Joseph Kostiner

Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region
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Preface

The course at hand entitled Cooperation and Conflict in the Gulf Region is part of the module Conflict and Cooperation in International Relations of our B.A. Politics and Organization. Hence its subject is at the core of this module and takes the Persian Gulf region as an example to show how conflicts emerge, interact and intensify, but also how actors try to tackle these conflicts through international cooperation and build a security architecture in the Gulf region. The issues addressed theoretically in the other courses of this module are deepened here empirically.

We have decided to take the Gulf region as a case in point because of the intense conflicts which concern not only the countries there but also Europe and the Western hemisphere. Due to its oil reserves the Gulf region has a central position in the world economy, and due to the struggle against Islamism and terrorism the unsolved security issues are in the main focus of International Relations.

I am very glad that this course has been written by one of the profoundest regional experts: Prof. Dr. Joseph Kostiner. He has focused his research for many years on the history, politics, and societies especially of the Arabic countries in the Gulf region. Prof. Kostiner is Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies in Tel Aviv and Associate Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University. He has visited the FernUniversität in Hagen many times and discussed issues concerning the international relations of the Arab world with students and researchers. These colloquies have always been very fruitful. Finally, I would like to thank Prof. Kostiner for the good collaboration preparing this course.

Georg Simonis
Chair for International Conflicts and Environmental Policy

Hagen, July 2007
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Prof. Kostiner's fields of specialization are: history and current affairs of the Arabian Peninsula states, social history of the Middle East, state and nation-building in the Middle East.

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Introduction

The Gulf region has experienced continuous conflict throughout the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century: an Islamist revolution in Iran, three devastating regional wars, and a rising tide of Islamic radicalism that threatens the stability of every regime in the Gulf.1 A former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir Alan Munro, has stated: “This shallow inlet with its placid sea and shores is today a cockpit, or perhaps a cauldron, possessing natural resources, combined with fervid undercurrents, which can quickly transform it into a flashpoint for aggression.”2 Oil is the fuel for the industrialized economies of the world. The Gulf states possess approximately 62 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves. Saudi Arabia alone possesses approximately 22 percent.3 Security in the Gulf is therefore critically important to the health of the international economy. This course will examine military, political, cultural, and socio-economic developments in the Gulf region that have led to conflicts and shaped regional security.

Britain, which had been the hegemonic super-power in the region, announced in 1968 it would withdraw its forces from the Gulf by 1971. This decision was a product of a number of factors. First, the British domestic economy was too weak to support extensive overseas military commitments. Second, Britain’s failure to peacefully resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Suez issue undermined its resolve in the Middle East. Further, its presence in the Gulf was encountering increasingly violent local resistance. In 1971, when Britain removed its forces from the Gulf, it left a power vacuum which created conflict between states ambitious to fill its role as regional power.4

In 1969, the U.S. was overextended by its military commitments in Vietnam, and despite a certain amount of fear of Soviet influence in the Gulf region – and that of Soviet allies, South Yemen, for example – the U.S. adopted a power by proxy security policy in the Gulf. This policy was part of President Richard

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Nixon’s doctrine and became known in the Gulf as the “twin pillars” strategy, which relied on Iranian military power and Saudi Arabian cooperation and financing. This policy was a reflection of (1) new political constraints on the U.S. military as a result of Vietnam and (2) the new Gulf reality without British forces. The U.S. National Security Study Memorandum of 1969 recommended increased weapons sales to Iran and Saudi Arabia to help them deter Soviet influence in the region and to maintain stability between the smaller Gulf states. The U.S. viewed Iran and Saudi Arabia as friendly powers, capable of keeping the radical ideologies of Iraq and the Soviet Union at bay. The U.S. twin pillars concept meant relying on local military force in place of U.S. forces in the region.

During the 1970s, the U.S. supplied Iran (and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia) with an enormous amount of advanced military weapons and technology to ensure their regional military power. Iran’s high level of modernization and larger population made it a better candidate for rapid military growth than Saudi Arabia. The U.S. also believed Iran’s local military power and Saudi Arabia’s financing and influence on the Gulf states would balance each other’s power in the region.5

The U.S. strategy for regional stability, a product of Cold-War strategic considerations, failed when Ayatollah Khomeini’s radical Islamic revolution erupted in Iran in 1978-79. Iran’s revolutionary leaders challenged the regional order and were not cowed by American power. On 4 November 1979 the U.S. officials in Tehran were taken hostage. On 14 December 1979 the U.S. announced it was creating a Rapid Deployment Force (“RDF“) for the Gulf region. On 26 December 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan posing a new threat to the Gulf region. This added urgency to the U.S. decision to create and position a RDF in the Gulf. The RDF became operational on 1 March 1980. Three amphibious Marine forces and seven Army units designated 100,000 troops for rapid response to regional crises. The RDF initiated a major restructuring of the U.S. military command structure to meet the new threats to stability in the Gulf. The size of the RDF increased during the 1980s in response to the U.S. strategic emphasis on deterring the Soviet Union from invading a new and unstable Iranian regime.6

The U.S. policy during the 1970s was a loose strategy without a clear U.S. commitment on how to respond in the case of drastic domestic crises in the Gulf. Instead of clear commitments, the U.S. policy relied on (1) the goodwill and stability of its local allies; (2) balance of power between local Gulf powers, not-

5 Kupchan, pp. 38-43.
bly Iran and Iraq; (3) minimal local military involvement; and (4) limited engagement.

The Arab Gulf states practiced a different approach to security. Notably, Saudi Arabia’s approach to regional security during the 1970s was to mediate conflicts before they reached the Kingdom’s borders. Unlike the U.S. approach, the Saudi strategy emphasized “soft power” rather than military strength. The Saudi regime attempted to appease radical regimes and religious groups so that they would not subvert or threaten the Gulf states. The Saudis also tried to coordinate its policies with the U.S. – Lebanon, 1976–78, Afghanistan, 1979–80 – but also rejected certain U.S. policies, such as the Camp David Peace Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978-79. The Saudi approach reflected, in part, Stephen David’s “Omnibalancing” theory, which explains that regimes try to tackle all threats – internal, as well as external – when considering the balance of power, whereas the typical approach to balance of power only considers countering external threats from other states. This meant attempting to thwart many problems simultaneously without a clear hierarchy of priority or rigid planning. The Saudi approach added to the partisan, casual, and undefined atmosphere of security that existed in the Gulf during the 1970s.

Therefore there was no clear mechanism to prevent or contain conflicts in the Gulf. There was too varied a patchwork of defense arrangements, and no binding agreements with either of the two regional military powers, Iran and Iraq, that would prevent them from attacking each other, or their smaller Gulf neighbors. Thus Barry Buzan’s characterization of a security complex suits the Gulf: “A security complex is defined as a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely so that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another. Security complexes emphasize the interdependence of rivalry as well as shared interest.”

1 Emergence of Conflict

Iran and Iraq have traditionally been the two most powerful states in the region. Both countries occupy geographically strategic locations, which border a number of politically sensitive areas. Further, their vast oil and gas reserves have provided them with wealth to build military strength and strategic leverage with the international community.

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In 1980, Iraq was ruled by Saddam Hussein. Saddam’s rise to president in July 1979 was through Iraq’s Ba’ath party, which came to power in 1968 and espoused a radical pan-Arab, socialist ideology. However, under Saddam’s rule Iraq was a dictatorship. Saddam used a Sunni network that was based on ties of family, clan, and tribe to rule over a Shi’i majority and Kurdish minority population. During the 1970s, Ba’ath power was underwritten by the massive explosion of Iraqi oil revenues. Between 1973 and 1975, Iraqi oil revenues increased by eight times. By the end of 1975, Iraq’s annual oil income was $8 billion. During the following years nearly 40 percent of oil income was used to purchase modern weapons for Iraq. Further, Iraqi active military manpower grew from 112,500 in 1974-75 to 535,000 in 1979-1980.

In 1980, Iran was ruled by a new Islamic revolutionary regime that espoused the radical ideology of its supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini did not accept the modern nation-state, which he saw as an artificial creation that divided the Muslim community, or ‘umma. Khomeini sought to re-unite the entire Muslim community under his banner of Islam: “Its ultimate goal was to launch an ‘ideological crusade’ aimed at bringing the genuine message of Islam to all peoples everywhere. In fact, Khomeini often compared the movement that brought him to power with the advent of Islam, and with its overall message extending to humanity at large.” Iran’s population was predominantly Shi’a, but its population contained a diverse ethnic mix that included Persians, Azeris, and Kurds. Khomeini also had access to great national wealth. Iran’s external cash reserves were $14.6 billion in 1979. And by 1980, Khomeini inherited the Shah’s military resources to back his expansionist threats. In 1974-75 Iran’s total active military manpower was 238,000, by 1979-80, it was 240,000.

Iran and Iraq have a historical rivalry that harkens back hundreds of years: Arab versus Persian identity, Sunni versus Shi’a identity, Safavid versus Ottoman Empires, internal Kurdish rivalries between factions, and control over the Shatt al-Arab waterway and the Gulf itself. Even the name of the Gulf is a historical source of rivalry. The Arabs claim it is the “Arabian” Gulf and, “Iran’s claim to the name of the Gulf is an ancient one and has been explained numerous times by contemporary Iranian historians. They assert that the Persian Gulf was

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12 Cordesman and Wagner, p. 57.
called the Persian Sea 2,500 years ago, when Darius, the Achmaemid king, called it ‘a sea which comes out of Persia ...’\footnote{Christin Marschall, \textit{Iran’s Persian Gulf Policy} (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p.5.}

Iraq’s Ba’ath revolution in the 1960s radicalized a formerly monarchical state and threatened its conservative Gulf neighbors with its radical Pan-Arab agenda, which envisioned Iraq in the pre-eminent role. Iraq’s call for Arab unity and revolutionary ideology also threatened Iran’s Shah, who was a monarchical ruler of a non-Arab nation seeking regional prominence. Iran viewed a radical Ba’athist Iraq as a rival to its regional supremacy. In the 1980s, Iraq, which had been viewed in the early 1970s as a radical regime, became the standard bearer for the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies who were being threatened by Khomeini’s subversive attempts to spread his revolution.

In the 1960s and 1970s the small Gulf states viewed Iraq as part of growing trend of radical pan-Arab nationalism that had spread to Egypt, Syria, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (“PLO”). The Gulf states feared this emerging radical trend would destabilize their governments. However, by the end of the 1970s a new radical threat emerged. In 1975, Ba’athist Iraq, weakened by its battles with Kurdish insurgents, managed a rapprochement with Iran, which culminated in a settlement to the Shatt al-Arab border dispute. However, Iran’s Islamic revolution in 1978-79 jeopardized this settlement and introduced a new element of state-supported pan-Islamic radicalism into the region. Khomeini’s Islamic rhetoric sneered at international state borders and attacked the monarchical institution that governed the smaller Gulf states. Further, Khomeini initiated a relentless campaign of propaganda against Saddam’s Iraq.

2 \textbf{Regional Asymmetry}

The state of continuous conflict in the Gulf was a function of a fundamental asymmetry between the smaller Arab monarchical Gulf states and the larger regional powers, Iran and Iraq. This trend of conflict can be seen as parallel to state formation in the region, as well as to the maturation of the world economy and its need for fuel. The Gulf’s vast reserves of oil and gas magnify the importance of the balance power between the vulnerable smaller states and the larger regional powers. Oil and gas make the Gulf region an integral part of the world economy. As a result, any conflict in the region is likely to involve the international community.

The asymmetry in the region is first a product of size. In 1981, the monarchical Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE
 came together to form the Gulf Cooperation Council ("GCC"). Yemen, due to its historic instability, lies at the periphery, but, due to its geography, remains part of the region, nevertheless. The GCC states are much smaller than their larger neighbors, Iran and Iraq. Size, in this case, is measured in terms of geography and demography, more than economic wealth. To a certain degree, Saudi Arabia is an exception, physically, to the rest of its fellow GCC members. Its geographic area is 2,150,000 square kilometers, while Bahrain’s is 662 square kilometers. However, all of the Gulf states are scarcely populated and, therefore, less powerful, traditionally, than Iran and Iraq, because they have less manpower to draw upon for military strength. Therefore, their foreign policies are based, in part, on the natural limitations of their size and populations. Even the size of the populations of the Gulf states can deceive: many of the Gulf states are populated by a high percentage of resident foreign workers. Many of these workers are not eligible for military service. Bahrain, had a population of approximately 230,000 in 1970 and 350,000 in 1980. Today, it has a population of approximately 700,000. It is the smallest Gulf state. In 1995, Bahrain’s military forces consisted of 10,700 men. In 2007, it has roughly the same size military force, but additionally a 10,000 strong internal security force. It is ruled by a Sunni King, Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, but has a majority Shi’a population. Kuwait is ruled by the Al Sabah family, and achieved full independence in 1961. Today, it has a population of 2.4 million and military manpower of 15,000–17,000 troops. Since 1970, Oman has been ruled by Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said. He has implemented an extensive modernization program. Oman’s first national census was taken in 1993. At the time it had a population of 2.017 million, including approximately 500,000 foreign nationals. Oman’s military forces grew from 15,000 troops in the early 1980s to 43,000 men in 1995, which is approximately its size today. In 2007, Qatar is ruled by Amir Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, and has a population of approximately 885,000. Its population in 1970 was only 111,000, of which 45,000 were natives. By the mid-1970s, its population was 200,000. Its armed forces grew from 5,000 men in the early 1980s to 11,000 men in 1995. Saudi Arabia is ruled in 2007 by King Abdallah bin Abd al Aziz, and is the largest geographic GCC state. It has a population of more than 27 million. In 1984, Saudi Arabia only had 63,500 men in its regular armed forces. In 2007, its regular military forces consist of 124,500 men. The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates ruled by president Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nuhayyan. The federation was formed in 1971, and today has a population of approximately 2.7 million. In 2007, the UAE has a military force of approximately 50,000 men, which is a large increase from 25,000 in 1980.\textsuperscript{14} 

These sparsely populated GCC states are, however, rich in natural resources. In 2005, the GCC states accounted for approximately 40 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves. Saudi Arabia alone accounted for 22 percent of that total. Qatar, comparatively oil poor, produces 11.4 percent of the world’s natural gas.\(^{15}\) The vast reserves of oil and gas in the Gulf have generated enormous wealth for the Gulf states. In 1974, 85 percent of the GCC states’ GDP was a product of trade in oil and gas products.\(^{16}\) This wealth has made these states both vulnerable and important. Their strategic importance is a product of the important role oil and gas play in the world economy. Oil and gas fuel industrialization, which is one of the driving forces behind economic growth. Furthermore, oil has increasingly become an integral part of the Western lifestyle, fueling wealthy societies built around automobiles and a tourism industry dependent on air travel. Therefore, there is political pressure from the Western societies to make sure the engines of the world economy have access to the fuel that drives them. This phenomenon was best exemplified by the 1973 oil crisis.

The crisis emerged during the 1973 October Arab-Israeli War. On 17 October 1973, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Libya agreed to decrease oil production by 5 percent a month until Israel withdrew from the territories it seized during the 1967 Six-Day War. Further, these countries cut production by 25 percent the following months and halted all oil shipments to the pro-Israeli U.S., and the Netherlands. This oil embargo lasted until March of 1974. The production cuts by the OPEC plus Syria and Egypt were accompanied by a 400 percent increase in the price of oil. Prices climbed from $3 per barrel before the October War to approximately $20 in December 1973. Oil prices continued to rise and were in the neighborhood of $40 per barrel in 1980. The dramatic price increase shocked the international economy. Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development countries reported an average inflationary increase of 7 percent, and unemployment increased by 2 percent. Further, the new price of oil generated tremendous wealth for the OPEC states. This crisis upset Western economies and elevated the strategic importance of Gulf politics to the international community.\(^{17}\)

Due to the regional asymmetry of power, the smaller Gulf states depended on the balance of power between the two larger powers, Iran and Iraq, to main-

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\(^{16}\) Cordesman, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security, p. 5

\(^{17}\) Kupchan, pp. 44-53.
tain regional security. During the 1970s, the Gulf states also relied, in part, on one of the larger powers to occasionally assist with their local security. For example, Iran’s military assistance under the Shah was instrumental to Oman’s ability to suppress the leftist insurgents in the Omani region of Dhofar in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite mutual security interests between the larger powers and the smaller Gulf states, they were hardly able to fully coordinate on a regional security policy. Iran’s dispute with the UAE over controlling the Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs, which began when the British withdrew from the Gulf exemplified the regional disputes that undermined regional security cooperation in the 1970s.

3 Geographical Disputes and Other Historical Sources of Tension Between Gulf States

Ideological changes in the region have been a historical source of conflict in the Gulf, as well. Arab Nationalism, Khomeinism, Communism, and the broad background of the Cold War were all important historical factors that contributed to regional conflict. The Cold War affected the regional balance of power in the Gulf. The region’s powers, Iran and Iraq, were split between supporting the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Following the fall of the former Soviet Union, U.S. policy toward the Gulf also influenced the regional balance of power, and, perhaps unintentionally, sowed the seeds for future conflict.

Territorial disputes between Gulf states were a function of the fact that borders between many of these artificially created states have not been fixed or regionally recognized. The Shatt al-Arab waterway between Iran and Iraq was a historical source of conflict dating back centuries, and a recurring bone of contention throughout the 20th century; it served as one of the catalysts that triggered the Iran-Iraq War. Iran’s dispute with UAE over Abu Musa and the Two Tunbs islands began in the 1970s and has continued to the present. Saudi Arabia and Yemen have had a long-standing border dispute that may have reached a resolution – in principle – in June 2000. Bahrain and Qatar have referred their dispute to the International Court of Justice to rule on the sovereignty of the Hawar islands, the Dibal and Jidda shoals, and Zubarah. Oman and the UAE have reached a boundary agreement in March 2000, but the agreement has not been implemented. Territorial ambiguity, lack of clearly defined and recognized borders, and access to natural resources continue to stir tension between the GCC states and hinder coordinated multilateral GCC security agreements.
Internal changes and political pressures in the smaller states have also caused regional conflict. Factors such as rapid social change, Shi‘i minority groups, and Sunni Islamic radicalism all create internal pressures that lead to internal and external conflict as well as threats to the status quo. The monarchical Gulf states are commonly viewed as “traditional” societies. This usually means that tribal social structures and Islam form the basis of local politics. Some argue this “traditionalism” leads to a political process where institutions are devalued because politics are personal, political participation is minimal, there is little in the way of civil society, political loyalty is a function of religious standards, and monarchical rule based on tribal elites is embedded in the culture. Further, this view leads some to conclude that the Arab monarchies of the Gulf are outdated and weak. And that the traditional rulers are incapable of managing the cultural and economic changes that come with vast oil wealth. This impression is compounded by the inability of the monarchical regimes to defend themselves from threats presented by their larger neighbors.18

The problem with such perceptions is that they fail to recognize the flexibility and adaptability of ruling elites of the Gulf states, which is a function of their wealth. In fact, in many cases, they have been able to develop productive state institutions, manage their wealth, introduce political dialogue and mechanisms for political participation, and remain loyal to their cultural heritage. To be sure, the changes have been slow and in small measures and there are visible social problems, such as foreign labor explosion, rising unemployment for young, educated citizens, and population explosion. One of biggest security challenges caused by recent social and political changes in the Gulf has been the emergence radical Islamic groups, which are threatening the internal stability of the Gulf monarchies.

Part One: The Iran-Iraq War

1 Introduction

The Iran-Iraq War was triggered by changes to the status quo in the region caused, in large part, by Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978-79. However, the reasons for war were subtle and complex, and included a variety of components. Iran and Iraq also had a longstanding history of conflict that can be traced back to the creation of the modern nation of Iraq – by European powers – following World War I. The historical legacy of conflict between the powerful ethnic, tribal, and religious groups in the two regions is centuries old. The original Arab-Islamic conquest of the Persian Sassanid Empire in 638 at Qadisiyya and the subsequent Sunni-Shi‘i division of the Muslim community of believers (or ‘umma) in 680 are two relevant examples that extend back to the 7th century of the modern era. However, the Iran-Iraq War was most directly a product of an immediate conflict that emerged when the regional goals and ambitions of Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein clashed.1

This chapter will attempt to address, (a) the historical sources of conflict between Iran and Iraq; (b) the regional status quo preceding the Iran-Iraq War and the regional goals and ambitions of Iran and Iraq, which led most directly to the conflict; and (c) the effect of the war on Iran and Iraq; (d) the economic factor in the war; and (d) the impact of the war on the Gulf littoral states, and their responses to the shifting challenges presented during the nearly nine years of fighting.

The causes of war are complex and subtle, and any isolation of tightly bound historical forces is liable run the risk of oversimplification. To the extent that it is possible, this chapter will isolate direct causes of the war, but also attempt to weave the direct causes into a broader historical narrative.

2 Historical Sources of Conflict

There are four main sources of historical tension between Iran and Iraq: (a) access to, and control of, the Shi‘i holy sites in the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Kar-
bala; (b) state manipulation of the Kurdish nationalist movement; (c) Iranian control of the traditionally Arab region of Khuzistan in southwest Iran; and (d) the dispute over control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which feeds into the Gulf.

2.1 Roots of the Historical Conflict

Iran is predominantly Persian, while Iraq is Arab. Iran has a rich Persian cultural identity that pre-dates the 7th century Arab-Islamic conquest and Islamic conversion of the Persian Sassanid Empire. This pre-Islamic, Persian cultural history is viewed by Iranians as separate and distinct from the Arab bedouin tradition originating in the Gulf. However, the Shi‘i sect of Islam constitutes the majority in both Iran and Iraq and links the two regions.

Shi‘i Islam is rooted in events that date back to the early days of Islam following the death of the Prophet. The Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, ‘Ali ibn ‘Abu Talib engaged in a long struggle against Mu’awiya to become rightful successor to the Muslim Caliphate following the third Caliph, ‘Uthman’s, death. After Muhammad died there was a dispute regarding who should succeed him as Caliph, or leader, of the Muslim community. The majority backed ‘Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s father-in-law and long time companion. ‘Ali eventually became the fourth Caliph, succeeding ‘Uthman, but many supported his rival Mu’awiya, the governor of Damascus. In 661, ‘Ali was murdered and his son, Hasan, abdicated his right to the Caliphate to Mu’awiyah. However, not all of ‘Ali’s followers accepted Hasan’s abdication. When Mu’awiyah died in 680, ‘Ali’s second son, Hussein, who hoped to re-claim the Caliphate, was accompanied into battle by a small group of loyal followers. They were massacred near Karbala, on the tenth day of the Moharram, in present-day Iraq by the Umayyad Caliph Yazid (Mu’awiyah’s son) and his forces. Hussein’s grave is located in Karbala. Hussein’s defeat is commemorated by Shi‘is during ‘Ashura, memorialized on the tenth day of Moharram each year. The holiday includes pilgrimage to the Shi‘i holy shrines in Najaf (where ‘Ali is buried) and Karbala, in Iraq. The Shi‘i believers publicly mourn during the ceremonies on ‘Ashura, and even physically beat themselves in self-punishment for not coming to Hussein’s defense at Karbala in 680. ‘Ashura is one of the holiest days of the year for Shi‘is.

Iranians are, for the most part, ‘Twelver’ Shi‘is. The number refers to chain of twelve men (Imams) in ‘Ali’s blood line who possess religious authority

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passed down during the early centuries of Islam. ‘Ali and his sons Hasan and Hussein were the first three Imams. Imams were designated at birth, which was usually accompanied by some kind of miraculous sign of confirmation. The twelfth Imam is said to be in “occultation” (ghayba) where he is hidden from the world. God will determine when the Imam will reappear. It is believed this messianic return will occur before judgment day, and the Imam will lead the righteous to victory over evil forces and rule the world during a period of peace.\(^3\)

Iranian Shi‘i religious identity is closely tied to the holy sites in Iraq, and Ayatollah Khomeini spent fourteen years of his exile from Iran in Iraq, before he was expelled by Saddam Hussein.

Ayatollah Khomeini was not the first Iranian ruler to adopt Shi‘i Islam as the state religion. Shah Ismail’s Safavid dynasty from the 15\(^{th}\) to 17\(^{th}\) centuries was the first Shi‘i state in Iran in early modern times. Shah Ismail organized his empire around the theology and law of Twelver Shi‘ism. Six of twelve Shi‘i Imams are buried in Iraq, and the last Imam went into occultation in the Iraqi city of Samarra. Shah Ismail sought to capture the Shi’a holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq to reinforce his empire’s Shi‘i identity.

Safavid Persia\(^4\) was in perpetual conflict with the Iraq region of the Ottoman Empire throughout the 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) centuries. In 1510, Shah Ismail captured Iraq, only to relinquish it to the Ottoman Empire in 1514 after defeat in the battle of Chaldiran. In 1529, the Safavids re-captured Iraq, only to be expelled again by Sulaiman the Magnificent in 1534. War over Iraq recurred in 1548, and again between 1553–55.

The Safavids were able to occupy Iraq from 1623 until 1638. In 1638, Sultan Murad IV and the Ottomans captured Baghdad; and the treaty of Zuhab, enacted in 1639, formally annexed Iraq into the Ottoman Empire and stipulated that two powers should not meddle in each other’s affairs. This treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire lasted for more than a century.

Tensions between Iran and Iraq resumed in the 18\(^{th}\) century. In 1733, Nadir Shah of Iran failed in his attempt to conquer Baghdad. And in 1746 another treaty was signed at Kurdan. In 1775, Iran occupied Basra and border conflicts continued. The troublesome areas were “Arabistan” in southwest Iran and the Zagros mountain region in the north, which was inhabited by the Kurds.\(^5\)

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\(^4\) Modern Iran was known as “Persia” by non-natives from antiquity until the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in the first quarter of the 20\(^{th}\) century, when he officially changed the name of the nation-state to “Iran” in 1935. See Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* (London: Orion Books, 2001), pp. 7.

2.2 The Empires’ Legacies

The formerly Arab area in southwest Iran known as “Arabistan” played an important role in modern tensions between Iran and Iraq. Between 1690 and 1923 the Kabide Emirate was a semi-autonomous region extending from Ahvaz in the north, to the Shatt al-Arab waterway in the west, Hindian in the east, and the Gulf in the south. The emirate maintained its independence by playing Iran off of the Ottoman Empire. The Kabide Amir controlled access to the Shatt al-Arab waterway – which formed at the meeting of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and flowed into the Gulf – and collected tolls on traffic from the Gulf to the Ottoman port in Basra.

In 1812–3, the leader of the Muhaisin tribe in southwest Iran carved out an independent principality for himself and established a port on the Shatt al-Arab at Khorramshahr (known in Arabic as Muhammarah). This caused tensions in the region to increase. In 1821, war broke out over control of the nomadic tribes that ventured across common borders. Iran invaded “Arabistan”, conquered the area and seized control of the new port in Khorramshahr. Arabistan became part of Iran. In 1823, with British assistance, the Treaty of Erzerum was signed. This treaty guaranteed protection for Shi’i pilgrims traveling from Iran to Iraq’s holy cities and regulated tribal movement along common borders.

In addition to Arabistan along the southwest Iran – Ottoman Iraq border, the Kurds in the north were a source of regional tension. The Kurds are a separate ethnic-racial group from the Arabs, Turks, and Persians. They trace their history back to Medes of the Bible and the Indo-European mountain tribes who settled in southeastern Turkey, northeastern Iraq, and northwest Iran. The Kurdish language is part of the Indo-European family of languages, and is closer to Farsi than to Arabic. In 1824, in violation of the Treaty of Erzerum, Iran supported a Kurdish rebellion in northeast Iraq.

By the Treaty of Erzerum in 1823, British and Tsarist Russian imperial power influenced relations between Persia and Ottoman Iraq. Fourteen years after the Treaty of Erzerum, in 1837, the Ottoman Empire invaded Arabistan and absorbed it into the Wilayet of Basra. Border tension also re-emerged between 1834 and 1840, due to the movement of Turkish tribes across the Iranian frontier. Iran, for its part, had supported the Kurdish rebellion in northeast Iraq in 1824. These problems were further aggravated by the persecution of Shi’i Iranians in Iraq and the Ottoman invasion of Khorramshahr (Muhammarah). In 1847, with the assistance of the British and Russians, a second Treaty of Erzerum was signed.

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6 The Kabide Emirate was a portion of the larger area that came to be known as “Arabistan” in the 20th century. Cordesman, p.11.
The second Treaty of Erzerum was significant because it divided the border territory along the Shatt al-Arab waterway (known in Persian as the Arvand Rud). Iran was granted control over the east bank of the river and the Ottoman Empire controlled the waterway itself, and the west bank. Iran was granted navigation rights on the river and agreed not to involve itself in northern Iraq. In exchange for established rights on the Shatt al-Arab, Iran gave up territory in the Zuhab-Qasr-e Shirin area and also received the island of Abadan (formerly known as Khizir). The port of Khorramshahr was given to Iran in exchange for exclusive Iraqi control over Sulaimaniyya in Kurdish region of the north. The treaty gave Iran control over Arabistan and the Ottoman Empire control over the Shatt al-Arab.

The second treaty of Erzerum established the territorial rights along the Iran-Iraq southwest border and the Shatt al-Arab. However, the treaty did not affect the problems that plagued the region. Arab tribes continued to move back and forth across the border, and the region surrounding the port of Khorramshahr continued to behave semi-autonomously. The border disputes, especially the conflict over control of the Shatt al-Arab, continued into the 20th century.

In 1908, the British discovered commercial quantities of oil near Arabistan. This complicated the border conflict, and changed the emphasis of the British interest in the Gulf. Iran and the Ottoman Empire signed the Protocols of Tehran in 1911, which called for settling all outstanding border issues. In 1913, British, Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman officials met in Constantinople to establish borders and settle rights on the Shatt al-Arab. The new agreement awarded Iran six islands on the Shatt al-Arab between the Khorramshahr port and the Gulf. The British, seeking easy outlets through the Gulf for its new Iranian oil, may have used its influence to help Iran secure the new territory on the Shatt al-Arab.

2.3 Components of a Recurring Conflict

World War I, the collapse of Tsarist Russia, and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire created big changes in the region. The independent nation of Iraq was established by the British Mandate in 1921 and confirmed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Iran also underwent a great change. The corrupt Qajar dynasty was ended, and, between 1921 and 1923, a new Iranian nationalism emerged as Reza Shah came to power. In 1923 and 1924, Reza Shah consolidated his power and suppressed Iran’s ethnic minorities in pursuit of his nationalist objectives. Reza Shah used his newly expanded military to crush the Arabs in the semi-autonomous region of Arabistan. He expanded the province, renamed the area “Khuzistan,” suppressed the use of Arabic, and resettled the population to dilute the Arab majority. The Shah’s policies of ethnic suppression and resettlement, in
combination with the establishment of a large British oil industry in Khuzistan, minimized the significance of the Arab factor in future border conflicts between Iran and Iraq. Following World War I, Iran and Iraq confronted one another as two sovereign states pursuing their respective national interests.

It was at this point in time that lasting components of war were formed between Iran and Iraq. Each state was an ambitious entity seeking territorial achievements. There was a natural strategic competition between two large states for supremacy over the Gulf basin. Iraq was in a geographically inferior position and forced to compete for control of access to waterways and to the Gulf. The Shatt al-Arab was a natural epicenter of the tension between Iran and Iraq. Further, the common cross border ethnic-religious groups, such as the Kurds, Shi’is, and the Arabs of Khuzistan, blurred the solid lines of international boundaries.

Iran refused to recognize the borders of modern Iraq, which it viewed as encroaching on its own interests. The Shi‘i religious scholars, or ulama, of Iraq, who were anti-British, sponsored anti-government resistance following the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1922 (see Box 1). Clashes between the British backed Iraqi government and the Shi‘i ulama increased and resulted in the Shi‘i ulama’s self-exile to Iran in 1923. With assistance from Iran, Iraq and the Shi‘i ulama reconciled and the ulama returned to Iraq with the understanding that they would stay out of Iraqi politics. By 1929 conditions between the two states had improved, and Reza Shah recognized King Faisal I’s Iraq.

*Box 1: Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922 and 1930*  

In 1921, Great Britain installed the Hashemite, Faisal bin Hussein as king of Iraq. Great Britain wanted a formal treaty agreement after years of being the country’s mandate power and Iraq objected to being a mandate and wanted a treaty to represent a change in its status.

This treaty was signed in October 1922, but not ratified until the spring 1924. The British high commissioner, Sir Henry Dobbs, was forced to issue an ultimatum to the Iraqi constituent assembly to ensure the treaty was ratified. However, despite the change in status, Iraq could not hide the fact that Britain was overwhelmingly in control of Iraq. Britain controlled Iraq’s financial affairs and maintained a virtual military occupation of the new state. Further, it retained mandate control until Iraq was capable of self-government.

The 1922 treaty was replaced by a new treaty in 1930. The treaty became the basis for Britain’s relationship with Iraq following Iraq’s independence in 1932. Domestic control of Iraq fell under the king’s authority, and defense of the borders was a responsibility of the new state, however issues of interna-

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The Kurds were also unhappy with the newly created Iraqi state. The Kurds of Mosul attacked the British mandate rule and then the subsequent central government in Iraq. In 1927, the Kurdish area of Iraq became an area of strategic importance when the British struck the largest oil reserve ever discovered – as of that date – near Kirkuk. In 1931-2, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani initiated a Kurdish insurgency for independence. It was crushed by a joint Iraqi-Turkish campaign in 1935.

Despite diplomatic progress between King Faisal I and Reza Shah, border disputes still fostered underlying hostility. Iran was also not satisfied with Iraqi control of traffic on the Shatt al-Arab waterway. According to Iran, the *thalweg* – or median line of the deepest part of the waterway – was the boundary agreed to in 1913.

In November 1934, Iraq brought the issue of the *thalweg* boundary on the Shatt al-Arab before the League of Nations. Iraq argued it had rights to (a) control over the entire waterway; (b) customs collections on all traffic; and (c) the right to control all warships on the waterway. Iran claimed that, (a) the border ran along the middle of the waterway; (b) both sides should enjoy free navigation on the water; and (c) Iran should have free movement of its warships on the waterway.\(^8\)

In the Spring of 1936, the two countries withdrew the case from the League of Nations, and entered into direct negotiations. Negotiations were affected by the leadership balance between Iran and Iraq, which had changed as a result of the death of King Faisal I of Iraq in 1933. His son, King Ghazi I, was not as adept at balancing the demands of Iraq’s various factions. In November 1936, Bakr Sidqi led a *coup d’etat* in Iraq that led to a period of internal chaos. In 1937, Iraq signed a treaty with Iran. The treaty was very favorable for Iran with respect to the Shatt al-Arab. It gave Iran, (a) control of the island of Abadan, and a four-mile anchorage area in front of Abadan where the Anglo-Persian company had a large oil refinery; (b) free anchorage to Iranian ships at the Iranian ports without paying Iraqi customs; (c) free navigation of all merchant ships; and (d) joint maintenance of the waterway. Iran gained a lot from Iraq’s political weakness at the time of the 1937 agreement. But the real winner appeared to be Brit-

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\(^8\) Abdulghani, pp. 4-17; Cordesman, pp. 11-13; Hiro, pp. 8-13.
ish oil interests, which benefited from British political influence in both Baghdad and Tehran. However, despite another agreement, the two countries continued to dispute the execution of the agreed-upon boundaries.

Four years later World War II erupted and Iran was occupied by foreign powers. Foreign occupation undermined Reza Shah’s nationalism doctrine and he abdicated the throne. During World War II both countries were weakened and used as staging areas for European powers to pursue their war interests.\(^9\)

The Kurds, seeking to exploit the weakened state of the government during World War II, launched another rebellion against the Baghdad government. Mustafa Barzani (Ahmed Barzani’s brother) led the insurgency which failed. Barzani fled from Iraq to Iran, where he helped found the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946. The Shah crushed this entity and Barzani was forced to flee to the Soviet Union. After World War II the demands of the new Cold War ushered in a brief period of calm between Iran and Iraq.

2.4 Another Component of Escalation: The Cold War and Western Attempts to Create an Anti-Soviet Alliance

By 1955, Iran and Iraq were being pressured to choose sides in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Iran and Iraq set aside their border disputes and attempted to jointly participate in a regional security agreement born out of the perceived threat of Soviet Communism to the region. The Baghdad Pact (see Box 2) was a security and defense agreement between Turkey, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq.

**Box 2:** Baghdad Pact\(^{10}\)

This was a defense pact involving Middle Eastern countries, from 1954 until approximately 1979. The Baghdad Pact was also known as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which was the term used after Iraq left in 1959. It was also referred to as Middle East Treaty Organization. The name comes from the signing that took place in Baghdad, Iraq in 1955.

The treaty was initiated by the U.S. and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, consisting of most West European countries, Turkey, U.S. and Canada) as part of the intent to create worldwide anti-Soviet alliances. During the first stage of the pact, Turkey signed a Pact of Mutual Cooperation with Pakistan. This was soon expanded to include Iraq and subsequently Iran and Great Britain.

\(^{9}\) Abdulghani, pp. 116-117; Cordesman, pp. 16-17; Hiro, p. 10-11.

\(^{10}\) See [http://lexicorient.com/e.o/baghdad_pact.htm](http://lexicorient.com/e.o/baghdad_pact.htm), accessed 15 February 2007.
The pact involved security and defense cooperation and refraining from interference in one another’s internal affairs. The pact which intended to secure the common protection of all the member countries never resulted in combat, but did succeed preventing Soviet expansion. The Soviet Union considered the pact “aggressive”.

With the signing of the pact, Great Britain handed over its two air-bases to Iraqi national authorities. During its short career in the alliance, Iraq was the strongest regional participant, and even served as the leader in the Western alliance with the Arab world.

The pact was designed to be open to new members, principally coming from the Arab League. Western countries even tried to pressure Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria to join, but without success. In fact Arab states, such as Egypt, became fierce opponents of the “imperialistic” pact.

Baghdad Pact Chronology

1954 February: Turkey signed a Pact of Mutual Cooperation with Pakistan.
1955 February 24: A military agreement was signed between Iraq and Turkey, and the term ”Baghdad Pact“ begins to be used. – Iran, Pakistan and Britain join the Baghdad Pact.
1959 March: The new republican regime of Iraq withdrew the country from the alliance.
1965: Pakistan tried to get help from their allies in their war against India, but without success.
1971: In a new war with India, Pakistan tried once again unsuccessfully to get allied assistance.
1979: The new Islamic regime of Iran withdraws the country from CENTO, as the alliance was now known.

Iraq perceived the pact as advantageous because it allowed it to work with Iran and Turkey to suppress its Kurdish threat and to neutralize any Turkish designs on its territory. Iraq was also looking to extend its British alliance, which was set to expire in 1957. The Shah of Iran viewed the Communist threat seriously and viewed the pact as a means to protect its national security. In 1957, both Iran and Iraq moved towards closer relations with the West by endorsing the Eisenhower doctrine (see Box 3) and rejecting Nasser’s anti-Western agenda in Egypt.