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# PERCEPTION AND MISPERCEPTION IN THE PERSIAN GULF: THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

by

GARY C. DEMACK

**I**n September 1980, Iraqi forces invaded Iran on three fronts along several hundred miles of disputed border. Many Middle East observers were surprised by the invasion and the undeclared war that followed, but they need not have been. Both ancient and recent history, together with a number of more current geopolitical, religious, and personality differences, made these hostilities virtually inevitable. The Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran was certainly not the decisive influence, but it did serve as the trigger that led Saddam Hussein to launch Iraq's invasion.

Most observers suggested when it started that the war would be short and would probably culminate in an Iraqi victory and Iranian territorial concessions. Now well into its third year, however, the war continues in its limited fashion. Contrary to initial expectations, Iraq has not gained a quick and easy victory, and the Straits of Hormuz have remained open. Although the objectives of the war have changed dramatically with the passage of time and the shifting fortunes of the two combatants, neither party has accomplished anything of consequence. The only real change has been a temporary decrease in the oil production and production capacity of both nations.

To this point, the war has been confined to the two hostile nations. Early fears that the conflict would spill over into other Persian Gulf states have not yet materialized. At least

on the surface, the region has not been further destabilized. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have not been drawn into the fighting, nor have they asserted their preferences with regard to its outcome in such a manner as to provoke a military reaction from either antagonist. Since Iranian objectives have expanded now that the Iranians have assumed the offensive, no end to the war is in sight. Continued unrealistic objectives will likely impede attempts at serious negotiations.

Neither superpower has been able to exert much influence on the conduct of the war or on its movement toward some kind of conclusion. Instead, what both the United States and the Soviet Union have accomplished has been a prolongation of the conflict by indirectly keeping both sides militarily supplied to the point of adequacy, defined as an ability to continue to wage war and not be overrun by hostile forces. Indeed, Tariq Aziz, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister, recently suggested that the two superpowers "want the war to continue or do not care whether it continues."<sup>1</sup>

Both the United States and the Soviet Union recognize the continued threat to the rest of the Middle East as long as the war continues. Yet both would prefer its continuation to a severe disruption of the prewar status quo. Nor have any of the other Gulf states been able to produce serious negotiations to end the fighting. As long as the war does not spill over into neighboring

countries, most of the Arab World seems content to let the two antagonists slug it out. Both Iran and Iraq are so preoccupied that neither is able to directly influence events elsewhere in the Gulf, thus denying themselves any ability to achieve their primary national objectives.

The war could continue indefinitely, too, because religion has now asserted itself as the dominant Iranian motivation. Khomeini, who has repeatedly called for the overthrow of the Baathist leadership in Iraq, now hopes to capitalize on recent Iranian military successes to liberate important religious symbols from Iraqi control. Najaf and Karbala, the two most important cities to Shia Islam after Mecca, both lie within Iraq and have majority Shia populations. Khomeini has resorted to trying to liberate these cities because his appeals to the Shiites to overthrow their Sunni leaders have, to date, failed. Indeed, it is quite possible "that the only break in the present military and political situation would come with the death of . . . Khomeini."<sup>2</sup>

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards, who have been leading the Iranian invasion of Iraq, have as their "spiritual objective . . . Karbala, as holy to Iran's Shiite Moslems as Jerusalem is to Christians."<sup>3</sup> With banners proclaiming, "Karbala, we are coming," the Revolutionary Guards have been seeking to liberate Karbala from the unbelievers, the Sunni Iraqi government, because it "is the burial place of the Shiites' patron, Hossein, 'martyred 1300 years ago in battle with the Sunni.'"<sup>4</sup>

It is Najaf, however, "the holiest of Shia cities," that Khomeini particularly wishes to liberate. Not only is Najaf considered holy by the Shia, but Khomeini spent 15 years of his exile there in the city where Ali, Mohammed's cousin, is buried. At the time, the Iraqi Shiite ulama in Najaf sensed that the old faith was losing ground to the modernization and urbanization taking place in Iraq. Additionally, the penetration of communism and the secularization of the Sunni Baathist leaders were points of concern. Khomeini witnessed these trends and activities and was

undoubtedly appalled at what was happening in this holiest of Shia cities.<sup>5</sup>

Najaf is also the city in which the al-Da'wah al-Islamayah (the Islamic Call) Shia political party was formed during Khomeini's exile there in the late 1960s. As a political party, the Da'wah is similar to Iran's Islamic Republican Party.<sup>6</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Arabs of Mesopotamia and the Aryans of Persia have warred upon each other at various times throughout history in the area now being devastated by their modern successors. In the sixth century B.C., the Persians, under Cyrus the Great, conquered the Assyrians (who had previously conquered the Babylonians). Before the rule of Cyrus, the Persians had been confined to the area east of the Persian Gulf, with their capital in Persepolis. Although the Gulf afforded protection from the lower Gulf sheikdoms, no protection was afforded at the head of the Gulf, around the Shatt-al-Arab River, from those who inhabited the western side of the Gulf. And, conversely, no protection was afforded those on the western side from the Persians.



The Persians inhabited a land that was composed almost entirely of mountains and deserts, [was] poor in rivers, [and] subject to severe winters and hot, arid summers . . . . It could support its . . . inhabitants only through such external contributions as trade or conquest might bring.<sup>7</sup>

The same might be said of Iran today. For the descendants of Cyrus, just add Islam and oil to modern-day Iran's list of reasons for trying to conquer or dominate its Arab neighbors. Given Iran's penchant for looking back to the days of empire—as evidenced by such disparate figures as the Shahinshah, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, and the Imam, Ayatollah Khomeini—can its Arab neighbors discount the threat from Persia? Can Iraq, the modern-day Mesopotamia, perceive Iranian actions as anything but attempts to reassert Persian power throughout the Gulf?

Saddam Hussein would welcome a weakened Iran, one that would be pliant to Arab demands backed up by Arab force. This Iran would be markedly less willing, and much less able, to reassert Persian claims of empire. It would be unable to resist the Arab tide in international events, most notably in dealings with Israel. It also would be a poorer country, shorn of much of Arabistan (Khuzistan) and consequently much of its oil revenues, with Iraq obviously benefiting from Iran's losses.

### THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Sunni Moslems are those who accept and obey the traditions (Hadith) of their Prophet's customs (Sunna) and conversation (they have thus received the name of Sunni, or traditionalists).<sup>8</sup> The Shiites, on the other hand, exalt the Koran and repudiate belief in the Sunni traditions. By the eighth century, the Shiite sect dominated the Sunnis in Egypt, India, and Persia. In the ninth century, however, the Shiites were proscribed, beginning a conflict that has lasted to this day.

Today, Shia Islam awaits the coming of the Mahdi (Hidden Imam), or Rightly Guided

One, who will rule by divine right. While many Sunni Moslems also believe in the Mahdi, they accord him neither the same divine mission nor fervent significance. The Sunnis regard their ulama primarily as servants of the state, whereas Shiites extend to their *mujtahids* (i.e., ayatollahs) far more substantial religious authority.

The Shahs of Iran, practicing Sunnis, paid less and less attention during their reigns to the *mujtahids*. The Reza Shah, Shah Reza Pahlevi's father, attempted to relegate Islam to the sidelines of Persian life. This largely successful effort was anathema, however, to the Shiites. When continued by Shah Reza Pahlevi, this further secularization of Iran led to outbreaks of religious disaffection, with the first concerted upsurge of protest coming in 1961:

The disturbances were led, if not directly instigated, by a singularly austere and obdurate mujtahid, the ayatollah 'sign or token from God' Ruhollah Khomeini. The riots were suppressed with great severity by the army and police, and Khomeini was banished from the country.<sup>9</sup>

Khomeini, as we have seen, began his exile in neighboring Iraq, where the Shiites are also in the majority, and where he continued to propagandize against the Shah. But then, in 1978, at the Shah's request, Saddam Hussein ordered him to leave Iraq.

Forced departure from the country that had provided him sanctuary for 15 years infuriated the Ayatollah. Another factor that invited hostility from the Imam was that Hussein, too, was a Sunni. In Khomeini's eyes, his departure from Iraq was yet another case of a Sunni leader expelling him. The expulsion, considered together with Iraq's secularization through Arab Socialism and the fanatical nature of Khomeini's version of Shia Islam, provides little wonder that the Imam harbors deep resentment toward Hussein. Before the war's inception, Khomeini had called for the overthrow of Hussein and the members of his Baathist Party, because they were not true believers. That hostile gesture contributed to the onset

of the conflict and now provides a reason for its continuation.

The uncompromising religious overtones that hostilities have now taken on for the Iranians were perhaps best illustrated by the nature of the surprise offensive undertaken by Iranian forces in July 1982, an offensive "designed to bring down the Baathist regime of . . . Hussein." The assault was led by Khomeini's Islamic Revolutionary Guards, "who suicidally hurled themselves at the enemy in one human wave after another."<sup>10</sup> Such fanaticism reflects, as much as anything, the seeming irreconcilability of the differences between the two national leaders.

### THE GEOPOLITICAL SETTING

The Shatt-al-Arab River, which connects the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the Persian Gulf, has served as the boundary between Iraq and Iran for 350 years. In 1639, Persia and the Ottoman Empire, which then controlled Iraq, concluded the Treaty of Zuhab. The treaty "is significant because it became the basis of future treaties and, in effect, established the framework of future contentions over the borders."<sup>11</sup> The Shatt-al-Arab conveniently determined the border in the south (although north of the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, the border territory was much harder to define).

Iraq controlled the Shatt-al-Arab in a succession of further treaties through 1911. During that period, the Persian boundary never extended any farther than the eastern bank, giving Iraq control of the river. Beginning in 1924, however, the Iranian subjugation of Khuzistan made the boundary

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demarcation of the waterway again the subject of dispute. Because the port of Abadan became important in shipping Persian oil, and the waterway was under Iraqi control, the Iranians began to call for a readjustment of the border from the river's east bank to its median. Iran based its claim on the principle of international law that prevails in cases where a river separates two states. The dispute was temporarily quieted by a 1937 treaty that gave Iran control of the Shatt-al-Arab to the median along a five-mile stretch around Abadan.

Then, in 1969, after the British announced that they would end their military presence in the Persian Gulf, the Shah unilaterally abrogated the treaty. He claimed the median as the boundary for the entire length of the Shatt-al-Arab. Iraq finally acceded to the Shah's abrogation in 1975, when it accepted the new boundary in exchange for the Shah's promise to end his assistance to the rebellious Kurds fighting for greater autonomy in northeastern Iraq. It is common knowledge that Iraq regarded this concession as less than a satisfactory quid pro quo.

Iran has felt somewhat threatened by the Iraqis when they have been in control of the waterway, especially in the area around Abadan. Iran does have other ports, however, and a long coastline from which its oil can be shipped. Iraq, on the other hand, has comparatively little capacity, since her shoreline on the Gulf is very short. Thus Iraq has severe problems in shipping oil other than through this marshy area or through pipelines across Syria, which at best are only a tentatively secure means for such shipment. Further,

it should be noted that Iraq needs additional territory to build a deep-water tanker terminal. Fao . . . has a working draft of only thirty-five feet, and Khar-Al-Anya's is only fifty feet. These facilities are therefore limited to tankers of 100,000 tons.<sup>12</sup>

Since 100,000 tons is small by today's standards, the Iraqis do indeed have a problem.

Iraq wants to be a dominant force in the Persian Gulf area. Owing to its short coastline, however, Iraq encounters much difficulty in pursuing such a position of prime influence. As Alvin Cottrell notes, "Hostile hands are always potentially around the country's throat . . . thus, it cannot be said to enjoy territorial security at all for its principal means of survival."<sup>13</sup>

### IRREDENTIST CLAIMS

Over the centuries, each fall of a Persian dynasty has been followed by a period of civil war and by foreign invasion. J. B. Kelly notes that "with the disintegration of the central government, regional loyalties [have asserted] themselves."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Iraq is no more secure, for it is

an artificial state, with no sense of historical continuity between its previous existence as three distinct vilayets of the Ottoman Empire and its modern metamorphosis as a . . . nation-state. Even the appearance of nationhood is illusory, for the population of Iraq is made up of a number of separate communities, each distinguished from the other by racial, religious, or even national differences.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in Iraq, nationalism is viewed in the Pan-Arab sense and consequently, it is, to a significant extent, inseparable from Islam. Forging a nation-state is no small task, especially when nationhood is construed by either half of a country's populace as transcending the geographical boundaries of the political state, and even more difficult a task when each of those two constructs is based upon differing Islamic precepts of the state's proper function.

Iran is composed of several distinct ethnic groups, with the Persians representing roughly 40 percent of the population. Among the several ethnic minorities, the Baluchis, the Kurds, and the Arabs have made demands for independence, with varying degrees of activism associated with those demands. Louis Snyder refers to the demands of these ethnic groups as demands of "mini-nationalism,"

otherwise described as "those smaller nationalisms, or regionalisms, absorbed into a larger centralized state."<sup>16</sup> He continues:

For unsatisfied mini-nationalists, a revolutionary situation or a war means opportunity. When the centralized state—the enemy—is faced with revolution or war, liberators see a possibility for fulfillment of their dreams. Instead of begging for autonomy, they point to a newly opened road to independence.<sup>17</sup>

Despite concessions granted the Kurds, particularly by the Baathist regime in Iraq, the Kurdish struggle in both Iran and Iraq remains complicated by oil and religion. The Kurds claim that the portion of Kurdistan that lies in Iraq includes the Kirkuk area and its oil wealth, from which they have not received their fair share of revenues.

The Iranian Kurds, who are Sunni, at first welcomed the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, since he had continuously used force against them. Believing that their day of freedom had finally arrived, they supported Khomeini's revolution in the expectation that Khomeini would be more sympathetic to their regionalist demands. Instead, they found him no more willing to compromise than the Shah had been. Thus the outbreak of war gave the Kurds the opportunity for which they were waiting.<sup>18</sup>

The Arabs of Khuzistan had a direct influence upon the miscalculation that led Hussein to go to war. Historically, the issue of suzerainty over Khuzistan (called Arabistan by the Arabs) has been a volatile one. And, historically, the Arabs there have given only nominal allegiance to Persia. A successful separatist movement in Khuzistan would remove the major oil-producing area in Iran from Iranian control, thus depriving that country of its major source of revenue. For that reason, in recent years the Iranians were demanding more than just nominal allegiance from Khuzistan's Arabs.

Before the 1980 invasion, Khuzistan Arabs had been rebuffed in their calls for autonomy and eventual independence, leading them to "begin a campaign of

sabotage in Iranian oil fields, blowing up pipelines and rail tracks and reducing the flow of oil to domestic refineries."<sup>19</sup> Dozens of Arabs were executed by Iran as the incidence of sabotage increased with the introduction of Iraqi guerrillas into Khuzistan. At the time that Khomeini was issuing repeated calls to the Shia in Iraq to revolt, Hussein was looking to Khuzistan's Arabs to flock to the Iraqi banner once the war began. Indeed, the initial Iraqi invasion was directed into Khuzistan along a line 500 miles long.

#### PERCEPTION AND MISPERCEPTION

With the Shah's overthrow and Khomeini's revolution, the Gulf War would appear to have become inevitable. Perceptual differences contributed heavily to this inevitability. The uneasy truce between Iran and Iraq broke down completely with the Shah's departure from the scene, because that departure fostered new perceptions, some of which were erroneous. Saddam Hussein's perceptions—more importantly, his misperceptions—played a key role in the Iraqi decision to invade Iran. Similarly, Khomeini's misperceptions now prolong the war. The religious and geopolitical issues and the personality factors that helped to bring the war about have since provided a convenient rationale for its continuation while cloaking the personal ambitions of the two national leaders.

Hussein's decision to invade Khuzistan was to serve as a springboard for his attempt to assume leadership of the Arab World. The Iraqi attack on the potentially contagious Khomeini revolution was in part an attempt to demonstrate Baghdad's capability and willingness to use force to defend "Arab" interests.<sup>20</sup>

Saddam Hussein has personal ambitions to lead a regeneration of the remnants of the Pan-Arab movement. He would very much like to inherit Nasser's mantle, and saw his opportunity to do so with the Shah's overthrow and the supposed precipitous decline of Iranian military capabilities. As head of Iraq's Baathist Party, Hussein wanted to "reaffirm the vitality of the Pan-Arabist idea, which "postulates the existence of a

single Arab nation behind the facade of a multiplicity of sovereign states."<sup>21</sup> "This Pan-Arab nationalist strain in Baathist thinking has become especially predominant with [his] accession to full power."<sup>22</sup>

In trying to reaffirm the vitality of Pan-Arabism, Hussein was pursuing an idea that is nearing its end, if it is not already a thing of the past. He thought that the war would serve to revive a dying ideology, in that his Arab brethren would stand behind him. But Syria, the only other country where the Baath remain in power, has sided with Iran in the war, suggesting further the bankruptcy of Pan-Arabism and the complexity of Middle Eastern politics.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond the pull of Pan-Arabism, Hussein had to take seriously Khomeini's repeated pronouncements that secular regimes ruling Islamic countries should be overthrown. Thus the war can be seen in part as a preemptive strike to quell any such attempt by decimating the Iranian military when it was at its weakest. That Khomeini really does want to export his Islamic Revolution throughout the Arab World (or at least the Shiite portion of it) and topple secular "atheistic" regimes was a valid conclusion. Events since the war's outbreak, however, lead one to conclude that these hopes were little more than wishful thinking. Furthermore, from Iraq's perspective, Khomeini's Islamic Revolution was merely Persian expansionism garbed in new symbols.<sup>24</sup>

Hussein apparently perceived Khomeini's regime to be on the brink of collapse and hoped to drive the final stake into its heart. Instead, he managed to galvanize Iranian society behind the Ayatollah and temporarily strengthen the fledgling regime. Indeed,

Khomeini appears to have fastened [his] grip more firmly on this country than at any time since the revolution that overthrew Shah Pahlevi almost four years ago. The war with Iraq has been a major factor, arousing patriotic spirit and stifling political dissent.<sup>25</sup>

The Ayatollah may even have welcomed the Iraqi invasion because it turned attention

away from the economic disaster that the revolution and subsequent purges had caused at home. It also allowed him to terminate the hostage crisis with the United States, the "Great Satan," and to concentrate on a more immediate Satan. In Khomeini's words, Hussein "is completely uninformed about Islam, and, among other things, is an Arab."<sup>26</sup> But while Iranian success in expelling the Iraqi invasion and thwarting Hussein's ambitions is rooted primarily in Persian nationalism, Khomeini's calls for the export of his revolution are deeply rooted in Shia theology.

Many different motivations have been suggested for Khomeini's invasion of Iraq once the bulk of the Iraqi invaders had been expelled from Iran. But most observers of the war seem to have overlooked the single factor that may be the most compelling. Hussein's attack on Iran gave Khomeini the pretext for exporting his revolution through military action, helping him to achieve religious goals in the prosecution of the war. Given Najaf's significance to Shiites, it was not by chance that Khomeini chose it as his place of exile. On the basis of his experience there, the Ayatollah expected the Shiite population of Iraq to rise in rebellion against Saddam Hussein. He believed that the Pan-Islamic movement would motivate Iraqi Shiites as well as other true believers. His revolution is grounded in his religious beliefs; and among the various reasons offered for his continuing the war, the most significant may be that he is intent on liberating holy ground from Iraqi control.

In expecting the Shia majority in Iraq to heed his call for an Islamic revolution, Khomeini miscalculated on several counts. First, many of the rural Shiis are of relatively recent Bedouin origin, and the Bedouin have not been known for the vigor of their religion. Even today, they continue to be governed more by ancient tribal custom than by Islamic law.<sup>27</sup> Second, Khomeini was unaware of, or discounted too much, the Iraqi Shiites' negative feelings toward him and other Iranian religious leaders. The tension that existed between Iranian and

Arab ulama in Najaf had spilled over to the Arab Shii populace, which believed that the Iranians looked down on them and their holy men. Finally, "Iraqi Shiis are clearly more comfortable with their own kind and prefer that real leadership should be in the hands of Shii that are Iraqi."<sup>28</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Iraq-Iran War seems now to have been inevitable. This inevitability did not arise from any single factor, but instead from a combination of factors that continue to influence the conflict by prolonging it. The outbreak of war was a result of wholly reasonable Iraqi security concerns heightened by the deterioration of the Shah's authority from early 1978 onward and the advent of a revolutionary regime in Iran.<sup>29</sup> The security concerns alone, however, would not have made the war inevitable. Other factors that prominently came into play were religion and ideology.

Unfortunately, Saddam Hussein failed to see what his invasion would bring about for the two countries. He apparently hoped that it would further divide Iran to the point at which Khomeini would be ousted. Claudia Wright, among others, points out that "Iraq was committed to a preemptive war . . . , [but] an all-out invasion of Iran was never contemplated."<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly, Hussein has since realized the difficulties implicit in trying to wage limited war with limited allied support when the enemy sees the conflict as total war. Khomeini seized the opportunity provided by the invasion to directly influence events that he hoped would bring about Hussein's downfall. Thus he has had the Revolutionary Guards waging all-out war against Hussein's forces, which themselves are fighting for more limited objectives.

Arabistan remains Khuzistan, and Iran still has its oil. Recent attacks on Kharg Island in the Gulf certainly make it more difficult for Iran to realize much-needed profits from its wealth, but nevertheless that wealth is still in Iranian hands. Furthermore, rather than a situation in which Khomeini has



been overthrown and Iran dismembered, the Ayatollah appears to have a firmer grip on Iran, despite its economic misery.

Syria, the only other Baathist state in the Arab World, has not sided with Iraq, and the rest of the Arab World has divided its allegiance. That should tell Hussein that Pan-Arabism is a dying, if not dead, movement. Here again, interestingly, religion enters the picture, for "the ruling elite of Syria are from the Alawi, a minority sect in Syria which is an offshoot of Shiism."<sup>31</sup>

On the Iranian side, perceptions have not proven to be any more accurate than those of Hussein. The Shia majority in Iraq has not risen in revolt against Hussein, in large part because they have noticed "that the status of the Arab Shia minority in Iran has not improved under the new religious dispensation."<sup>32</sup> That Khomeini expected the defense of Iran against invasion to have a larger religious appeal is apparent. That he expected the export of the Islamic Revolution to be welcomed among Shiites throughout the Persian Gulf region is equally apparent. Undoubtedly, "revelations of the Khomeini regime's covert arms dealings with Israel significantly dampened whatever revolutionary [or] religious appeal the movement had in the Arab world."<sup>33</sup>

The long-term importance of the region where Iranian and Iraqi armies are currently locked in combat is reflected in the words of a former British foreign secretary and viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, who observed that in the 19th century Persia was looked upon as one of the key pieces "on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world." Not long after, at the time of the interwar period of this century, oil had made Khuzistan both an important strategic location for the British, and a most valuable possession for Tehran, at the same time that Arab nationalism among Arabistan's tribes was developing.<sup>34</sup>

Broaden the notion from British to Western interests, and the same holds true today and is likely to remain true in the future. Regardless of the outcome of the current war, Khuzistan potentially holds the key to a significant portion of the world's

security. The region's oil, who controls it, and what the controlling party does with it will continue to be disputed long after Khomeini and Hussein have departed. The conclusion of the war will not alleviate, but instead may further exacerbate, the underlying problems that led to the present clash of interests. And in the absence of effective regional or international pressures to halt the war, it will probably go on until internal developments force an end.

If the Gulf War ultimately winds down through mutual exhaustion, both Iran and Iraq will have suffered substantial damage in human and economic terms, but will not necessarily be faced with domestic political upheaval leading to the overthrow of either national leader. On the other hand, if either Iran or Iraq emerges a clear-cut victor, the region could be further destabilized. A disruption of the status quo in the region is the greatest potential danger of the war's eventual conclusion. Should Iraq win, such a disruption easily could take the form of a partial or complete dismemberment of Iran. Should Iran win, there may be no way of stopping Khomeini from further attempts to realize an Islamic polity throughout the Persian Gulf.

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