

# THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CEASE-FIRE

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*One of the significant developments in 1988 was the cease-fire in the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. Throughout the conflict, Iraq was consistently willing to accept a cease-fire. Iranian intransigence, however, proved to be an obstacle to any agreement. Richard Morgan Wilbur contends that no one country or force was solely responsible for the ultimate acceptance of an end to the hostilities. Wilbur argues instead that the cease-fire occurred as a direct result of the international pressures generated by those countries potentially most affected by the outcome of the war.*

## INTRODUCTION

On July 17, 1988 the Islamic Republic of Iran publicly accepted United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, thereby agreeing to a cease-fire in the nearly eight-year war with the Republic of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The cease-fire took effect the next month under the supervision of the United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG) peacekeeping forces and has been accompanied by lengthy and frequently stalemated negotiations. Whether a lasting peace based on the resolution's eight-point program can be achieved, or whether the cessation of hostilities proves to be merely a hiatus in a conflict with deep cultural and historical roots, remains to be seen.

Delineating the discrete military and political events which drove the Iran-Iraq War to its stalemated end is a relatively simple process. However, identifying the broader political, economic and social forces which defined the conflict's parameters is more difficult. These forces are what shaped the belligerents' eventual acceptance of the cease-fire resolution and the negotiating table.

Two significant themes readily emerge from an analysis of these broad influences. The first is that the United States and the Soviet Union, confronted by a regional war not of their making but which posed a strong threat to their respective national interests and the balance of power in Southwest Asia, chose primarily diplomatic rather than military means to pursue an end to the war. The second is that Iran was forced to accept the cease-fire through a conjunction of internal and international policies and events which isolated the Iranians both politically and militarily and prevented their successful prosecution of the war.

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1. United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, which was passed unanimously on July 20, 1987 and was accepted shortly after by Iraq, called for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of forces to the internationally recognized boundaries.

## THE SUPERPOWERS

United States foreign policy regarding the Iran-Iraq War consisted of three interrelated goals: a commitment to the freedom of navigation through the Persian/Arabian Gulf in order to preserve the flow of oil to the free world, the maintenance of the regional balance of power, and a restriction of Soviet influence in the gulf through a strong commitment to regional defense. The overriding concern of the United States in Southwest Asia is the protection of Western access to Middle Eastern oil. Based on present production technology, the Middle East sits atop more than 60 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and accounts for 17 percent of the industrialized world's crude oil consumption.<sup>2</sup> Over time, as the Western demand for oil imports increases and the percentage of non-gulf reserves decreases, ensuring the stability of this region, and of oil production and prices, will become even more critical. By maintaining an increased naval presence in the gulf throughout the war, the United States hoped to guarantee freedom of navigation and, by implication, access to oil.

America's concern for the regional balance of power increased when the war provided an opportunity for the rise of a hegemonic power in the gulf, potentially affecting the power shift within the Middle East. An Iraqi victory would enhance that country's position in the Middle East to the detriment of Israel and the friendly gulf states to the south of Iraq. An Iranian victory, on the other hand, was equally unacceptable. Iran's open hostility toward the United States and its exportation of Islamic fundamentalism would threaten the stability of the Middle East and Western access to oil supplies.

The United States was also concerned with the potential for increased Soviet influence in the region. The confusion and violence of the Iranian Revolution and of the subsequent conflict between Iran and Iraq presented the Soviet Union with an opportunity to extend its influence in the gulf region, particularly in Iran.

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American policy in the war was designed specifically to avoid becoming directly engaged in the conflict. Rather it was aimed at bringing about a diplomatic end to the war through economic and political pressure.

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The USSR welcomed the fall of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979 as it effectively extinguished all US influence in the upper gulf region. (The United States and Iraq had severed diplomatic relations in 1967.) Observers feared that the

2. Rajai M. Abu-Khadra, "Is the Gulf War Endangering World Oil Supplies?" *Middle East Insight* (January/February 1988): 42.

Soviets would fill this superpower vacuum, through a direct physical presence on Iranian soil, through increased diplomatic activity, or by proxy through the pro-Soviet Iranian Tudeh Party. As a consequence of an Iranian victory, improved Soviet-Iranian relations would extend Soviet influence throughout the entire gulf region. On the other hand, an Iraqi victory surely would lead to a collapse of the Khomeini regime, inviting in some way a larger Soviet role in Iran.

By pursuing a strong commitment to a regional defense program, the United States intended to preclude Soviet expansion of influence in the lower gulf and to guide the war to a stalemate. American commitment to regional defense was evidenced through arms and logistical support for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the collective security program formed in 1981 by Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>3</sup> American support for the GCC program, the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers in 1987, and the strong naval presence in the gulf strongly enhanced Arab-American relations, as evidenced by the GCC's provision of extensive support services, including overflight rights, the use of Arab airfields, ship repair facilities, and logistical support to US forces in the gulf. The American decision to reflag the Kuwaiti ships was not, as is occasionally argued, a face-saving measure after the Iran-Contra revelations, but rather a continuation of the US attempt to minimize Soviet influence in the gulf. Failing to accede to reflagging the tankers "would have created a vacuum in the gulf into which Soviet power would surely have been projected."<sup>4</sup>

US policy in the war was designed specifically to avoid direct engagement in the conflict. The goal was to bring about a diplomatic end to the war through economic and political pressure. This policy followed two basic paths, both of which stemmed from the American view of the Iranian Revolution as the disruptive force in the region. The United States provided Iraq economic credit amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars per year; military intelligence, which proved to be invaluable in Iraq's air attacks on Iranian oil installations; and indirect support through aid to the GCC defense system.<sup>5</sup> On the political and diplomatic level, the United States pursued an increasingly effective arms embargo against Iran through Operation Staunch, in which US allies were pressured to refrain from selling arms and military-related supplies to Iran. Throughout the war the United States supported the ongoing UN mediation efforts, which culminated in the adoption and acceptance of Security Council Resolution 598.<sup>6</sup>

The Soviet Union also pursued a foreign policy of strategic denial aimed at preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon. Unlike the United States,

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3. Ralph King, *The Iran-Iraq War: The Political Implications: Adelphi Paper 219* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1987), 50-54.

4. Caspar W. Weinberger, as quoted in Ruhollah K. Ramazani, "The Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf Crisis," *Current History* Vol. 87, No. 526 (1988): 62-63.

5. The exact amount of American credit offered to Iraq during the war is unclear. One US government source has stated that this amount approximated \$1 billion mostly in the form of agricultural credit.

6. Laurie Mylroie, "Iraq's Changing Role in the Persian Gulf," *Current History* 88 (1989): 92. See also Amatzia Baram, "Iran-Iraq: The End of a War," *New Outlook* (September/October 1988): 35.

however, the primary concern of the Soviet Union in the gulf region is not oil, although stability in the world's oil market is also of concern to the USSR because of its dependence on oil and natural gas exports as an important source of foreign exchange revenue. To the Soviets, Southwest Asia traditionally has represented an area of strategic importance, enhanced by the discovery of oil and the subsequent increase of Western influence in the region.

The Iranian Revolution at first was welcomed by the USSR, as it effectively erased American influence in Iran. The departure of the Americans presented a strategic opportunity for increased Soviet influence in the country. The outbreak of the war, therefore, was viewed with apprehension lest the Khomeini regime fall and be replaced by a pro-Western government. However, the Soviet Union found itself in a compromising position. The USSR was bound to the government of Iraq through a 1972 treaty of friendship, but this treaty was not reciprocal with respect to Iraqi foreign policy. Although Baghdad in the few years prior to the outbreak of the war had begun to display pro-Western attitudes and had even criticized the Soviets for the invasion of Afghanistan, the USSR still provided most of Iraq's arms until the start of the war. The outbreak of the war sparked a debate among Soviet policymakers concerning the desirability of supporting Iran in the war at the risk of alienating Iraq and its Arab supporters. An Iranian victory would provide tremendous support to the Islamic fundamentalist "message," a message that the Soviets feared would inspire dissent among their burgeoning Muslim population in the Caucasus and Soviet Central Asia.<sup>7</sup>

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In moderating its historically hostile attitude toward Israel, Iraq began to redefine its position as a leader of the hard-line states to a position as a moderate Arab state.

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Throughout the war, the Soviets sought to prevent either party from achieving hegemony in the gulf and consistently shifted their support to the side on the defensive.<sup>8</sup> After the Iraqi invasion in September 1980, the Soviet Union terminated its support to Baghdad and went so far as to offer arms and supplies to Iran, an offer which Iran declined. As the ground war began to turn in favor of the Iranians in 1982, the same year in which the Tudeh Party was banned, Moscow resumed its support for Iraq while exerting pressure on the diplomatic front for an end to the war. The Soviet Union remained Iraq's primary supplier of military support throughout the war, substantially increasing the level of armaments after strong Iranian advances, particularly

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7. For a general discussion on the worldwide concern over fundamentalism, see Les Aspin, "Iran and its Revolutionary Messianism: An American Policymaker Views the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Insight* (January/February 1988).

8. Baram, 35.

after the Iranian offensives of 1983 and 1984 and Iran's capture of the Fao Peninsula in 1986.

As a result, the Soviets cooperated in the efforts to deny Iran arms through active support of US-sponsored Operation Staunch.

Soviet-American cooperation in hastening an end to the war through other than military means signified a confluence of superpower interest with respect to the gulf. Regular consultation between the two superpowers continued throughout the war, even after the Iran-Contra revelations. Both superpowers agreed on the need to contain the violence of the Gulf War and bring it to a diplomatic, inconclusive end for two basic reasons. First, both Moscow and Washington desired an end to the war which would maintain the gulf's *status quo ante bellum* while avoiding a direct superpower military conflict: the victorious power should not be in a position to dominate and destabilize the region.

The second impetus for US-Soviet cooperation was that the Iran-Iraq War provided an arena for the unchecked proliferation of weaponry which had been initiated in the preceding decades by local governments with the support of the superpowers. Financed by the tremendous influx of oil revenue in Southwest Asia in the 1970s, the massive military buildup of the gulf contributed to the commencement of the war and the belligerents' ability to sustain the war effort. Indicative of a worldwide phenomenon, this "democratization of warfare" threatened the superpowers' ability to contain the violence of the war and maintain the regional status quo. Of equal concern to the superpowers was the arrival on the world scene of third party arms producers and distributors — governments who find in arms sales a lucrative source of foreign exchange revenue and an opportunity to exert political influence throughout the world. Superpower fears of "outside" interference in the gulf and the escalation of the war deepened after the Iranian purchase and deployment of Chinese Silkworm anti-ship missiles in the lower gulf in September 1986. Despite Operation Staunch, the effectiveness of the arms embargo was limited throughout the war by the continued sale of arms to Iran by such Western countries as Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal and Spain, as well as by Moscow's apparent inability to contain the flow of arms to Iran from its East European allies.<sup>9</sup> The United States redoubled diplomatic pressure on Western sources after the embarrassing Iran-Contra revelations, with a consequent improvement in the effectiveness of Operation Staunch.

#### REGIONAL FORCES

The superpowers were not alone in considering Iran a threat to regional security. The majority of Middle Eastern countries, including the gulf states and the moderate Arab governments of Jordan and Egypt, backed Iraq in its battle to contain what they perceived to be an imperialistic and ideological

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9. According to a senior US official, the lure of huge amounts of revenue from the sale of arms to *both* belligerents played a large role in the superpowers' concern for the proliferation of weaponry in the region. These suppliers would seek to gain the benefit of these sales even at the risk of incurring superpower displeasure.

Iranian regime. This Arab front, mobilized financially and politically behind Iraq, completed the isolation of Iran and significantly enhanced Iraq's ability to wear down Iran militarily and force an end to the war. Iran did receive some support, however. A small group of Arab nations that included Syria, Libya and South Yemen backed Iran for intra-regional political reasons. Israel also supported Iran throughout the war with vital arms sales, but for very different reasons.

Israeli policy during the war directly contradicted superpower and Arab goals of isolating Iran and bringing about a diplomatic end to the war. Motivated by the desire to exhaust its erstwhile enemy Iraq and by the hope of creating friendlier relations with a post-Khomeini Iran, Israel implemented a policy of arms sales designed specifically to prolong the war. In pursuit of this policy, Israel exploited the communications network previously used for arms deals with the shah and consistently ignored US pressure to honor the arms embargo. Israeli fear of Iraqi power apparently blinded it to the dangers of an Iranian victory and caused it to ignore the evident Iraqi shift of policy towards Israel.<sup>10</sup> Illustrative of this shift was the acknowledgement of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in August 1982 of the need for a "secure condition for the Israelis" and his assertion that "there is no Arab official now who believes it is possible to remove Israel and has this as his policy."<sup>11</sup> It was not until the autumn of 1987 that Israeli policy began to shift toward support for a cease-fire, reflecting the dangers inherent in an escalating and costly war. Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin admitted in June 1988, "I've changed my mind. The Gulf War no longer serves Israel's interest because of the arms race it generates."<sup>12</sup> Although the amount of arms sold by Israel to Tehran arguably may not have been enough to turn the tide of the war, Israeli foreign policy certainly played a large part in sustaining the war for its eight-year duration.

Syria was the key supporter of Iran as a result of Syria's ongoing struggle with Iraq for preeminence within the Arab world and the long-standing hatred between the two Ba'athist regimes. In particular, Syria regarded the Iraqi invasion of Iran as a diversion from the Arab struggle against Israel.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian faction provided a modest supply of arms to Iran throughout the war, and Syria is purported to have allowed Iranian aircraft the use of its airfields during the Iranian attacks on western Iraqi oil fields in 1981.<sup>14</sup> Syria's most important contribution to Tehran's war effort was the closing of the Iraqi pipeline to the Mediterranean port of Baniyas in 1982, a move which seriously threatened the Iraqi economy.<sup>15</sup>

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10. Baram, 36. See also Laurie Mylroie, "After the Guns Fell Silent: Iraq in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 43 (1989): 1.

11. Quoted in Mylroie, 53.

12. *Ibid.*, 58.

13. King, 41.

14. *Ibid.*

15. The closing of the pipeline caused the loss of revenue from 400,000 barrels per day, estimated at \$5 billion per year, in 1982 terms. See Abbas Alnasrawi, "Economic Consequences of the Iraq-Iran War," *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 8, No. 3 (1986): 876.

The majority of Arab countries, led by the gulf states, however, supported Iraq as the champion of the Arab cause in the ancient cultural and historical antagonism between Persians and Arabs. This Persian-Arab conflict amounted to a dispute over geographical boundaries — the Zagros Mountains and the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, known as the Shatt al-Arab (Ervand Ruz in Farsi) — as well as tension between the Shi'ite Persian and Sunni Arab cultures. These hostilities escalated during the shah's reign with the massive military buildup of the 1970s and imperial designs within the region (including the annexation in 1971 of three southern gulf islands, Abu Musa, and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs). With the fall of the shah and the assumption of power in Iran by a Shi'ite clerical regime, Persian imperialism became imbued with the revolutionary zeal of Shi'ite Islamic fundamentalism. The gulf states, with large, vocal Shi'ite minorities and historical ties to Iran, greatly feared Tehran's professed goal of exporting its revolution. The Arab states in general, like the USSR, viewed Iranian fundamentalist zeal as a dangerous source of inspiration to their respective Sunni and Shi'ite fundamentalist populations. The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War unfolded in 1979 against a background of unrest in the region, with Shi'ite demonstrations in Saudi Arabia's eastern province and the Sunni fundamentalist attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

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When the combination of international and internal pressures began to threaten the revolution itself, the Iranian leadership looked to the UN resolution as a face-saving means of ceasing the hostilities.

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Egypt also had faced problems with its small, yet powerful, fundamentalist minority. An Iranian victory in the war would have meant nothing less than an Islamic fundamentalist challenge to the legitimacy of these governments.

The gulf states also had reason to fear a victorious Iraq emerging strengthened from the war. Baghdad had pursued a leadership role in the Arab world for years and had developed substantial military strength. Iraq had demonstrated clearly its aggressiveness and military muscle within the region by its irredentist attitude toward Kuwaiti territory, resulting in two invasion attempts in 1961 and 1973. The Arab gulf states' fear of the Iranian revolutionary regime was so great, however, that they regarded Iranian expansion as the immediate threat to regional security and therefore put their collective support behind the Iraqi front line of defense. Gulf Cooperation Council support to Iraq came in the form of \$35-\$40 billion, the sale of 300,000 barrels per day of crude oil from the Saudi-Kuwaiti Neutral Zone, the use of Saudi Arabia's TAPLINE oil pipeline and the construction of the IPSA-1 pipeline through Saudi Arabia for the export of Iraqi oil through the Red Sea,

the replacement of oil field equipment damaged in the war, and the transshipment of Iraqi goods through Kuwaiti ports after the Iranian blockade of Iraq's ports in 1981.<sup>16</sup>

Improved relations with Jordan and Egypt also contributed to Iraq's ability to weather Syrian and Iranian attempts to cripple the Iraqi economy. In moderating its historically hostile attitude toward Israel, and, in particular, by abandoning a rejectionist stance against an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, Iraq began to redefine its position as a leader of the hard-line states to a position as a moderate Arab state. Jordan provided Iraq unlimited use of its port at Aqaba and its highway and rail system for the movement of Iraqi exports and imports. Egyptian labor, totaling between one and two million persons, played an important role in continuing development projects while Iraqi men fought at the front. In return, Iraq continued to champion Egypt's bid for readmission to the Arab League, from which it had been expelled for negotiating with Israel under the Camp David Accords.

Gulf state support of Iraq came at a high price, however. Iran, through its allies in the gulf communities, continually harassed the GCC governments in the hope of forcing a diminution of support for Iraq. For example, Tehran was linked to numerous assassination attempts and airline hijackings in Kuwait during the war.<sup>17</sup> During the Hajj to Mecca between 1981 and 1983, Iranian pilgrims staged large anti-American demonstrations, and the 1987 riot by an estimated 70,000 Iranians left over 400 people dead. Militarily, Iran attacked shipping and Kuwaiti oil installations. Contrary to Iranian intentions, these highly antagonistic activities did not have the desired effect of decreasing GCC aid, even as the economic cost of shoring up the Iraqi economy continued to grow.

The ability of the GCC states to maintain the level of support to Iraq was constrained, however, by the steady decrease of oil revenue. After an initial rise in crude oil prices in 1980 and 1981 due to the outbreak of the war, the average posted prices of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) fell almost consistently throughout the entire conflict, including a dramatic plunge in 1985 and 1986. Prices fell from a high of nearly \$33 dollars per barrel in 1981 to a low of approximately \$10 per barrel in 1986.<sup>18</sup> The continuous fall in prices reflected a market glut, exacerbated by OPEC's inability to maintain a production ceiling, particularly in the last few years of the war. Toward the end of the hostilities, many OPEC nations were producing oil at levels well above their assigned quotas in desperate attempts to regain oil revenue which had been cut in half in just a few short years by a decreasing demand for OPEC oil, falling prices, and the devaluation of the US dollar.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Ibid. See also J. E. Peterson, "The GCC States after the Iran-Iraq War," *American-Arab Affairs* 26 (1988): 99.

17. Peterson, 99-100.

18. *International Petroleum Encyclopedia* (Tulsa: PenWell Publishing Company, 1988), 5-10.

19. For a more detailed discussion concerning OPEC internal discord see Peterson, "The GCC States," and Abu-Khadra, "Is the Gulf War Endangering?"

The oil market deeply affected GCC governments. In Saudi Arabia alone, annual income from crude oil exports fell from more than \$100 billion before 1982 to less than \$20 billion in 1987, while the cost of Iraqi aid continued at \$3-\$5 billion per year.<sup>20</sup> By 1986 the country's deficit had reached \$17 billion and forced the government to cut aid to Iraq and other countries. The oil market had equally stringent effects on the belligerents, but for reasons discussed below, Iraq's international support system enabled it to carry on the war effort even as the economically and politically isolated Iranians continued to falter.

#### IRAN AND IRAQ

The total cost of the war to Iran and Iraq, in human and material terms, is beyond calculation.<sup>21</sup> Over 900,000 people died, and 1.6 million were left homeless.<sup>22</sup> On average, the war cost each belligerent \$11 billion per year. By the end of the war, Iraq's foreign debt had reached nearly \$60 billion, while Iran escaped the war with almost no debt.<sup>23</sup> However, through strong economic and diplomatic relations, Iraq was able to outlast an adversary largely self-reliant yet unable to sustain the military or civilian will necessary to emerge victorious from such a war.

On paper, and indeed on the ground until the last year of the war, Iran held the advantage. With a population three times as large as that of Iraq (50 million and 16 million respectively), Iran theoretically could have won the war through attrition. The history of the war bears this out. From 1982 through April 1987 Iran was on the land offensive, first pushing Iraqi forces back to the international boundaries and then advancing into Iraqi territory until it threatened Iraq's important port city of Basra by January of 1987. Outclassed tactically and materially, these Iranian offensives were sustained largely through sheer numerical superiority and ideological enthusiasm. In spite of adversities, Iran was able to sustain its war effort for nearly eight years, relying especially on its oil revenues, its advantage in population, and the willpower to forestall defeat. Nevertheless, not even the charismatic leadership of the Imam Khomeini and the ideals of the revolution itself could sustain Iranian fighting spirit without the replenishment of military and economic resources. The length of the war and its cost in bloodshed ultimately caused this revolutionary zeal to wane, and the Iraqis were able to seize and

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20. Stephanie G. Neuman, "Arms, Aid and the Superpowers," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 66, No. 5 (1988): 1048.
21. One attempt at such a calculation included military expenditures and lost oil revenue for both belligerents through 1985, arriving at a total cost, as of December 1985, of US\$416.2 billion (Alnasrawi, 885).
22. Lee H. Hamilton, "Challenges for United States Policy in the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 43, No. 1 (1989): 10. See also Eric Hooglund, "The Islamic Republic at War and Peace," *Middle East Report* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1989): 8.
23. Opinions concerning the state of Iranian debt vary. See cf. Peterson, "The GCC States;" Ahmad Ashraf, "There is a Feeling that the Regime Owes Something to the People," *Middle East Report* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1989); and Graham Fuller, "War and Revolution in Iran," *Current History* 88 (1989): 535. The staggering Iraqi debt may be misleading because roughly one-half of this amount is owed to Arab countries and most likely will never be repaid.

maintain their first ground advantage by April 1987. When the combination of internal and international pressures — Iraqi military victories, internal Iranian discord and flagging revolutionary zeal, and increased international military activity in the gulf — began to threaten the revolution itself, the Iranian leadership looked to the UN resolution as a face-saving means of ceasing the hostilities.

The Iraqi military advantage stemmed directly from its numerical and technological superiority in tanks, armored vehicles and combat aircraft. Its ability to remain tactically flexible resulted from a steady external (mostly Soviet) supply of armaments, training and leadership.<sup>24</sup> By 1984, it became obvious that without sustaining huge ground casualties which Iraq could ill afford, the Iraqis would have to find some other means of breaking the Iranian will to fight.

Iraq was able to achieve this through “economic war,” in which superior Iraqi air forces consistently struck Iranian oil facilities and neutral merchant shipping, hoping to cripple the Iranian economy by disrupting its major source of revenue. This “Tanker War,” which culminated in the American reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers in May 1987 and the United States’ entry into the war, was initiated and conducted passionately by Iraqi planes. (It should be remembered that the USS Stark was hit by an Iraqi Exocet missile after being mistaken for an oil tanker.) The Tanker War and Kuwait’s request for reflagging purportedly were coordinated by Iraq and Kuwait to involve the United States militarily, as a counter to the Iranian naval threat.<sup>25</sup>

Two additional military advantages helped Iraq erode the Iranian will to fight. In the “War of the Cities,” also begun in 1984, Iraq targeted Iranian cities with the intention of deepening civilian distaste for the war. Both belligerents employed these tactics with comparable results until the early months of 1988. At this time Baghdad acquired the capability of extending the range of their Soviet Scud-B missiles to 300 miles, enabling Iraq to bomb the major Iranian cities of Tehran, Qom and Isfahan, and the oil installations in the southern gulf.<sup>26</sup> In Tehran alone, the spring 1988 bombings caused the exodus of approximately 1.5 million Iranians, or one-third of the capital’s population.<sup>27</sup> Iraq’s other military advantage, the ability and apparent willingness to use chemical weapons, also significantly undermined Iranian confidence. Initiated in 1983 at a time of great momentum for the Iranian ground forces, the Iraqi use of chemical weapons was, in the words of David Segal, essentially a defensive measure, “primarily employed to disrupt Iranian offensives, not to launch Iraqi ones.” Iran apparently also used chemical weapons in 1987, specifically mustard and phosgene gases.<sup>28</sup>

24. David Segal, “The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis,” *Foreign Affairs* 66 (1982): 5.

25. Leonard Binder, “The Changing American Role in the Middle East,” *Current History* Vol. 88, No. 535 (1989): 67.

26. Iraq scaled back its missile attacks on Iranian population centers in 1986 and 1987, possibly because of international opinion and the success of Iranian counterattacks. Their ability to extend the Scud-B’s range in 1988 restored the Iraqi advantage in the War of the Cities.

27. “Shortages, Despair Visible,” *Iran Times*, 8 July 1988.

28. Segal, 956. See also Ashraf, 16.

By April 1988 it became clear that Baghdad had achieved the final military advantage in the war. A series of Iraqi offensives regained strategic Iraqi territory which Iran had taken two years to conquer, including the Fao Peninsula, the Majnoon Islands and the Shalamcheh border area. In the gulf itself, the escalating Tanker War had drawn the US Navy into the fray, culminating on April 17, 1988 (the same day that Iraq regained control over Fao) in the destruction of two oil platforms and six Iranian naval vessels. This combination of land and naval defeats, occurring on the same day, marked "the psychological turning point" in the war.<sup>29</sup>

On the economic and diplomatic front Iraq enjoyed the clear advantage of support from the superpowers, international trading partners and Arab backers. This outside support provided Iraq with military hardware, training and intelligence; millions of dollars in credit; the ability to restructure loan payments and to finance ongoing development projects; and the ability to maintain the essential export of crude oil and the import of consumer and military goods. Unlike Iran, which had to pay up-front for imports, Iraq's favorable relations with its creditors allowed it to finance internal development and continue the war effort on credit.<sup>30</sup>

Although the world community generally recognized Iraq as the aggressor in the war by invading Iran on September 22, 1980, Iraq's consistent willingness to accept a cease-fire and negotiate peace (after its initial advances into Iranian territory in the first week of fighting) was largely responsible for continued international support and credit arrangements. Baghdad's strategic shift in policy toward Israel and its pragmatic economic program of development and external cooperation (through the coordination of oil exports and expansion of construction projects for intra-regional pipelines) guaranteed its continued external support in the war.

For the Iranians, the success of the war and the survival of the revolution itself became inextricably intertwined. The revolutionary regime came to power on the strength of its Islamic fundamentalist beliefs. To fundamentalist zealots, the governments of the shah and other Muslim countries were illegitimate because they did not adhere to the correct precepts of Islam. In particular, the Ba'ath Socialist regime of Iraq became the subject of violent attacks by Iranian leaders, who accused the regime of being non-Islamic.<sup>31</sup> Iranian rhetoric and activities in the revolution's first year-and-a-half drastically increased tensions between the two countries and led to the Iraqi Shi'ite majority overthrow of the Sunni minority government of Iraq. Contrary to Iranian expectations, their Iraqi coreligionists remained loyal to Baghdad, providing over 50 percent of the Iraqi military force. Iraq similarly expected support from the Arab minority population in Iranian Khuzestan, only to be

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29. According to Shahram Chubin, director of research at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva. Quoted in "More Deadly than Poison," *Newsweek*, 1 August 1988.

30. Alnasrawi, 875-880.

31. For a general discussion of Tehran's relations with other Muslim governments, see Peterson, "The GCC States," or Mylroie, "Iraq's Changing Role."

frustrated by the high degree of loyalty and nationalism entrenched in the region.<sup>32</sup>

By September 1980, Iraq felt justified in attempting what it considered a preemptive strike against Iranian imperialistic intentions, hoping to topple the fragile Khomeini regime or at least contain the Iranian exportation of the revolution.<sup>33</sup> After the first week of fighting, Iraq sued for peace, having failed to depose the Ayatollah Khomeini, yet remained willing to accept an agreement based on the currently held territorial boundaries. Iran refused this and all subsequent Iraqi calls for peace, demanding a return to the prewar boundaries recognized by the 1975 Algiers Accord<sup>34</sup> and the branding of Iraq as the aggressor in the conflict. Iranian revolutionary zeal and the legitimacy of the clerical regime were tied by that time to a military victory and international vindication. Constant Iranian intransigence in the face of international mediation attempts and Iran's continued goal of exporting its style of Islamic government to the other countries in the region intensified the Arab fear of Iranian intentions and mobilized world opinion against Iran. Only when the revolution itself became threatened by the continuation of the war did the government act to sever the relationship and end the war.

A number of factors and events compelled the revolutionary regime to fear for its own future: Iranian military ineffectiveness and inefficiency; an economy plagued by material deficiencies and a lack of trained personnel; the continued depression of the oil industry; an American and international determination to force an Iranian capitulation; and domestic war weariness, coinciding with an internal political struggle and grave concern for Imam Khomeini's health.<sup>35</sup> Iranian military ineffectiveness and inefficiency, as well as the shortage of trained personnel within the industrial sector, resulted from the revolution itself. As in other social revolutions, Iranian society underwent a series of purges designed to eliminate counterrevolutionary factions. To an ideology which by its very nature was anti-modern, the leadership of the shah's former army and of the industrial sector represented a formidable threat to the purity and legitimacy of the revolution. Consequently, thousands of educated and influential Iranians fled the country, in fear of being purged by the new regime.

Within the Iranian military two new, ideologically motivated organizations were created to bear the brunt of the fighting and spread the message of the revolution through military means: the Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards Corps) and the reserve Basij militia (Popular Mobilized Army). The relatively well-trained and well-led regular army was relegated to situations in which it could be supervised and led by other revolutionary ideologues.<sup>36</sup> This resulted in a

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32. King, 13.

33. *Ibid.*, 5-10.

34. Iraq had grown unwilling to accept a redefinition of the international borders set by the Algiers Accord to be the Shatt al-Arab River. This agreement, in effect, allowed Iran access to the river along the *thalweg*, or deep-water line. Iraq abrogated the accord in 1980.

35. Numerous articles describing many of the symptoms of this war weariness are to be found in the popular press from the beginning of 1988, including the *Iran Times*, *The Economist*, and *Newsweek*.

36. Segal, 953.

double bureaucracy, political infighting and battlefield ineffectiveness. Significantly, by late spring of 1988, the Iranian government recognized the ineffectiveness of this dual system and attempted to correct the problem by creating a central military command under the control of a new commander in chief, Majlis Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. However, this reorganization began too late to alter the pattern of the war.

During the war, shortages of material goods, ranging from military hardware to food, plagued the Iranian economy.<sup>37</sup> These shortages were related

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directly to Iran's shrinking oil revenues, which were cut drastically throughout the war by Iraqi air strikes against oil facilities and by falling oil prices and the weakening US dollar. In the first five years of the war Iran was forced to import \$14 billion worth of oil products due to damage sustained by its refineries.<sup>38</sup> The last three years of the war, characterized by a halving of oil prices and by increased aerial attacks against Iranian facilities and tankers, proved to be especially detrimental to the economy.

Iranian trade statistics show that the revenue losses during the last years of the war severely crippled the economy even though Iran was able to maintain crude oil exports at a production capacity of roughly two million barrels per day.<sup>39</sup> In 1983, a year of strong military advances, Iranian exports and imports were valued at \$19 billion and \$18 billion, respectively.<sup>40</sup> By 1986, when oil prices hit rock bottom, exports and imports dropped to \$7 billion and \$10 billion, respectively.<sup>41</sup>

It became dramatically obvious by early 1988 that the United States and the world would accept nothing short of Iranian capitulation. The escalation of American naval activity in the gulf, culminating in the tragic downing of Iran Air flight 655 on July 3, 1988, convinced Iran of American determination to force an end to the war.<sup>42</sup> Diplomatically, Iran had sought support for its position that before a cease-fire could take effect, Iraq should be named the aggressor in the war. Tehran also actively campaigned for a strong condemnation of Iraqi use of chemical weapons in the war. When neither of these

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37. In 1986 and 1987, Iran imported an annual average of \$3 billion in foodstuffs ("Food Self-Sufficiency Elusive," *Iran Times*, 19 August 1988).

38. Hooglund, "The Islamic Republic." See also "Iran Reveals Huge Oil Losses," *Iran Times*, 9 September 1988.

39. "Country Report — Iran," *Economist Intelligence Unit* No. 3 (1988): 8.

40. *Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1988* (Washington: International Monetary Fund, 1988), 229.

41. "Country Report — Iran," 13.

42. "Khomeini Reverses War Policy," *Iran Times*, 22 July 1988; See also Fuller, *War and Revolution*, 81.

demands were satisfied, particularly after Iraq's acceptance of the cease-fire resolution in July 1987, Iran fully understood the extent of its isolation.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, general war weariness — born of years of sacrifice and economic and military hardship — and flagging revolutionary zeal revealed anti-war sentiment in Iranian society. Increasing anti-war demonstrations, public statements from dissident politicians and a mass failure of the population to mobilize itself for the war effort illustrated the level of domestic unrest.<sup>44</sup> Psychologically, the spiralling inflation rate, fear of chemical weapons and the continuing missile attacks on major cities created an atmosphere of chaos and impending collapse.

Politically, the ongoing power struggle between factions within the Iranian government was exacerbated by expectations of Imam Khomeini's imminent death. The "moderates" in the government, led by Speaker Hashemi-Rafsanjani, favored an end to the war and the consolidation of the revolution through reconstruction and internal developments.<sup>45</sup> These men very much feared for the future of the revolution if the imam were to die before the end of the war. Only his charismatic leadership, it was felt, could keep the country together through an acceptance of peace and, effectively, the admission of defeat in the war against Iraq.<sup>46</sup>

Faced with these factors and steady losses on the battlefield, the Iranian government accepted the inevitability of defeat and searched for a means to end the war with a minimum of damage to its credibility. That opportunity arose with the downing of the Iranian civilian airliner on July 3, 1988. The sheer magnitude of the disaster and the apparent willingness of the United States to continue vigorous military actions gave the Iranian government the domestic and international justification it needed to accept UN Resolution 598 and agree to a cease-fire.<sup>47</sup>

#### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

No one country or force was responsible for the Iranian acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 598. The cease-fire was caused by the confluence of the foreign policy objectives of the United States and the Soviet Union and of various Middle Eastern countries. Iraq and Iran found themselves constrained in their actions by the matrix of support and international pressures created by the foreign policies of other nations. In retrospect, the political, economic and military support provided to Iraq by the superpowers and Arab

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43. According to the *Iran Times*, Iran was so isolated by the end of the war that it "could not find a single member of the UN Security Council that would even introduce its resolution to condemn Washington for the shootdown" ("Ten Reasons Why Iran Might Rather Switch than Fight," *Iran Times*, 22 July 1988). See also Hooglund, "The Islamic Republic," and Fuller, "War and Revolution."

44. Several articles concerning these events appeared in the *Iran Times*, on 10 June, 8 July, and 22 July 1988.

45. According to Hooglund, Iranian moderate leaders apparently became sensitized to civilian war weariness as early as the winter of 1985 (Hooglund, 6).

46. Fred Halliday, "Iran-Iraq: The Uncertainties of Peace," *The World Today* Vol. 44, No. 10 (1988): 1. See also "Ten Reasons Why," *Iran Times*.

47. Halliday, 1.

countries left the Iranian government little chance of decisively beating its Iraqi foe, much less of fulfilling its greater goal of extending its fundamentalist ideology to the rest of the Muslim world.

The Iran-Iraq War provides a dramatic example of the power of cooperation between the superpowers and even among regional governments. In particular, US-Soviet cooperation in this war demonstrated, perhaps for the first time, a collective desire to suppress and contain a regional conflict through primarily non-military means. Recognition of their common interest in restoring the *status quo ante bellum* and mutual appreciation of the dangers inherent in superpower confrontation in this strategically vital area prompted joint support for a diplomatic solution.

Although claiming that the Cold War is over may be premature, superpower cooperation in pursuit of an end to the war suggests that *when a confluence of interests exists*, a degree of joint US-Soviet pressure and cooperation can disengage regional conflicts from East-West rivalry and provide the context for a political solution. Soviet spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov stated in April 1988,

“We now have something which we haven’t had for a very long time: a Soviet-American dialogue, not just on disarmament, but on all the issues. This includes regional conflicts. There are many problems made more difficult by our rivalry that we can solve together.”<sup>48</sup>

Superpower cooperation with respect to the gulf developed because of a confluence of national interests. As a US government source has indicated, the superpowers may find themselves working together in efforts to solve problems related to worldwide military developments, such as missile proliferation and the use of chemical and biological weapons. However, cooperation in a broader range of issues is not likely in the near future.

Of particular concern to the superpowers during the gulf conflict was the proliferation of weaponry in the region. This example of the worldwide “democratization of warfare,” begun in Southwest Asia with the massive influx of oil revenue of the last two decades, dramatically influenced superpower policy during the war. Formulation and implementation of the superpowers’ foreign policies now must take into account the presence of massive arms supplies throughout the world (much of which was provided by the superpowers themselves) and the subsequent increase in the influence of non-superpower producers and distributors such as Brazil and the People’s Republic of China. The United States and the Soviet Union no longer hold all the armament purse strings in the world nor do they exclusively control the most advanced military technology. To contain this new and potentially disruptive force, they must develop the ability to separate volatile regional conflicts from the traditional East-West rivalry.

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48. Quoted in Segal, 962.

Two additional themes which have emerged from the Iran-Iraq War are that the character of the Iranian Revolution was uniquely national and that cultural and ideological ties in Southwest Asia are readily subsumed within nationalism. Shi'ite Islamic fundamentalism, the driving force of the revolution and the Iranian war effort, was rejected emphatically by the Muslim governments of Southwest Asia as the model of Islamic rule. This rejection was rooted in the deep ideological differences between Shi'ite and Sunni beliefs, recast in an anti-Iranian, anti-imperialist mold as a response to the Iranian policy of exporting the revolution through military and political means. Fearing both the power of fundamentalist fervor in their own countries and the military prowess and imperial designs of Tehran's revolutionary regime, the Sunni Arab governments of the Middle East became active supporters of Iraq. The isolation of Iran from other Muslim countries, except for the small Syrian-led faction, effectively stemmed the spread of the fundamentalist message and threatened the very survival of the revolution. Denied the fulfillment of its ideological and military goals, the Iranian government has been forced to focus on domestic problems ignored or exacerbated during the war, couching the future of the revolution in uniquely Iranian, Persian terms.

The strength of nationalism in the gulf region also was illustrated clearly by the war. Both Iran and Iraq had expected, and had indeed relied heavily upon, the allegiance of the ethnic minorities living within each other's boundaries. The failure of the Iraqi majority Shi'ite population or the Arab minority of Iranian Khuzestan to revolt against their respective governments surprised the belligerents. Each had assumed that the war could be won quickly with the help of these populations. The absence of this support played a major role in prolonging the fighting. This dramatic display of nationalism in a conflict based heavily on religious and cultural differences demonstrates the level of development of nationalist identity and the strength of the nation-state system in the region. The future efficacy of traditional ideological and cultural ties in gulf politics is therefore questionable.

The role of ideology was challenged in still another aspect during the war. The usual domination of political motives over commercial ones was reversed in the war because of the level of revenue generated by arms sales to the belligerents. The war and the worldwide proliferation of weaponry provided a bonanza for a wide variety of countries motivated by the constant demand for arms and arms support. Political loyalties became blurred: allies of both the United States and the Soviet Union continued to risk superpower displeasure by selling arms to Iran in contravention of Operation Staunch. The worldwide arms trade thus represents a dangerous precedent in which traditional superpower influence over allies can be eroded or broken in the name of economic expediency.

Because of the gulf region's strategic importance to both superpowers, its long and virulent history of cultural enmity and the tremendous influx of oil wealth over the last two decades, the Iran-Iraq War became a political arena which reflected many of the dramatic recent changes in world politics. Among the demonstrated changes are the diversification of the world's arms industry,

the subsequent loss of control by the superpowers over Third World arms imports and the subservience of ideology to both nationalism and economics. Perhaps most significant was the subsequent realization by both superpowers that future cooperation will be necessary to contain regional conflicts which potentially threaten the global balance of power and the national interests of both the Soviet Union and the United States.