents, a comprehensive understanding of the subject can never be achieved, thus posing a fundamental obstacle to the study of this subject.

³⁴² Bob Woodward, pg. 514.

lamented, "I never had a chance to learn from Bill Casey what he knew about Iran-Contra. Probably only John Poindexter and Oliver North know all the answers."³⁴³

The eruption of "Iran-Gate" had a dramatic impact on the conduct of American policy towards the war. Undoubtedly, as the aforementioned State Department analysis had suggested, the scandal had significantly hurt American credibility in the Persian Gulf. Iraq was furious that the United States had sold weapons to Iran just before the disastrous al-Fao offensive. Similarly, Gulf States were angry and felt they had been betrayed by the United States.³⁴⁴ Consequently, the disclosure of the arms sales to Iran had a devastating effect on American credibility in the region, which forced the administration to make decisions that eventually drew the United States directly into the Iran-Iraq War.

³⁴³ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pg. 543.

³⁴⁴ Joseph A. Kechichian, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Gulf War," Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lesson for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 103.

Chapter Seven:

Forcing the War to an End

Since the start of the Tanker War in April 1984, attacks in the Persian Gulf had gradually increased in frequency. For instance, there were 102 attacks in 1986, but this “represented a quickening of the pace compared to 50 in 1985 and 30 in 1984.” Cumulatively, by May 1987, Iraq had attacked between 140-150 ships, while Iran was responsible for 90-95 incidents. The Tanker War was increasingly becoming problematic for the United States as the Gulf States looked to America for protection.³⁴⁵ Iranian attacks primarily focused on Kuwaiti vessels due to Kuwait’s financial support for Iraq’s war effort. As a result, in December 1986, Kuwait quietly asked the United States to provide a naval escort for its tankers, but withholding that it had also offered the same proposal to the Soviet Union. Interestingly, “The Reagan administration initially refused, apparently because it did not want to damage its secret venture to establish better ties with Tehran.” But when the Soviets agreed to the same proposal that had been rejected, the United States “reversed itself and offered to protect all Kuwaiti tankers.”³⁴⁶ The Kuwaitis had been doubly clever. First, the Kuwaitis understood that the rabidly anti-Soviet Reagan administration would naturally oppose any opportunity that could increase Soviet influence in the region. As predicted, Kuwait’s gesture to Moscow “set off alarm

³⁴⁵ Morton I. Abramowitz to the Secretary, “Persian Gulf Tanker War – Background,” May 18, 1987, DNSA, GWU, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00436, pg. 1-2.

³⁴⁶ Mark N. Katz, “Moscow and the Gulf War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, Contributions in Military Studies, Number 99, 1990), pg. 143.

bells in Washington.” Second, in the aftermath of the Iran-Gate scandal, the administration, desperate to improve its credibility in the region, recognized that helping Kuwait would improve its standing. Essentially, when the United States agreed to the request, the Arab regimes realized that “they can manipulate the Reagan administration [simply] by putting into play their Soviet cards.”³⁴⁷ The Kuwaiti request to escort its tankers marked the start of a phase of direct involvement in the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War.

After its victory at al-Fao in February 1986, Iran launched its “final offensive” against Basra at the start of January 1987. The offensive’s objective was to seize as much Iraqi territory as possible in order to force embarrassing concessions from Iraq in peace negotiations. At the time, Iraq’s military focused intensely on the Iranian breakthrough in the south at al-Fao, which Iran played upon when it launched “a diversionary assault across the Shatt just north of the al-Faw position.” Iraq fell for the bait, so when “the real assault came to the east and northeast of al-Basrah,” it was “caught by surprise.” Like previous offensives, the Iranian forces initially made rapid advances, but eventually they were halted by Iraq’s heavy reliance on firepower and chemical weapons. Iraq launched a major counterattack at the end of January, but the Iranian lines held. For the next month, Iranian forces slowly inched forward, coming within approximately three kilometers of Basra.³⁴⁸ But the offensive finally ended in late February after Iraq reinforced its defences with heavily equipped Republican Guard units and Iran’s military could no longer sustain the heavy casualties it had incurred during the

³⁴⁷ Barry Rubin, “Drowning in the Gulf,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 69 (Winter 1987-1988), pg. 125.

³⁴⁸ Dennis Ross to Frank Carlucci, “Response on Waite and Status of Iran-Iraq War,” January 20, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00395, pg. 1. This figure was calculated based on a statement in a National Security Council cable that stated, “the latest intelligence shows the Iranians around two miles from the Iraqi perimeter defenses around Basra.”

offensive. Nevertheless, the second Battle of Basra was not a total loss for Iran as it had managed to take a significant amount of Iraqi territory and penetrate five of the six defensive rings surrounding the city.³⁴⁹

On January 21, as the second Battle of Basra raged, senior Reagan administration officials met to discuss the direction of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War. There was little doubt, that the “Iran-Gate” scandal had had a negative impact on its policy; the question was how could the administration improve its credibility in the region. For the first time, Caspar Weinberger felt the time had come “to drop any pretense of even-handedness” because there was not point in talking about ending the war “with no winners or losers.” To underline his view, Weinberger pointed out that “Iran is the aggressor in this case; and we should not only be supportive of Iraq, but should be seen to be supportive.” Further, he argued the administration should arm Iraq, which prompted a heated debate amongst senior officials about the legality of such a transaction that proved “inconclusive.” While many officials opposed Weinberger’s stance, in the aftermath of “Iraq-Gate” there was an evident shift in the thinking of the administration towards the war. Iran was clearly the problem.³⁵⁰

In response to the heated discussion about providing Iraq with direct or indirect military aid, the State Department drew up a policy analysis of the pros and cons of such an assistance transaction. Certainly, providing weapons would boost Iraqi morale. More importantly, it would signal the Gulf States about the administration’s commitment to prevent an Iranian victory. Nevertheless, the provision of American weaponry would have little if any effect on the ground because Iraq’s forces were not trained in their use.

³⁴⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 221-224. See also, Anthony Cordesman, pg. 124-137.

³⁵⁰ William A. Cockell to Colin Powell, “Iran-Iraq,” January 21, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00399, pg. 1.

In addition, providing US military aid could raise the expectations of a broader commitment of American forces to the region, undercut Operation Stanch, and could further set back the prospects for normalized relations with Iran. Perhaps the most important factor was that Congress would never approve the sale, especially after the administration had purposely deceived it during the arms-for-hostages imbroglio. The State Department's analysis underlined the conflicting positions within the administration, a classic conflict between State Department "doves" and Defense Department "hawks." The reality was that overtly providing support for Iraq was not a feasible policy option, but the administration had other options that potentially could improve American credibility in the region without entirely abandoning the neutrality policy.³⁵¹

Not long after Weinberger had called for openly supporting Iraq, he recommended re-flagging Kuwaiti oil tankers with the Stars and Stripes. Unlike proving military support for Iraq, re-flagging offered a number of advantages to the United States. For instance, it would remain neutral in the Iran-Iraq War, increase its naval presence in the Persian Gulf, and underline the American commitment to protect the Gulf States. President Reagan approved the decision to re-flag the Kuwaiti vessels on January 29 and ordered CENTCOM to provide "appropriate military/naval protection" to ensure their safety. In doing so, the administration officially made "a major commitment of U.S. military force to the Iran-Iraq conflict."³⁵²

³⁵¹ Department of State, "Direct/Indirect U.S. Military Assistance to Iraq," January 21, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00400, pg. 1.

³⁵² Maxwell Orme Johnson, "The Role of U.S. Military Force in the Gulf War," as cited in Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 130.

The American decision to re-flag Kuwaiti tankers led to a build-up of American forces in and around the Persian Gulf and increased the potential of a confrontation with Iran. While the American naval force within the Gulf remained at six ships, the President ordered a full carrier group, "including the 85,000-ton carrier *Kitty Hawk* and eleven escort ships," to position itself in the Indian Ocean just outside the Persian Gulf; a direct challenge to Iran's regional hegemony. Meanwhile, in mid-February, "the US detected that Iran was deploying a much heavier coastal defense missile near the Straits of Hormuz and that there had been at least one test firing" of a Chinese-made Silkworm missile. Iran also was increasingly making use of domestically produced marine mines. For instance, in the summer of 1986, Iran mined the waters around the Iraqi port Umm Qasr.³⁵³ Then, in May and June 1987 four ships hit Iranian mines in Kuwait's Al Ahmadi channel.³⁵⁴ Iran's increasing use of marine mines proved an effective way for it to control access to the Persian Gulf and harass the Gulf States. But American entry into the conflict forebode a direct American-Iranian conflict, yet interestingly enough the first incident was provoked by Iraq.

The decision to commit American forces to the protection of the Gulf was not without risk. This reality became apparent on May 17 when the *USS Stark* came under attack by two Mirage F-1 jets that fired two Exocet missiles at the vessel,³⁵⁵ killing thirty-five Americans (nineteen confirmed dead and sixteen missing).³⁵⁶ Information attained

³⁵³ Anthony Cordesman, pg. 133-134.

³⁵⁴ Department of Defense, Defense Research Reference Series, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reference Aid," DDB-2600-5954-88, 1988, RRPL, William J. Burns, Box 91852 "Gulf War," Folder 2.

³⁵⁵ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "SPOT Intelligence Report: For Urgent Reading, Attack on *USS Stark*," May 17, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00434, pg. 2.

³⁵⁶ Secretary of State to American Embassy Baghdad, "Gulf Working Group: Sitrep No. 6 as of 0500," State Ref: State 151833, May 19, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00438, pg. 1.

from AWACS and signal intelligence identified the attackers as Iraqi, not Iranian.³⁵⁷ Yet after the State Department consulted with Iraqi Ambassador Handoo and demanded a full explanation,³⁵⁸ much to the surprise of the administration and outside observers, Saddam Hussein expressed his “deepest regret” for the incident in a letter to Reagan the next day. Explaining that Iraqi planes “had no intention whatsoever of striking against a target belonging to [the United States] or any country other than Iran,” Hussein asked if the President “would kindly convey to the families of the victims [his] personal condolences and sympathy” for their loss.³⁵⁹

The *USS Stark* incident not only underlined the risks posed by the re-flagging operation, it incited intense criticism from Congress that resulted in a re-evaluation of the mission. Reagan increased the number of American naval vessels in the Gulf from six to nine and in the region to thirty-three. The *Stark* incident also led to a redefinition of the Navy’s mission from escorting vessels to a commitment to “freedom of navigation” and “preserving the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.”³⁶⁰ As Reagan’s fifth National Security Advisor, Frank Carlucci, observed in June 1987, American allies in the Gulf faced the difficult choice of either “giving in to Iranian intimidation or accepting Soviet offers of protection.” Therefore, the administration believed it had to increase its military commitment to the Persian Gulf. At the same time, Washington specifically warned Iran “that if its forces persisted in hostile activities in the Gulf, namely, mining

³⁵⁷ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “SPOT Intelligence Report: For Urgent Reading, Attack on *USS Stark*,” May 17, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00434, pg. 2.

³⁵⁸ Secretary of State to American Embassy Baghdad, “Iraqi Aircraft Attack on US Naval Vessel,” State Ref: State 150888, May 17, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00433, pg. 1.

³⁵⁹ Hussein to Reagan, May 18, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00435, pg. 1.

³⁶⁰ Maxwell Orme Johnson, pg. 115.

and missile attacks on tankers, U.S. forces would have no recourse but to take Iranian forces under fire.”³⁶¹

The pace of American involvement rapidly increased. On July 24, the *USS Brighton*, one of the first re-flagged Kuwaiti ships, struck a mine north of Bahrain, an embarrassing spectacle because the United States could not determine who placed the mine, although Iran was the presumed culprit. Nevertheless, “over the next month mines appeared everywhere in the Gulf, as well as outside the Strait of Hormuz and in the Gulf of Oman.” As a result, a general increase in the international naval presence in the Gulf occurred as Great Britain, France, Italy, Denmark, and Belgium expanded their fleets to deal with the mines.³⁶² Meanwhile, the United States maintained a low profile until the evening of September 21, when American helicopters observed an Iranian vessel laying six mines in the northern Gulf close to American naval forces. The helicopter strafed the ship, but it continued its mining activities. The next morning, the Navy, exercising “its inherent right of self-defense,” boarded the ship and found ten additional mines below its deck, thus proving that Iran was engaging in mining operations.³⁶³ The vessel’s crew was repatriated to Iran and the ship was scuttled, much to Tehran’s chagrin.³⁶⁴

While this incident heightened tensions between the United States and Iran, it served to reinforce earlier American warnings to Iran to end its aggressive operations in the Gulf or face the consequences. The incident was also significant because for the first time the United States had directly engaged Iranian forces in combat, leaving Iran with a

³⁶¹ Barry Rubin, pg. 124.

³⁶² Maxwell Orme Johnson, pg. 135, 116.

³⁶³ Secretary of State to United States Delegation to the United Nations, “Security Council: U.S. Letter on Incident with Iranian Vessel,” September 22, 1987, RRPL, Box 92155, William J. Burns Collection, Folder 3, “Exchanges with Iran,” pg. 1; and Boleslaw Adam Boczek, “The Law of Maritime Warfare and Neutrality in the Gulf War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 180.

³⁶⁴ Sharam Chubin and Charles Tripp, pg. 217.

bloody nose. Of greater importance, the United States irrefutably had identified Iran as the source of the widespread use of marine mines in the Persian Gulf. From this point onwards, any incident involving marine mines would result in retaliatory actions against Iran. Nevertheless, this further entangled the United States in the Iran-Iraq War.

In September and mid-October, Iran further provoked conflict when it fired Silkworm missiles at Kuwaiti territory from the al-Faw peninsula. While the first Silkworm attacks caused no significant damage, an attack on October 15 struck a “US-managed, Liberian-flag tanker” anchored “8 miles off Kuwait’s al-Ahmadi oil terminal,” leaving two crewman missing.³⁶⁵ Presumably, the attack on Kuwait was in retaliation to an incident that had occurred on October 8 when the United States sunk three Iranian vessels after they fired upon American helicopters. The October 15 Silkworm attacks on Kuwait led the President to authorize further punitive measures against Iran. On October 19, the Navy shelled Iran’s Rashadat and Resalat oil platforms, east of Qatar. The incident underlined the deepening American commitment to the Persian Gulf and its decision to use force against Iran if necessary, despite the fact that Iraq was responsible for crippling the *Stark*.³⁶⁶

On July 20, 1987, the Security Council passed Resolution 598, which, building upon previous resolutions, called for a “comprehensive, just, honourable and durable settlement” to the Iran-Iraq conflict. The resolution deplored both sides for attacks on civilian population centers and neutral shipping, for violating “international humanitarian law and other laws of armed conflict, and, in particular, the use of chemical weapons

³⁶⁵ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, SPOT Intelligence Report, “Persian Gulf: Fourth Time Lucky for Iranian Silkworms at Kuwait,” October 15, 1987, DNSA, China and the US Collection, CH00893, pg. 1.

³⁶⁶ Department of Defense, Defence Research Reference Series, “The Iran-Iraq War: A Reference Aid,” DDB-2600-5954-88, 1988, RRPL, William J. Burns, Box 91852 “Gulf War,” Folder 2.

contrary to obligations under the 1925 Geneva convention.” The resolution outlined the need for an impartial arbitrator to terminate the fighting and the settlement of outstanding disputes between the two parties. It also set out a framework for reconstruction, ensuring regional stability and the repatriation of POWs.³⁶⁷ According to Anthony Clark Arend’s analysis of the UN’s role in the Iran-Iraq conflict, Resolution 598 was significant for several reasons:

First, it represented the first time that the Security Council declared that there had been a “breach of peace” and that it was acting under Articles 39 and 40 of the Charter, the provisions of Chapter VII dealing with the collective security function of the organization. Second, it marked the first time that the Council had expressed a concern to determine “responsibility” for the initiation of the war. ...Third, Resolution 598 used language that was much stronger than that contained in previous resolutions. ...Fourth, the resolution specifically called for the establishment of a U.N. observer group to monitor the cease-fire. Fifth, it stressed the need to work closely with both parties to resolve all issues and reach a settlement that would be acceptable by both states. ...In short, Resolution 598 contained elements of collective security, but they remained muted, presumably to guard against either side believing that the United Nations was biased in either direction.

As in the past, the Iraqis accepted Resolution 598 on August 14, but “no such response came from Iran.” Tehran’s refusal to accept the resolution led to aggressive diplomacy on the part of Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cueller to convince Iran to accept the terms in late 1987, but his efforts proved fruitless because Iran was concentrating on another “final offensive.”³⁶⁸

Iran’s new offensive came on March 13, 1988, when Iranian forces struck Iraqi positions into Kurdistan in the north, capturing several villages. Two days later, Iran staged a major offensive that captured the town of Halabja, situated twenty-four

³⁶⁷ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 598, Document S/RES/0598, July 20, 1987. Located on the World Wide Web: www.parstimes.com/history.un_598.html

³⁶⁸ Anthony Clark Arend, “The Role of the United Nations,” as cited in Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 194-195.

kilometers within Iraqi territory. This prompted an Iraqi counter-offensive on March 16 that involved extensive use of cyanide and nerve gas, killing thousands, most of them Kurdish civilians. The Iranians immediately seized upon this opportunity to denounce Iraq internationally for its use of chemical weapons on its own civilian population. In the aftermath, Iran published, “pictures of men, women, children and animals frozen to instant death,” but this turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for Iran. By emphasizing the depressing scale of death caused by chemical weapons at Halajba, the images demoralized the Iranian public. In addition, for the first time in the war, Iraq fired modified SCUD-B rockets against Tehran, igniting fear that Iraq could launch chemical weapon attacks against Tehran, which, in turn, increased political pressure on the regime to end the war.³⁶⁹

In April 1988, the State Department produced an analysis on the status of the Iran-Iraq War. Essentially, the conflict had remained a stalemate, but as State noted, “Iraq’s continued use of chemical weapons risks Iranian retaliation on a growing scale. Iraq now certainly possesses weapons stocks and delivery means (aircraft, artillery, rockets) for much more widespread use.” This was problematic because the “pattern of regular direct chemical exchanges with Iranian troops on the battlefield, however, would rather quickly spur existing Iranian programs to produce chemical weapons, and could lead to a jump in use this year producing significant casualties.” Although Iranian use of chemical weapons would increase casualties, the analysts felt “this would eventually lead to a mutual backing off from the employment of chemicals, as in World War I.” In the

³⁶⁹ Dilip Hiro, pg. 200-201.

end, the State Department concluded that “Iraq can’t win, but need not lose; Iran can win, but probably won’t.”³⁷⁰

After the American attacks on the Iranian oil platforms in October 1987, Iran made a point of avoiding direct engagement with the United States. But in April, the Revolutionary Guards resumed the mining of the northern Gulf. Consequently, on April 14, the *USS Samuel Roberts* struck an Iranian marine mine northeast of Qatar. In response, the President again ordered the Navy to strike two Iranian oil platforms on April 18. After destroying the Nasr oil platform, the Navy attacked the nearby Salman platform that served as a Revolutionary Guard command center. At this point, Tehran ordered two of its frigates and four additional vessels to challenge the Americans.³⁷¹ In the ensuing naval battle, the *USS Wainright* fired three Harpoon missiles at the Iranian vessel *PTG Joshan*, disabling it. “The *Joshan* initiated the exchange after being warned off by the *Wainright*. A missile fired by the *Joshan* missed the US ship. The *Wainright* also fired two Standard missiles at an Iranian F-4; both missed.”³⁷² In the resulting naval battle, the Navy sank “two Iranian frigates,”³⁷³ three small boats,³⁷⁴ and destroyed the platform.³⁷⁵ As it turns out, what had begun as a retaliatory operation against Iran turned out to be the largest American naval battle since the Second World War.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁰ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, “Iran/Iraq War,” HLDG Briefing, April 12, 1988, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00547, pg. 1-3.

³⁷¹ Thomas L. McNaugher, “U.S. Policy and the Gulf War,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 117.

³⁷² Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, “SPOT Intelligence Report: Gulf Situation Report,” April 18, 1988, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00553, pg. 1.

³⁷³ Pieter H.F. Bekker, “Oil Platforms (Iran v. United States),” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 98, No. 3. (July, 2004), pg. 553-554.

³⁷⁴ Department of Defense, Defence Research Reference Series, “The Iran-Iraq War: A Reference Aid,” DDB-2600-5954-88, 1988, RRPL, William J. Burns, Box 91852 “Gulf War,” Folder 2.

³⁷⁵ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, “SPOT Intelligence Report: Gulf Situation Report,” April 18, 1988, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00553, pg. 1.

³⁷⁶ Stephen R. Shalom, “The United States and the Iran-Iraq War,” *Z-Magazine* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), pg. 12. Located on the World Wide Web: www.Zmag.org/zmag/articles/ShalomIranIraq.html

The most interesting aspect about the American attack on the Iranian oil platforms was its timing. Just as the Americans were attacking the Iranian oil platforms, Iraq launched a decisive offensive against the al-Foa peninsula on April 17. Employing its highly trained Republican Guard units in the offensive, within thirty-six hours the Iraqis had recaptured the entire peninsula. Following quickly upon this success, the Iraqis launched the second phase of its offensive on May 25, retaking the Fish Lake territory that the Iranians had seized during the second Battle of Basra. In June, Iraq continued attacking, taking territory around Mehran on June 18 and retaking the Manjoon Islands on June 25 that Iran had captured in February 1984. Cumulatively, these four offensives regained all Iraqi territory occupied by Iran. But to accomplish this incredible military victory, Iraq had made extensive use of chemical weapons, a tactic that completely demoralized Iran's military.³⁷⁷

On July 3, immediately following the rapid Iraqi victories against Iran, three Iranian gunboats fired upon and narrowly missed an American reconnaissance helicopter in the southern Gulf. Because of Iran's provocative actions, the *USS Vincennes* and the *USS Sides* engaged the Iranian vessels. In the ensuing battle, Iran Air Flight 655, en route on a 224-kilometer flight from Bandar Abbas to Dubai, strayed too close the vicinity of the battle. Fearing that Flight 655 was a F-14 coming to aid the Iranian vessels, the *USS Vincennes*, equipped with "the most sophisticated radar and electronic battle gear," hailed the European-made A300 Airbus and "warned it to keep away" from

³⁷⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 224-227.

the battle. When Flight 655 failed to respond, the naval vessel fired two Standard surface-to-air missiles at the passenger jet, killing all 290 passengers aboard.³⁷⁸

The shooting down of Flight 655 was the war's final turning point. Initially, Washington denied having downed the Iranian jet, but finally admitted fault in the incident the next day when President Reagan stated that "This is a terrible human tragedy. Our sympathy and condolences go out to the passengers, crew, and their families... We deeply regret any loss of life." The reason for the delay was due to the immense task of "sifting through... detailed reports and electronic intelligence... to confirm [that it was] a tragic case of mistaken identity."³⁷⁹ At the same time, it was unsurprising that, "the Iranians believed the *Vincennes* had purposely shot down their civilian airliner as a warning that the United States would stop at nothing to destroy Iran."³⁸⁰ As a result, on July 5, Iran called for an urgent Security Council meeting to denounce the American actions, a surprising option since Iran had boycotted the UN since October 1980.³⁸¹ When Iran's Prime Minister Mir Hussein Musavi arrived at the UN, instead of finding support for Iran's condemnation of the American attack on its airliner, he "found diplomats telling him to end the war."³⁸² The Prime Minister's UN visit occurred at the same time that its leadership was "debating... their country's final response to Resolution 598."³⁸³ The lack of support for Iran at the UN injected a new reality to the Iranian leadership; it was completely isolated in the world. Consequently,

³⁷⁸ George C. Wilson, "Navy Missile Downes Iranian Jet Liner," *The Washington Post*, July 4, 1988, pg. A01. Located on the World Wide Web: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/flight801/stories/july88crash.htm

³⁷⁹ Ibid., pg. A01.

³⁸⁰ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 229.

³⁸¹ Dilip Hiro, pg. 211-212.

³⁸² Thomas L. McNaugher, pg. 121.

³⁸³ Eric Hooglund, "Strategic and Political Objectives in the Gulf War: Iran's View," Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 53.

the pragmatists “convinced the hardliners that a U.N.-supervised cessation of hostilities was the best course to follow so that Iran could put aside the war and get moving again on its internal revolutionary agenda.”³⁸⁴

On July 12, Iraq launched the true “final offensive” of the war against Dehloran, driving forty kilometers into Iran. After decisively defeating Iranian forces, Iraqi forces promptly withdrew to the “border with the equipment and prisoners they had captured.”³⁸⁵ The decisive Iraqi victory had effectively destroyed the Iranian military. Iran, with no options left, was forced to accept Security Council Resolution 598. As a result, on July 18, Iran notified Perez de Cuellar “that it accepted the Security Council’s document without reservations. Khomeini himself subsequently ratified Iran’s acceptance.”³⁸⁶ On July 20, Khomeini made a radio address to the Iranian public announcing his acceptance of the resolution:

Because of the events and factors which I will not discuss for the time being, and considering the advice of all ranking political and military experts of the country... I agree to accept the ceasefire resolution... I consider it to be in the interest of the revolution and the system at this juncture. God knows that, were it not that all our honour and prestige should be sacrificed for Islam, I would never have consented [to the ceasefire.]

On August 7, both Iran and Iraq accepted a compromise proposal for a cease-fire and formal negotiation for peace were set to start on August 20, thus formally ending the eight-year long conflict between the two nations.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Eric Hooglund, “Strategic and Political Objectives in the Gulf War: Iran’s View,” Ed. Christopher C. Joyner, *The Persian Gulf War, Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pg. 53.

³⁸⁵ Kenneth M. Pollack, pg. 229.

³⁸⁶ Eric Hooglund, pg. 53.

³⁸⁷ Dilip Hiro, pg. 243, 248.

Conclusion

While officially American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War had been that of strict neutrality, throughout the conflict the United States openly contradicted its stated policy by providing military, economic, political, and diplomatic support to Iraq. Starting in the spring 1981, the Reagan administration began quietly increasing contacts with Iraq at the request of the Gulf States which viewed Iraq as a bulwark against the spread of radical Shi'ite Islam. The objective of the rapprochement was to encourage Iraq to continue its trend towards moderation and to see if Iraq was capable of replacing Iran in a modified "two-pillar" policy. But just as American-Iraqi relations had begun to improve, Iran suddenly expelled Iraqi forces from its territory in June 1982. Iraqi reversals created a sense of panic in Washington. The Reagan administration based its trepidation on an adaptation of the Truman administration's domino theory, believing that if Iraq fell to Iran, soon thereafter Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States would collapse as well. These fears prompted the United States to unofficially tilt towards Iraq. As part of the American tilt, the Reagan administration had sold the Iraqis dual-use (military/civilian) heavy trucks and a large quantity of Hughes helicopters, supplied Iraq with tactical intelligence about Iranian formations, provided diplomatic support at the United Nations, and helped Iraq receive EXIM credits to purchase American goods during its economic crisis of 1983-84. In addition, the United States also engaged in Operation Staunch, the attempt to curb the flow of American weaponry to Iran, which ostensibly prevented an Iranian victory over Iraq in the war. Also, in 1987-88, after Kuwait's request to re-flag its oil tankers, the

United States actively engaged Iranian forces in combat, culminating in the downing of Iran Air flight 655. In light of these numerous examples, the United States was clearly not neutral in the Iran-Iraq War.

Although the Iran-Iraq War occurred during the Cold War era, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the conflict was that it did not take on any of the characteristics of Cold War conflicts such as Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Angola and Afghanistan. Indeed, one could argue that the Iran-Iraq War was a Cold War anomaly because neither superpower could influence Iran. It can safely be assumed that had Iran and Iraq gone to war during the mid-1970s, the conflict would have resembled other Cold War altercations. Prior to the Iranian Revolution, Iran had been a close ally of the United States, just as Iraq had been an ally of the Soviet Union. But the Iranian Revolution had changed everything. Suddenly, the United States had lost its secure pillar in the region and the new regime in Tehran had formulated a non-aligned stance in international affairs. This sudden shift had left Washington scrambling to devise immediate tactics and long-term strategies, which largely rested on an optimistic belief that Iran would eventually realign itself because of its military-supply relationship with the United States. However, when Iraq invaded Iran and the American prediction failed to materialize, the United States lost its only means of influencing the Tehran regime. Interestingly, the Soviets faced a similar dilemma because Iran deeply distrusted Soviet intentions and Moscow lacked a military-supply relationship that it could use to build influence in Iran. The superpowers shared identical policy objectives towards the war, which was unlike other Cold War conflicts. They both wanted a return to the *status quo*, with neither belligerent emerging victorious, while also undermining their opponent's opportunities to expand influence in the region. Because of

this rare confluence of interest and the mutual absence of influence in Iran, the Iran-Iraq War was undoubtedly a Cold War anomaly.

Although the American policy was inconsistent, three major factors consistently influenced Washington's objective to restore stability to the region: the Soviet Union; access to oil; and the protection of regional allies. Like all crises that occurred between 1945 and 1991, the overriding American concern was to prevent the Soviet Union from advancing its interests. By the time the conflict broke out, America's influence in the region was at an all-time low because of Carter's mishandling of the Iranian Revolution. Problematically, the war threatened the security of close American allies, notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. These states feared that if the conflict were to escalate beyond Iraq and Iran, the resulting insecurity would force them to look to either the United States or the Soviet Union for protection. Fortunately, Carter quickly identified the major policy considerations – checking the Soviets, safeguarding the hostages, ensuring access to oil through the Strait of Hormuz, and protecting regional allies – and responded with a rational policy of strict neutrality. By selecting strict neutrality, the Carter administration effectively forced the Soviet Union to either follow suit or face the risk of escalating the Iran-Iraq War into a major Cold War conflict. As a result, the Soviet Union played a negligible role influencing the scope and duration of the conflict.

From the conflict's outset, access to oil in the Persian Gulf was a major driving force behind American policy. Anxiety centered on the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the so-called "jugular vein of the West," through which the vast majority of the region's oil flowed. Even before the conflict commenced, the Carter Doctrine had announced the

unshaken American commitment to maintaining access to the vital Persian Gulf. Unsurprisingly, when the war started the newfound threats posed by Iran only exacerbated American fears. Fortunately, for the first half of the war neither Iran nor Iraq made significant efforts to inhibit the flow of oil through the Strait. However, this changed in June 1983 when France sold five Super Etendard jets to Iraq, which enabled the Iraqis to attack economic targets in the Strait. Thereafter, attacks on neutral shipping gradually escalated throughout the war. As the attacks in the Gulf increased, so did the anxiety of the Gulf States, which in turn looked to the United States for protection. The United States responded by dramatically increasing its military presence in the region, which further demonstrated the American commitment to protecting access to the oil in the Gulf. Without a doubt, access to oil greatly influenced the shaping of the American policy towards the war. Had the Persian Gulf not contained such enormous oil deposits, would the United States have been as interested in protecting it?

Tied to American concerns about access to oil was a final factor, protecting America's regional allies from both Iran and the Soviet Union. From the outset, American policy focused on containing the war in order to prevent its expansion throughout the region. The fear was that if the war were to escalate to include Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Bahrain, Oman or Kuwait, the United States would be forced to intervene to protect its allies or look impotent in the face of aggression. But because the United States was able to immediately check Soviet opportunities in the war, the Gulf States continued to look to Washington for protection from Iran. To ease regional anxiety, the Reagan administration made a number of controversial decisions. It sold AWACS to Saudi Arabia, supplied Iraq with tactical intelligence, economic aid,

diplomatic support at the UN, and attacked Iran militarily. Through these actions, the United States recovered the influence it lost in the region following the mishandling of the Iranian Revolution.

Because the United States had failed to devise an effective grand strategy in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War was reactionary, responding to political, economic and military developments in the conflict as they occurred. While the objective of a grand strategy is to provide policymakers with a plan to achieve long-term policy goals, when no such plan exists, policies can become unfocused and contradictory, which was undoubtedly the case of the American policy during the Iran-Iraq War. Throughout the war the Reagan administration continuously adjusted its tactics to suit its most-immediate objectives. However, because there was no unifying strategy guiding its tactics, the administration was compelled to take an *ad hoc* approach to manage the conflict. The result was that the United States, sometimes directly violated its own policy of neutrality by providing Iraq with tactical intelligence or selling weapons to Iran. The sales to Iran exemplify the contradictory nature of the American policy. By the mid-1980s, the United States had already made a conscious decision “to drop any pretense of” neutrality in the conflict by tilting towards Iraq, yet when it appeared that the Soviets were better positioned to influence events in a post-Khomeini Iran the Reagan administration decided to sell Iran weapons.³⁸⁸ To make matters worse, the United States never informed the Gulf States of this transaction. Consequently, when the deal became public, the Gulf States were furious with the Reagan administration. They viewed Iran as a major threat to their regimes and the

³⁸⁸ William A. Cockell to Colin Powell, “Iran-Iraq,” January 21, 1987, DNSA, Iraq-Gate Collection, IG00399, pg. 1.

region, which was why they had urged the United States to tilt towards Iraq in the first place. In the end, the inconsistent and contradictory nature of the American policy towards the Iran-Iraq War was due to the Reagan administration's failure to devise a functional grand strategy for the Persian Gulf after the onset of the Iran-Iraq War. Some might argue the United States remains unable to devise a workable grand strategy in that region to this day.

APPENDIX A

3034

~~SECRET~~

THE IRANIAN SITUATION: AN ASSESSMENT

November 12, 1980

1. General Background

Conflict between Iran and Iraq has now been underway for the past two months. US diplomatic hostages are, after more than one year, still in the hands of Iranian radical and government hands. A major internal power struggle is evolving between radical clergy and so-called moderates. Additional power blocs inside and outside the country could, and almost certainly will, enter this power struggle. Food, fuel oil, heating oil and medical supplies are now in seriously short supply, impacting on the domestic and conflict situation. All elements involved (people, shortages and situation) have reduced the flexibility of the current leadership to the point where very few viable options are available either for the continuation of the war or the pursuit of peace. Inflation rate of 100% and an unemployment rate of 5-million (of 36-mill. pop.) further exacerbates the situation. Failure to achieve success in economic, military or political arenas has led to widespread public unrest to the point where the demand for some form of strong leadership is growing significantly.

Prior to the war with Iraq, some 500,000 small arms pieces were in the hands of the general public; that figure now has reached appr. 1-million. Marxist groups (Fedayeen, Chirikya, etc.) and pro-Soviet Tudeh Party members, plus left Mujahedin are now heavily armed. These groups have varying -- but all strong -- overt and/or covert connections with the USSR.

There are appr. 3,000 identified Marxists among the Iranian clergy, and close to an estimated 5,000 active KGB agents/officers in the country. There has been no intelligence community to monitor Soviet covert agitprop, political action and intelligence operations in Iran.

Ayatollah Khomeini and the clergy are neither able to continue the war or make peace with Iraq. The longer they remain in power, the more the country is weakened and prepared for structural disintegration and chaos, the result

of which could be a leftist takeover or the seizure of power by a "Qadhafi" figure from the younger military.

The USSR, because of extensive overcommitment in Afghanistan and concern over the European situation (Poland), and because of internal political changes, is not expected to interfere militarily in a direct fashion, but it does not need to do so. If the present trend continues without additional catalysts, the Marxist or pro-Marxist groups will be able to achieve control of the country in the wake of the clergy without overt Soviet assistance.

2. Internal Dynamics

There is growing and widespread discontent with the clergy rule in Iran, with the final discontent brought about by the apparently insoluble conflict with Iraq. The evident lack of leadership from the clergy has led to a leadership vacuum which the left hopes to fill. However, the situation is such that at present the left is reluctant to seize power because the national deterioration and disintegration has not yet reached the level where it would be publicly acceptable. It is, however, moving in that direction. Additionally, the left is insufficiently cohesive to mount such a move. As well, an extreme right move -- whether religious or military -- is also not acceptable to the general population. The Center, such as the National Front, is similarly unacceptable because of its clear inability to control the situation in the recent past. The major external alternatives until recently were viewed as Dr. Shahpour Bakhtiar (for two weeks the Shah's last prime minister) and former Imperial Ground Forces' commander, Gen. Gholam Ali Oveisi. They, too, are unacceptable in the current situation because of their close identification with Iraq in the months prior to the conflict.

3. Major Forces: Internal

The three major internal forces are: (i) Clergy; (ii) Leftists; (iii) Military.

The clergy has lost its ability to control events, either toward resolving the conflict or toward resolving economic problems, food and other supply shortages. This, and the fact that it is by its very nature a restricted group in terms of numbers and because its nominated leader (Khomeini) is in failing health, spells the end of clergy rule in the near future.

The left is fragmented and unless a total vacuum occurs

because of premature clerical collapse, or unless the clergy and left are galvanized by extreme-right military action (such as extensive pressure from a force led by Oveisi), it is unable to move in the very near future to seize power. The conflict with Iraq has unified the military to the extent where it could currently thwart a leftist take-over of the reins of power. The left's major hope is for more time to consolidate and to assume control over some areas of power, and for the gradual replacement of the old military by a new military force (such as the Revolutionary Guards) which was being implemented before the conflict with Iraq returned some of the armed forces' power.

The Military, whilst regaining some of its viability in order to meet the military threat from Iraq, remains restricted to a large degree in its ability to overthrow the clerical Government in the immediate term. This, however, is changing more rapidly than the power position of the other two major internal power groups. The military will once again fragment, however, if the older, traditional leadership still inside the country fails to make headway either in the Iraq conflict or in the assumption of power internally. The emergence of a young officer clique to seize power as it did in Libya is now more feasible than ever, and, indeed, fits with Libya's strong and overt current support to the Iranian military.

3(a). Major Forces: External

The major external Iranian forces impacting on the current situation are: (i) the monarchy; (ii) external Iranian technocrat/middle class expatriates; (iii) external military personnel; (iv) Dr Bakhtiar's organization; (v) Gen. Oveisi's organization; (vi) some National Front elements; (vii) Gen. Bahram Aryana's organization; (viii) Soviet-controlled "student" groups.

Alliances, tacit or formal, between some of these groupings can and has occurred, and several may seek a unity of action in order to bring about the desired result of overthrowing the present situation inside Iran. However, the potentially most strong group is the external military, led by a core of officers who have, in the past two months, achieved a considerable degree of organization and commitment. They are largely in the United States and Western Europe. This group is now increasingly supportive of Gen. Bahram Aryana, the former commander of the Imperial Iranian Armed Forces.

Gen. Aryana, resident in Paris and now 73 years old but extremely active

was discharged by the Shah because of his growing power. Has historically been identified as

strongly Persian in outlook and was in no way identified with Iraq. Condemned Iraqi aggression over BBC and some other international radio, a factor not without significance because of the dependence of many Iranians on the BBC for news and opinion. Has developed a strong command structure and has stated a readiness to return immediately to Iran to "liberate" it. As former supreme commander of the Iranian forces and the most senior Iranian officer outside the country he has organized a Supreme Command of the Liberated Armed Forces. Receiving widespread support from officers outside the country and has contacts inside Iran. Aryana believes in moving the takeover in three stages: subversion of the current rule; military takeover and creation of stability; return of control to civilians.

The monarchy has improved its potential to impact on the situation by the statement by the (then) Crown Prince (now Shah) to the effect that he was ready to return to Iran and fight for the country. Whilst his popularity has improved, the consensus is that the monarchy, and the King himself, should maintain a low-key approach to the situation.

Former Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar and Gen. Oveisi have been reduced in significance since the conflict with Iraq. Both had strong Iraqi connections and alliances. Dr Bakhtiar's major core of supporters within the armed forces was destroyed in an abortive and premature coup attempt prior to the Iraq conflict, reducing his apparent attractiveness even before his association with Iraq undercut his position. Gen. Oveisi, despite major expenditures to buy the allegiance of expatriate officers, has been unable to build a loyal external force and is regarded internally as being too closely aligned with both the former Shah and excesses of force. His top-level connections (with Pres. Sadat, for example) have kept him in the limelight, although there is little substance to support him.

Expatriate Iranian middle class refugees, many of them skilled in technical areas, largely believe that the only solution is a military one. They remain mostly uncommitted, but potentially a significant economic and psychological force. Some 2.5-million Iranians are abroad.

Expatriate Soviet-backed groups continue to function although their major task was completed with the overthrow of the Shah. They retain some viability as an agitprop (agitation propaganda) force, but their impact has been lessened by their reduced numbers and by the tide of events.

4. International Impact

The changing political situations in the United States and the Soviet bloc hold the key to major external pressures on Iran, with the exception of the immediate impact of the Iraqi invasion. Both superpowers recognize the geopolitical and resource importance of Iran, but their ability to achieve their goals with Iran is now changing. The United States, because of the election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency, and the coming to power in the US of a more strategically aware and sensitive group of policymakers, will result in a reassertion of US power which will affect the psychological and physical situation in the region. Internal Iranian groups, confused and fragmented by Carter's policies, can now regroup around the expectation of revived US support for a moderate, pro-Western Iran.

The USSR, on the other hand, has peaked in its major efforts against its Iranian target because of a variety of factors: the commitment to the Afghan conflict and the resultant world outcry; the concern over the stability of its Warsaw Treaty allies highlighted by the Polish situation; the failing health of the Soviet leadership gerintocracy; and the internal Soviet economic problems. This could change with a change of Soviet leadership, but any such changes will not be completed within the next few months even should Pres. Brezhnev die immediately. However, the USSR's apparatus operating against Iran (mainly KGB and International Section) continues to have an impact, and the Soviet supply of arms, and oil to the current Iranian leadership could impact strongly -- and even decisively -- on the outcome of the present crisis if no other forces project themselves onto the situation.

5. Outlook

Failure of external factors to act, or a failure of the traditional military to acquire power (with or without external help), will lead to continued disintegration of Iran. This in turn will result in the almost certain acquisition of power by either the pro-Soviet left or a Qadhafi-type figure. Such an eventuality would severely de-stabilize regional states, Balkanizing the region in preparation for conflict of a level likely to lead to superpower confrontation.

The prospect for change in a moderate, pro-Western fashion appears to be coalescing around Gen. Bahram Aryana, who seems to be acceptable as an "umbrella" for a broadly divergent group of nationalist moderate forces, ranging from the monarchy's supporters to those in favor of a moderate

democracy. Aryana believes, probably correctly, that unless he moves inside Iran in the very near future the emergence of a "Qadhafi-type figure" is more likely. He is reported preparing to move. Aryana is the only leadership figure currently visible who would not antagonize large sections of the Iranian population, and who would be acceptable not only to the United States and Western Europe, but also to a degree to the USSR with which he would resume normal relations.

SECRET
CONFIDENTIAL

APPENDIX B

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

April 30, 1980

Dear Colleague:

Your support is needed to help head off the Administration's apparent decision to proceed with the sale of \$11.2 million worth of gas turbine engines to power four modern missile-carrying frigates being built in Italy for the Iraq navy.

The Commerce Department unilaterally approved the export licenses on January 23 without consulting the State Department or notifying the Congress in apparent disregard of the notification requirement of Section 6(i) of the Export Administration Act with regard to the sale of militarily significant items to certified supporters of international terrorism. At that time, we urged the President to revoke the sale. To date the Administration has not formally replied except to say that our request is under view.

The Administration is likely to go ahead with the sale unless opposition in Congress appears to be intense and widespread. You are invited to join us in signing the attached follow-up letter to demonstrate Congressional opposition. The issue at stake here is whether or not the United States will maintain a consistent posture of opposing international terrorism. We believe that under the present circumstances the United States cannot afford to appear to acquiesce to Iraq's support for international terrorism by allowing the sale of any equipment intended so directly for military purposes.

Please call 54411 or 57300 if you would like to cosign this letter.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Bingham

Millicent Fenwick

John Buchanan

Dante Fascell

Dear Mr. President:

We are strongly opposed to the Administration's reported decision to proceed with the sale of eight gas turbine engines to power four modern missile carrying frigates being built in Italy for Iraq -- a country which repeatedly has supported international terrorism. We call upon you to block this sale permanently.

As a matter of general policy, we believe the United States should prohibit the sale of equipment or services specifically intended for military end-use to countries which have been identified as repeated supporters of international terrorism. In individual instances, overriding American interests might suggest specific exceptions to this posture, but such a case has not been made with regard to this \$11.2 million frigate engine sale, and we doubt that it can be made.

The Secretary of State, in December, pursuant to the requirements of Section 6(1) of the Export Administration Act formally listed Iraq with Syria, Lybia and South Yemen, as countries which repeatedly have provided support for acts of international terrorism. Since that time, as you are aware, an Iraqi-backed faction of the PLO attacked the children's nursery at the Misgav Am kibbutz on April 7. Nine hours later a two year old child was among the three innocent civilians killed and four more children, aged one to three, were among the sixteen wounded.

With American diplomats currently being held hostage by terrorists in Teheran and, until recently, in Bogata, this is the time to underscore U.S. opposition to international terrorism -- not to take a step which would be construed as acquiescing in it.

Additionally, we believe such a sale is extremely unwise in terms of the volatile power politics of the Persian Gulf. We question the development of even an indirect military supply relationship with the radical regime in Baghdad which, along with the Soviet-backed PFDY, is regularly cited by the Administration as a potential de-stabilizer in the Persian Gulf necessitating large arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Iraq now only has small missile and patrol boats, but these frigates will greatly enhance the ability of Iraq to project its naval power down the Gulf to include the Strait of Hormuz, through which passes 70% of the world's oil. Admittedly, alternative suppliers could step forward to provide engines so that our blocking the sale may not prevent Iraq from getting the frigates ultimately. Nevertheless, it would be incongruous for the United States to be required to support the further military build up of the moderate states in the Gulf in order to counteract the potential threat posed to the world's oil life line by Iraqi frigates powered by U.S. engines.

We are aware of the belief in some quarters of the Administration that Iraq may be receptive to developing closer relationships to the West, thereby attenuating its overwhelming dependence on the Soviet Union. This would clearly be in our interest and it should be encouraged. But in view of the availability of alternate Western suppliers for the engines, there must be better ways to send an American "signal" rather than direct involvement in contributing to the construction of the frigates making Iraq's the strongest local Navy on the Persian Gulf. We suggest that civilian commodities rather than military-related items could be a much more appropriate way to indicate a desire to improve relations.

We also suggest the review process for cases such as this one should be tightened to close the loop-hole that allowed the Commerce Department to approve the engine license on January 23 without the prior notification to Congress contemplated in Section 6(1) of the Export Administration Act. This type of slip-up should be prevented in the future by administratively revising the control list to specify that the sale of all military end-use equipment and services to countries which are identified supporters of international terrorism would automatically be reviewed by the Secretary of State and reported, as necessary, under Section 6(1). Tightening the procedures after the fact is necessary in our view, but not in itself sufficient. The frigate engine sale must also be reversed.

In conclusion, Mr. President, we urge you to revoke the licence for the Iraqi frigate engines and revise the control list for review of future sales in order to maintain your Administration's consistent opposition to international terrorism.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX C

~~TOP SECRET~~

MEMORANDUM

DECLASSIFIED
NLS F96-127/1 #184

THE WHITE HOUSE BY CAS NARA, DATE 3/02/01

WASHINGTON

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~
~~CONTAINS CODEWORD~~

3499

June 12, 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR RICHARD V. ALLEN

FROM: The Situation Room

SUBJECT: Noon Notes

Israelis Claim U.S.-Israeli Relations May Be Seriously Damaged: Israeli Washington correspondents and political analysts are writing that the President's decision to suspend shipment of the F-16s, though likely to be short-lived and symbolic, may have dealt relations with Israel a serious blow. Yediot claims it is doubtful U.S.-Israeli relations will be what they used to be, and former premier Rabin argues Israel cannot let the "unprecedented," "extremely grave" decision go unanswered. Wolf Blitzer accuses the U.S. of using arms supplies as a point of leverage, setting back relations to the "bad" days, "even if Reagan and his senior advisors had little realization of its historic significance." Blitzer also claims some in the administration are seeking a full-scale confrontation with Begin. Ha'aretz' Samet points to Secretary Weinberger's "pro-Saudi attitude" and administration plans to deal very vigorously with the West Bank autonomy issue and said it seemed something "irreparable" happened this week to the President's approach to the Israeli question. (U)

Canada Issues Strongest-Ever Condemnation of Israel: Embassy Ottawa reports that in the most negative statement it has ever made toward Israel, Canada has "strongly condemned" the Iraq attack as "extremely harmful" to Middle East peace. The Canadian Arab community has been active in demanding action against Israel, and Arab ambassadors will meet Foreign Minister MacGuigan today. He is expected to cite Canada's statement of condemnation but reiterate Ottawa's unswerving opposition to any international agency considering Israel's expulsion. (C)

IAEA Director's Statement on Israeli Attack: At today's IAEA debate on the Israeli attack, Director General Eklund commented that it is not the responsibility of the agency to search facilities which do not contain safeguarded material. He said the agency's procedures are designed to ensure fuel

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REVIEW ON JUNE 12, 2011

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elements shipped from abroad are checked on arrival and continuously monitored. The design of the facility and of the fuel elements indicates a very high probability that diversion of the fuel elements would be detected. Noting that diversion could also be accomplished in an Osiris-type reactor through undeclared production of plutonium, Eklund said such production underneath the reactor is practically impossible since the core is on a thick concrete slab lined with a heavy steel plate. He concluded that diversion of fuel elements in this type reactor cannot be technically excluded but would very probably be detected. (U)

Jordanian Media Reaction To Israeli Raid: Jordanian press today comments that Washington would be deceived if it believed that delaying delivery of the planes to Israel could assuage Arab resentment. One editorial states the upcoming Security Council meeting will give the U.S. a last chance to abandon its blind support of Israel. Another states it hopes the Security Council will not be taken in by Israeli deceptions or American apologia and will instead insist that Israel sign the non-proliferation treaty or face an arms embargo. (U)

People's Daily Commentary on U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan: An authoritative commentary in People's Daily yesterday serves notice that any U.S. effort to seek PRO consent to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in exchange for U.S. arms sales to China is a "doomed to failure." It also warns that any future arms sales to Taiwan by any country will "draw a strong reaction." Countering arguments by some in the U.S. who hold that U.S. arms sales to Taiwan are in keeping with U.S. security interests, the commentary maintains that this "is an antiquated theory of power politics and equally untenable." The article concludes that those trying to find ways for the U.S. to sell arms to Taiwan should realize that "they cannot hope to rescue this hopeless situation." (U)

Walesa Says Peace and Order Necessary: In a meeting with several thousand workers yesterday, Lech Walesa said radicals were necessary to the trade union movement and that KOR activists would be protected by the union. He continued, however, that Solidarity now protects the workers and KOR has no reason to exist. Stating that at the present time peace is the highest requirement, he repeated several times that the Polish people want peace. He came out against strikes except as a last resort. Walesa is planning many more such meetings in the coming weeks. Our embassy points out he is definitely following the line that it is necessary to "hunker down" and consolidate the gains the union has made thus far. (C)

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