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Causes of the Iran-Iraq War

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The Iran-Iraq War is one of the most destructive conflicts since World War II. It has potentially profound implications for the stability of the region, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the West’s petroleum lifeline, and for other interests of the superpowers. It is also of considerable theoretical importance as a model of conflict in an era of declining superpower influence, emerging regional powers, and revolutionary change. Yet in spite of its importance, the Iran-Iraq War has received surprisingly little attention in the United States. While the media have provided a running account of the course of the war, there have been few attempts at a more interpretive analysis. Drawing particularly little attention is the question of the causes of the war. This is critical, not only for understanding how the war might be resolved, but also for anticipating whether similar wars are likely to occur in the future and knowing how they might be avoided.

This study of the Iran-Iraq War will attempt to go beyond a simple chronology of events and identify a relatively small number of critical causal factors. The analysis of these variables and their interrelationships will allow us to understand the war in its theoretical context. This will provide both a better explanation for the causes of this particular war and a means of using this case study to enhance our general theoretical understanding of the causes of war.

Historical Overview

Serious conflict between Iran and Iraq has been going on since the 1960s. It has involved support for subversive movements and territorial disputes, the latter centering on the disposition of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway—a vital transportation route and an object of contention since the Ottoman
Empire. With diplomatic support and military aid from the United States, Iran under the shah was unquestionably the leading military power in the Persian Gulf region. The shah attempted to extend Iran's influence throughout this region and made territorial encroachments into areas claimed by several Gulf regimes. In 1969 Iran declared a 1937 treaty giving Iraq virtually full control over the Shatt-al-Arab, and two years later seized from Arab emirates three small islands (Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs) near the Strait of Hormuz. At Algiers in 1975, Iraq agreed to redefine the Shatt boundary by the shawab principle, ceding half of the waterway to Iran, in return for an end to the shah's support of Iraqi Kurdish insurgents who had engaged Baghdad in a protracted and costly rebellion.

The conservative Arab monarchs resented the shah's often expansionist guardianship over the Persian Gulf. Iraq's actions were tolerated in exchange for the shah's noninterference in their regimes. These Arab leaders, particularly the clerical factions. In the fall of 1978, at the request of the city of Najaf.

After the fall of the shah, Arab leaders were apprehensive over the unfolding Iranian revolution. With moderate Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister the new Khomeini regime did much to alleviate Arab fears by emphasizing Islamic brotherhood. Noninterference in internal affairs, mutual respect for territorial integrity, nonrecognition of Israel, and a willingness to abandon its role as gendarme of the Gulf. Statements from Iranian clerics reviving territorial claims on Bahrain and the islands seized in 1971, however, served to reignite Arab suspicions regarding the intentions of the new regime's more fundamentalist elements. Relations began to deteriorate in the spring of 1979 because of the resurgence of minority movements in both Iran and Iraq, and the support given to each movement by the other regime in Iran's support for Iraqi Shi'ites against the Sunni-dominated Baath regime led Baghdad to crack down on Shi'ite activities in the holy cities. Saddam Hussein publicly indicted the Persian fundamentalists and ordered the sacking of Khomeini's former residence, the deportation of his representatives, and the arrest of the preeminent Shi'ite dissident cleric, Mohammed Bakr al-Sadr.

Despite sincere efforts by the Baghdad and Bazargan governments toward reconciliation in the summer, by the fall of 1979 Shi'ite unrest throughout the upper Gulf prompted renewed statements from Baghdad decrying Teheran's agitation of Arab Shi'ites. Saddam Hussein began making subtle threats against the Khomeini regime, he also demanded the end of Iranian control of Gulf islands and moderation toward Iran's disaffected minorities. Official dialogue between the two countries soon ended, however, following repeated attacks by revolutionary guards of Iraqi consulates and its embassy in Teheran. The replacement of the Bazargan government in November by a Revolutionary Council, dominated by clerical factions, solidified the Islamic Republic's Party's (IRP) hold on Iran. The new president, Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, and Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghorbadeh became increasingly dependent on the newly ascendant clerics of the IRP. Teheran intensified radio broadcasts aimed at the Shi'ites of the Arab Gulf states, decrying their "corrupt" or "Zionist" regimes and demanding their overthrow and replacement by fundamentalist-oriented Islamic republics. This campaign was supplemented by popular demonstrations in Shi'ite communities and repeated acts of political violence. These included bombings and assassination attempts against Iraqi officials, notably an attempt on Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz in April 1980. These actions were chiefly the work of al-Dawa (the Call), an Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite opposition group. Iraq responded with its own propaganda attacks directed at Iranian Arabs and cracked down further on its own Shi'ite activists with mass expulsions, continued arrests, and executions, including that of the leading Iraqi dissident, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr. Iraq was also blamed by Iran for the seizure of the Iranian embassy in London and an assassination attempt against Iranian prime minister Ghorbadeh.

In the summer of 1980 border violence erupted and the cycle of hostility began to escalate. After an attack on two Iraqi villages in early September, Baghdad demanded Iranian recognition of Iraq's "rights" and territorial claims. These included Iranian withdrawal from a disputed area in Kermandshah province, renegotiation of the 1975 agreement, and an end to Iranian-sponsored unrest and border violence. On September 17, Saddam Hussein declared that Iran had violated the 1975 agreement and announced that Iraq now considered the treaty void, a move which Iran immediately rejected. On September 22 Iraq initiated air attacks against Iranian airfields, including Teheran's, and followed with a major ground assault into the oil-producing province of Khuzestan.

The Iraqi military threat was accompanied by the following conditions for cessation of hostilities: recognition of Iraqi rights and territorial sovereignty, agreement on good neighborly relations with all Arab Gulf states, noninterference in their internal affairs, and an end to all aggressive activities. Iraq claimed the entire Shatt-al-Arab but made no territorial claims on the Gulf Islands. By October, and with Iraqi forces pressing forward, Saddam Hussein proclaimed that militarily "we have realized our goal" and called for a cease-fire and negotiations. However, Iran refused to negotiate prior to a complete Iraqi withdrawal. As the war continued during the first half of 1981, the two sides reached a virtual stalemate in the fighting. By
fall, however, persistent Iranian counteroffensives forced an Iraqi withdrawal. By March 1982, Iran had seized a clear advantage, with Iraq withdrawing in June from its own borders and Iran carrying the war into southern Iraq in July.

Theoretical Framework

Having briefly described the key events leading up to the war, our task now is to abstract from the complexity of this historical sequence and identify a small number of key variables which can explain the outbreak of the war. The key concepts around which this interpretation is built are the quest for power and prestige, an expansionist revolutionary ideology and its effect on domestic political stability, a power vacuum generated by internal political convulsion, expectations of third state support, and misperceptions. Secondary variables closely tied to and reinforcing the above are humiliation and concern for the regional balance of power. These variables have been among the most important causes of wars for centuries and have received extensive treatment in the theoretical literature on international conflict. The theoretical linkages by which these variables lead to war need to be summarized briefly before they can be applied to this particular case.

Power has been the central concept in Western realist theories of international politics since Thucydides, and the drive for continental or regional predominance has long been recognized by balance-of-power theories and others as one of the primary causes of war. Closely related to power is prestige, for the latter is viewed by statesmen as inseparable from credibility, resolve, and the reputation for power. It has been suggested that "prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations." It is also hypothesized that states which perceive a discrepancy between their actual military power and their prestige are the most likely to initiate a war, in order to bring the political and economic benefits of their perceived status to the "just" level defined by their military power. States are particularly concerned with prestige considerations when they believe they have recently suffered a humiliation at the hands of this adversary or others. Since national honor and prestige profoundly affect the domestic political and personal prestige of the regime and individuals in power, statesmen often seek diplomatic or military victories abroad not only as ends in themselves but also to enhance their political support at home.

States go to war not only because of ambitions to enhance their power and prestige but also out of fear deriving from external threats. These may be military threats to one's territorial integrity or power position or political threats to one's domestic political stability. Political threats may derive from an expansionist revolutionary ideology which aims to impose its values on other societies, from external support for displaced national minorities or other ethnic groups which overlap state territorial boundaries, or from more direct external efforts to destabilize another regime. Military and political threats serve to reinforce one another. A military defeat may induce a change of regime or even a revolution, while internal political instability may seriously weaken a state's military strength and thereby alter the regional or continental balance of power. A state attempting to export a revolutionary ideology abroad is fearing both because of the immediate threat to the viability of other regimes but also because of the new diplomatic alignments that might result and their effect on the balance of power. In the context of these national interests of power, prestige, and domestic political stability, and the individual political interests served by them, certain opportunities may arise that increase the likelihood of war. Particularly important is a sudden increase in power differentials between states, deriving from either military defeat or from internal weakness induced by political instability or economic decline.

Another critical condition for war is the perception of diplomatic, economic, or military support from some states and the expectation of the neutrality of others. Such behavior is particularly important if there are mutual security interests among the states in question as well as ideological, religious, or cultural ties which bind them in a common cause.

Misperceptions and miscalculations are also critical in the processes leading to war. Statesmen tend to misperceive not only the balance of military capabilities but also the resolve of the adversary to continue the war. They also miscalculate the effect of the war on the unity of the adversary's population and on the morale and effectiveness of its military forces. Military overconfidence is so critical that with few exceptions it may be said that it is a necessary condition for the numerous wars ultimately lost by the initiator. This theoretical framework and historical perspective provides the basis for an interpretation of the causes of the Iran-Iraq War and an analysis of its implications for the general theoretical question of the causes of war.

Causes of the Iran-Iraq War

Saddam Hussein's Quest for Preqerence

For years a leading objective of Saddam Hussein was to gain for Iraq a position of preeminence in the Persian Gulf and in the Arab community. Iraq's potential to be the predominant power in the area and successor to Egypt as the leading Arab state is based on several demographic, economic,
and military factors. Its population—nearly 14 million—is greater than that of any Arab petroleum exporter except Egypt, is largely literate, and consists of relatively large and sophisticated middle and technocratic classes. At 3.5 million barrels per day before the war, Iraq was the second largest OPEC producer, earning annual revenues of $23 billion. Iraq's exploration has been relatively limited but it is widely believed that its crude reserves could be second in the Gulf only to the Saudis. Finally, Iraq's military forces are larger than those of any other Arab Gulf state and nearly the equal of Iran's.

Saddam Hussein was secure in his leadership and maintained firm control over the military. The domestic policies of the socialist Baath regime also aided in consolidating its control. Income had risen dramatically while inflation had been limited to 12 percent. Unlike the other oil-exporting Gulf states, Iraq's distributive policies prevented the formation of an opulent upper class. Economic development has resulted in mass public housing, agricultural modernization, and petrochemical and steel industries. Saddam Hussein has also sought to broaden his political appeal by establishing a parliamentary body, the National Assembly, which is responsible for overseeing non-security policy. These considerations led him and others to perceive a significant increase in Iraqi strength. Claudia Wright wrote in 1979 of Iraq as a "new power" in the region, and William Quandt concluded in early 1980 that Iraq "is certain to be a dominant influence in the Gulf region in the 1980s." 14

Saddam Hussein's own policies were clearly designed to advance Iraq's position in the Middle East. He engineered increases in Iraqi military power, including the development of a nuclear program which may make Iraq the only Arab state able to counter Israel's nuclear potential. He successfully rallied the Arabs against the Camp David accords by convening two pan-Arab conferences. In the Baghdad summit in November 1978 the moderate Arabs were prevented from splitting away from united Arab opposition, further enhancing Iraqi diplomatic prestige. Saddam Hussein sought to assert Iraq into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by having the Iraqi PLO element, the Arab Liberation Front, attack Kibutz Mizgav in northern Israel in April 1980. More importantly, he moderated the socialist Baath regime's radical position in the Arab world and ended his revolutionary rhetoric against the monarchs. This new position was evident in another leadership bid in February 1980, when Saddam proclaimed an Arab National Charter. The charter called on all Arabs to refrain from force in resolution of disputes, a remarkable change from Baghdad's previous revolutionary rhetoric. Iraq's growing estrangement from the Soviet Union, movement away from its former terrorist friends, and support for foreign aid, particularly to Jordan, overcome Baghdad's previous position as a

pariah from the Arab moderates. Moderation extended to economic issues such as production levels and pricing, which grew in line with Saudi preferences. Saddam also attempted, though unsuccessfully, to serve as an ideological bridge between the moderate and radical Arabs and to secure a leadership role among the nonaligned.

Inseparable from Saddam Hussein's concern for prestige among the Arabs, and most significant in any bid to be the foremost Persian Gulf military power, is the goal of asserting Iraqi influence over Iran. Indeed, Baghdad's rhetorical concern with the territorial issues of the 1975 Algiers agreement initially led some observers to conclude that a redress of its territorial provisions was the primary Iraqi motivation for the war. The coerced cession of full control over the Shaat-al-Arab waterway was a major humiliation for the prestige-conscious Baghdad regime.15 This humiliation extended beyond Iraq to other Arab states—it symbolized the concessions the Arabs had repeatedly been forced to make to their stronger Persian neighbor. In addition, successive defeats at the hands of the Israelis, in which the Iraqis fared particularly poorly, added further to Arab humiliation. The importance of Arab pride as a driving force in the conflict is indicated by Arab celebration of early Iraqi successes as the greatest military victory of Arab over the Persians since the Battle of Qadisiya in 637.

Although an Iraqi victory would have precluded any return to Iranian hegemony in the Gulf and would have catapulted Iraq to a position of preeminence in the region and in the Arab world, this concern does not by itself explain Saddam's decision for war. Baghdad's initial posture toward the Bazargan government was indeed favorable. Its demands for a rectification of territorial disputes did not begin until after the Khomeni regime shifted to a general policy of exporting its Islamic fundamentalism to the other Gulf states and supporting, in particular, unrest among Iraqi Shi'ites. The Baghdad regime has made it clear that its rejection of the 1975 Algiers agreement was based primarily on Tehran's violation of the pledge for noninterference in internal affairs, not the territorial issues per se. Moreover, unlike the issue of noninterference in domestic affairs, Iraq's territorial demands were jettisoned as conditions for an end to hostilities even while its forces were present in strength in Kuwait. Territorial disputes, including those that were brought to the Shaat, served as a pretext rather than a cause of the war. For a full understanding of Saddam's motives, we must consider the perceived threat to the domestic political stability in Iraq and to the moderate regimes of the Gulf emanating from revolutionary Iran.

The Revolutionary Threat to Iraq and the Gulf

The Arab leaders of the Persian Gulf states were alarmed by the revolution in Iran because its populist and sectarian nature threatened their Sunni-
dominated regimes. To Arab leaders, and particularly the conservative monarchs, whose autocratic regimes in many ways resembled the shaf’s, the revolution demonstrated the potential fragility of their own authority when confronted with Islamic fundamentalism linked to social discontent. Fundamentalist Islam, wedded to a militant Shi’ism, threatened both the Sunni leadership of the monarchies and the secular-oriented Baath regime in Baghdad.

The loyalties of the Shi’ite populations of the Arab Gulf states were of paramount concern. They constitute a majority in Iraq and Bahrain and sizable minorities in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Shi’ism is concentrated in the Eastern province. Iraq had perhaps the most to fear from the Iranian revolution. Its Shi’ite majority has long resented its generally inferior political and economic status within the Sunni-dominated elite, and has also been organized into ideological and functional groups not unlike those which formed the shaf’s early opposition. Tens of thousands of Shi’ites had been expelled from Iraq in the seventies. There is little doubt regarding Baghdad’s interpretation of the Iranian revolution and its meaning for the Iraqi Shi’ite population. As A.H. Abidi has observed, “despite its secular posture, the Iraqi government interpreted, though not openly, the antimperialist nationalistic movement in Iran as a Shi’ite resurgence, as well as one which might have a spillover effect on Iraq.” Indeed, the success of the Iranian revolution gave support to dissident movements and pro-Khomeini activists not only in Iraq but also in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. After the Khomeini regime had emerged, domestic sympathy initially constrained the countries’ leaders from openly criticizing the revolution, though privately they did not hesitate to voice their fears. With the outbreak of war, fears of escalation, and particularly of Iranian strikes against the Gulf’s vulnerable petroleum facilities, further muted the moderate public support of Iraq. King Hussein of Jordan, however, whose involuntariness to threats from the Iranian Air Force has allowed him a certain degree of freedom, has characterized the conflict as one between the Teheran regime and all the Arab Gulf states, on whose behalf the Iraqis have been a “front line.”

Reinforcing Arab fears was the expansionist mission of the revolutionary Iranian regime. The goal of exporting the revolution and creating new Shi’ite Islamic republics soon began to be translated into concrete programs of agitation, particularly in Iraq. Radio broadcasts from Ahwaz and Teheran had been going on since the fall of 1979, and by the spring of 1980 export of the revolution was stated government policy. Terrorist activities in Iraq, including the attack on Deputy Prime Minister Aziz, were primarily the work of the Iranian-backed al-Dawa. These activities included assassinations and assaults on police stations, party officials, and army units. In his effort to justify the Iraqi invasion before the UN Security Council on October 5, 1980, Foreign Minister Hammadi stressed the role of the Islamic Republican Party in stimulating Shi’ite agitation as being Baghdad’s chief concern.

Prime Minister Bazargan resigned, and with him went Foreign Minister Yazdi, so the arena was left free for Khomeini and his followers. At that time, Khomeini unmasked the true intentions of his Islamic revolution, by deciding to export it to Iraq and the Arab Gulf region. The decision was reached to overthrow our Government through subversion in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, by the so-called Sons of Islam—the Imam’s Soldiers, the militants of the Dawa Party. We witnessed all over our country, and particularly in the central and southern parts, acts of sabotage and terrorism of mounting magnitude. Dr. Hammadi’s statement is indicative of Baghdad’s primary motivation for the war: ending Iranian assistance to dissident Iraqi Shi’ites. While any Shi’ite or fundamentalist challenge could not have triggered an immediate collapse of the Baath regime, the long-term threat as perceived by Iraq was unmistakable. There was no reason to anticipate an eventual attenuation of the subversion, particularly after the failure of the rapprochement effort in the summer of 1979 and the ascendency of the IRP. As Aced Dawa, who observed, “Although such groups were not at present constituted a threat to Hussein, the growing restlessness among members of the Shi’ite population in the wake of the Khomeini revolution poses a menacing long-term problem.”

The timing of Iraqi escalations, which appear to follow specific Iranian efforts at agitation, provides further evidence of Iranian perceptions of a revolutionary threat from Teheran. September 1979 statements by Ayatollah Ruhouani calling for the annexation of Bahrain and export of the revolution through the Persian Gulf were followed immediately by the dispatch of the Iranian defense minister on a tour of the Gulf states to assure them of Iraqi protection. In October, after Shi’ite demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, Saddam Hussein made his first real warning to Teheran, saying: “Iraq’s capabilities can be used against any side which tries to violate the sovereignty of Kuwait or Bahrain or harm their people or land. This applies to the entire Gulf.” In the same month, after the attacks on Iraqi consulates and the embassy, Saddam broke diplomatic relations and indicted the export of the revolution. The Khuzestan invasion itself came after numerous encounters over the border.

Thus Iraq had two primary aims in launching its military attack against Iran. First, to regain control of the Shatt-al-Arab and obtain thereby a position of preeminence in the Gulf and in the Arab community; second, to put an end to Iranian agitation of Shi’ite movements in Iraq and
other Gulf states. These goals were mutually reinforcing. Iraq could not increase its power and prestige if Iranian agitation continued to pose a major threat to domestic stability and the ending role of the Baath party in Iraq. At the same time, an Iraqi success in stopping Iranian efforts to export its revolution, and perhaps even toppling the Khomeini regime, would undoubtedly catapult Iraq to a leading position in the Arab world and perhaps give it a dominant position in the Persian Gulf.

While these two objectives did serve to reinforce each other, this analysis had led us to conclude that it was the determination to end the Shi'ite agitation and the threat to the stability of the Baath regime that took priority for Baghdad. As Azeed Dawishzadeh argues, "the exasperation felt by the Iraqi leadership in the face of Iran's continued efforts to incite the Shi'ite population of Iraq against the Baghdad government was the immediate cause of the war." 19

The political, diplomatic, and military situation in the Gulf region greatly facilitated Saddam Hussein in his efforts to gain both objectives. The other Arab Gulf states feared the revolution but lacked the means to act against it. Iraq had the capability, had gradually moderated its radicalism, and had emerged from its diplomatic isolation. The Arabs needed Iraq to contain the Islamic revolution and promote moderation in the region. Iraq needed their diplomatic and economic support for its effort against Iran and to advance its aspirations for leadership in the region. Thus from the beginning, Saddam Hussein consistently championed Arab positions. Together with the Saudis, Iraq played a leading role in organizing the Gulf monarchies into cooperative security arrangements to counter the fundamentalist threat posed by the revolutionary regime in Tehran. While the Gulf monarchs had been devising mutual security arrangements in the summer of 1979, Saudi-Iraqi cooperation opened the door for an eventual Iraqi security relationship with the other Gulf states. The Saudis and Iraq quickly settled a border dispute which had precluded closer relations. This was followed by Iraq's entry into a Gulf agreement on monitoring terrorities.

In the summer and fall of 1979, Iraq was the only Arab state to recognize the new Iranian regime in Tehran. Iraq's economic relations with Iran were virtually non-existent before the revolution. Iraq's oil revenues from the Persian Gulf were negligible before the revolution. Its need for Iran was primarily economic. In 1978, 21% of Iraq's total imports came from Iran. Iraq was dependent on Iran for its petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, and the like. With the revolution, Iraq's economic relations were transferred to other Arab states, particularly Egypt. Iraq was happy to lose its economic relationship with Iran.

In the summer of 1979, Iraq's foreign minister, Faris al-Hasnawi, visited Baghdad, followed by the Emir of Ras al-Khaima and a United Arab Emirates' emissary. Emissaries from Egypt and other Arab states were also shuttling about in the region securing a security consensus. In August Saddam Hussein made the first visit to Saudi Arabia by an Iraqi president. In the resulting communiqué and in following Iraqi consultations, the focus of the meetings was described as "the present situation in the Islamic world," a clear reference to Iran.

This was followed by a further flurry of diplomatic activity. In spite of the official silence of the Arab Gulf states, there is some evidence that they were informed in advance of Iraqi military plans and gave their approval. As Claudia Wright concludes, "Iraqi diplomacy during 1980 created an Arab entente that brought together Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the smaller Gulf states in support of Iraq taking military action against Iran." 21

As the war began to wind down, the other Arab states were much more open in providing diplomatic, economic, and logistic assistance to Iraq in support of its war effort.

The promises (or at least expectations) of diplomatic and economic support from this coalition were critical for Iraq's decision for war. In the absence of this support, Iraq's prospects for victory and the pressure for Iranian concessions would have been considerably diminished and Saddam's goal of preeminence in the Arab world only an illusion. This is precisely why Saddam went to such efforts to forge a diplomatic coalition. In this sense Iraq's expectation of third-state support was probably a necessary condition for the war.

Weakness and Opportunity

Two other factors combined to provide a further opportunity for war and served to increase the expected costs of the failure to resort to force. The first was the perceived military weakness of Iran and the resulting power vacuum in the Gulf. The Iranian military had been decimated by its politico-military efforts under the revolution. As a result, the Iranian forces were not as capable as were their Iraqi counterparts.

Meanwhile, by 1979, Iraq's military spending had risen to $2 billion a year (13 percent of its GDP) and Iraq leaders had come to believe that they were the most formidable military force in the Gulf. Nor was it expected that Iran could sustain a war effort without its petroleum revenues from Khuzestan's oil, which had financial reserves of only $12 billion in September 1980, had already seen a drastic drop in oil revenues since the start of the revolution and had been forced to finance more than half of its $40 billion national budget through deficit. At the beginning of the war, Iraq boasted financial reserves of about $35 billion, more than enough to finance its social and economic policies for years without oil revenues, though those reserves were never anticipated. As noted earlier, Saddam Hussein was also confident of financial and logistic assistance from his conservative neighbors (who have generously provided both), including $20-$30 billion in grants and interest-free loans.
Iraq was therefore confident of its military and financial capabilities to achieve its objectives. The Iraqi plan was to seize the Khuzestan oil facilities, denying their badly needed resources to the Teheran regime and forcing it to negotiate, or, possibly, precipitating its demise. Of Baghdad’s interventions, Claudia Wright has written:

Iraq undertook to limit military action while offering negotiations. An all-out invasion of Iran was never contemplated. The plan to capture Khuzestan on which these Arab nations agreed was proposed as the last stage in an escalation.

The classic classicist design, to which Iraq’s senior officials constantly adhered in their interviews — [was test] the war was an extension of the politics of border negotiations by means of a military siege.26

It was a weakened Iran and a power vacuum in the Persian Gulf that provided Iraq with an opportunity to resolve existing territorial disputes, stop the Shia agitation, and gain a position of preeminence in the region. The temptation for war was all the greater because Saddam Hussein could not be certain that this opportunity would always be available. The ascendency of the clerical factions of the IRI in Teheran and their continued consolidation of power offered little hope to Saddam or the other Gulf leaders that Shia agitation could end with an eventual succession of a less zealous Iranian leadership. The months of serious internal challenge to the revolutionary movement ended, in July 1980, in a failed coup attempt by all three services. This led Iraqi and other Gulf leaders to conclude that in the absence of outside intervention no internal opposition was left with the strength to topple the Khomeini regime, and that the national and military depletion of Iran due to its prolonged upheaval had already ebbed. Any delay in the military effort against Iran would only increase the cost and risk involved. Unfortunately for Saddam Hussein and Iraq, these rational calculations were flawed by some fundamental misperceptions, leading to an ill-advised war that would only further destabilize the region for years to come.

Misperceptions

Iraq misperceived Iran’s military power and potential relative to its own, the resolve of the Khomeini regime to continue the war in the face of early setbacks, and the effect of the war on Iranian society and politics. These misperceptions were critical — had they not existed, it is extremely unlikely that Saddam Hussein would have initiated the war.

Iraq suffered the same military overconfidence that historically has characterized so many states on the eve of war. It greatly underestimated the competence of the Iranian Air Force and its ability to attack important objectives in Iraq. Saddam also underestimates the Iranian Army, including its morale, equipment, and its stockpiles for a protracted war.27 Iraq’s political miscalculations were equally critical. Whereas Iraq expected that the war would further fragment a divided Iranian society, reduce the morale of the military, and perhaps even topple the Khomeini regime, in fact it had the opposite impact, uniting Iranian society and rekindling the revolutionary spirit which brought Khomeini to power. Like foreign invaders throughout history, Iraq was confronted with an inspired army willing to fight to the death to defend its homeland and revolution. Nor did Khuzestani Arabs welcome and aid the Iraqi forces as liberators, which the Iraqis had expected. The political pressures with which Iraq expected to force Iranian concessions served instead to increase that nation’s resolve and determination not only to expel the invaders but also to topple the Iraqi regime.

Equally serious was Iraq’s overestimation of its own strength. Iraqi troops had only limited military experience and poor training.28 The effectiveness of Shia troops commanded by Sunni officers fighting in Shia territory against a Shia revolution was questionable. The tactics which had been developed against the Kurds proved less effective against a national army like Iran’s. These constraints were overlooked in part because of a politicized and highly centralized Iranian military and government which treated critical analysis as national disloyalty. The irony, in the words of Anthony Cordesman, is that “Iraq thus went to war against an opponent that it regarded as crippled by internal politics with crippling political weaknesses of its own.”29

Conclusion

By initiating a war against Iran, Iraq seized what it believed to be a good opportunity to eliminate a serious threat and at the same time advance long-standing objectives. The threat derived from the Islamic revolution in Iran and the continued efforts of the Khomeini regime to export that revolution. Saddam Hussein believed that Iranian efforts to incite revolutionary and ethnic conflict constituted a significant threat to the secular Iraqi state and his personal leadership. It also threatened the domestic political stability of the other Gulf states and therefore the stability of the region as a whole. These threats would only increase as the clerics further consolidated their hold in Iran in the face of a demoralized internal opposition and as the Iranian military was regenerated after the early excesses of the revolution. In the face of the increasing political threat backed by an Iranian military that would probably grow stronger relative to his own, and convinced that the threat could be removed only by force, the opportunity...
afforded by Iran’s temporary military, political, and economic weaknesses proved overwhelmingly attractive to Saddam. This war would also serve to advance other important national and personal interests, of which prestige was the most important. It would redress the humiliating Algiers agreement and thereby correct Iraq’s historic position as an inferior Persian Gulf power. In addition, by defeating the traditional Persian enemy Iraq would advance pan-Arabic interests by eradicating a major source of the revolutionary threat facing all of the Arab regimes. This, Saddam hoped, would gain for Iraq a position of preeminence in the Arab world and greatly enhance his own personal prestige and influence at home, among Arabs, and in the nonaligned.

These objectives were mutually reinforcing. Iraq could not achieve a preeminent position either as a military power in the Gulf or as a leading Arab power while its own and other Arab regimes were being undermined from within. An accommodation by Arab monarchs with the revolutionary Iranian regime or their overthrow and replacement by fundamentalist regimes would dramatically shift diplomatic alignments and the regional balance of power. This would pose a military as well as political threat to the regime in Baghdad. Nor could Iraq be confident of defeating Iran and enforcing its desired political concessions without the diplomatic and economic support of the Arab regimes.

In spite of these objectives and opportunities, the war would not have occurred without Iraq’s fatal misperceptions and miscalculations. Iraq underestimated Iran’s military capabilities relative to its own, the unifying effect of the war on Iranian society, the military consequences of revolutionary fervor, and the resolve of the Khomeini regime.

The key factors leading to the Iran-Iraq War are certainly familiar to students of the history of warfare: an expansionist revolutionary ideology and its threat to domestic political stability and the balance of power, a conservative coalition to maintain the status quo, the quest for power and prestige, and military overconfidence. While many of these variables are interrelated in this case, it is particularly interesting that the primary threat was political rather than military, that prestige was apparently more important than immediate strategic or economic objectives, that fear was as important as ambition, and that misperceptions were critical. While these patterns are by no means the general rule, they are hardly the historical exception. The Iran-Iraq War provides further confirmation that neither revolutionary changes in the international system nor the development of new military technologies have fundamentally altered the reasons why states go to war. Theories developed to explain great-power wars of the past may be equally applicable to small-power wars of the present.

13 Richard W. Contam argues that this was the primary cause of the war. See "Revolutionary Iran and the War with Iraq," Current History 80 (January 1981): 41.


16 For a recent assessment of the Shi'ite populations' potentially destabilizing effects, see Middle East Economic Digest (June 11, 1982):30-32.


19 Ibid., p. 70, 145.

20 Interview with David Brinkley on "This Week" (ABC), February 28, 1982.

21 Adnet A. Diewisha, "Iraq: The West's Opportunity," Foreign Policy 41 (Winter 1980-1):42. Further evidence that Saddam Hussein feared continuing efforts by the Khomeni regime to topple his own was suggested by Raymond Habsby at the conference on The Three Wars of 1982: Lessons to be Learned (Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, April 15-16, 1983).


23 Diewisha, p. 146.


25 Claudia Wright, "Implications of the Iraqi-Iranian War," p. 285. An explicit admission by a senior Israeli official of prior notification by Iraq is given in the Christian Science Monitor (October 17, 1980). Further evidence of cooperation and encouragement by certain Arab states has been suggested by James A. Bill (private conversations). Most complete evidence regarding the precise degree of collaboration among Arab states in the decision for war is not yet available. Nevertheless, the parallel with the rise of the First Coalition


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 42.