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ESSAYS

A Revolution and A War: How Iran Transformed Today's Middle East

How the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the eight-year Iran–Iraq War greatly and irreversibly influenced the geopolitics and regional dynamics of the Middle East

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian



An Iranian girl carries a photo of the late leader of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, to mark the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution, a week before parliamentary elections, Tehran, Feb. 11. *Damir Sagolj/Reuters*

Since the Iranian 1979 Revolution, but also more recently, the geopolitics of the Arab World vis-à-vis Iran has undergone a significant transformation. Iran has strengthened its alliance with Russia and China and has remained a hostile force resisting U.S. hegemony. Its influence has only grown as a number of armed non-state or quasi-state groups spread across the region. Another development in favor of Iran has been the rise of sectarianism in the Islamic world, which—with the exception of Tunisia—has reached its pinnacle. Finally, the Arab Spring, which heralded democracy to people, failed to do particularly that in the end. These events and others require us to adjust the prism through which we examine the geopolitics of the region today.

Prior to the 1979 Revolution, what shaped the geopolitics of the region was the Nixon Doctrine. The doctrine influenced Nixon's foreign policy decision to arm its allies, both Iran and Israel, to the teeth in the 1970s. The United States consistently sold the latest, most sophisticated, conventional weapons to Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (the Shah of Iran). It is estimated that the Shah purchased a total of 15 billion dollars of the most-advanced U.S. arms—weapons that were technologically superior to most of those available to other US allies, except Israel. Adjusted for inflation, 15 billion dollars in 1970 amounts to almost 1 trillion dollars in 2022. This leaves analysts with no doubt that both Nixon and Henry Kissinger believed that strengthening Iran's military would stabilize the Middle East; because the Shah was considered to be the “police” of the region, Iran was assigned the role of a buffer state whose function was to prevent the spread of communism and ensure a steady supply of oil.

The strategic support of the United States to the Shah was due to the geographic proximity of Iran to the former Soviet Union. As American analyst Gary Sick once said, Iran was the site for the United States to watch over the activities of the Soviet Union. By heavily arming Iran, the United States sought to build a shield against its rival, making sure that the Russians would never realize their dream “to reach the warm waters of the Persian Gulf”. Hence, the Shah of Iran was at the forefront of receiving the largest and most advanced U.S. military weapons such as the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), which was then the most sophisticated and expensive radar that the United States and Iran used to conduct reconnaissance operations on the Soviet borders. Moreover, Washington decided to help Iran build its nuclear program as early as in the 1950s under the “Atoms for Peace Program”. It may be interesting to the reader to note that the CIA reported to then-President Gerald Ford that the Shah would have an atomic bomb by 1984.

Armed by the United States, Iran's U.S.-assigned role as the police of the region manifested in many instances. One was during the Dhofar rebellion against the Sultan Qaboos of Oman from 1963 to 1976. The civil war began with the formation of the Dhofar Liberation Front—a communist group which aimed to create an independent state in the Dhofar area in the south of Oman. The Dhofar Liberation Front was heavily supported by the Soviet Union and had launched serious attacks on the central government in Qaboos. Were it not for the Shah of Iran's intervention in sending troops to put down the Dhofar rebellion, the Dhofar Liberation Front would have continued to challenge the rule of Sultan Qaboos. The fact that Iran intervened in the so-called “Arab affairs” as it saw fit; that it sent troops to another sovereign country; and that no country opposed the Shah for his interventions in the domestic affairs of other countries clearly shows Iran's political might in the region.

Another example is related to Bahrain. The Shah had claimed uninterrupted Persian sovereignty over Bahrain since the pre-Islamic era. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, the Shah expressed objections to London over the 1930 treaty to recognize the sovereignty of Bahrain. In fact, in 1927, Reza Pahlavi, the Shah's father,

took the dispute with Britain over Bahrain to the League of Nations, albeit with no resolution. In the end, in 1971, the Shah agreed with Britain to grant Bahrain independence from Iran, but insisted that the Greater and Lesser *Tonb* and *Abu Musa* islands would remain under the Iranian sovereignty.

With the onset of the 1979 Revolution, the regional affairs of the Middle East were the subject of tremendous change. The revolution brought about a completely different discourse by bringing down millennia of monarchical rule to an Islamic Republic. Iran, once an ally of the United States, turned into one of its avid foes, resisting its imperial tendencies. Although one could argue that the principles on which the Islamic Republic crafted its foreign policy have more or less remained the same particularly when it came to resisting U.S. presence in the Middle East region, bringing down millennia of monarchical rule through the transformations that led to the rise of an Islamic Republic as a result of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and in particular, the effect of Iraq–Iran War, forces us to rethink the ways we look at the geopolitics of the region.

Before that, it is important to examine Iran's current standing in the region in comparison to similar countries in the region including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan.

Iran's Standing in the Region as U.S. Ally

In the 1960s, Turkey's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was greater than that of both Iran and Pakistan, but in the 1970s, this trend changed. This can largely be attributed to the fact that the price of oil dramatically increased, which gave the Shah a large inflow of foreign exchange, which also led to a staggering growth in the relative size of capital. As the price of oil increased right after the 1973 oil crisis, Iran's GDP became greater than that of Turkey. Iran under the Shah also spent twice as much as Turkey and Pakistan. In 1975, Turkey and Pakistan spent 4 and 6 percent of their GDP on military expenditure whereas Iran spent 12 percent.

These figures clearly demonstrate Iran's weight and significance as the most influential ally of the United States in the Middle East region. Indeed, as the most powerful U.S. military ally in the Middle East at the time, the Shah pursued a policy that minimized the risk of confrontation with the Soviet Union, and this "zero-problem" approach with the Soviet Union is one of the success stories of its foreign policy.

Buttressed by its role as an ally of the United States, Iran was also able to exhibit regional superiority in terms of sheer exhibition of power. Take, for example, the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq to settle any disputes and conflicts concerning their common maritime border on Shatt Al-Arab River. In exchange for the Shah's withdrawal of support to the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion, Iran's borders were to be respected. However, following an eight-year war with Iran, the Algiers Agreement was abandoned, not to be revisited again, and Iraq stood to lose the most from the treaty abrogation, losing benefits it had once acquired from the border river.

The Geopolitics of the Middle East and the 1979 Revolution

The popular demonstrations in Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini against the dictatorship of the Shah and the U.S. domination of the region gave rise to the "last of great revolutions". The 1979 Revolution was accompanied by certain events that altered the geopolitics of the Middle East region as Iranian-U.S. relations faltered. The occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and the hostage-taking of U.S. diplomats that lasted for 444 days, was among the first major post-revolutionary shocks after the 1979 Revolution. Although it was a reaction to twenty-five years of U.S. dominance of Iran (1953–1979), to this day, this very event looms over Iran's relations with the West, and in particular the United States. Iran became the flag-bearer of hostile countries to the United States to the extent that none of the Soviet allies in the region were as threatening to the United States the way Iran was.

The second event that altered Iran's position in relation to the region and the United States was the severance of diplomatic ties with Israel, following which the Israeli embassy in Iran was closed. Iran went from a country that was friendly to Israel to one of its stubborn foes. The severing of ties with Israel and the subsequent hostilities between Iran and Israel had—and continues to have—consequences for Iranian-U.S. relations.

The third event was the promotion of revolutionary political culture. The most telling example of this was Khomeini's slogan of "exporting the Islamic Revolution" to other countries in the Islamic world. The transformation of the political culture of the region under the influence of the 1979 Revolution frightened the Petro-Arab monarchies in the region, because their regimes were similar to that of the Shah's dictatorship, which meant that they feared popular uprisings the most. It is crucial to note that both the United States and the Soviet Union feared the possibility of the 1979 Revolution being exported to countries in the Middle East, but also to the satellite states of eastern Europe. Exporting a revolution based on the Iranian model meant that developing countries that were dependent on either of the superpowers would demand independence.

The 1979 Revolution brought many consequences for the broader region. First, it produced a state that had an anti-imperial ideology and identity, one that purported that resisting U.S. hegemony was the only way to liberate the "oppressed" nations in the post-colonial world. Due to the spread of this ideology, the Iranian state has actively opposed U.S. imperialism in the region for the past four decades. Second, it caused Iran to support the freedom and/or resistance movements across the region, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Third, during the 1980s, when Iraq had launched a protracted war against Iran, including launching hundreds of missiles and chemical weapons on civilians, the state faced tremendous shortages in military equipment due to the embargo imposed by the United States. This caused military generals to start manufacturing missiles and other heavy artillery equipment by the mid-1980s. Largely due to the United States' economic sanctions on Iran, coupled with an arms embargo by all world powers, Iran was forced to develop domestic technical capabilities in the production of heavy artillery and missiles.

Despite economic sanctions and the arms embargo, Iran developed significant industrial and manufacturing sectors in steel, rubber, cement, and iron that other countries in the region lacked, as well as cutting-edge sectors such as auto aerospace, nanotechnology, and stem cells. In the later decades, particularly after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran emerged as a country that exerted power and influence in the region, and developed a rivalry particularly with Saudi Arabia, which has greatly influenced the geopolitical dynamics of the region. On the political front, Riyadh has continuously tried to check the growing role of Iran in the Arab World, but the Kingdom's attempts at doing so have all but failed. Saudi attempts to curtail the power of Iran's ally Hezbollah in Lebanon, to contain the role of Iran in Iraq, to stop its support for the Houthis have fallen short. These failures offer enough incentive for the Saudis to be obsessed with Iran as a legitimate geopolitical competitor.

Yet, another watershed event that would have even greater influence on the geo-politics of the region is the Iran–Iraq War.

The Iran–Iraq War's Role in Shaping the Geopolitics of the Region

In September 1980, Iraqi forces launched a full-scale invasion of Iran—a conflict that lasted for eight years, killing at least a half million lives, injuring over a million, and displacing millions more. The Iran–Iraq war remains one of the largest and longest conventional interstate wars since World War II. Throughout the 1980s as Iraq invaded parts of Iran's territory, it continued to enjoy the full support of the Arab World. The economic cost of the war is estimated to have been over a trillion dollars. After eight years of warfare, the armies ended in virtually the same positions in which they had started in September 1980. It was also the only war in modern

times in which chemical weapons were used on a massive scale along with ballistic missiles to attack cities. It was the most extensive use of weapons of mass destruction since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in 1945.

On January 15, 1991, Reuters quoted King Fahd of Saudi Arabia saying that the sum of Saudi Arabia's financial support to Iraq topped 27 billion dollars while estimates of support from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to Saddam reached up to 80 billion dollars in the 1980s. The tremendous physical and human cost that Saddam Hussein inflicted on Iran is one thing, but the consequences of this destructive war on the geopolitics of the region are quite another. In fact, the Iran–Iraq War set the trajectory for the future geopolitics of the region, and remains one of the most critical junctures in contemporary history of the Middle East region.

First, the Iraq–Iran War and the subsequent embargoes imposed on Iran gave Iran a strong incentive to develop an indigenous military complex after it had been one of the largest buyers of sophisticated conventional weapons in the region. Indeed, securing conventional weapons in order to defend its people against the aggression of Saddam's regime was one of the major challenges of the Iranian government. Virtually no country was willing to sell conventional weapons (i.e., Scud missiles) to Iran to be used in defense when its cities were showered with the same missiles by the Iraqi army. It is now well-documented that hundreds of Russian missiles were launched by the Iraqi forces on Iran's civilian populations and tens of thousands of Iranians were either wounded or martyred.

The massive cost of the war forced Iran to establish an independent local missile industry. As a result, Iran went from being a major purchaser of missiles to one of its major producers by the late 1990s. Today, Iran's ability to produce long-range missiles is on par with those of global powers. Missiles are not the only conventional weapons that Iran manufactures. Fighter jets, tanks, artillery, submarine, drones, and speedboats are among the other high-tech military equipment it also manufactures. Groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and the Houthis in Yemen have been able to achieve considerable missile power with the help of Iranian knowhow and have played a decisive role in confronting Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, the three countries that are actively united against Iran.

Second, Saddam's use of unconventional weapons such as chemical weapons against Iran was a sheer violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and all treaties on weapons of mass destruction. The Western world not only turned a blind eye from Saddam's extensive and comparatively greater use of chemical weapons against Iran's civilian population, but also supplied and sold his Baath Party more of them. Additionally, the failure of negotiations with the West (1980–1995) to operate Tehran Research Reactor, built by the United States in 1967 and to complete the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant whose construction began in 1975 by German companies but was not completed, was another major reason that Iran sought to produce its own nuclear power. In 2003, Iran achieved enrichment and heavy water technology, and its access to these two technologies meant that it could build a nuclear bomb if decided to. Although Iran could now challenge Israel's monopoly over possessing a nuclear weapon in the Middle East, its nuclear capability has become the biggest political and security issue between Iran and world powers in the last fifteen years. The fact that Iran does have such technical capacities in the nuclear field—and other countries in the region (except Israel) do not—gives Iran a competitive edge.

Third, Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf fundamentally worsened after the Iraq–Iran War due to their one-sided support of Saddam Hussein's regime. The GCC states moved toward purchasing the latest and most sophisticated weapons from the United States. To them, the first and biggest threat in the re-

gion came from Iran. The United States has increased its military presence to support its allies, establishing 46 military bases in eleven Middle Eastern countries, which is considered to be a staggering number of military bases in one region.

Fourth, the Iran-Iraq War demonstrated to Iranian officials that countries in the region are willing to do whatever it takes to bring regime change in Iran. From uniting themselves with Israel to using non-conventional weapons against civilians, the aim for the Arab states was to change the revolutionary governing system in Iran. Iranian officials knew that they needed to transcend their national borders to resist the aggression of the neighboring countries including Israel. Hezbollah of Lebanon is a telling example of the proxies Iran propped up to project its influence in the region. Over time, Hezbollah acquired significant power and remains a strong force to this day. It defeated Israel in its 2006 invasion of Lebanon. In fact, Arab countries lost all military wars against Israel, but Hezbollah prevented Israel from advancing onto Lebanese territory. Today, Hezbollah's increasing power is a major source of concern for the United States and Israel. It remains a military force with tens of thousands of missiles and 100,000 troops and has political representation in the Lebanese parliament and government.

Fifth, one of the most crucial geopolitical transformations has been the emergence of armed non-governmental or quasi-governmental groups in the Middle East. Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and the Fatimids of Afghanistan are among the major Shiite groups that have been supported by Iran. Iran built alliances with these groups in response to the security situation in the region. For example, when ISIS conquered Iraq in 2014, occupying 40 percent of the country within two years and capturing the large and oil-rich cities of Mosul and Kirkuk, the Iraqi cities Baghdad and Erbil were on the verge of collapse. In response, Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa to form the Popular Mobilization Forces, which is reminiscent of the Iranian *Basij Forces*, established in 1979 as a volunteer paramilitary organization operating under Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and later formed a "people's militia" to aid in the war against Iran (The Quds Force of Iran used its experiences of forming the Basij popular force in countering Saddam's aggression to help the Lebanese Hezbollah with its popular mobilization). The Popular Mobilization Forces militia, with the help of the Iraqi army, eventually defeated ISIS and cleared Iraqi territory of terrorists, and as a result, new influential political-security-military dynamic entered the balance of power in Iraq. During the Syrian crisis, the Shiite group "Fatimids of Afghanistan" with the support of Iran, played an important role in Syria and in the fight against ISIS and Al-Qaeda. To be sure, Iran's alliance with organized groups is not limited to the Shiite ones, but also Sunni groups such as Hamas. This clearly shows that the alliance that Iran has built is not organized around sectarian lines.

Sixth, Iran's pivot to the East was a result of the world powers' support of Saddam's aggression in the Iraq war. After the war, Eastern powers, namely Russia and China, pursued a form of rapprochement with Iran, whereas those of the West—particularly the United States and Western Europe—pursued a hostile approach to Iran. The upshot was that after Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and Europe's unremitting compliance and subservience to Trump's maximum pressure strategy, Iran's Supreme Leader officially declared that Iran no longer trusts Europe and that Iran should count on the East. Hence, the continuity of Western powers' hostility toward Iran after the war has provided the strongest incentives for Iran to turn toward the East. The twenty-year strategic agreement with China and the twenty-year strategic agreement with Russia are two clear examples of Iran's lack of mistrust of the West. Today, China and Russia are Iran's main trade partners, whereas in the early 2000s, it was Germany.

Back to Diplomacy

For Iranians, it is not easy to forget the magnitude and the scale of death and destruction of the Iraq–Iran War. However, massive death and destruction aside, the long-term consequences of that war shaped in many ways the geopolitics of the region. Indeed, many of the hard problems of today's Middle East have originated in those eight years.

The Iraq–Iran War set the political trajectory of the region in some important ways for the decades to come. But that is not the only war the Middle East has witnessed. If one war has that many pernicious consequences for peace and stability in the region as I examined above, one might ask in horror, what would be the long-term consequences of the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States in early 2000s and the Saudi-led war on Yemen for the future of the region? These questions are hard to even contemplate. But they give us enough reason to believe that exhibition of power in the form of warfare is doomed to failure. Sooner or later, the United States will have to realize that its policy of domination has led to disastrous outcomes for the region and beyond. To fill the vacuum left behind by the United States when it leaves the region is an invitation to create a regional security and cooperation system among the countries of the region. A regional security and cooperation system in the Persian Gulf engulfing Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the other GCC member states would be the first vital achievement. To move toward such a strategy, we need an end to war and to choose diplomacy as the only choice.

No doubt the 1979 Revolution shaped the geopolitics of the region. However, Iraq's aggression against Iran and the support of regional countries and international powers was the most important factors shaping Iran's foreign policy strategy and its geopolitical shift. The Iran–Iraq War bolstered the resistance discourse against hegemony and neo-imperial forms of domination by the world powers, including and most importantly by the United States. Iranian officials remember when Saddam enjoyed the support of powers from both the West and the East, from both the United States and Soviet Union. If the Iranian leaders are suspicious of the United States when it comes to holding its end of the bargain on any negotiation table, the suspicion almost entirely can be attributed to the hard lessons they learned during the Iraq–Iran War. The experience of the war shows that the terrible consequences of a war remain a stumbling block to peace efforts. To achieve a lasting peace, belligerent thinking must be thrown into the dustbin of history, focusing only on the option of diplomacy.

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