



Chapter 1

Superpower Rivalry and the Shifting Terrains of War and Peace

This chapter explores the significance of the Cold War, both as a source of the conflicts which unfolded in the Middle East from 1979 to 1991 (and beyond) and as a legacy of mindsets and approaches (including the exercise of military power and the construction of exaggerated threats). Both the United States and the USSR saw the region's resources and strategic location as vital to securing their own national interests. Though rarely engaging in direct military action on the ground, during this period, they competed for influence among the regional powers. Viewing the region almost exclusively through the lens of the Cold War, superpower interventions often ignored the local roots of regional conflicts (thus exacerbating and prolonging them) or bolstered a geopolitical status quo that was centered more on their own interests than on the aspirations of the region's peoples. However, regional actors were not simply puppets, and attempts to assess the overall impact of the Cold War in the Middle East must also consider the extent to which local leaders could manipulate superpower rivalries, accepting foreign aid or arms for their own regional or domestic designs. Either way, not only did superpower rivalry contribute to a persistent instability in the Middle East, but the legacy of Cold War interventions continued to influence the region's politics well after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Iranian Revolution

The 1979 Iranian Revolution is one of the most significant events of the modern history of the Middle East, not least for the challenge it posed to the distribution of global power. Iran's oil resources and geographic location at the crossroads of

Eurasia made it of particular strategic importance. Persistent foreign interventions throughout the twentieth century had sparked continual debates among Iranians over how best to secure their country's independence. By the 1970s, most Iranian nationalists had concluded that the royal autocracy of the Shah, the second ruler of the Pahlavi dynasty, had become thoroughly compromised by America's dominant economic and political influence. The Shah's subservience, together with the authoritarianism and corruption of his own rule, fueled widespread discontent in Iran, and helps explain why the 1979 revolution became ever more focused on anti-American agitation. In the end, the Shah's downfall transformed Iran from a key western ally in the region into America's new arch-enemy.

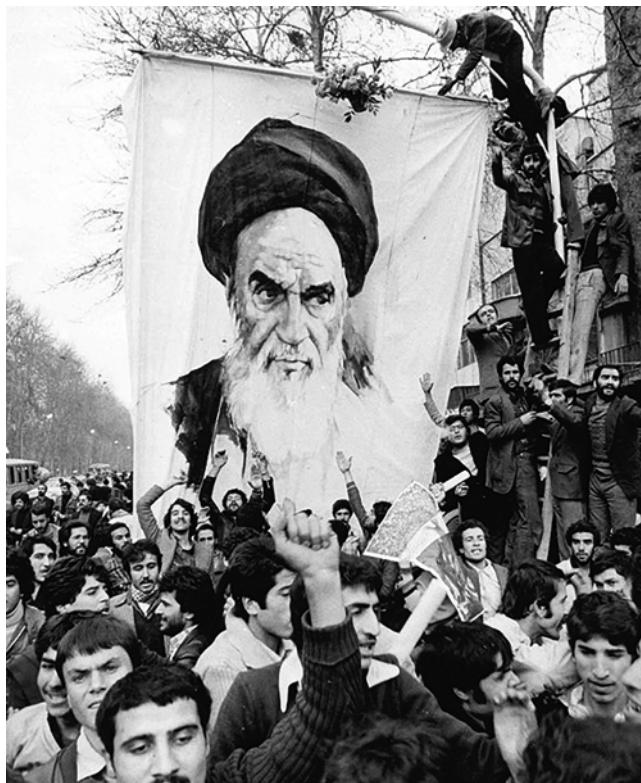
The roots of this troubled and contaminated relationship date back to the consolidation of the Shah's monarchical rule in the early 1950s. Up to that point, the country's oil wealth had mostly benefitted Western oil interests. In 1951, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh took control of his country's oil industry. Nationalization was widely acclaimed by Iranians. But it was more than Western powers could countenance, given their own economic self-interest as well as their intensifying Cold War struggle against the Soviet bloc. Working together, British and American intelligence services successfully orchestrated mass street protests in Iran against Mossadegh. Their intervention was facilitated by the refusal of Western oil companies to refine or market Iranian oil following its nationalization. Mossadegh's government suffered from the loss of oil revenues and could not win a prolonged war of attrition with the Western powers. In 1953, the Shah's authoritarian regime was reinstated with the assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency. Etched deeply into Iranians' worldviews, the overthrow of Mossadegh caused such a rupture in Iranian-American relations that, to this day, he remains widely revered in Iran for standing up to foreign interests.

Though the United States was not itself a significant importer of oil from the Gulf region, Washington's Cold War allies in Europe (and Japan) were increasingly dependent. Rather than maintain direct Western corporate ownership over Persian Gulf oil resources, the United States shifted over the following decades toward building military relationships with authoritarian regimes. These regimes could now expect to receive a larger share of revenues from their oil exports, as well as higher levels of American aid and arms transfers. Such a policy was a prominent feature of President Nixon's foreign policy in the 1970s: desperate to extricate America from the Vietnam quagmire, the Nixon regime sought in a number of strategic cases around the world to minimize the actual burden of America's military footprint by relying on highly armed local powers. In the Gulf, this approach manifested itself through very high levels of support for the monarchical regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia

(as well as neighboring Arab sheikhdoms). They, in turn, embraced the opportunity to deepen military ties through massive arms deals. As regional rivals, such as Iraq and South Yemen, turned to the Soviet Union for weapons, the Gulf region witnessed massive militarization. In the years leading up to 1979, arms shipments to the region rose fourfold, in comparison to a doubling of the global arms trade: one-quarter of all global arms shipments were delivered to the region.

From 1953 to 1979, the Shah of Iran ensured a pro-Western stance for his country's oil industry, while furthering American strategic aims in the Persian Gulf. A huge consumer of US arms, the Shah built a sophisticated armed force that acted as America's regional ally in policing the Gulf. Iran also provided key facilities from which America could monitor neighboring Soviet activities. Further, the Shah used arms purchases to bolster his own personal rule, building a ruthlessly effective intelligence service, SAVAK, which shut down opposition. Western governments, blinded by their partiality for a valued surrogate, appeared unaware of the growing depth of the Iranian people's dissatisfaction with the Shah's decadent and corrupt regime. Indeed, Western observers commonly lauded the regime's leadership: "an island of stability" proclaimed President Carter in late 1977, ignoring the stresses and strains of the Shah's rule which would soon lead millions of people to occupy the streets.

In addition to the Shah's subservience to US interests, a multitude of social and economic forces drove the 1979 Iranian revolution: the widespread brutality of police rule, the neglect of urban migrant workers, the mismanagement of agricultural land reform, and the growing exclusion of religious leaders from legal and educational fields all repelled a wide and diverse swathe of Iranian society, ranging from Marxist to religious, liberal to conservative. One must also underline the singular role played by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose charismatic leadership mobilized widespread opposition. Khomeini relied heavily on the network of mosques to spread his message within Iran. But his message was not uniformly religious, nor did it receive the backing from all religious clergy. Rather, his message was above all a populist one. On the one hand, it was the effective melding of Islamist notions of social equity and integrity with leftist revolutionary ideas of justice for the dispossessed which mobilized large segments of the urban poor.¹ On the other, he galvanized nationalist resentment against an elite widely despised for its compliance with foreign interests. Above all, the appeal of Khomeini's own uncompromising demands for an end to the corrupt Pahlavi empire made it very difficult for other opposition leaders to negotiate a different course with the Shah before he left the country, which he finally did on 16 January 1979.



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Photo 1.1 Protesters Calling for the Overthrow of the Shah. *Demonstrators in Tehran calling for the overthrow of the Shah in December 1978 carry a poster of the exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.*

Khomeini himself returned triumphantly from exile (where he had been relegated since 1963) in February 1979. But his consolidation of power occurred in stages over the following two years wherein a formative role was played by international crises, in particular the November 1979 hostage crisis and the 1980 invasion by Iraq. By turning these confrontations into domestic struggles over who should rule Iran, Khomeini successfully manipulated them in such a way as to marginalize or discredit rivals for power. He gleaned powerful national legitimacy by skillfully casting himself as Iran's protector against international and regional enemies.

For example, the crisis which erupted in November over the holding of American hostages was especially damaging for the relatively moderate Prime

Minister Mehdi Bazargan and the secular, middle-class constituency he represented. Bazargan had been appointed to lead a new government formed in the immediate wake of the Shah's departure. At this point, there remained strong support for a more secular constitution as well as for negotiating a new trajectory in the country's relationship with America. But his government collapsed at a critical moment: just as Bazargan was about to put a new constitution to a vote, a militant group of Iranian students in Tehran stormed the US embassy building, known colloquially in Iran as a "nest of spies." Popular anti-American sentiment was running high in part due to the prevailing fear of another American-sponsored coup, similar to the 1953 restoration of Pahlavi rule. American diplomats inside the embassy were taken hostage and held for 444 days. Though Khomeini had not initially supported the students, the popularity of the embassy's seizure led him to endorse the takeover, amid highly publicized warnings of underground plotting against the revolution. Prime Minister Bazargan's consistent opposition to the taking of American hostages, and his failed attempts to negotiate their freedom, made him appear increasingly suspicious within revolutionary circles. In the end, the crisis brought about Bazargan's resignation. General opposition to America had cemented its useful role in Khomeini's rhetoric, underscoring just how powerful and highly popular was his rejection of foreign influence.

If it was the long alliance between the Shah and the United States that inflamed the anti-American sentiment of Iran's revolutionary movement in the late 1970s, it would be the prolonged shock of the hostage episode that imbued Americans with a reciprocal sense of deep mistrust and resentment over the following decades. With less consideration for the revolution's internal dynamics (characterized as much by nationalism as by religion), or of the actual threat posed to their own interests, Washington saw fanatical Muslim clerics bent on a singular attack on the United States, and sought militant responses. The collapse in diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran set the scene for the following four decades during which time US leaders have openly advocated regime change, while hardliners in the Iranian regime refer to the America as "the great Satan." Throughout all of the dramatic changes witnessed by the region, and the world, leaders in the two countries have consistently framed their interests as a "zero-sum game."²

The regional consequences of the Iranian Revolution were profound. While characterizing the definite break with the United States as a rejection of almost two centuries of Western exploitation in their own country, Iranian leaders also projected themselves as the region's true defenders. They railed against Arab monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, whose dependence on Western protection was said to compromise their Islamic credentials, and they aimed to inspire, and support, opposition movements struggling against repression throughout the region. Muslims everywhere were called upon to confront the impiety of

their compromised leaders. While efforts by Khomeini to export the revolution proved largely unsuccessful, his loaded rhetoric nonetheless sought to place Iran at the vanguard of a regional “axis of resistance” to American imperialism and its network of allies. In doing so, it put Iran in the crosshairs of American foreign policy hawks who now focused on “containing” Iran. It also greatly intensified regional rivalries with both Saudi Arabia and Iraq, with devastating consequences for both countries and numerous aftershocks for the entire region.

This second conflict, following upon the hostage crisis, that dominated Khomeini’s post-revolution foreign policy, and simultaneously helped him mobilize domestic support for the new clerical regime, began in September 1980 when Iraqi president Saddam Hussein launched a full-scale attack across the border with Iran. The failure of Western powers, and even the United Nations, to immediately condemn Iraq’s obvious aggression further reinforced Iran’s view of a hostile international order. The eight-year Iran–Iraq war would have dire and tragic consequences for all involved. Yet, in this time of national crisis for Iranians, Khomeini himself was provided with further opportunities to consolidate his political position. With Iranians now rallying around the flag, Saddam Hussein’s invasion stemmed the risk of an unstable post-revolutionary situation sliding into a divisive internal conflict. Khomeini and his close allies used the threat posed by external enemies to build a more cohesive regime, strengthening their control over the state apparatus at the expense of rival political constituencies.

In this respect, one of the most significant developments to result from the Iraqi invasion was the potential to integrate the Iranian military, formerly loyal to the Shah, into the new Islamist regime. It is worth underlining Khomeini’s calculated use of modern state institutions and popular political rhetoric. Not only did Khomeini mobilize the main professional armed forces in defense of the Iranian homeland, he also established a new security organization, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to defend his own regime against any external or internal threats. The IRGC’s mandate continued to expand significantly during the war with Iraq, as it took on greater roles in foreign policy and even economic policy. The Revolutionary Guards would become an increasingly important stepping stone for the political careers of those who could draw significant legitimacy from their commitment and service during the conflict. Indeed, the legacy of the war with Iraq became as embedded in the experience of the new leadership, and as formative a force in shaping their worldview, as the relatively shorter revolutionary period itself. In addition to its naval, air, and ground forces, the IRGC included a volunteer para-military force known as the *Basij-e Mostazafin* (Mobilization of the Oppressed), whose members were sent in human waves to their death at the front lines. Although the mobilization of urban youth had been instrumental in the overthrow of the Shah, Khomeini largely ignored their continued agitation for immediate radical

socio-economic transformations. Urging them to fight Iraq instead thus proved an effective way for Khomeini's regime to channel their revolutionary zeal toward the defense of the homeland, while at the same time "cloaking itself in the legitimacy their sacrifice conferred."³ The seemingly endless foreign campaigns to dominate Iran and its resources were entrenched in the memory of the new generation of revolutionary Iranians who would come to the fore in the next century. Also deeply embedded are the opportunities outside intervention can provide to leaders when rallying national support and/or suppressing domestic opposition.

Though it is difficult to exaggerate how important and defining the experience of invasion and war was for Iranians, it often seems a forgotten war in Western perceptions of the history of Iran and the Gulf region. Western observers have instead tended to assign the labels "First Gulf War" to the international conflict triggered by Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and "Second Gulf War" to President Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq. But they are all closely connected, each one another horrific reminder of the fact that it is much easier to start a military conflict than extricate oneself from it.

The Iran–Iraq War

With the expectation of a swift Iraqi victory, President Saddam Hussein launched his surprise attack on Iran in September 1980. Instead, his gambit triggered a destructive war which raged until August 1988. One of the century's longest conventional wars, it ravaged both countries and caused deep shifts in the region's geopolitics. Saddam Hussein clearly felt the need to defend his secular nationalist regime against the threat represented by Iran's new Islamist-infused revolutionary ideology. Yet, his invasion of Iran mostly sought to take advantage both of the evident disorder into which Iran and its once powerful military had lapsed, and of the general international antipathy shown toward its new regime. Though often framed as an epic battle between Arab nationalists and Islamic revolutionaries, the conflict was rooted in regional rivalry and contested borders.

When Saddam Hussein rose to power in 1979, he was the latest in a long line of leaders in Baghdad who, since the time of British colonial rule, had essentially used Iraq's state apparatus and wealth to consolidate power within a deeply connected circle of confidantes and dependents.⁴ Domestically, Hussein's centralized distribution of Iraq's growing oil revenues effectively forced the leaders of Iraq's various social and ethnic groups to position themselves in relation to Hussein himself, lest they find themselves excluded from any access to state largesse. This pattern of rule was further sustained by Hussein's projection of himself as Iraq's indispensable military leader, patriotically defending the

whole nation. These various components of Saddam Hussein's rule culminated in his reaction to the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

First, Hussein, a Sunni leader committed to secular Iraqi nationalism, feared that Khomeini's rhetoric about exporting an Islamic revolution might inspire activism among Iraq's own Shi'i community, which constituted more than 60% of Iraq's population. Second, Hussein, a self-declared regional champion of the cause of Arab nationalism, sought to bolster his political position by casting himself as the protector of the Arab world against a projected Persian threat. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Hussein brandished his own military position as a defender of Iraqi territory by asserting sovereignty over all of the Shatt al-Arab, the vital waterway which forms the boundary between the two countries. Iran and Iraq had long wrestled with this southern border demarcation: previous agreements had declared shared sovereignty of the waterway, but Hussein now sought to assert full control over both of its banks.

Not for the last time would Hussein combine his sense of fear and opportunism with tragic miscalculations. In a dangerous gamble, he presumed that the disarray of Iran's armed forces (which had suffered from desertion of personnel during the revolution) and its growing international isolation (which separated its defense establishment from its foreign military suppliers) would ensure a quick victory for Iraq. Instead, eight years of horrific war ensued. Hussein's initial attack did move quickly into Iran's oil-rich and Arab-populated province of Khuzestan. But Iranian forces rallied to block the Iraqi advances. Feeling emboldened, Khomeini then went on the offensive, successfully taking the fight into Iraqi territory by 1982. Spurning a ceasefire proposal, Khomeini made the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime a key war aim. It was now Iran's turn to miscalculate, overrating the situation's opportunities and dismissing the costs. Neither side was henceforth able to achieve any further decisive military breakthroughs, and the destructive conflict settled into a grueling war of attrition. Until 1988, neither regime was willing to accept a compromise that risked losing the respect of their nation and of their military corps.

Saddam Hussein increasingly relied upon the technological superiority he achieved through the help of the United States and the West, which simultaneously sanctioned (at least officially) Iran's ability to restock its military equipment. Iraq used long-range missiles and an expanded air force to attack Iranian cities. Saddam Hussein also resorted to manufacturing and using chemical weapons. In addition to deploying such weapons against Iran's mass infantry, Saddam Hussein used them against Iraq's own Kurdish population in the north. Iraq's internal conflict with its Kurdish population dates to the post-First World War origins of the state. British colonial officials had determined that the new governing regime set up in Baghdad would rule over the oil-rich areas in the north, an area which encompassed an amalgam of ethnic and religious communities with strong concentrations of Kurds. From then on, the emergence of

an Iraqi Kurdish nationalist movement claiming rights over this region clashed with the Iraqi central government's fear of the loss of vital oil reserves. During the Iran–Iraq war, with Iranian advances threatening Iraq's oil reserves in the north, Hussein launched an especially brutal effort to repress Iraqi Kurds. “Anfal” was the name given to a series of Iraqi operations in 1988 which, it is estimated, killed over 50,000 people, most of them civilians.⁵ One of the worst incidents occurred in the Kurdish town of Halabja, an Iraqi city close to the border captured by Iranian forces, where mainly unarmed Iraqi civilians were killed by chemical weapons.

Though played down at the time by American and other Western supporters of Iraq, shocking images of Halabja were relayed by the Iranian media. It was, in part, Iran's fear of Iraqi chemical attacks – and of the tolerance toward them by an international community which at the time appeared undisturbed by their use – that compelled Tehran into signing a 1988 ceasefire. That fear would also be a key factor in Iran resuming its own nuclear program. Iran's nuclear program had first been initiated by the Shah, who had signed on to the American-sponsored “Atoms for Peace” program, which shared atomic research for purposes such as energy and medicine. Following the war, however, Iran's nuclear technology would be developed more clandestinely, with the Iranian regime trying to keep at bay an international community it felt it could not trust, and that did not trust it.

If the origins of Iran's nuclear program can be traced partly to the siege mentality that evolved during the Iran–Iraq war, so too can Iran's reliance on asymmetric warfare be traced to their search for deterrence. From the outset, Iran lacked solid support from either of the superpowers, both of which were condemned in Khomeinist revolutionary rhetoric for their exploitation of the non-aligned world. Reflecting the widespread anger at the region's century-long subjugation to foreign influence, the ayatollah preached a new strategic doctrine he termed “Neither West nor East.” More practically, Iran sought to build a web of influence across the Middle East. Feeding off widespread frustrations with the status quo, especially among Shi'i populations in neighboring countries, Iran took advantage of whatever opportunities were available to provide financial and military resources to local resistance fighters across the region. The Iranian regime's development of ties with such proxy groups was rooted as much in the hard-headed concern for its overall ability to deter shared enemies, as it was in the adventurous exporting of its own ideologies. As will be elaborated upon in later sections, the most notable example of this strategy of deterrence can be seen in the emergence of the Lebanese Hizbullah movement. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, the prevailing instability, during which all Lebanese factions reached out to foreign powers, provided Iran with valuable opportunities to expand its interests and influence through the support given to members of the Lebanese Shi'i community who resisted the Israeli

occupation. Iran would also draw closer with Hamas (the Palestinian movement with roots in the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood), the Dawa Party in Iraq (which struck against Saddam Hussein and his western supporters), and the Syrian government (even though Syria's own nationalist regime was engaged in one of the region's most brutal suppressions of an Islamist opposition). In return for its support, Tehran hoped to be able to view all these allies as an extension of their own military apparatus and expected them, if necessary, to retaliate on its behalf against the vulnerabilities of shared enemies. But it is important to note here that these various allies maintained their own political agendas, all defined very much by their own national political contexts. Iran's leverage over them could be limited.

In this respect, it is useful to reflect on the extent to which the Iran–Iraq war posed a serious test to the loyalties of both Iraq's majority Shi'i population and Iran's own Arab population. In fact, defying the hopes, and fears, of both Hussein and Khomeini, both of these populations shared in their own nation's surging sense of domestic patriotism and attachment to a homeland under attack. On the Iraqi side, national identities proved resilient, as Khomeini failed to rally widespread defection from the Iraqi army of Shi'i coreligionists across the border. Iraq, too, failed in its attempts to recruit from Iran's minority Arab population inhabiting the border regions.

The United States for its part struggled greatly to formulate a coherent position toward the Iran–Iraq war. At first, American leaders appeared comfortable with neither side winning, nor for that matter losing, what they hoped would remain a localized conflict. Still, America, locked as it was in its own contest with Iran over the hostage crisis, leaned toward a preference for Iraq. Saddam Hussein thus came to enjoy various levels of American support: diplomatic cover at the UN, weapons deliveries from Western allies (who were also pressured to halt sales to Iran), critical intelligence assessments on Iranian deployments, and financial credit toward the import of agricultural products. In 1987, the United States began protecting the oil shipments of pro-Western Arab regimes that were supporting Iraq. Oil, of course, played a critical role throughout this war, determining the actions and strategies of the regional adversaries, while also further internationalizing the conflict. On the one hand, it was the combatants' accumulated reserves from the sale of oil that fueled the enduring carnage, through the continual recycling of petrodollars for arms. On the other hand, repeated attacks on oil infrastructure and sea lanes characterized much of the fighting throughout. During a late phase of the fighting that came to be known as the "tanker war," oil shipments in the Gulf came under attack from all sides. When fighting in Iraq's southern regions effectively rendered its economy land-locked, the small neighboring country of Kuwait allowed Iraq to increasingly rely upon its own tankers to carry Iraqi oil exports.

Kuwait then requested US protection from possible Iranian attacks, to which Washington agreed. By giving US flag protection to Kuwaiti tankers, and escorting them through the Persian Gulf, the United States took a large step in expanding its own military footprint in the region. With an enlarged US naval force present in the Gulf, a series of clashes with Iranian forces inevitably occurred, culminating in a US missile downing an Iranian passenger airliner in July 1988, killing 290 civilians on board.

Later that year, Khomeini accepted a ceasefire agreement drawn up by the UN Security Council in 1987. Resolution 598 had called for a return to the status quo ante bellum, thus forcing Saddam Hussein to finally settle the border dispute by accepting the Shatt al-Arab border line as lying where it had been when he launched the war, eight years earlier. Khomeini likened the signing of the agreement to drinking from a poisoned chalice, but by 1988, Iran was exhausted, running out of volunteers, money, and weapons, ever more isolated internationally, and increasingly fearful of chemical weapon attacks.

Few conflicts in contemporary history have been so long, so costly, and so pointless. Devastating for both Iran and Iraq, neither achieved its aims. An estimated half million lives were lost, with at least as many people wounded, many in trench battles reminiscent of the First World War, some by chemical weapons. Over a million people fled their homes. An entire generation on both sides was scarred by the devastation. Both countries ended up massively indebted and now faced the huge costs of rebuilding their economic infrastructure. Tragically, for Iraqis, the bloodshed and sacrifices would continue for another generation: two years later, in 1990, Saddam Hussein made the decision to occupy Kuwait, in yet another misjudgment of regional and international responses.

The Iran–Iraq war resulted in a complex and fraught realignment of regional alliances and foreign policy orientations. To fully understand these far-reaching consequences, one must recognize the deepening interconnections between the Persian Gulf arena and other parts of the region, in particular: the ever-evolving attempts to bring an end to the Arab–Israeli conflict; and the long-running foreign intervention in Afghanistan. As in the Persian Gulf, 1979 proved also to be a formational year for those conflicts, to which we now turn.

The Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty

On 26 March 1979, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and US President Jimmy Carter signed the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. The ceremony capped a breakthrough diplomatic summit held six months earlier, in September 1978, at the presidential retreat called Camp David. The landmark negotiation was the culmination

of two significant developments. The first relates to the willingness on the part of an American president to engage in serious and intense mediation efforts: Jimmy Carter's presidency brought to the White House a sense of urgency to negotiate peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The second factor relates to the willingness on the part of Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat to accept the mutual advantages that a separate agreement would bring to their own countries. Begin and Sadat would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their bilateral efforts. Although Carter originally sought a comprehensive regional peace, the negotiations failed in the end to provide anything meaningful on the future of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

The Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty was Israel's first peace agreement with an Arab state since 1948 when Israel was established as a Jewish state amid a war that resulted in the dispossession of most of its indigenous Palestinian Arab population. Though armistice agreements were signed between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1949, the adversaries remained in an official state of war for decades. This prolonged conflict was punctuated by several recurring rounds of hostilities, the most prominent among them being the June War of 1967.



Carter / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Photo 1.2 Camp David Handshake. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, American President Carter, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat greet each other during the 1978 negotiations hosted at the presidential retreat known as Camp David.

The 1967 War

Up to 1967, Israel focused on the task of building a new nation-state and absorbing Jewish immigrants from across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Palestinian Arab society, on the other hand, had been shattered by the 1948 fighting, with more than half of its population dispersed as refugees in neighboring countries. Israel refused to let these refugees return to their homes in what was now a new Jewish state. Responsibility for caring for Palestinians in refugee camps was taken on by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). For the following two decades, some Palestinians sought assimilation in their host countries, but many hoped that a united, mobilized Arab world might support them in reclaiming their patrimony. In this sense, people spoke more during this period of an “Arab-Israeli” rather than a “Palestinian-Israeli” conflict, often viewing Palestinians more as a “refugee problem” to be managed than as a national entity to be reconstituted. When, for example, a new umbrella movement, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was created in 1964, the initiative was taken by Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser as a way to assert his firm control over Palestinian activism. It was not until this leadership was discredited within the wreckage of the 1967 war that the PLO brought a diverse group of Palestinian guerrilla movements together under the new leadership of Yasir Arafat. Chapter 3 will consider in greater detail the evolving relations between Israel and the PLO. Here, we recognize how profoundly the 1967 war shifted the relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors, especially Egypt.

The transformative 1967 war had been precipitated by a dramatic escalation of events that began with a sharp deterioration in relations between Syria and Israel. In an escalating game of brinkmanship, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser mobilized some of his forces to the Israeli border and blockaded Israeli shipping through the strategically important Straits of Tiran. Asserting that the closure of the Straits constituted a *casus belli*, Israel launched a surprise attack that devastated the military forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan within six days. Brief as the fighting was, the war had far-reaching consequences that have remained central to the settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict ever since.

Vast swathes of Arab land came under Israeli military occupation. From Egypt, Israel seized the Sinai Peninsula, taking control of its oil reserves and compromising Egypt’s control over the Suez Canal. From Syria, Israel captured the Golan Heights, which touch the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. A fertile area of great geopolitical importance, the Golan Heights lies at a pivotal location, bordering Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Israel. Ever since its capture, public opinion in Israel has favored keeping and colonizing the territory, either as a military asset against Syria, or because of its fertile topography on which dozens of Jewish settlements have been built. But Syria, like Egypt,

made the full return of every inch of occupied territory central to any peace deal with Israel. In addition to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Syria's Golan Heights, Israel's conquests in 1967 included Palestinian lands known as the West Bank and Gaza Strip, that is, those parts of the Palestine mandate territory which were not included in the internationally recognized state of Israel, but had, since 1948, been ruled by Jordan and Egypt, respectively.

In the wake of this dramatic shift in the international politics of the region, the UN grasped the window of opportunity to establish a possible peace framework. In November 1967, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which set out a "land for peace" deal that, ever since, has remained the basis of international attempts to achieve regional peace. According to its terms, the resolution emphasized "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war," and required Israel to withdraw "from territories occupied in the recent conflict" in return for which Arab states would acknowledge Israel's right to "live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries." The Israeli government accepted Resolution 242, but imposed its own interpretation: the lack of a definite article "the" in the clause "from territories occupied" allowed Israeli leaders to claim that Israel was not required to withdraw from *all* such territories. Though a minority within Israel was originally in favor of moving forward toward a peace agreement in line with Resolution 242, the conquest of the West Bank, in particular, a territory steeped in religious significance, spurred on a competing Jewish irredentist movement bent on keeping and colonizing the occupied lands, while controlling and repressing the Palestinians who live there.

For their part, Arab leaders did not rush to negotiate over Resolution 242 from positions of weakness, though Egypt, Jordan, and Syria would individually affirm the resolution. The humiliation of defeat roundly diminished the appeal of Nasser's regional leadership. The defeated Arab states now focused on securing the return of their own territories within the framework established by the UN. In Egypt, the crushing defeat brought about numerous changes, especially once Nasser, who suffered a fatal heart attack in September 1970, was succeeded by his Vice-President, Anwar Sadat. Though little was expected of Sadat when he first came to power, he spent the next decade setting in motion deep transformations, including steps toward a settlement of Egypt's own outstanding issues with Israel as well as a reorientation of its economy toward the West. We will deal with these shifts in turn.

Camp David Accords

Inheriting a crushing legacy of military failure from Nasser, Sadat found at first few diplomatic avenues through which to regain conquered territory. The American government, for its part, expressed confidence in the perceived stability provided by the military dominance of their main ally, Israel, vis-a-vis

the comparative weakness of the region's Soviet-supported states. Maintaining that the United States held 99% of the cards in the game of Middle East peace, Sadat felt he needed to shake American faith in the status quo.⁶

In 1973, Sadat successfully launched a surprise war against Israeli forces in the Sinai, in coordination with both a simultaneous Syrian attack on the Golan Heights and an effective embargo by Saudi Arabia on oil exports to Israel's Western allies. Although the resulting conflict ended fairly quickly, it brought the United States and the USSR to the brink of conflict, and it weakened Israel's sense of invincibility. The initial victories scored by the Egyptian military transformed President Sadat, if only for a moment, into "the hero of the crossing," endowing him with an overall position of prestige and strength from which he felt he could now bring Egypt into a peace settlement with Israel. More importantly, though, the 1973 war demonstrated to many in the United States the desirability of solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the wake of this crisis, and especially following Jimmy Carter's election in 1976, America would, for the first time, commit sustained diplomatic resources to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

In 1978, Carter invited Sadat to meet with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin at Camp David. Though hoping for a just and lasting regional peace, the eventual 1979 treaty focused only on ending hostilities between Israel and Egypt. Based on UN Resolution 242's "land for peace" formula, Israel agreed to withdraw all of its troops and settlers from the Sinai Peninsula over two successive stages, in 1980 and 1982. In return, Egypt would extend full diplomatic relations with Israel, assure Israeli freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal, and accept restrictions on its own military forces stationed in the Sinai Peninsula. The treaty gestured to the idea of establishing a comprehensive regional settlement that also recognized some provisions for the autonomy of Palestinians. In Begin's mind, however, the ambiguous withdrawal provision of Resolution 242 did not specifically refer to all fronts and thus could be fulfilled by the removal only of settlements in the Sinai Peninsula. Begin's acceptance of peace with Egypt must thus be seen as part of his efforts to secure the West Bank for the further expansion of Jewish settlements there. Indeed, Begin only delegated his interior minister, not foreign minister, to head the prospective Palestinian autonomy talks called for by the Camp David Accords (see Chapter 3).

Few doubt that the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty constitutes a watershed moment in Middle East history. However, there is less agreement on whether overall it was a positive or negative one. On the one side are those who highlight the negotiated agreement as a hallmark of American diplomacy, led by a clear national interest in settling Middle East disputes (which, if left unresolved, carried the risk of renewed superpower conflict) and by a president's deep commitment to achieving peace. Though often lamented as a "cold peace,"

Egyptian–Israeli relations since 1979 continue to stand in sharp contrast to the bellicose and combative period preceding it. True, the treaty has never been distinguished by especially friendly relations between the populations, or even dramatic increases in trade or tourism across the border. Rather, what is most remarkable about the treaty is the fact that it has remained intact. Despite the heavy stresses and strains of the last four decades, neither country, whatever the leadership, has ever called for its abrogation.

On the other side are those who regretted the dividing and weakening of the Arab world. In pursuit of a narrow definition of Egyptian national interests, Sadat's main goal was the return of the Sinai Peninsula and a new strategic alliance with the United States, both of which promised to bring in much-needed foreign currency. Though less than the aid received by Israel, Egypt received major financial inducements which effectively integrated it into US regional policy strategies, including plans for economic liberalization. America hoped that other Arab countries would follow Sadat's path, but instead, the treaty isolated Egypt from the Arab world. In the judgment of many in the Arab world, Sadat's acceptance of a separate bilateral peace that privileged Egypt's recovery of its own territory came at the cost of a regional agreement based on UN Resolution 242.

In this respect, the most significant event in the wake of the 1979 treaty was the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon

Menachem Begin was Israel's sixth prime minister but the first to come from outside the left-leaning Labor alignment that had dominated Israeli governments since the state's founding. At the time of Israel's establishment in 1948, Begin had led the Irgun movement, a militia dedicated to the forceful creation of a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan river (that is, including the state of Jordan). At Camp David, Begin saw strategic gains to be made in negotiations with Egypt over the future of the Sinai Peninsula. But he never wavered in his ideological commitment to the West Bank and Gaza, which he referred to as Judea and Samaria (or the "liberated" Biblical homeland) and to which he felt the Jewish people had a timeless right. Completely mistrustful of the land's Palestinian leaders, whom he likened to Nazis, he trusted only in a strong Israel, perpetually mobilized against its enemies. In this regard, the 1979 treaty's isolation of Egypt would provide Israel with unprecedented security. Further bolstering Begin's position was the election in 1980 of President Ronald Reagan, who re-emphasized the value of strategic cooperation with Israel as seen through the renewed prism of the Cold War and the shared threats posed by "international terrorism." Not for the first time would relations between

right-wing governments in Israel and America share in the strategy of focusing on more broadly perceived global threats as a means to marginalize regional problems.

In the wake of the 1979 treaty with Egypt, it appeared to Begin that Israel could confidently maneuver unchecked. Yet, only a few years later, in 1983, the tragic destruction wrought by his government's foreign policies would force him to retire, depressed and reclusive. Begin's increasingly defiant foreign policy can be seen in three especially provocative initiatives, all undertaken within a relatively brief period: the Israeli annexation of Syria's Golan Heights; the demolition of the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq; and, finally, the invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon. Chapter 3 will consider Israel's domestic politics in some more detail; here, we will examine the main regional reverberations of Begin's main foreign policy initiatives.

First, to quell growing unease among certain sectors in Israeli society that Syria's Golan Heights might be treated like the Sinai Peninsula, as a bargaining chip in bilateral negotiations, Begin pushed through domestic legislation effectively annexing the Golan Heights in December 1981, in violation of international law and UN Resolution 242. (Israel had already annexed East Jerusalem, and a large adjoining part of the West Bank, shortly after the 1967 war). In response, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution declaring that Israel's decisions were "null and void," and had no international legal effect. On the ground, however, Israel began to impose its own legal administration on the Golan, efforts toward which were greatly facilitated by the fact that the Israeli army had already forced out over 100,000 inhabitants, and destroyed their villages, following the 1967 occupation.

Second, in June 1981, Begin ordered Israeli bombers to strike the French-built Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq. This attack proclaimed the "Begin doctrine," the assertion that Israel would not allow an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction. Although the Osirak bombing was widely criticized at the time, the strike has since come to be seen by some as a potential model for Israeli actions against the nuclear program of Iran. In exploring the assumptions that lay behind the Osirak strike, as well as its repercussions, one should note at the outset that Israel had already developed its own nuclear capability in the 1960s. Israel remained deliberately vague about this program, but its growing arsenal of nuclear weapons constituted, as in any regional arms race, a key factor driving the development of weapons programs elsewhere in the region. As for the Osirak attack, Israel claimed it acted out of fear that the reactor would produce plutonium for warheads, though it was not evident that in 1981, Saddam Hussein was in fact on the brink of a plutonium bomb. What is, however, much clearer is that Hussein seriously stepped up his efforts to acquire a nuclear capability in the wake of the Osirak attack. As Stephen Walt argues, Israel's actions in effect, "*reinforced* Iraq's interest in acquiring a deterrent,"⁷

thus driving Hussein to push a full-fledged weapons program underground, dispersed in less vulnerable locations. What in fact finally eliminated Hussein's reconstructed program, which soon became much more advanced than it was in 1981, was the international inspections regime set up in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. Finally, while Israel viewed its precision attack on Osirak as an immediate success, the world did voice its disapproval. The unprovoked attack was broadly condemned at the time as a violation of international law. This consensus included the United States, which was immediately put on the defensive for an action in which it was presumed complicit and which, it was further feared at the time, strengthened the hand of the region's more radical leaders and movements.

The third, and most consequential, of Begin's foreign policies pursued in the wake of the Egyptian Israeli treaty, was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Israel had first invaded Lebanon in 1978, aiming to prevent attacks from Palestinian militants by pushing them back from the border. The invasion did not eliminate the presence of Palestinian fighters, though the United Nations deployed a new division known by its acronym UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) to "restore international peace and security." The basis for linking the Camp David negotiations to the subsequent 1982 military assault on Lebanon is twofold. First, such an operation would not have been launched had Israel not been as confident about peace on its southern border with Egypt. Second, Israel's post-Camp David interest in consolidating permanent control over the West Bank motivated Israel to sever the links between the occupied territories and the outside Palestinian leadership. This required destroying the political and military bases of the PLO, the government-in-exile whose headquarters were located at that time in Beirut. In addition to suppressing Palestinian aspirations for independence, Israel's invasion of Lebanon aimed at establishing in Beirut a new, pliant Lebanese government. Begin, and his defense minister, Ariel Sharon, expected it to be a simple matter for their invading forces to install in Lebanon a new leader, Bashir Gemayel, who would sign a second peace treaty with Israel. They learned instead that their campaign would depend not on their relations with Gemayel, but, as Helena Cobban writes, "with a whole range of Lebanese groups of whose very presence Sharon had previously seemed unaware."⁸

Lebanon's unique confessional system, enforced by French colonial rulers during the interwar period, called for sensitive power-sharing arrangements between various religious sects. Lebanon's weak state structures made it, upon independence in 1943, an attractive hub for finance, services, and tourism. However, its failure to develop strong and stable national institutions and ensure an equitable distribution of economic resources encouraged a general retreat into various sectarian communities which then further exacerbated the growing political and economic disparities between them. Sandwiched between

meddling neighbors, Syria and Israel (but also increasingly subject to the interventions of Iran and Saudi Arabia), sectarian leaders looked to foreign patrons for support as they took charge of their own military protection. From the beginning, a pre-eminent position was held by the Christian Maronites, whose leaders were prepared to fight any challenge to their political power, even though Maronite numbers were dwindling compared to those of other sectarian demographics, especially the Shi'i community.

When a sectarian civil war broke out in 1975, it erupted as a three-cornered civil war that pitted a coalition of mostly Christian minorities, who wished to maintain their dominant political and economic position, against another coalition made up of mostly Muslim Lebanese, who sought a fairer share of the resources. At the same time, the Palestinian refugee community was increasingly accused of building a state within a state. Confined in dispersed camps for fear that their assimilation might upset Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance, Palestinian leaders sought to secure freedom of action of their own. Under an agreement brokered by the Arab League in 1969, the Palestine Liberation Organization was able to build an elaborate bureaucratic and security apparatus in the camps, some of which they also used as bases from which to launch attacks southward onto Israel.

During the increasingly destructive war, the Christian Maronite position weakened. Somewhat paradoxically, it was neighboring Syria that initially came to their rescue. First intervening in 1976 with "Arab peacekeeping troops," Syria wished neither the fragmentation of Lebanon nor a clear-cut victory by any local side. Rather, the Syrian president, Hafez al-Asad, sought to take advantage of the chaos for his own interests. While attempting to burnish his own pan-Arab credentials, he first tried to consolidate his position in Lebanon as an overall arbiter. Then, he gradually gained control over the country's political and economic institutions (Syrian troops would not leave until forced out by a popular uprising in 2005). But Syrian troops also found themselves entangled in tense confrontations with all sides, including the Christian militias who instead looked increasingly to Israel for support, and the Palestinians whose leader, Yasir Arafat, would seek to improve his relations with Syrian rivals such as Iraq and Egypt.

The main architect of Israel's invasion of Lebanon on 6 June 1982 was Ariel Sharon, Menachem Begin's minister of defense. Sharon initially justified a Lebanese invasion in terms of the security threat posed by Palestinian guerrilla fighters on its northern border. But Israeli troops, coordinating closely with Maronite forces, rapidly advanced all the way to Beirut and, throughout the summer of 1982, subjected the city's mostly Muslim neighborhoods housing the PLO headquarters to intense bombardment. The siege of Beirut was widely condemned around the world. President Reagan protested and demanded a halt to the shelling. In his response, Begin compared the battle for Beirut with the final battle against the Nazi regime, whose leaders were buried in bunkers beneath

Berlin. Reagan persevered and sent a special envoy, Philip Habib, to negotiate an agreement to end the fighting and to evacuate Palestinian fighters to neighboring Arab states. By mid-August, PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat led his fighters, by sea, to an ever more distant exile in Tunisia. These arrangements, which promised security for the Palestinian civilians left behind in the refugee camps, were to be supervised by a multinational force headed by the United States and France. The United States was now well ensnared in the Lebanese civil war.

With his first goal, that of expelling the PLO, fulfilled, Ariel Sharon sought to secure a second goal: installing a sympathetic client government in Beirut that would pave the way for Lebanon to become the second Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Sharon's main ally was a Christian militia known as the Phalange and, according to plan, its leader, Bashir Gemayel, was elected Lebanon's president on 23 August 1982. Sharon's triumph was brief, however, as Gemayel never actually assumed office. Within weeks of his election, Gemayel and dozens of his supporters were killed when a bomb shattered their Beirut headquarters. Israeli forces moved to occupy mainly Muslim West Beirut while, claiming revenge, partisans of Gemayel committed a three-day massacre in two of Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, from 16 to 18 September. With Israeli forces stationed around the camps, and at one point firing flares to provide night-time illumination, Christian militia fighters linked to the Phalange slaughtered unarmed civilians. In Israel, the atrocities generated the largest protest the country had seen. A commission of inquiry, headed by supreme court chief justice Yitzhak Kahan, charged Sharon with personal responsibility for facilitating the entry of rampaging Phalangist forces into the refugee camps, concluding that he should have foreseen the potential for catastrophe. The commission forced Sharon to resign from his post, and shelve his political career for the next two decades.

The Sabra and Shatila massacre caused an international outcry, and American prestige was now at stake. In helping mediate the earlier PLO withdrawal, the United States had sought to bolster its proclaimed honest broker role by providing assurances that remaining Palestinians would be protected. The United States also feared that prolonged chaos would benefit the Soviet Union. Accordingly, President Reagan ordered the withdrawal of Israelis from Beirut, and hastily dispatched a new Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF) to help the new Lebanese government provide some security. Yet, although the task of the officially neutral MNF was to stabilize the political situation, it was difficult for these forces to maintain any distance when the internecine fighting resumed. In September 1983, US warships began shelling south Beirut in support of the Lebanese army, then battling pro-Syrian militias. For those communities in Lebanon that perceived America's involvement as taking sides, or that opposed any Western military engagement on Lebanese soil in principle, the United States had now become a target for attacks.

Hizbullah

In the end, Israel's invasion of Lebanon would mark yet another terrible miscalculation by military leaders attempting to remake the Middle East. It resulted in tens of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese deaths, with many times more wounded and made homeless. Though the invasion succeeded in forcing the PLO to leave Beirut, the invasion in fact facilitated the further entrenchment of the Syrian occupying forces. And it also generated a new adversary in the form of Hizbullah, a Shi'i militia whose operations against Israeli occupying forces would force their eventual withdrawal in May 2000.

Shi'i communities in southern Lebanon had reportedly welcomed the initial Israeli advance in June 1982. They had suffered during previous decades from the Palestinian guerrillas' transformation of the region into a destructive battleground in their fight against Israel. However, the further north the Israeli army moved, and the more established its military occupation of the country, the more radicalized Shi'i military units became. Portraying their resistance as part of a national consensus against foreign occupation, a conglomeration of Shi'i militant groups gradually coalesced into Hizbullah, a disciplined political and military organization. Hizbullah benefitted greatly from the support of Iran and Syria, both of which resented the imposition of American influence in the region, and especially its overwhelming support for Israeli foreign policy. The growing convergence of strategic interests between Syria and Iran helped Iran to move Revolutionary Guards into Lebanon to help mobilize Hizbullah. Ideologically, this initiative built on the Iranian revolution's appeal to other oppressed Muslim populations in the region; more pragmatically, however, Iran's employ of Hizbullah as a proxy was, as discussed above, one of the most important prongs in Tehran's efforts to develop asymmetric paramilitary forces across the region.

Growing anger directed at Israeli and American forces in Lebanon fueled a succession of Shi'i guerrilla attacks between 1983 and 1988. These attacks, backed by Syria and Iran, included: the April 1983 suicide truck bombing of the US embassy in Beirut; the October 1983 suicide truck bombing of the US barracks killing 241 Marines (the worst single casualty toll of American soldiers since the Vietnam War); and a subsequent attack on a French base. They were followed, in succeeding years, by continued attacks claiming more American lives, including that of the president of the American University of Beirut, Malcolm Kerr, and by taking hostage a dozen Americans, held in Beirut. In 1985, Israel redeployed its forces closer to its own border, and consolidated its position in a so-called security zone in south Lebanon. Meanwhile, in the suburbs of Beirut, often referred to as the *dahiya*, Hizbullah built an effective nationwide organization which would increasingly cater to the social and economic needs of Shi'i communities ridden by war and conflict, while at the

same time effectively claiming the role of Lebanon's, including the Palestinians', defender against the United States and Israel.

The 1989 Taif accords at last succeeded in bringing a resolution to the devastating civil war (1975–1990) that had pitted Lebanon's religious communities against one another. But, the accords failed to bring about strong state institutions that could provide necessary national services for all Lebanese citizens. The new arrangements sought to avoid future communal conflict through a power-sharing system that balanced the interests of sectarian political leaders. In effect, the system ended up empowering individual politicians who, having shed their militia uniforms, now sought as elected politicians to consolidate their own political positions and secure their own financial interests. The weak national governance structures that emerged from the civil war essentially allowed sectarian leaders to keep their own stranglehold on power, on the assumption that they represented the religious communities they otherwise corralled behind them, through fear or patronage. This enabled extensive forms of corruption and fraud, greased networks of patronage and clientelism, and forced a massive drain on the state's scarce economic resources.

As for Hizbullah, it responded to the Taif accords by playing an increasingly central role in Lebanese politics, competing at the ballot box and taking its own seat in Lebanon's power sharing game. Its success in parliamentary elections was largely due to its effective network of social services (especially given the dearth of national government services) and its ability to court helpful alliances with other constituencies. At the same time, though, it insisted on retaining its weapons. Whereas other militias demobilized according to the terms of the Taif accords, Hizbullah justified its continued paramilitary status in terms of its resistance to the continued Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, a terrain which privileged the local guerrilla soldier over a foreign occupying army. As for the broader Lebanese population, it generally split over Hizbullah's dual identity as both a parliamentary political party and an autonomous paramilitary force. Some praised Hizbullah for its resistance to Israel and to the regional hegemony sought by its ally, the United States. Others held the organization responsible for Israel's retributive damage inflicted upon the country's civilian infrastructure, and so demanded that its military capabilities come under national control.

Reagan's "War on Terror"

In response to the rapidly escalating events in Beirut in 1983, President Reagan considered military retaliation, but then rejected this in favor of cutting losses and withdrawing the Marines. This was due to a number of reasons, chief among them the risk of another tragic attack, the dysfunctional nature of

Reagan's administration, and the growing domestic criticism of his Lebanon policy during an election year. Despite the "cut and run" accusations that were thrown at Reagan's Lebanon policy, and somewhat surprisingly given the evident success of terrorism's coercive logic in this case, Reagan's rhetoric against terrorism nonetheless would become a hallmark of his regime overall. It was the Reagan administration that first invoked the term "war against terrorism" in 1984, while passing new legislation that sought to curb terrorist activities. In later decades, American officials would describe the 1983 Beirut bombings as having marked the dawn of a new era in international terrorism. Some drew a direct line from the October 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut to the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon: in 2017, for example, US Vice-President Mike Pence referred to Beirut as the "opening salvo in a war that we have waged ever since – the global war on terror."⁹ But this ready conflation of suicide terrorism with militant Islam misses key features present in the 1980s and prevailing ever since. For example, as outlined by Robert Pape, the author of a comprehensive study of suicide attacks worldwide, the common goal of all suicide terrorist campaigns (undertaken by many different religious and ethnic groups) is rarely religious but rather territorial: the strategic, and often successful, use of coercive power to force the withdrawal of foreign powers from one's own homeland. "Religion is rarely the root cause," concludes Pape, "although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective."¹⁰

In the mid-1980s, when Reagan felt the need to respond to what seemed a threatening rise of terrorist activities, he quickly zeroed in on Libya and its erratic leader, Muammar Qaddafi. This requires some consideration. Qaddafi came to power in 1969, experimenting with dramatic populist agendas and proclaiming revolutionary anti-imperialist language. Buttressed by a well-timed and massive increase in the country's oil revenues, he purchased large amounts of weapons from the Soviet Union and offered broad support for national liberation movements across the Middle East and North Africa and throughout Africa, including the PLO, the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, and the African National Congress in South Africa. Not only did Reagan's Cold War lens target Libya as solidly in the Soviet bloc proper, but the country's susceptible geography and the low international reputation of its increasingly isolated leader were all as important to Reagan's decision-making process as was Qaddafi's singular involvement in supporting terrorism. Iran, too, had been blamed by Reagan for both hostage-taking and terrorist bombings, especially those in Lebanon. However, Iran's geostrategic position made it much harder to attack. And, as we shall see, members of the Republican administration had yet to decide to sever completely all communication with Iran's new revolutionary regime.

Relations between Libya and America hit their nadir in 1986, when Reagan held President Qaddafi responsible for bombing a Berlin nightclub that killed two Americans. The American public accepted the administration's justification that Libya's conduct amounted to armed aggression against the United States, and responded positively to Reagan's attempt to make an example of Qaddafi's unrestrained behavior. In a powerful display of American air power, Reagan ordered the bombing of a number of Libyan targets (including Qaddafi's home), killing dozens. Others, however, saw the attacks as more a desperate act of frustration than as indicative of a focused US strategy, and questioned whether the invocation of self-defense was justified and the attacks proportionate. In the end, the attacks on Libya not only left Qaddafi unharmed, but they allowed him now to boast about defying American power. Instead of stemming his support for terrorism, Qaddafi – whose daughter had been killed in the US bombing – planned revenge. In December 1988, a Pan Am passenger jet was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 people in the air and on the ground, making it the single deadliest terrorist attack in the United Kingdom's history, an attack for which Qaddafi eventually took responsibility.

Despite, or perhaps because of, being a major preoccupation of the Reagan administration, terrorism would prove to be an intractable foreign policy problem. In the Libyan case, the United States was confronted with the limits of its own firepower in curbing Qaddafi's support for terrorists. In regard to Iran, also singled out as one of the worst culprits behind terrorist operations, the United States adopted a different track, and soon found itself caught in an increasingly tangled web of foreign policy. Whereas Qaddafi was widely denigrated as a Soviet stooge, and lacked any means to respond effectively to American military intervention, some US strategists felt that revolutionary Iran could be influenced, by using more clandestine measures, to play a moderating role. Plus, the two countries were objectively allied in supporting the Afghan guerrilla fighters, known as mujahidin, against the Soviet invasion (see below). In 1985, officials in the Reagan administration concocted an elaborate scheme – sometimes referred to as “Irangate” or the “Iran Contra Affair” – to secretly sell weapons to Iran, using Israel as a conduit. In exchange, Iran was expected to help in the liberation of the aforementioned American hostages seized in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the proceeds of the arms sales were used to fund anti-communist guerrillas (referred to by Reagan as “freedom fighters”) in Nicaragua, despite, and in contravention of, the restrictions Congress had imposed on supporting them.

The roots of this scheme can be traced to two sets of circumstances previously outlined. On the one hand, the Iranian army, in desperate need of military resources in the war with Iraq, was completely dependent on spare parts from the United States, which had for decades dominated arms sales to the Shah. On the other, Iran had links to the Lebanese hostage-takers, to whom

Khomeini's regime had been sending resources as part of its strategy of asymmetric warfare. Though the idea of having the anti-American regime of Iran pay for the anti-communist rebellion in Nicaragua must have initially seemed very attractive to some officials in the Reagan administration, the scheme completely unraveled. It is now remembered as one of the most damning foreign policy scandals of the Reagan administration. A few American hostages were successfully freed, but more were taken. Not only did Reagan's activities defy his own very public assurance that he would never concede to the demands of hostage-takers, but the sale of missiles to Iran, when America was at the same time helping Iraq, revealed a dangerous policy of playing both sides.

In the end, these vacillations in US policy would contribute to the solidification of regional security arrangements in the Persian Gulf. Following the revelations of Irangate, the United States was desperate to repair the damage wrought on American credibility and reliability as an ally in the Gulf. So when, in 1987, Kuwait requested support for its oil tanker exports against a possible Iranian attack, the United States responded eagerly to prove its continued support for its Gulf Arab allies. From then on, not only was the US acting directly to protect friendly regimes in order to secure uninterrupted access to oil, it was investing heavily in military facilities throughout the region, especially in Saudi Arabia. The signal importance of the Persian Gulf as a fundamental American security interest was thus engrained into Washington's foreign policy during the 1980s. The United States sold billions of dollars of weapons to Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. But Washington's general lack of confidence in their allies' ability to operate the complex weapon systems led US officials into an ever-closer military engagement in the region, forging new operational links in preparation for any potential threat in the future.

Jihadism in Afghanistan

In late December 1979, the Soviet Red Army crossed over the border into Afghanistan. The decision turned into one of the Soviet Union's biggest, and last, foreign policy disasters. As has been witnessed time and again, leaders hoping to achieve specific political goals through (what was promised to be) a limited and temporary military intervention were instead forced to deal with a devastating, and ultimately failed occupation. Soviet forces were sent in to prevent the overthrow of a communist government that had been established in Kabul in 1978. The United States, already greatly concerned by the revolutionary turmoil unfolding in neighboring Iran, interpreted Soviet actions as an aggressive act of expansion. President Carter described it as the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War, and Ronald Reagan, denouncing the Soviet Union as an evil empire, massively increased US military spending.

Reagan was especially keen on supporting insurgent guerrilla groups against perceived Soviet threats, whether they be Nicaraguan or Afghan. Indeed, Reagan presented his support for such freedom fighters as self-defense. In the case of Afghanistan, a large proportion of the opposition were members of Islamist movements (which the Soviet Union, for their part, considered terrorists).

When supporting the Islamist movements' efforts to counter the Soviet occupation, the United States worked especially closely with Saudi Arabia. For its part, Saudi support for the Afghan Muslim fighters was fully in line with its own concerns in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the seizure of the Grand Mosque by Sunni extremists at home. Fearing the challenge posed to their own claims of regional leadership, Saudi rulers reacted by spending staggering sums of their vast oil wealth to showcase and promote their own puritanical brand of Sunni Islam, known as Wahhabism, and forging ties with cultural and educational institutions, and military and intelligence agencies, across the region. Within a few years, tens of thousands of mujahidin traveled from across the Middle East, and became known as "Afghan Arabs." An additional interest of the Saudi regime lay in diverting the mounting frustration and opposition being expressed by its own young men, many of whom eagerly volunteered to join the self-proclaimed "jihad" against Soviet atheists. The mujahidin also received the backing of Pakistan, whose own regional ambitions also relied on playing the religious card, and whose safe havens along the Afghan border were of utmost importance to the jihadi resistance.

Jihad is Arabic for struggle, and for most Muslims, the term refers to the personal striving of an individual to cleanse one's soul and conform to God's guidance. Western understandings and stereotypes, however, have been greatly influenced by the more radical mutations of jihad as interpreted by small, fringe groups who have captured global attention and view jihad solely in terms of a violent, offensive war against those who are deemed unbelievers or heretics. The term "jihadi" has thus generally come to refer to a militant Islamist activist. Jihadis tend to proliferate among the pent-up grievances of authoritarian states or in the political power vacuums of failed states: many recruits have been radicalized in prison (including the Egyptian leader of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was tortured in jail in the 1990s). But generalizations are difficult, and not all jihadi groups are united: many jihadis fight against one another. Fawaz Gerges draws the important distinction between religious nationalists and transnationalists.¹¹ On the one hand, religious nationalists seek the revolutionary transformation of society and politics within a state by overthrowing its secular regime, referred to as the "near enemy." Transnationalists, on the other hand, argue that, given the evolving regional and international conditions, the only way to bring down the "near enemy" was to confront its

superpower patron, the United States, also referred to as the “far enemy.” Chapter 4 will place Islamist politics in its local and national contexts, but it is important to note here that the roots of the global militant jihadist movements which culminated in al-Qa’ida’s attacks of 11 September 2001 are to be found in the Afghan struggle. It was when Arab jihadis returned to their homes after forcing the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan that they combined their tactical wartime experiences with their convictions that Arab regimes were no less clients of Washington than the Afghanistan government had been of Moscow. When pressed in 1998 to reflect back on this strategy, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national security advisor, asked rhetorically: “What is more important for world history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet empire? A few hot-headed Islamists or the liberations of Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War?”¹²

Carter’s and Reagan’s Cold War support for anti-Soviet Islamist fighters sowed a terrible harvest. In Afghanistan, the American Cold War strategy of trapping the Soviet Union in its own quagmire led to extensive fighting that drove millions of refugees into Pakistan and Iran, and killed over one million people, mostly civilians. For almost a decade, Soviet troops were pinned down in an unwinnable war: as costs and casualties mounted, their military operations proved increasingly unpopular at home. When the Soviet Union began looking for an exit in 1986 (and finally withdrew in 1989), it appeared to many that Reagan’s support for “freedom fighters” had struck an especially successful blow in the Cold War at a bargain price (and shared between the United States and Saudi Arabia). Yet few American officials, enthralled as they were by the idea of turning Afghanistan into a Soviet “Vietnam,” thought to concern themselves with the fate of the insurgent groups they sponsored. One of the main leaders of the Afghan Arabs, who played a key role in the jihadi recruitment process, was the rich Saudi Arabian Osama bin Laden. Although his own Afghan-based movement was closely interlocked in a relationship with America during the protracted conflict with the Soviet Union, it would acquire a life of its own in the war’s neglected aftermath. Bin Laden used his broad contacts to raise funds for roads and military installations in Afghanistan. It was from the militant networks he helped build there that a new cohesive structure, with its own radical ideology, would emerge. It was known as al-Qa’ida (Arabic for “the base”).

In 1990, al-Qa’ida’s ambitions were transformed by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, and the international response which landed hundreds of thousands of non-Muslim foreign forces in Saudi Arabia, Islam’s birthplace. Flush with victory over the Soviet empire, al-Qa’ida now felt empowered to take on their former patrons and sponsors: the American empire together with its subservient and corrupt regimes, especially those that ruled Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The “Second” Gulf War, 1990–1991

In 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran on the assumption that Iran’s post-revolutionary weakness would quickly force it to recognize Iraqi supremacy and concede territory along the long-disputed Shatt al Arab waterway. That was a gross miscalculation. The resulting eight-year war of attrition caused tremendous wreckage but brought no concessions from Iran. Indeed, Hussein officially accepted Iran’s position in August 1990, when he needed all of his forces to then be fully engaged in another military adventure, the invasion and occupation of his southern neighbor, Kuwait. It would be another enormous blunder, transforming the international politics of the region yet again. Reversing Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait would take a few months; the ruinous impact of the postwar settlement endured for decades.

Iraq’s eight-year war with Iran had forced Saddam Hussein into financial dependence upon his oil-rich, and increasingly apprehensive, Arab Gulf neighbors. Far from establishing Iraq’s regional hegemony, Saddam Hussein ended up owing over \$40 billion, mostly to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Racked with huge debts, Hussein also faced massive reconstruction costs. Rather than test the loyalty of his powerful and war-hardened military, by forcing on it the sorts of budget cuts or massive demobilization that usually accompany postwar reconstruction efforts, Hussein instead sought financial compensation (as well as a distraction from rising domestic discontent) by seizing Kuwait’s assets. On 2 August 1990, Iraq’s forces swiftly overran the kingdom’s tiny forces, allowing Hussein to announce that Kuwait was now Iraq’s 19th province, while its soldiers looted Kuwaiti properties.

In addition to the need for cash, other factors contributed to Hussein’s surprise invasion. These included Iraq’s long-standing territorial dispute with Kuwait and the many grievances it held regarding Kuwait’s oil production. The boundary drawn by the British following First World War had effectively left the new state of Iraq land-locked: Iraqi rulers had ever since eyed Kuwaiti territory for the secure access it could provide to the Persian Gulf and the world economy beyond. Moreover, the colonial border straddled a large oil field, which Saddam Hussein accused Kuwait of encroaching upon. Making matters worse, Kuwait had been ignoring the quotas set by the intergovernmental Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), thus pushing down the price of oil and reducing the export revenues Iraq desperately needed for its postwar reconstruction efforts. In deciding to invade Kuwait, Hussein also likely believed two things. Firstly, the United States and the international community would respond passively, as, for example, they had in 1980 when he attacked Iran. Secondly, if the United States did respond, no Arab government would risk colluding with an American military force. In both cases, Hussein, again, miscalculated. Nonetheless, from Hussein’s perspective, continuing

down the road of brinkmanship, in the face of mounting international economic sanctions and the threat of military force, seemed to present less of a threat to the nature of his authoritarian rule in Iraq than would publicly admitting an error or forcing upon his army generals a humiliating retreat.

President George H.W. Bush was initially caught off guard by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. But his administration quickly assembled, under recognized international norms, the broadest anti-Iraq coalition. At this time, Bush benefitted greatly from the extraordinary cooperation to which an increasingly supine Soviet Union acceded. On the very day of Iraq's invasion, the UN Security Council, with unprecedented unanimity, passed Resolution 660. The resolution condemned Iraq, demanded its immediate withdrawal from Kuwait, and imposed a comprehensive system of sanctions on all exports and imports except medical supplies and foodstuffs intended strictly for humanitarian circumstances. Given the Iraqi oil economy's vulnerability to external shocks, the impact was immediate and produced serious hardships for its people. Although a broad consensus had formed quickly on the immediate imposition of sanctions against Iraq, the international debate became more polarized as the United States rapidly turned to the preparation of a military response. Before comprehensive attempts could be made to evaluate the overall impact of sanctions, America began to activate the threat of force. By November, it became clear that Bush was committed to a military intervention. The number of American forces in Saudi Arabia was doubled, and Saddam Hussein (a former recipient of US aid in his previous war against Iran) was demonized in the domestic politics of Western countries. Largely guided by American diplomats, the UN passed resolution 678 at the end of November, authorizing member states "to use all necessary means" to force Iraq to end its occupation of Kuwait. Saddam Hussein was given until 15 January 1991 to withdraw from his campaign.

It was especially important for Bush that the anti-Iraq coalition include as many Arab states as possible. Saddam Hussein did receive some level of support (including from Jordan, Yemen, and the PLO), but most countries condemned the invasion of Kuwait and bolstered US efforts to liberate it. Gulf neighbors offered generous financial support, though limited military support. Other Arab regimes, for their part, recognized they were well-positioned to take advantage of the situation. In the case of Egypt, for example, the United States, together with other major Western creditors, was suddenly prepared to negotiate huge reductions in the foreign debt owed them, in return for Egypt joining the coalition. As for Syria, whose relations with Iraq had long been antagonistic, it was natural enough for Hafiz al-Asad to support a coalition against his rival Saddam Hussein (just as al-Asad had supported Iran in 1980). Still, Syria's decision to join the US-led coalition reaped rewards in the form of Western acceptance of Syria's continued military deployment in Lebanon.

In another geopolitical reversal brought about by Bush's coalition-building process, the United States intentionally left its ally Israel out of its plans. The concern here was whether the additional participation of Israeli military forces could provide Saddam Hussein with useful material with which to reframe the conflict as another Arab–Israeli war, and thus make it more difficult for Syria and Egypt to stay involved. Indeed, when war broke out in January 1991, Saddam Hussein launched missiles at Israel, either as an act of retribution against an American ally, or in the hope of breaking the American-led coalition by compelling Israel to retaliate with devastating force. Israel would not be drawn in, but this was in contradiction to its general strategy of aggressive military deterrence on which Israel's security doctrines had, until then, been built. Israeli leaders welcomed the defeat of their long-time foe, Saddam Hussein. But some now harbored new concerns about both their own country's vulnerability to long-range missile attacks, as well as the nature of its strategic partnership with America. The repercussions of the Gulf War on Palestinian–Israeli relations were significant, and will be more fully explored in Chapter 3.

Although most Arab regimes were understandably distrustful of Saddam Hussein, Arab populations were more receptive to the broader challenge he represented to a rapidly changing global order that was increasingly dominated by America and its close allies. Seeing this, Hussein sought to mobilize public opinion (if not Arab regimes) on his behalf by exploiting prevailing resentments. For example, throughout the Arab world, there was widespread indignation at the inequitable distribution of oil wealth, and at the profligate leaders of the oil-producing regimes who could only secure their own positions through close relations with the United States. Further, Saddam Hussein tried to exploit the broad regional support for Palestinians. He attempted at one point to link negotiations over his illegal occupation of Kuwait with Israel's much longer occupations of the West Bank and Gaza. President George H.W. Bush, however, was uninterested in negotiating any gains for Hussein. America refused to allow Hussein any chance to leverage the occupation as a bargaining chip for any kind of concession, be it a territorial redrawing of the contested Iraq–Kuwait border, a financial readjustment of the debt Iraq owed to Gulf countries, or any kind of propagandistic victory in his claim to regional leadership. For Bush, there could be no reward for Hussein's aggression.

On 17 January 1991, President Bush launched "Operation Desert Storm." The war consisted of a devastating bombing campaign of Iraq's military and economic infrastructure, carefully choreographed through Western media but resulting in the destruction of decades-long development. This was followed by a ground attack on Kuwait, which quickly turned into a rout of the occupying Iraqi forces. By then, Saddam Hussein had already redeployed his elite troops

back to Iraqi soil, in order to ensure the future security of his regime in Baghdad. So, the soldiers left stationed in Kuwait were essentially sacrificed in a panicked and chaotic withdrawal along the road from Kuwait City to the southern Iraqi city of Basra. The highly publicized scenes of devastation – blackened tanks, trucks, and bodies – earned it the moniker “highway of death,” with a further distinguishing feature consisting of terrible ecological destruction following upon Saddam Hussein’s order to set ablaze Kuwait’s oil wells, as part of a failed scorched earth policy.

Conclusion

Though Saddam Hussein might not have fully realized the repercussions at the time, Cold War rivalry, of which he had been a beneficiary in the past, had ended and the Soviet Union was now too weak to contest America’s position in the Middle East. As alarming as was the prospect of what Hussein might do with access to even greater oil revenues, Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait also presented Bush with a putative test of American leadership in the rapidly evolving post–Cold War world order. George H.W. Bush succeeded in accomplishing his limited, and internationally sanctioned, goal of forcing an end to Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait. Subsequent claims of a successful restoration of the status quo, however, ignored the continuing reverberations of the coalition’s military victory, and the Pandora’s box of issues that had been unleashed by the occupation and war. Internationally, the solid consensus that had been reached on forcing Iraq out of Kuwait unraveled upon the failure to agree on how the formidable sanctions regime might be maintained to ensure Iraq’s continued disarmament, together with a large number of other objectives. Regionally, Arab governments and populations remained fractured between those who supported the Allied coalition against Iraq and those who opposed it. Restiveness on this point would feed even more severe divisions over the continued reliance of some regimes, especially the ruling families of the Gulf, on American military forces quartered on local bases.

Notes

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