CHAPTER V:

IRAN’S PLACE IN THE REGION

IRAN-IRAQ

Iran’s relations with no other country have been as complicated and tortuous as its ties with Iraq. It is often assumed that Iran and Iraq are natural antagonists, destined to have relations marked by friction and tension. Given the countries’ prolonged war in the 1980s and their sustained attempts to assert influence in the Persian Gulf, such a narrative has a degree of historical justification. Still, today emphatic voices suggest that the post-Saddam Iraq with its empowered Shiite majority is likely to emerge as a close ally, if not an actual subsidiary, of the Islamic Republic.

The turbulent history between the two nations can alternatively support a variety of assessments and predictions. It is true that the two sides fought a vicious war that destroyed both countries’ infrastructure and scarred a generation. Yet, how does one explain the long periods of cooperation between them in the years since Iraq assumed its formal independence in 1932? The answer lies in the domestic political complexion of the two parties. When both Iran and Iraq were governed by conservative monarchies, they managed to regulate their competition, contain their differences, and even cooperate on issues of common concern. However, the revolutionary, Ba’athist regime in Iraq, which took power in 1968, found the Pahlavi dynasty objectionable, just as Iran’s theocrats would later find Saddam Hussein reprehensible. All this is not to suggest that the two sides are free of territorial disputes or regional ambitions that may provoke difficulties. But such tensions are harder to resolve by regimes that are ideological antagonists.
Much in the Middle East changed in the past few years as Saddam’s tyranny was displaced by American military intervention. The political empowerment of the Shiite community in Iraq is likely to portend better relations with Iran, since many of Iraq’s leading Shiite political actors have close and intimate ties with the Islamic Republic. Despite the alarmist discussions regarding Iran’s determination to spread its revolution next door, for Tehran the critical issue remains preventing Sunni domination of Iraqi politics, as in the past such a monopoly of power by a distinct minority group had led it to embrace an aggressive pan-Arabism ideology as a means of justifying its political hegemony. The rulers of the Islamic Republic have no illusions that the Shiites in Iraq are likely to concede to their authority, but they are merely seeking a more amenable set of interlocutors next door. For the first time since the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in 1958, Iraq is no longer a revisionist state infused with discursive pan-Arabism pretensions. After all the diplomatic maneuvers and conflicts, the American invasion finally opened the possibility of not just improved but friendly relations between two of the Middle East’s bitterest enemies.

In yet another paradox of the Middle East, two other antagonists of the region, the United States and Iran, now find themselves uneasily on the same side of the Iraq debate. A cursory examination of the news coverage will often find U.S. officials complaining about Iran’s conduct, its disturbing influence, and its unsavory activities. For their own reasons, both parties have come to view democratic pluralism as the most suitable path for the future of Iraq. The Bush administration’s missionary zeal to promote representative governments across the Arab world actually stems from a judicious perception that in the end, democracies constitute the most peaceful form of government. The success of democratic rule in Baghdad is thus one of the few things that both Washington and Tehran can agree on.
To properly appreciate the changing dynamics of Iran-Iraq relations, we must assess the critical turning points in this relationship since the inception of modern Iraq. Such an examination will reveal that more than territorial disputes or contending hegemonic aspirations, it was ideology that caused tension and ultimately war between these two states. While the monarchical governments managed to contain their disputes, the ideological regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Iranian clerics ultimately waged a devastating war against each other. Today, for the first time, ideology does not seem a source of friction and tension between the two states, portending a more stable Persian Gulf.

IRAN AND THE OLD IRAQ

During the interwar years, conservative elite, often composed of landowners and tribal sheikhs, dominated the landscape of Arab politics. The traditional Hashemite monarchy that reigned in Baghdad belonged to this class, as its fears of revolutionary radicalism and Soviet encroachment made it an ally of the West. The common foreign policy outlook, shared institutions, and ties to America’s anti-Communist containment network led to an unprecedented degree of cooperation between Baghdad and Tehran, as both parties were committed to the preservation of the regional status quo.¹

By the 1950s, the Middle East was a changed region. A new middle class had emerged with its own political and economic ambitions that could no longer be confined to the framework conceived by the conservative monarchies. An Arab Cold War had descended on the region, with the pro-Western monarchical regimes being challenged by radical republics professing neutralism abroad and socialism at home. No state embodied this struggle more than Egypt as its dynamic leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, captured the imagination of the Arab political class. Although typically indifferent to inter-Arab intrigues, the Shah viewed the resistance against Nasserism as a
momentous battle. The monarchies of Iran and Iraq once more found themselves on the same side, resisting the same foes and struggling under the same banner. The 1958 coup in Iraq, leading to the bloody overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy, dramatically altered the once cordial relations between Iran and Iraq. The new radical officer corps led by Abdul-Karim Qasim loudly proclaimed its pan-Arab mission and proved openly disdainful of the monarchy next door as a relic of a reactionary era. Although in the past national interests had bound the two countries together, ideological discord was the new order of the day. Territorial disagreements, particularly over the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway, seemed insoluble as the two countries viewed each other with suspicion and fear.

Iraq’s impulsive ruler, Qasim, now claimed the Iranian province of Khuzestan with its Arab population as “Arabistan” and christened the Persian Gulf as the “Arabian Gulf.” Iraq’s strident nationalists also dismissed the intricate 1937 treaty detailing arrangements for the mutual use of the Shatt al-Arab waterway as an intolerable infringement of Arab rights. The new republican regime not only challenged the legitimacy of the Iranian government but also its territorial boundaries. The Iraqi government that sanctioned its power through claims of pan-Arabism and as the self-appointed defender of the larger Arab community viewed its Persian neighbor in distinct ethnic terms. For the new masters of Baghdad, Iran was a stagnant Persian monarchy sustained in its power by Western imperial preference, while for the Shah, the militant Iraqi government’s self-professed identity with the radical Arab bloc, its pro-Soviet inclinations, and its determination to claim the Persian Gulf for the Arab cause was bound to be a threat. The Hashemite monarchy may have had serious differences with Iran, but it did not contest the essential integrity of the Pahlavi regime.

The arrival of the Ba’athist regime through a bloody coup in 1968 further anguished the Iranian state. The Ba’athist ideology was even more
strident in its claim of unifying the mythical Arab community and resisting pro-Western regimes. The Sunni-dominated government also effectively disenfranchised the Shiite and Kurdish majorities and looked abroad for its legitimacy. The Sunnis were dominating Iraq not for crass parochial purposes, the Ba’athists claimed, but for the larger cause of Arab solidarity. The vicissitudes of unstable internal order, the determination of an imperious Sunni populace, and the imperatives of Arab politics fostered an aggressive foreign policy. Baghdad now became the benefactor of a wide variety of leftist and pan-Arab opposition forces in the Persian Gulf and openly appealed to the Arabs who lived in Iran’s oil-rich southern provinces. With its ties to the Soviet Union and its revolutionary outlook, Iraq represented a continued and escalating threat to Iran.

The ascendance of a radical regime in Baghdad coincided with important changes in Iran’s foreign policy orientation. Rising oil revenues and American benevolence allowed the Shah to nurture his aspiration of creating a powerful military to police the Gulf Persian. An overextended America, struggling in its Vietnam quagmire, was happy to cede this role to the ambitious Persian monarch. After all, the Nixon Doctrine called for arming pliable proxies willing to shoulder the burdens of the Cold War. While the Shah may have been inclined to share the sploils of the Nixon Doctrine with the conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia and accept a twin-pillar policy, no such deference was yielded to the Ba’athist regime. The Shah signaled his attitude clearly, warning his local challengers that if they “do not respect Iran’s legitimate right in the Persian Gulf; they must expect Iran to show the same attitude toward them.” ²

For the Ba’athist state, with its claims as the guardian of Arabism, Iran’s preeminence constituted a transgression against both its ideological commitments and regional aspirations. Baghdad denounced Iran’s assertions as “illegal ambition in Iraq’s territorial waters and the Arabian Gulf.” ³ Iraq’s
propaganda once more focused on fomenting uprisings among the Arab-speaking population in Khuzestan. The new Iraqi regime even invoked the sacred cause of resisting Israel, claiming that Iran was working in conjunction with the Jewish state to provoke a crisis in the Persian Gulf as a means of undermining Arab solidarity against Israel. In the aftermath of Egypt’s defeat at the hands of Israel during the 1967 war, Iraq sensed a unique opportunity to assume the mantle of Arab leadership and perceived its relations with Iran in a larger Arab context. Border clashes, deportation of Iraqis of Iranian origin, and a strident propaganda campaign now characterized relations between the two erstwhile allies.

Such conflict was not without its share of victims. By the early 1970s Baghdad was locked into one of its perennial conflicts with its restive Kurdish minority. The cynicism of Iran’s policy was on ample display, as the Shah viewed the Kurdish struggle for autonomy as an effective means of pressuring Iraq into acquiescing to his territorial demands and his quest to assume greater control over the contested Shatt al-Arab waterway. The prevailing imbalance of power and the Iraqi regime’s preoccupation with its internal conflicts forced it to acquiesce to the Algiers Accords in March 1975, granting Iran much of its demands. Having achieved his strategic aims, the Shah brutally cut off his assistance to the Kurds, sacrificing his ally of convenience. Not for the last time, Kurds would find themselves betrayed by an external power pledging friendship and solidarity. By 1979, the mutual ascendance of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran added further fuel to this combustible mix. In essence, dogmatic politicians who were prone to accept great risks in pursuit of their objectives now led both states. As both leaders sought to impose their ideological templates on the region, conflict between the two states became nearly inevitable.
Iran-Iraq War

Too often in history, the rise of revolutionary regimes leads to wars and conflict. Revolutionaries tend to perceive their ideals as universally applicable and the existing order as necessarily iniquitous. The demarcation between domestic politics and foreign affairs soon blurs, frequently evaporating all together. The cause of revolutionary affirmation mandates the export of the new order, demonstrating its vitality and vigor. More so than any of its predecessors, the Iranian revolution not only exhibited these sentiments, but its particular religious character made its forceful exportation all the more important. As we have seen, Ayatollah Khomeini waged his revolt not just to displace the Shah’s monarchy but also to usher in a new epoch. Such a pattern of revolutionary provocation was soon evident as the ayatollahs decried the Ba’athist regime, offering material and moral sanction to its many opponents. A strident secular state seeking to organize the region under the banner of pan-Arabism and allying itself with the atheist Soviet regime was a particular affront to Ayatollah Khomeini. In the initial heady days, when Iran’s euphoric clerics had managed to overthrow a formidable monarchy, the revolution appeared awesome, ferocious, and relentless. In such an atmosphere, caution and restraint did not always guide Tehran’s new rulers.

For its part, the Ba’athist regime viewed its Islamist neighbor with an equal degree of contempt and concern. As the vanguard of a secular, modern Arab order, the Ba’athists as irrational retrogression belittled the resurgence of traditional institutions and religious politics. The Islamic Republic with its regional mandates and ideological claims was a unique threat to Saddam’s rule. The tense relations between the two states were further strained as Iran’s message of revolutionary defiance proved particularly attractive to at least a segment of Iraq’s Shiite majority. Organized opposition forces such as the al-Dawa Party soon conducted violent campaigns against Ba’athist targets and officials, most likely with Iranian complicity. The minority Sunni regime,
shielding its absolute power behind the veneer of pan-Arabism, must have felt particularly vulnerable to Ayatollah Khomeini’s appeal to the hard-pressed Shiite populace. The Iraqi counter reaction featured all the brutality and excess exemplified by Saddam’s tyranny, as the Shiite community was subject to relentless reprisals, and some of its most venerable clerics were summarily executed. However, such harsh repressive measures did not ease Saddam’s mind, since he feared that the contagion of Khomeinism might yet destabilize his rule. Once more, ideological antagonisms intruded, intensifying suspicions and making violence an attractive option for the perennially impetuous Iraqi leader.

To attribute the emerging conflict between the two states to ideological incompatibility is to discount Saddam’s overweening ambitions. By 1980, Egypt’s acceptance of the Camp David Accords had effectively removed one of the principal obstacles to Iraq’s leadership of the Arab world. Moreover, the revolutionary chaos in Iran and the decimation of its officer corps by the clerics was leading Saddam to perceive that a decisive military strike would not only provoke the collapse of the theocratic regime but also consolidate Iraq’s leadership of the Arab realm. A combination of threats and opportunities was proving irresistible to a leader prone to taking great and dangerous risks. As border clashes between the two states intensified, Saddam openly castigated the “Imam Khomeini” and implored the Iranian masses to “find someone else other than the Khomeini.” By the summer of 1980, Saddam took the inflammatory step of renouncing the 1975 Algiers Accords, which had provided a framework for operating the contested Shatt al-Arab waterway. The Iraqi dictator simply claimed, “Since the rulers of Iran have violated this agreement from the beginning of their reign as the Shah before them, I announce before you that we consider the March 1975 agreement abrogated.” Finally, on September 22, 1980, Saddam took the catastrophic decision to invade Iran, beginning one of the longest and most destructive wars in the modern history of the Middle East.
Even in the context of strained relations between the two states since 1958, Saddam’s invasion of Iran was a stark departure from the previous pattern. To be sure, there had been sporadic border clashes and both parties had supported proxies against each other, but a full-scale military invasion cannot be seen as a mere continuation of the existing tensions. In essence, Saddam dramatically altered the nature of the conflict between the two states and escalated tensions to a new level. Indeed, had Saddam not reached the pinnacle of power, the controlled rage between the two states might well have persisted as it had for over two decades. But as a rash ruler with ambitions to establish his state as the leader of the Arab world and the hegemony of the Gulf Persian, “Saddam perceived a unique opportunity to rid himself of his theocratic nemesis next door. The defeat of Iran would not just evaporate a strategic challenge, but it would lead the grateful Gulf sheikdoms to accept Iraqi predominance and the larger Arab realm to acclaim the vanquisher of the Persian hordes. On the other side, Ayatollah Khomeini stood with his own determinations, which would lead to the continuation of the war despite its human and material costs. To the mix of ideological animosity and territorial dispute was now added the personality of two leaders, indifferent to the suffering and welfare of their citizenry. The Iran-Iraq war was consequently destined to be one of the most prolonged and devastating conflicts in the annals of warfare.  

The Iran-Iraq war was unusual in many respects, as it was not merely an interstate conflict designed to achieve specific territorial or even political objectives. This was a war waged for the triumph of ideas, with Ba’athist secular pan-Arabism contesting Iran’s Islamic fundamentalism. As such, for Tehran the war came to embody its revolutionary identity. The themes of solidarity and sacrifice, self-reliance and commitment not only allowed the regime to consolidate its power but make the defeat of Saddam the ultimate test of theocratic legitimacy. War and revolution had somehow fused in the clerical cosmology. To wage a determined war was to validate one’s revolutionary
ardor and spiritual fidelity. The notion of compromise and armistice was alien to the Islamic Republic, as its commitment to the war transcended conventional calculations.  

Iraq would soon discover the problem with invading a revolutionary state infused with a messianic ideology: the imperatives of caution and pragmatism are lost on the militant elite. As an ideologically driven state, Iran never defined the war in terms of territory lost or gained but as a spiritual mission seeking moral redemption. For the clerical rulers, Iran had been attacked not because of its provocations or territorial disputes but because the Islamic Republic embodied a virtuous order. This was an infidel war against the Islamic revolution, the “Government of God,” and the sublime faith of Shiism. “You are fighting to protect Islam, and he is fighting to destroy it,” Ayatollah Khomeini told the Iranian people. In a similar vein, Rafsanjani emphatically declared, “The fact that we are not making peace stems from the Koran and the honor of Islam.” The clerical leadership genuinely insisted that the war was a blessing, as it would either lead to a momentous victory for the forces of piety or to martyrdom, which was itself the ultimate form of salvation. Thus, the sacrifices of the war were exalted even if the ultimate outcome was not an Iranian triumph.  

Throughout the duration of the conflict, religious discourse and symbols were used to present the war to the public. The duty of the righteous Muslim was to resist oppression and wage war against enemies seeking to tarnish Islam. The importance of patience and steadfastness was also noted, however, as God would reward not just the zealous but those who persisted in their ardor despite setbacks and suffering. Such claims may seem self-serving, designed to galvanize a populace called to endure significant difficulties for an undetermined period. For the clerical leadership this was not just a gesture of cynical manipulation of popular sentiments, however, but a genuine expression of their ideological framework of the war. Seldom in their many declarations
and speeches does one find the ruling elite preoccupied with the limited territory in dispute or Saddam’s violation of agreements governing relations between the two states. The sweeping, universalistic rhetoric revealed that for Tehran this was a more profound, even an existential, struggle between the forces of Islamic virtue and a profane Ba’athist ruler. During Saddam’s later conflicts with the United States, he would be castigated by American politicians as an aggressor, a genocidal maniac, even another Hitler. Yet the Islamic Republic’s distinct ideological approach to the war eschewed such terms for the more emotive Koranic designation of Saddam as a heretic, an embodiment of evil plotting against the true essence of Islam. In a sense, the clerical rulers appropriated the rhetoric of the Muslim empires that had battled the armies of the Crusaders, where the issue was not mere aggression but a collision of two contending civilizations—this case, the ethical Islamic Iran against Saddam’s world of dissimulation, treachery, and cynicism.  

Given such perceptions, the Islamic Republic’s military doctrine avoided issues of tactics and strategy in favor of revolutionary fervor. Ayatollah Khomeini captured this sentiment by stressing, “Victory is not achieved by swords; it can only be achieved by blood.” While traditional armies sought a coherent command structure and access to necessary armaments, Iran was to rely on its culture of martyrdom and sacrifice, on the theory that moral superiority and the power of faith were sufficient to overcome Iraq’s devastating war machine, generously supplied by the Western powers seeking to contain Iran’s ambitions.

Nor did Iran’s war aims reflect the limits of its power. Tehran’s objective remained the complete destruction of Saddam’s regime and the elimination of the Sunni domination of Iraq’s politics. The fact is that after 1982, when Iran evicted Iraqi forces from its territory, Baghdad was prepared to cease the war. However, Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical brethren insisted on the continuation of the conflict until their maximalist objectives
were achieved. The problem for Iran was that its military capabilities were not sufficient to realize its inflexible aims. The gap between determination and capacity ensured a stalemate, as neither side was powerful enough to impose a solution on the other, while Tehran was simply unwilling to reach a compromise solution to end the war. After 1982, the war settled into a pattern of bloody deadlock, reminiscent of the carnage of the First World War, where the capture of inches of territory would consume countless lives. Iran would unleash sporadic, large-scale offensives using human waves that would inevitably be repulsed by Iraq’s better-equipped army. Then an inevitable lull would ensue, only to be shattered by the grisly pattern of another failed operation. As the war persisted, both parties sought to alter tactics and cultivate new allies in order to somehow breach the stalemate. It was in the context that Iraq introduced chemical weapons to an already deadly battleground.  

Iraq’s employment of chemical weapons against Iran began in 1983, and after their initial battlefield use, the list of targets was gradually expanded. Nor did the Iraqi leadership deny its right to utilize such weapons to fend off Iranian attacks. By 1984, Iraqi military commanders were boasting of how they used “insecticide” to exterminate “the swarms of mosquitoes.” The former Iraqi foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, was uniquely honest when admitting the use of such weapons albeit in retaliation for what he said was Iran’s similar deployment of chemical weapons. After eight UN investigations, sheaves of evidence from eyewitness accounts, and captured Iraqi documents, it can be declared conclusively that while Iraq did employ weapons of mass destruction, there is no indication of Iran’s similar use, belying Aziz’s spurious claims of just retaliation.

In the end, the principal strategic utility of chemical weapons is to terrorize the combatants and demoralize the population. Saddam was successful in this regard, because Iraq’s systematic use of chemical agents
gradually undermined the confidence of Iran’s zealous volunteers and the cohesion of its armed forces. Throughout the war, Iran’s hard-won battlefield gains were often reversed by Baghdad’s use of weapons of mass destruction. In a similar vein, the potential targeting of cities, which became much easier by the mid-1980s once Iraq developed long-range missiles, dramatically frightened Iran’s civilian population, leading to mass exodus from cities and towns. The pressure exerted by an increasingly frightened population and the beleaguered armed forces proved a heavy burden for the clerical hard-liners seeking to perpetuate the war until victory. In the meantime, the apparent internationalization of the conflict was yet another lever pressing the clerical leadership to end the war. The massive aid and intelligence information offered to Iraq by the Western powers was supplemented in the latter stages of the conflict by a robust U.S. navel presence protecting gulf commerce from Iranian menace. Given that the Gulf sheikdoms’ oil profits were allowing them to generously subsidize Iraq’s war machine, Iran’s inability to disrupt that trade offered Iraq another important advantage. As battlefield losses mounted, the international community simply would not allow Saddam to fall. It baffled Iran’s leaders and citizens alike how the Western bloc, with its emphasis on human rights and democratic values, had come to embrace a tyrannical Sunni ruler.

By 1988, Iran’s population was exhausted and war-weary. Eight years of sacrifice and hardship had not produced the much-pledged victory. The steady stream of volunteers who sustained Iran’s war effort had been reduced to a trickle, compelling the regime to impose draconian conscription measures to meet its basic manpower needs. The huge offensive operations with their human wave assaults were no longer a possibility as draft evasion and the loss of revolutionary ardor compelled the army to reduce the scope of its activities. More pragmatic officials, such as Rafsanjani, now began to implore Ayatollah Khomeini that the time had come for ending the conflict. The war that had been so useful in terms of consolidating the revolution now began to threaten
the theocratic edifice through popular disenchantment, demoralized youth, and grumblings within the armed forces.

The final event that pressed Iran’s internal debate toward an armistice was the accidental shooting down of an Iranian airliner in July 1988 by a U.S. naval vessel, the USS *Vincennes*. Despite America’s apology and an offer of compensation for the 290 passengers killed, Tehran assumed that this was a signal of a more vigorous American involvement on behalf of Iraq. Iranian officials now feared that prolonging the war with Iraq would lead to direct U.S. military engagement to overthrow the Islamic Republic. In an unprecedented move, the commanders of Iran’s regular armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards, who had been so at odds about how to wage the war, informed the central government that they lacked the capability to protect the state against both Iraq and America. The military’s judgment was endorsed by all the relevant institutions, including the firebrands in the parliament; the president of the republic, Ali Khamenei; and senior economic advisers. Such combined pressures finally compelled Ayatollah Khomeini to inform the nation of his decision to cease the conflict.

He confronted his countrymen and proclaimed the end of the war:

Today, this decision was more deadly than drinking hemlock. I submitted myself to God’s will and drank this drink to His satisfaction. To me, it would have been more bearable to accept death and martyrdom. Today’s decision is based only on the interest of the Islamic Republic.

Despite its revolutionary determination, Iran fought the war with disadvantages it could not overcome. Given the absence of reliable and generous allies, an inability to gain steady sources of weapons, and international isolation, Tehran had to rely exclusively on its own resources to achieve the unrealistic goal of the destruction of Saddam’s regime. Iraq may
not have been able to defeat Iran, but proved sufficiently resilient to rebuff Iranian offensives. As the war dragged on, the gap between Iran’s objectives and its capabilities continued to widen, imposing a dose of reality on a regime that took pride in defying conventional calculations. The Iran-Iraq war ended nearly two decades ago, and in the intervening period, Iranians have come to deal with the causes and legacy of the most prolonged conflict in their country’s modern history. As with Americans wrestling with the Vietnam War, Iranians, after an initial determination to forget, are struggling with the wounds of a controversial conflict. In many ways, the war continues to define the parameters of Iran’s political culture and international orientation. In the 2005 presidential election, Rafsanjani’s role in the war became a subject of controversy, as questions were asked as to why he and the leadership of the Islamic Republic at that time did not end the war in 1982 when an armistice was apparently available. 27 And, of course, Ahmadinejad, himself a war veteran, did much to emphasize his service on behalf of the nation and the lessons that it imprinted on his consciousness.

Today in Iran, one rarely finds a family that has not been affected by the war – the loss of a son, a disabled relative, the hardship that all had to suffer. Memoirs, books, scholarly conferences and journalistic accounts deal with the war, its continuing legacy, and its visible scars. The war, as with much of history in Iran, is a living enterprise. 28 Increasingly, after much contemplation and discussion, a consensus is beginning to emerged both in public circles and among the governing elite that the cause of Iraq’s persistent belligerence was the Sunni domination of its politics. The Sunni minority was always looking abroad for glory and pan-Arabism acclaim to sanction its hold on absolute power. For the clerical oligarchs a stable Iraq is one where the majority Shiite and Kurdish populations have a determining role in the governing deliberations. Given Iraq’s demographic realities, the electoral process will ensure the rise of the Shiite community and effectively diminish the power and
influence of the Sunni populace. In a strange paradox, the war has made the Iranian leaders forceful advocates of democratic pluralism next door.

Such emerging perceptions are consistent with the Islamic Republic’s discourse and propaganda during the war. Throughout the conflict, Iran was careful to distinguish between Saddam and the Iraqi populace. In numerous speeches, Ayatollah Khomeini noted the dissimilarity between Saddam and his Sunni power base and the vast majority of the Iraqi population. The Sunni elite’s embrace of Ba’athist ideology had essentially transformed them into heretics, Ayatollah Khomeini argued. Thus, the war was waged not against a people, but a system- the Sunni dominated, secular Ba’athist order. In a clever move, the vast majority of the Iraqi populace was absolved of its complicity in the war as the Ba’athist Sunnis were depicted as agents of anti-Muslim transgression, with the Iraqi people also serving as one of their chief victims. 

Beyond Iraq, the war also shaped Tehran’s views of the larger international community. The Western powers’ indifference to Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against Iran has led to a pervasive suspicion of the international order, particularly its American guardian. The notion that Iran’s tangible security interests can best be achieved by relaying on international conventions and treaties has a limited audience in a country that has suffered substantial casualties at the hands of Saddam’s chemical warfare. It is here that the legacy of the war makes the development of a nuclear capability all the more attractive to the clerical rulers. Moreover, America’s lack of concern about Iran’s sufferings continues, as the indictments against Saddam brought after the U.S. invasion still do not include his war crimes against Iran. Such persistent insensitivity has caused uproar in Iran, as Tehran continues to demand that the Iraqi dictator for his abuse of the Iraqi people and invasion of Kuwait, and for his indiscriminate use of weapons of mass destruction against Iranian soldiers and civilians. So long as the United States ignores these requests, the wall of mistrust between the two countries is likely to remain
intact. As Iran’s rulers look next door, there is a new Iraq. The once docile and repressed Shiite forces have now been empowered, and the once imperious Sunni Arabs sand isolated and marginalized in a country in which they dominated politics for many decades. The future of Iraq remains uncertain, but one thing that appears definite is that the ideological antagonisms that once led to tension, conflict, and ultimately war between the two states have all but evaporated. For the clerics, America’s invasion offers enormous challenges but also a remarkable set of opportunities.

IRAN AND THE NEW IRAQ

On July 7, 2005, a momentous event took place in Tehran. Saadun al-Dulaimi, Iraq’s defense minister, arrived there and formally declared, “I have come to Iran to ask forgiveness for what Saddam Hussein has done.” The atmospherics of the trip reflected the changed relationship as Iranian and Iraqi officials easily intermingled, signing various cooperative and trade agreements and pledging a new dawn in their relations. In yet another paradox of the Middle East, it took a hawkish American government with its well-honed antagonism toward the Islamic Republic to finally alleviate one of Iran’s most pressing strategic quandaries. Since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, the Bush administration has periodically complained about Iran’s mischievousness and intervention in Iraq’s politics. The question then becomes, what are Iran’s priorities and objectives in Iraq? Does Iran seek to export its revolution next door and create another Islamic Republic? Is it in Iran’s interest to intensify the prevailing insurgency and further entangle America in its bloody quagmire? Do Iran and the United States have common interests in the troubled state of Iraq?

As Iraq settles into its disturbing pattern of violence and disorder, the Islamic Republic has contending, and at times conflicting, objectives next door. The overarching priority for Tehran is to prevent Iraq from once more
emerging as a military and ideological threat. As we have seen, a consensus has evolved among Iran’s officials that the cause of Iraq’s aggressive behavior was the Sunni domination of its politics. Thus, the empowerment of a friendlier Shiite regime is an essential objective of Iran’s strategy. Given the fears of a spillover from a potential civil war and the fragmentation of the country, however, Iran’s leaders also want to maintain Iraq’s territorial integrity. Finally, there is the menacing U.S. military presence in Iraq. Contrary to the notion that Iran seeks to fuel the insurgency as a means of deterring the United States from attacking its suspected nuclear facilities, Tehran appreciates that a stable Iraq is the best means of ending the American occupation. These competing aims have yielded alternative tactics, as Iran has been active in subsidizing its Shiite allies, dispatching arms to friendly militias, and agitating against the American presence.  

Since the demise of Saddam, a curious conventional wisdom is emerging as many in the Washington establishment and the Sunni elite of the Middle East ominously warn of a rising “Shiite Crescent” and how a mini-Islamic Republic is being created in at least the southern part of Iraq. The monarch’s alarmism was echoed by Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal: “We fought a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason.”  Although Iraq’s Shiite political society is hardly homogeneous, the two parties that have emerged as the best organized and most competitive in the electoral process are the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the al-Dawa Party. Both parties have intimate relations with Tehran and allied themselves with the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq war. For its part, al-Dawa is Iraq’s longest surviving Shiite political party, with a courageous record of resisting Saddam’s repression. Under tremendous pressure, al-Dawa took refuge in Iran, but it also established a presence in Syria, Lebanon, and eventually Britain. Despite their long-lasting ties with the Islamic Republic, however, both parties appreciate that in order to remain
influential actors in post-Saddam Iraq they must place some distance between themselves and Tehran. The members of SCIRI and al-Dawa insist that they have no interest in emulating Iran’s theocratic model, and that Iraq’s divisions and fragmentations mandate a different governing structure. Their persistent electoral triumphs reflect not just superior organization but a successful assertion of their own identity. Still, al-Dawa and SCIRI retain close bonds with Iran, and have defended the Islamic Republic against American charges of interference and infiltration. In the end, although both parties have no inclination to act as Iran’s surrogates, they are likely to provide Tehran with a sympathetic audience and an alliance that, like all such arrangements, will not be free of tension and difficulty.

Although less well publicized by Tehran, it appears that Iran has established tacit ties with the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and has even supplied his Mahdi army. Unlike Iran’s relations with SCIRI and al-Dawa, the Islamic Republic’s ties to Sadr are more opportunistic, since they find his sporadic Arab nationalist rhetoric and erratic behavior problematic. Nonetheless, given his emerging power base, his strident opposition to the American occupation, and his well-organized militia group, Tehran has found it advantageous to maintain some links with Sadr. Among the characteristics of Iran’s foreign policy is to leave as many options open as possible. At a time when Sadr is being granted an audience by the Arab leaders and dignitaries across the region, it would be astonishing if Iran did not seek some kind of relationship with the Shiite firebrand.

Finally, there is Iran’s relationship with Iraq’s most esteemed and influential Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The Grand Ayatollah stands with traditional Shiite clerics in rejecting Ayatollah Khomeini’s notion that proper Islamic governance mandates direct clerical assumption of power. As we have seen, Khomeini’s innovation contravened normative Shiite political traditions, making its export problematic, if not impossible. Thus far
both parties have been courteous and deferential to each other, with Sistani refusing to criticize Iran and Tehran generous in crediting him for the Shiite populace’s increasing empowerment. Moreover, even though Sistani has not pressed for a theocracy, he still insists that religion must inform political and social arrangements. Once more Iran’s reigning clerics have forged correct relations with the Grand Ayatollah and harbor no illusions that he would serve as an agent for imposition of their theocratic template on Iraq. The professions of the region’s Sunni elite notwithstanding, as the clerical regime plots its strategy toward Iraq it is not inordinately interested in exporting its failed governing model to an unwilling Shiite population. The opposition of the senior Iraqi clerical class and Shiite politicians has convinced Iranian officialdom that its policy next door should be guided by practical concerns as oppressed to grand ideological missions. An influential Iranian politician, Muhammad Javad Larijani, plainly commented, “Iran’s experience is not possible to be duplicated in Iraq.” As such, Tehran’s promotion of its Shiite allies is a way of ensuring that a future Iraqi government features voices who are willing to engage with Iran. The clerical rulers have no delusions about the Iraqi Shiite community subordinating its communal interests to Iran’s prerogatives; they merely hope that promotion of Shiite parties will provide them with a suitable interlocutor. Iran’s policy toward Iraq, as elsewhere in the Gulf Persian, is predicated on carefully calibrated calculations of national interest, as opposed to a messianic mission of advancing the revolution.

Today the essential estrangement of the Iraqi Shiites from the larger Arab world, and the neighboring Sunni regimes’ unease with their empowerment makes the community more attractive to Iran. The ascendance of the Shiites may be acceptable to the Bush administration with its democratic imperatives, but the Sunni monarchs of Saudi Arabia and Jordan and the presidential dictatorships of Egypt and Syria are extremely anxious about the emergence of a new “Shiite Crescent.” At a time when the leading pan-Arab newspapers routinely decry the invasion of Iraq as a U.S. – Iranian plot to
undermine the cohesion of the Sunni bloc, the prospects of an elected Shiite government in Iraq being warmly embraced by the Arab world seems remote. Iraq’s new Shiite parties, conservative or moderate, are drawn to Iran as they look for natural allies. It is unlikely that this will change because the political alignments of the Middle East are increasingly being defined by sectarian identities.

Although it is customary to speak of Iran’s ties to the Shiites, the Islamic Republic has also sought to cultivate relations with the Kurdish parties, particularly Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. As noted, the history of Iran’s relations with the Kurdish population is contentious; the Shah mercilessly exploited the Kurds and then cast them aside when they proved inconvenient. Soon after assuming power, the Islamic Republic confronted Kurdish separatism, and one of its first challenges was the suppression of a determined Kurdish rebellion. However, during their long years of common struggle against Saddam, the two sides often cooperated with each other, and eventually came to establish relatively reasonable relations. For the past two decades, Iran not only sustained those ties but often housed substantial numbers of Kurdish refugees whenever they had to flee Saddam’s war machine. Today, Iran’s relations with Talabani are cordial and correct, as Tehran hopes that a degree of autonomy will persuade the Kurds to remain within a unitary Iraqi state.

The intriguing aspect of Iran’s approach toward Iraq is the extent that it is conditioned by its wartime experiences as opposed to Islamic fervor. Iraq is a land of sectarian division, ethnic cleavages, and contending foreign policy orientations. As we have seen, the Sunni minority sought to sanction its authority under the Ba’athist regime by embracing a pan-Arabist enterprise and employing an aggressive transnational ideology as the foundation of its legitimacy. The Shiites and the Kurds also possess foreign policy goals, but these are more inclined toward improving relations with Iraq’s non-Arab
neighbors. In that sense there has always been a coincidence of interests among Iran’s Persians and Iraq’s Shiites and Kurds, as they have all harbored intense suspicions of the dominant Sunni class. As an important editorial in Sharq emphasized, “The great enmity between the two powers was not just the consequence of the eight-year war, but the nature of the ideology of the two in the course of the past quarter-century.” Indeed, that ideological antipathy has evaporated, as Iraq will no longer serve as an instrument of Sunni elite with its revisionist schemes and preoccupations with inter-Arab intrigues.

Contrary to Washington’s presumptions, the realization of Iran’s objectives is not predicated on violence and the insurgency but on the unfolding democratic process. In a strange paradox, the Iranian clerical hard-liners, who have been so adamant about suppressing the reform movement; have emerged as forceful advocates of democratic pluralism in Iraq. Indeed, a democratic Iraq offers Iran political and strategic advantages. After much deliberation, Iran’s theocrats have arrived at the conclusion that the best means of advancing their interests is to support an electoral process dedicated to constructing a state with strong provinces and a weak federal structure. Such an arrangement would empower the more congenial Shiite populace, contain the unruly ambitions of the Kurds, and marginalize Iran’s Sunni foes. Moreover, Iran’s stratagem is not devoid of realpolitik considerations. A pluralistic Iraq is bound to be a fractious, divided state too preoccupied with its internal squabbles to contest Iran’s aspirations in the Gulf Persian. At a time when Iraq’s constitutional arrangements are ceding essential authority to the provinces and favoring local militias over national armed forces, it is unlikely that Iraq will once more emerge as a powerful, centralized state seeking to dominate the Persian Gulf region, if not the entire Middle East. It would be much easier for Iran to exert influence over a decentralized state with many contending actors than over a strong, cohesive regime. For Iran, however, Iraq remains a series of balancing acts. Tehran fears that the insurgency and even the democratic process itself may lead to the fragmentation of Iraq into three
independent and unstable entities. Iran is an intact, ancient nation whose boundaries do not suffer from the artificiality of its Arab neighbors. Even so, Iran possesses a restless Kurdish population concentrated in the northeastern Azerbaijan province that may make common cause with a prospective Iraqi Kurdish state and agitate for autonomy. In its frequent contacts with the Iraqi Kurds, Iran has acknowledged their prerogatives and their sufferings under Saddam while nudging them toward continued membership in a confederated Iraqi state. Iran’s speaker of the parliament, Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, stressed this point in February 2005: “Iran’s permanent policy is to defend Iraq’s territorial integrity.” Thus far, this delicate diplomacy seems to have succeeded, for despite their assertiveness the Kurds do not display a desire to leave Iraq altogether and set up a completely autonomous state. Since the U.S. invasion, Iran has persistently called on the Shiites and the Kurds to remain within a unitary state and establish elected institutions that can diminish the potency of the Sunni insurgency by granting that beleaguered populace an alternative channel for asserting its claims. Again, Iran’s actual conduct contradicts the claims of those Arab dignitaries who charged that the Islamic Republic is seeking to fracture Iraq and establish a Shiite theocracy in the south. A more strategically minded Iran would prefer the Iraqi state to remain intact, although weakened and divided against itself. And the best manner of achieving this objective is to continue to press for democracy and pluralism.

Iran’s presence in Iraq, however, can best be seen within the context of its tense relations with the United States, if not the larger international community. Such influence and presence provides Iran with important leverage in dealing with the Western powers. The fact that America and its allies may believe that Iran will retaliate in Iraq for any military strikes against its nuclear facilities implicitly strengthens Tehran’s deterrence against such a move. At a time when Iran’s nuclear ambitions are at issue, it is not in the theocracy’s interest to unduly disabuse the United State of that impression. Should the Islamic Republic’s implied deterrence fail and the United States does strike its
nuclear installations, then Iran’s extensive presence in Iraq will give it a credible retaliatory capacity. Yahya Rahim Safavi commander of the Revolutionary Guards has plainly outlined Iran’s options: “The Americans know well that their military centers in Afghanistan, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and Iraq will come under threat and they may be vulnerable because they are in Iran’s neighborhood.” The fact remains that Iran’s network in Iraq is not necessarily designed for attacks against America, though it does offer the theocracy a variety of choices should its relations with the United States significantly deteriorate.

Nor can one suggest that Iran is determined to fuel the insurgency as a means of compelling an American withdrawal, thus establishing its preeminence in the Gulf Persian. Although the assertion of Iranian dominance in the Persian Gulf region is partly contingent on a withdrawal of the U.S. presence, to some extent pressures in the United States and Iraq are once again achieving Iran’s objectives. The Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq is a contentious political topic in the United States, with a majority of the American people regretting the decision to intervene. In the meantime, as the political process unfolds and Iraqis make their own deals and arrangements, it is likely that many in Iraq would see an American occupation as provocative and nationally objectionable. A proud state that has long viewed itself as a vanguard nation and the seat of Islamic civilization cannot long tolerate the infamy of being the only occupied Arab country. Iran does not have to inflict damage on the United States to provoke its withdrawal from Iraq, because the natural trajectory of events makes a reduced American presence in the Persian Gulf nearly inevitable.

It is a truism of international relations that national interests and strategic imperatives define conflicts between nation-states. Too often the composition of domestic political order and ideological inclinations are cast aside for arguments rooted in power politics. The relations between Iran and
Iraq contravene this established pattern of analysis. Both states have often clashed over their territorial demarcations, warily eyed the other’s regional ambitions, and toyed with supporting local actors more amenable to their desires. Yet it would be a misreading of history to suggest that Iran and Iraq are destined to be antagonists and that their relations will inevitably be marked by tension and conflict. Prior to the 1958 Iraq revolution, the conservative monarchical regimes that governed the two states forged intimate ties. The changing ideological nature of the two regimes in the succeeding years did much to exacerbate their difficulties. The Shah’s monarchy perceived revolutionary Iraq as a threat not because of these capabilities but because of its radical orientation. In a similar vein, Saddam’s secular state saw Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic fundamentalism as a challenge not because of the power of Iran’s decimated armed forces but because of the lure of its ideals. In this context, all the unresolved territorial issues and disagreements took the shape of more menacing threats. These were no longer disputes that states could resolve, or at least manage, but were seen as indications of an aggressive posture. In due course the ambitions of Saddam and Ayatollah Khomeini, the two states’ conflicting transnational aspirations, and their contending ideologies made a prolonged war inevitable.

As the Bush administration contemplated its invasion of Iraq in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedies, it is unlikely that it appreciated how its plans would enhance Iran’s stature and security. The Islamic Republic now stands as one of the principal beneficiaries of America’s regime-change policy. However, in assessing the ironies and paradoxes of the Middle East, one need not descend into a zero-sum game, whereby any measure that benefits Iran is necessarily viewed as endangering America’s interests. Much of the tension and instability that has afflicted the critical Persian Gulf region in the past three decades has stemmed from animosity between Iran and Iraq. The contested borders, proxy wars, and finally a devastating eight-year conflict between the two powers not only destabilized the Middle East but threatened the global
economy, with its reliance on the region’s petroleum resources. The new Iraq emerging from the shadow of the American invasion will not just be a more humane society than the tyrannical Saddam Hussein regime; it will also be a more peaceful state willing to coexist easily with its Persian neighbor. And that development is not just good for Iran and Iraq, but also the United States.

**Iran’s Place in the Middle East**

A state’s international orientation is shaped by a variety of factors and historic interactions. Cultural traits, ideological aspirations, demographic pressures, and religious convictions are all critical in determining how a country views its environment and its place within its neighborhood. Iran is no exception, since its unique national narrative and Islamic pedigree define its approach to the Middle East. As with most revolutionary states, Iran has journeyed from being a militant actor challenging regional norms to being a pragmatic state pursuing a policy based on national interest calculations. However, Iran’s journey has been halting, incomplete, and tentative. Through the 1980s, under the Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran thrashed about the Middle East, seeking to undermine established authority in the name of Islamic redemption. Ayatollah Khomeini’s successors would wrestle with the legacy, as they sought to integrate the theocracy into the global society. From Rafsanjani to Khatami to Ahmadinejad, Iran’s presidents would seek the impossible, balancing Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision with the mandates of the international community.

The best manner of understanding Iran’s regional policy is to envision three circles: the Persian Gulf, the Arab East, and Eurasia. The Persian Gulf would by far be the most significant, while the Arab East and Central Asian lands would assume less importance. The intriguing aspect of Tehran’s policy is that while ideology may define its approach toward one of these circles, in the other, careful national-interest determinations would prove its guide. Thus,
while in the 1980s the Saudis would decry Iran as a grave fundamentalist threat, Russian diplomats would just as convincingly testify to Tehran’s pragmatism and moderation. In essence, geography and competing interests would do much to moderate Iran’s ideological tendencies. Given the fact that Iran’s oil is largely exported through the Persian Gulf, the theocracy eventually appreciated the need for stability in this critical region. As such, ideological crusades attacks against the Gulf sheikdoms ended, and Iran accepted the prevailing status quo. In a similar vein, the theocratic regime recognized the futility of antagonizing its powerful Russian neighbor, and did not inflame the Islamic sentiments in the former Soviet bloc. As the two powers cultivated favorable economic and strategic relations, Iran was provided further incentives for a policy of moderation. However, in the more distant Arab East that neither bordered Iran nor offered it lucrative commercial opportunities, Tehran behaved in a zealous manner and allowed its animosity toward Israel to condition its strategy. The fact remains that Iran’s excessive ideological posture toward this region did not infringe on its tangible interests, limiting the need for caution and pragmatism.

Such a bewildering array of policies and priorities has often confounded the international community, making Iran’s foreign policy difficult to comprehend. Through a more detailed assessment of the evolution of Iran’s regional policy, one can better appreciate why the clerical state has made the decisions that it has and where it is likely to go from here. More than any other nation, Iran has always perceived itself as the natural hegemony of its neighborhood. Iranians across generations are infused with a unique sense of their history, the splendor of their civilization, and the power of their celebrated empires. The Achaemenid Empire of the sixth century B.C.E. was, after all, the first global power, reigning over lands that stretched from Greece to India. Subsequent Persian dynasties of Sassanians and Safavids displayed similar imperial reach as they intricately managed vast domains. A sense of superiority over one’s neighbors, the benighted Arabs, and the unsophisticated
Turks, would define the core of the Persian cosmology. The empire shrank over the centuries, and the embrace of Persian culture faded with the arrival of more alluring Western mores, but a sense of self-perception and an exaggerated view of Iran have remained largely intact. By dint of its history and the power of its civilization, Iranians believe that their nation should establish its regional preeminence.

Yet Iran’s nationalistic hubris is married to a sense of insecurity derived from persistent invasion by hostile forces. The humiliating conquests by the Mongol hordes and Arabs have left Iran profoundly suspicious of its neighbors’ intentions and motives. Few nations have managed to sustain their cultural distinction and even absorb their conquerors as effectively as the Persians. In due course, Persian scholars, scribes, and bureaucrats would dominate the courts of Arab empires and define their cultural landscape. Nonetheless, such unrelenting incursions with their prolonged periods of occupation have had a traumatic impact, leading Iranians to simultaneously feel superior to and suspicious of their neighbors.

By far, the one set of imperial conquerors that proved the most formidable challenge to Iran were the Western powers. These states could neither be absorbed as the Arabs were, nor did they necessarily defer to Persians for the management of their realm. In a sense, Iran became another victim of the “Great Game,” played by the British and the Russians for the domination of Central Asia, and later the intense Cold War rivalry between America and the Soviet Union. While it is true that Iran was never formally colonized, as was India, nor did it undergo a traumatic national liberation struggle as did Algeria, it was still dominated and its sovereignty was still usurped by imperial intrigue. Behind every Shah lay a foreign hand that could empower or humble the Peacock Throne with ease. The Shahs and the parliaments debated and deliberated, but all Iranian politicians had to be mindful of the preferences of the imperial game masters. At times a degree of
autonomy would be secured by manipulating great-power rivalries, but this was a precarious exercise, since accommodation usually proved better path toward self-preservation. The Islamic Republic’s stridency and suspicions of the international community can better be understood in the context of Iran’s historic subjection and manipulation by outside powers. However, to ascribe Iran’s foreign policy strictly to its sense of nationalism and historical grievances is to ignore the doctrinal foundations of the theocratic regime. Ayatollah Khomeini bequeathed to his successors an ideology whose most salient division was between the oppressors and the oppressed. Such a view stemmed from the Shiite political traditions as a minority sect struggling under Sunni Arab rulers who were often repressive and harsh. Thus the notion of tyranny and suffering has a powerful symbolic aspect as well as practical importance. Iran was not merely a nation seeking independence and autonomy within the existing international system. The Islamic revolution was a struggle between good and evil, a battle waged for moral redemption and genuine emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of the profane and iniquitous West. Ayatollah Khomeini’s ideology and Iran’s nationalist aspirations proved reinforcing, creating a revolutionary, populist approach to the regional realities.38

The Islamic Republic’s inflammatory rhetoric and regional aspirations conceal the reality of Iran’s strategic loneliness. Iran is, after all, a Persian state surrounded by non-Persian powers, depriving it of the ethnic and communal ties so prevalent in the Arab world. If durable alliances are predicated on a common vision and shared values, then Iran is destined to remain somewhat insulated from the rest of its region. Nor, until the mergence of the Shiite bloc in Iraq, has religion necessarily mitigated Iran’s isolation. Historically, the persecuted Shiites have been held at arm’s length by the Sunni Arabs, who harbor their own suspicions of their coreligionists. In a standard Persian self-justification, Iran has tried to turn its isolation into an advantage, since notions of self-sufficiency and self-reliance have had an emotive appeal
to a beleaguered populace. Nonetheless, as Iran’s rulers look over the horizon, they seldom see a placid landscape or ready-made allies. Iran is a country of contradictions and paradoxes. It is both grandiose in its self-perception yet intensely insecure. It seeks to lead the region while remaining largely suspicious and disdainful of its neighbors. Its rhetoric is infused with revolutionary, yet its actual conduct is practical, if not realistic. A perennial struggle between aspirations and capabilities, hegemony and pragmatism has characterized Iran’s uneasy approach to the Middle East.

Despite the clerics’ often-declared pan-Islamic pretensions, the Persian Gulf has always been Iran’s foremost strategic priority. The critical waterway constitutes Iran’s most direct link to the international petroleum market, the lifeblood of its economy. Although the issue of Iraq will be address later, it is important to note here that Tehran’s concerns and aspirations in the Persian Gulf transcend Iraq. The Islamic Republic, as with all its monarchical predecessors, perceived that Iran by the virtue of its size and historical achievements has the right to emerged as the local hegemony. The changing dimensions of Iran’s foreign policy are most evident in this area, as revolutionary radicalism has gradually yielded to pragmatic power politics.

Soon after achieving power, Ayatollah Khomeini called on the Persian Gulf States to emulate Iran’s revolutionary model and sever relations with the “Great Satan,” the United States. The profligate princely class, the hard-pressed Shiite populations, and these states’ dependence on America were all affronts to Iran’s revolutionaries. The theocratic state unambiguously declared the monarchical order a source of oppression and tyranny. “Monarchy is one of the most shameful and disgraceful reactionary manifestations,” Khomeini declared. An authentic Islamic society could not prevail under the banner of monarchy, because the proper ruling elite were the righteous men of God. Thus, beyond their foreign policy alignments, the character of the Persian Gulf regimes proved a source of objection to Iran’s new rulers.
As Iran settled on its course of enmity and radicalism, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emerged as the subject of particularly venomous attacks. In a sense, the two states had much in common, as they both predicated their legitimacy on a transnational mission of exporting religion and safeguarding Islam. The natural competition between their contending interpretations of Islam was sufficient to ensure a tense relationship. To this pressure was added Saudi Arabia’s close ties to the United States, further fueling Ayatollah Khomeini’s already intense antagonism toward the House of Saud. “In this age, which is the age of oppression of the Muslim world at the hands of the U.S. and Russia and their puppets such as al-Sauds, those traitors to the great divine sanctuary must be forcefully cursed,” he said. 41 the Iranian revolutionaries saw the Saudis as not just sustaining America’s imperial encroachment of the Middle East, but also employing a reactionary interpretation of Islam to sanction their hold on power. 42

Tehran’s efforts were not without success; in the early 1980s, demonstrations rocked Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. In the end, however, Iran’s revolutionary message proved attractive only to a narrow segment of the minority Shiite population. Even the sporadic Shiite demonstrations were not designed to emulate Iran’s revolution, but rather were an expression of the Shiites’ economic and political disenfranchisement. The protesters used the specter of Iranian subversion to press their claims and extract needed concessions from the ruling elite. The prevailing regimes, for their part, seemed to appreciate this reality and, after putting down the demonstration by force, opted for economic rewards as a means of restoring quiescence. This strategy essentially ended Iran’s attempt to exploit Shiite grievances to launch a new order. By the time of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, Iran’s revolutionary foreign policy had not achieved any of its objectives. Tehran’s attempt to export its revolution had not merely failed, it had led the Persian Gulf states to solidify against Iran. Leading regional actors such as Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic, while
the sheikdoms put aside their historic enmities and came together in the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization largely devoted to containing Iranian influence. Along these lines, the Arab princes and monarchs further solidified their security ties to the United States and generously subsidized Saddam Hussein’s military in his war with Iran. The revolution without borders seemed uneasily confined within Iran’s boundaries.

The 1990s will stand as one of the most important periods of transition for the Islamic Republic. The end of the prolonged war with Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini’s death suddenly shifted focus away from external perils to Iran’s domestic quandaries. The specter of invading Iraqi armies had ensured a remarkable degree of political conformity and allowed the regime to mobilize the masses behind its exhortations of national resistance. The basis of the regime’s legitimacy and authority would now have to change; the Islamic Republic had to offer a reason for its rule beyond the catastrophic invasion of its territory and the moral claims of its clerical founder. Along these lines, Iran’s new pragmatic rulers, led by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, began discussing a regional security arrangement whereby the stability of the Persian Gulf would be ensured by the local regimes as opposed to external powers. After Saddam’s eviction from Kuwait in 1991 and the deflation of his power, the clerics perceived a unique opportunity to establish their hegemony in the region. Instead of instigating Shiite uprisings and exhorting the masses to emulate Iran’s revolutionary model, Tehran now called for greater economic and security cooperation. However, the success of this ambition was predicated on the withdrawal of American forces. This was to be hegemony on the cheap, with Iran’s preeminence recognized, the U.S. presence lessened, and a permanent wedge drawn between Iraq and the Arab Gulf states. The only problem with this proposal was that it remained fundamentally unacceptable to the sheikdoms for whom Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait had conveyed the danger of relying on imperious local regimes for their security.43
In essence, Iran’s new stratagem conflicted with the Persian Gulf States’ survival tactics. The sheikdoms, with their perennial concern about the designs of their more powerful and populous neighbors, viewed Tehran’s penchant toward collective security with apprehension. Although relations between Iran and the Gulf states did improve in terms of establishment of formal diplomatic ties and volume of trade, the local princes were not about to sever ties with the United States in order to appease Iran. In line with their long-standing historic practice, they sought the protection of external empires against neighboring states that have often coveted their wealth and resources. In the aftermath of the Persian Gulf war, the level of defense cooperation between the United States and the Persian Gulf regimes significantly increased, with America enforcing the containment of Iraq and the no-fly zones from military bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Whereas in the 1980s Iran’s revolutionary radicalism had polarized the Gulf Persian, in the 1990s its insistence that these states share its opposition to the American presence proved a source of division and tension.

In the end, Rafsanjani and his pragmatic allies did not fundamentally harmonize Iran’s ties with its neighbors. To be sure, the Islamic Republic did dispense with much of its revolutionary radicalism and began to project the image of a judicious state, basing its policies on careful calculations of national interest. However, Tehran’s tense relationship with the United States and its insistence that the Persian Gulf States share its antagonism undermined its own gestures of goodwill. The most momentous change in Iran’s regional policy came with the election of the reformist president Muhammad Khatami in 1997. As we have seen, Khatami’s international perspective grew out of the debates and deliberations prevalent in Iran’s intellectual circles. Many dissident thinkers and clerics were uneasy about the static nature of Iran’s foreign policy and its evident inability to respond to the changing global and regional realities. The reformist perspective was not limited to making the theocracy more accountable to its citizenry, but also sought to end the Islamic Republic’s
pariah status and integrate Iran into global society. As with his political reforms, Khatami was drawing on the works of intellectuals outside a power structure that had grown stagnant and complacent. In terms of his approach to the Gulf Persian, Khatami appreciated that previous attempts at reconciliation with the sheikdoms had failed due to Iran’s dogmatic insistence that they share its hostility to America. In essence, Khatami compartmentalized Iran’s relations. Tehran continued to object to the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and persisted in calling for an indigenous network to displace the American armada. The refusal of the Persian Gulf States to embrace Iran’s proposals did not, however, trigger a counter reaction and an unleashing of terror. Khatami was willing to normalize relations with the Persian Gulf States despite their attachment to the United States. For all practical purposes, Iran was prepared to live in a Gulf whose balance of power was determined by the United States.

In a remarkable gesture, Ayatollah Khamenei endorsed Khatami’s initiative. In a speech to the gathering of Arab dignitaries at the Organization of Islamic Conference’s 1997 meeting in Tehran, Ayatollah Khamenei plainly declared, “Iran poses no threat to any Islamic country.” 44 Tehran’s “Vision Statement,” which was approved by Ayatollah Khamenei, recognized the sovereignty of local states and the inviolability of borders, and it pledged noninterference in the internal affairs of the incumbent regimes. Certainly, the popular appeal of Khatami in his honeymoon period must have impressed the Supreme Leader to adjust his positions. Despite the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei’s powers are not contested by elections or plebiscites, he has always been somewhat sensitive to public opinion and shifts in the popular mood. The Leader may have perceived that Khatami’s election offered Iran certain opportunities for mending fences and reconciliation with important states, such as Saudi Arabia. At any rate, Ayatollah Khamenei provided the essential backing that Khatami’s diplomacy of reconsideration required.
Khatami’s “Good Neighbor” diplomacy finally managed to rehabilitate Iran’s ties with the local regimes. An entire range of trade, diplomatic, and security agreements were signed between the Islamic Republic and the Gulf sheikdoms. In this way, Khatami managed finally to transcend Ayatollah Khomeini’s legacy and to displace his ideological antagonisms with policies rooted in pragmatism and self-interest. This is the impressive legacy that Iran’s unnecessarily maligned president has bequeathed to the reactionaries who have succeeded him. 45

Today, as a hard-line government consolidates its power and proclaims a desire to return to the roots of the revolution, dire warnings are on the horizon. Both Washington policymakers and their European counterparts seem to suggest that the new regime will once more resort to violence and terror to subvert its neighbors and export its Islamic revolution. Such alarmism overlooks Iran’s realities. Under Khatami’s auspices, Iran’s Gulf policy underwent a fundamental shift, with national interest objectives its defining factor. Irrespective of the balance of power between conservatives and reformers, Iran’s regional policy is driven by fixed principles that are shared by all of its political elites. This perspective will survive Iran’s latest leadership transition. Although Ahmadinejad and his allies are determined to reverse the social and cultural freedoms that Iranians have come to enjoy during the reformist tenure, with regard to Persian Gulf issues the new president has stayed within the parameters of Iran’s prevailing international policy. In his August 2005 address to the parliament outlining his agenda, President Ahmadinejad echoed the existing consensus, noting the importance of constructive relations with “the Islamic world, the Persian Gulf region, the Caspian Sea region, and Central Asia.” 46 Moreover, the most important voice on foreign policy matters, the head of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, has reiterated the same themes. 47 Unlike the Iran of the 1980s, Ahmadinejad’s Iran has not embarked on attempts to subvert the sheikdoms
and has not revived its links to the Persian Gulf terrorist organizations unleashing violence as a means of fostering political change.

Although the assertive nationalists who have taken command of Iran’s executive branch had dispensed with their predecessor’s “dialogue of civilizations” rhetoric and display a marked suspicion of America, they are loath to jeopardize the successful multilateral détente that was the singular achievement of the reformist era. As far as the Persian Gulf is concerned, Iranians seemed to have finally buried Ayatollah Khomeini’s dictates and moved to an era of uncontested pragmatism.

**Iran and the Arab East**

One of the more enduring ideological aspects of the Islamic Republic’s international relations has been its policy toward the Arab East. The defining pillar of Iran’s approach to this region has been its intense opposition to the state of Israel and the diplomatic efforts to normalize relations between the Jewish state and its neighbors. Iran’s strident ideological policy has been buttressed by strategic incentives, as its support for groups such as Hezbollah gives it a power to influence the direction of politics in the Levant and inject its voice in deliberations that would otherwise be beyond its control. Unlike the Persian Gulf, where geographic proximity compelled Tehran toward a pragmatic search for stability, in the more distant Arab East, Iran feels free to be mischievous and injudicious. Along this path, Iran has made common cause with the radical Syrian regime that shares its antipathy to Israel, while alienating the key Egyptian state that has often sought to resolve the divisive Arab-Israeli conflict. So long as Iran’s policy toward the Arab East remains immured in its conflict with Israel, Tehran is unlikely to edge toward the type of pragmatism that it has demonstrated in the Gulf Persian.
On the surface, the high-profile visits and the wide variety of compacts and accords may give the impression that Iran and Syria are intimate allies sharing the same vision and embracing similar priorities. However, the ties between the two states are at best an alliance of convenience based on shared fears and apprehensions. For the past two decades, Iran’s persistent animosity toward Israel has coincided with Syria’s quest to exert pressure on the Israelis as a means of recovering lands lost during the 1967 war. However, while Iran’s policy is driven by Islamist determinations, Syria is propelled forward by cold, strategic calculations. Tehran may view Hezbollah as a vanguard Islamist force struggling against the “Zionist entity,” while for Damascus, the Lebanese militant party is just another means of coercing Israel. As such, potential disagreement between the two states looms large. Syria may yet accept an agreement that exchanges recognition of Israel for the recovery of the Golan Heights, while Iran’s more ideologically driven hostilities are not predicated on territorial concessions. 48

Beyond the issue of Israel, Iraq also constitutes a potential source of division between Syria and Iran. During Saddam Hussein’s reign, the two powers shared yet another antagonist. The Syrian Ba’ath Party long condemned the so-called revisionism of its Iraqi counterpart and viewed itself as the legitimate representative of the Arab socialist cause. The very secular objections of the Syrian regime were shared by the Iranian clerics, whose own war with Saddam made them equally hostile to the Iraqi dictator. However, once more there are indications that Iran’s lone Arab alliance may not survive the changing politics of the Middle East. Unlike the Iranian theocracy, Syria does not wish to see a further empowerment of religious forces, particularly Shiite actors, in Iraq. As a secular state that has waged a merciless war against its own Islamists, Syria finds the ascendance of religious parties in Iraq particularly disconcerting. As with most of the dynasties and republics of the region, Syria had hoped that Saddam’s demise would somehow bring to power yet another Ba’athist amenable to the predilections of the secular Arab bloc.
The intriguing aspect of Iraq’s current tribulations is the extent to which Iran and Syria are on the opposite sides, with Damascus fueling the largely Sunni insurgency, while Tehran lends its support to the ruling Shiite parties. One state is hoping to destabilize Iraq through continued violence, while the other views the conventional political process as the best means of securing its national objectives.

In yet another paradox of the Middle East, what is increasingly binding Damascus and Tehran together is the Bush administration. The inability or unwillingness of Washington to substantively engage in the Arab-Israeli peace process and craft an agreement acceptable to Syria has made Iran an indispensable partner for Damascus. The relentless pressure brought on both parties by the Bush White House has compelled them to rely on each other as they face yet another common enemy. Nonetheless, developments in the region during the next several years may yet disentangle ties between these two unlikely allies. However, an Iran that is beyond the reach of Israeli armor can afford its militancy and persist with its ideologically determined policies. In the meantime, as a secular state Syria may find Iran’s new Shiite allies in Iraq as objectionable as do the Saudis and Jordanians, who are loudly decrying the emergence of the “Shiite Crescent”. As the Middle East increasingly polarizes along sectarian lines, Syria will have to choose between its contentious alliance with Iran and its alignment of interest with the larger Arab bloc. Whatever the vagaries of the Iranian-Syrian alliance, Egypt remains the epicenter of Arab politics. Egypt’s population now exceeds that of the rest of the Arab East, and its geographic size dwarfs peripheral states such as Lebanon and Jordan. Moreover, Egypt’s encounter with modernization is the longest, its industrial and educational structures the most extensive, and its cultural and intellectual output the most prolific. Cairo’s influence has ebbed and flowed over the years, but it is hard to imagine Arab cohesion without its active leadership. Iran’s tense relation with Egypt has drastically limited its influence in the Arab
East. No alliance with Syria or patronage of Hezbollah can compensate for Tehran’s estrangement from the most pivotal state in the region. 49

Although many in the United States are accustomed to perceiving Iran as unrelentingly hostile to America, during the early part of the revolution, Iran’s animosities were distributed more widely. For Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, no leader symbolized the pusillanimity of the Arab political class more than the Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat. The Camp David Accords ending Egypt’s hostility toward Israel were bitterly denounced by Iranian clerics as a gesture of un-Islamic behavior, even apostasy. For Ayatollah Khomeini, the accords proved that Sadat was the purveyor of “false Islam” and an agent of Zionism. Sadat’s warm embrace of the exiled Shah (who spent the last days of his life in Egypt) further enraged the reigning Iranian clerics. Tehran’s celebration of Sadat’s assassin by naming a prominent street after him and even issuing a stamp commemorating the occasion in turn infuriated an Egyptian ruling elite that was already anxious about the potential of Iran’s revolutionary Islam. These early policies established a certain legacy for Iran’s relations with Egypt that would prove difficult to surmount. In the intervening decades, other events would intrude, buttressing the legacy of mistrust and animosity. 50

The Iran-Iraq war further added fuel to the Iranian-Egyptian antagonism. For Cairo, which was ostracized by the Arab bloc because of its reconciliation with Israel, the war offered a unique opportunity to reassert its Arabism and to mend ties with its erstwhile allies. Soon after the war began, Egypt started furnishing arms to Iraq despite the fact that the two powers had spent decades bitterly vying for the leadership of the Middle East. Beyond exploiting an opportunity to return to the Arab fold, Cairo’s policy was designed to contain Iran’s revolution within its borders. An Iran that was preoccupied with the daunting challenges of a prolonged war was bound to be a less mischievous state. For the Islamic Republic, such policies were tantamount to Egypt
effectively joining the war, congealing the clerical class’s enmity toward Cairo. The aftermath of the war did not necessarily lead to a thaw in relations. The 1990s witnessed yet another radical divergence of perspectives between Tehran and Cairo. For the United States and Egypt, the defeat of Saddam’s armies constituted an ideal time to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, while Iran perceived the time ripe for the advancement of its Islamic model. Militant Islam seemed an ideology on the ascendance, with Islamic Jihad challenging the Egyptian regime, Hezbollah assuming a greater prominence in Lebanese politics, and the Islamic Salvation Front triumphing in democratic elections in Algeria. The Palestinian resistance that had historically been led by secular leftist parties was increasingly being spearheaded by violent Islamist organizations such as Hamas. For the Iranian clerics, it seemed that the region was finally embracing Ayatollah Khomeini’s message. While the Egyptian state was seeking to stabilize its domestic situation and persuade the Arab states to follow its path of reconciliation with Israel, Iran was actively promoting the fortunes of the emboldened Islamists.

In a sense, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s blaming of Iran for the surge of fundamentalism in Egypt and the wider Middle East was self-serving and convenient. Egypt has long struggled with Islamic radicalism and the roots of the Islamist rage lay deep in the Egyptian society. After all, the most significant fundamentalist party in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood, was born in Egypt in the 1930s, and since then has found a ready audience across the region. 51 The fascination with Wahhabi Islam ought not obscure the fact that the intellectual and tactical architects of al-Qaeda are mostly Egyptians, led by the notorious second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri. 52 Nonetheless, even the modest support that Iran offered Egypt’s religious extremists was sufficient to antagonize and Egyptian state that in the early 1990s was battling a serious Islamic insurrection. During the Khatami era there were attempts to relax the tensions with Egypt. However, it appeared that such normalization was not a top priority for either state. Khatami’s internal
struggles and his attempts to reach out to the United States were sufficiently contentious to preclude yet another provocative diplomatic foray. In the meantime, the Mubarak regime was struggling with its own domestic challenges and with a foundering peace process, and so it was also disinclined to move forward aggressively.

Today the relations between the two states may not be as inflammatory as during the early periods of the revolution, but they seem frozen in time, as neither side seems inclined to press ahead. The hard-line Ahmadinejad regime is unlikely to seek a new opening, as many conservatives in Iran have yet to forgive Egypt for the Camp David Accords. The reactionary newspaper Jomhuriye Islami captured the sentiment of many on the Right: “Any form of political relations with Hosni Mubarak is tantamount to getting digested into the system prepared and designed by America and Zionism in the region.”

Given such sentiment within his support base, it is unlikely that Ahmadinejad can move forward toward more proper relations, even if he were so inclined. In the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Republic finally appreciated after years of revolutionary radicalism that it could not have suitable relations with the Gulf sheikdoms unless it first came to terms with Saudi Arabia. Such lessons have yet to be fully absorbed by the Iranian elite when it comes to the Arab East. The reality is that Iran cannot be part of the larger Middle Eastern landscape until it rationalizes its relations with Egypt. But for Iran to assert its influence in the region it has to have a more constructive agenda than prefabricated Islamist slogans and hostility to the Jewish state. Hovering over all this is the gradual fracturing of the Middle East along sectarian lines, with Shiite Iran increasingly pitted against the alarmed Sunni powers. The Islamic Republic may emerge as a critical player in its immediate neighborhood, but as a non-Arab, Shiite state it is unlikely ever to become a significant actor in the Arab East.
**Iran and the Eurasia**

In contrast to its policy toward the Persian Gulf and the Arab East, Iran’s approach toward its northern and eastern neighbors has been one of sustained realism. The proximity to a strong Russian state and the prospect of commercial contracts and important arms deals has always injected a measure of pragmatism in Iran’s policy. In a curious manner, despite its declared mission of exporting the revolution, the Islamic Republic has seemed perennially indifferent to the plight of the struggling Muslims in Central Asia. A beleaguered Iranian state requiring arms and trade and an aggrieved former superpower seeking profit and relevance have forged an opportunistic relationship that eschews ideology for the sake of tangible interests. Nor is such pragmatism unique to Russia; as when the theocracy looked to Afghanistan, its priority was always stability, not Islamic salvation. In essence, the fears of being isolated in the international arena and having Afghan troubles seep over its borders have compelled Iran’s theocratic oligarchs to transcend their ideological exhortations and focus on achieving their practical objectives in the vast Eurasian landmass.

On the eve of the Islamic Revolution, Iran’s prevailing foreign policy slogan was “Neither East nor West.” Ayatollah Khomeini was as contemptuous of Soviet Communism as he was of Western liberalism, and he often denounced the Soviet Union in harsh and unyielding terms. Iran vocally condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and materially assisted the mujahedin’s resistance to the occupation. On the domestic front, the clerics relentlessly persecuted the Communist Tudeh Party and other leftist forces attracted to the Soviet model. For its part, Moscow proved a generous supplier of arms to Saddam Hussein, as he waged his war of aggression against Iran, and often supported Iraq against Iran in various international forums.
Yet even as tensions were simmering, both sides seemed to veer away from active confrontation as trade between the two powers continued to increase, and the Soviet Union was never without an extensive diplomatic representation in Tehran. In a manner radically different from its approach to the United States, the theocratic regime seemed to appreciate that its geographic proximity to the Soviet Union and its estrangement from the West required a more realistic relationship with Moscow. The two sides would often differ, as they did on critical issues of Afghanistan and Iraq, yet somehow Ayatollah Khomeini managed to suppress his ideological animosities and pursue ties with the Soviet state that seemed beneficial to Iran’s overall interests. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the rise of the Russian Federation ushered in a new regional policy in Moscow. The Soviet state had been inordinately invested in the fortunes of radical Arab regimes and shared their concerns regarding developments in the Arab-Israeli arena. For the new masters of the Kremlin, the direction of the newly independent Central Asian republics and the nature of Islamic awakenings in that region were far more relevant than the plight of the Soviet Union’s Arab clients. The stability of the Russian frontier was now partly contingent on Tehran resisting the impulse to inflame Islamic sentiments in Central Asia. Moreover, with its imperial reach dramatically contracted and the country in dire need of hard currency, Russia began to auction off its military hardware to the highest bidder. Iran proved a tempting market for Russian arms merchants, since it possessed both cash and a seemingly insatiable appetite for military equipment.

The Islamic Republic had to make its own set of adjustments to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Central Asia. During the Soviet era, Iran propagated its Islamic message over the airways in a variety of local languages without evident anticipation that it would have any impact. Such limited propaganda effort satiated its ideological imperatives without unduly straining its relations with its powerful neighbor. But the collapse of the Soviet empire and the independence of the Central Asia republics presented
Iran with the need for circumspection. The Islamic Republic had to balance its strategic ties with Russia with its declared mission of exporting its revolutionary template to new, fertile grounds. In a unique display of judiciousness, Iran largely tempered its ideology, essentially denoting the importance of trade and stability over propagation of its Islamic message. The full scope of Iran’s pragmatism became evident during the Chechnya conflict. At a time when the Russian soldiers were indiscriminately massacring Muslim rebels and aggressively suppressing an Islamic insurgency, Iran’s response was a mere statement declaring the issue to be an internal Russian affair. At times, when Russia’s behavior was particularly egregious, Iran’s statements would be harsher. However, Tehran never undertook practical measures such as dispatching aid to the rebels or organizing the Islamic bloc against Moscow’s policy. Given that Iran had calculated that its national interests lay in not excessively antagonizing the Russian Federation, it largely ignored the plight of the Chechens despite the Islamic appeal of their cause.

The Chechnya issue reveals that during the past decade, a tacit yet important bargain has evolved between Russia and Iran. The Islamic Republic has emerged as Russia’s most important partner in the Middle East and as a valuable market for its cash-starved defense industries. Although in recent years the nuclear cooperation between the two states has garnered much attention, the more significant fact is that Russia has also been willing to sell Iran a vast quantity of conventional arms, including sophisticated aircraft and submarines. Iran, on the other hand, has kept a low profile in Central Asia and has refrained from destabilizing a region critical to Russia’s security. This important relationship has led Moscow to provide Iran indispensable diplomatic support, particularly at a time when its nuclear portfolio is being addressed in a variety of international organizations. The United States, hoping to garner Russian support for its policy of sanctioning and ostracizing Iran, would be wise to consider the overall nature of relations between Moscow and Tehran. Given that reality, the notion that Russia would assist in applying
significant economic pressure on Iran for its nuclear infractions is far-fetched and fanciful. A similar penchant toward national interest calculations has defined Iran’s policy toward Afghanistan, its neighbor to the east. Despite Iran’s close linguistic and cultural ties to Afghanistan, relations between the two countries have not always been simple. The fiercely independent Afghan tribes have historically resisted Persian encroachment and have jealously guarded their rights. Tehran’s most natural allies are found in the province of Heart, where proximity to Iran and a large Shiite population have encouraged the establishment of close relations. But for Tehran the issue in Afghanistan has not been ideological conformity but stability. Since assuming power, the theocracy has looked warily upon its neighbor with its war against the Red Army, the rise of Taliban fundamentalism, and, finally, the American invasion. Afghanistan’s tribal identity, ethnic diversity, and largely Sunni population have made it an uneasy place for implanting the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary message. And, to its credit, Iran has not been active in seeking to export its governing template to its troubled neighbor.

During much of the 1980s, Iran’s policy toward Afghanistan was opposition to the Communist regime and assisting forces battling the Soviet occupation. In yet another uneasy paradox, this decade saw a rough coincidence of objectives between Iran and the United States as both parties had an interest in holding back Soviet power in Southwest Asia. Although Ayatollah Khomeini attempted to justify this policy on Islamic grounds, the instability of the war and the extension of Soviet influence southward offered sufficient strategic justification for Iran’s conduct. At a time when Iran was housing nearly two million Afghan refugees, the clerical state understood that it could not afford a failed state next door. In a similar manner, Iran had to endure the prolonged years of Taliban rule. The radical Sunni regime that waged a merciless war against Afghanistan’s intricate tribal system and routinely massacred Shiites provided a formidable challenge for the Islamic Republic. In the summer of 1998, the killing of ten Iranian diplomats by
Taliban forces in Mazar-i-Sharif nearly led the two states to go to war. Beyond active confrontation, Iran was extraordinarily alarmed by the puritanical Taliban regime’s reliance on the drug trade and on Sunni terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda to sustain its power. Today a large portion of Afghan drugs end up in Iran, creating its own addiction crisis; it is estimated that the Islamic Republic may have as many as two million drug addicts. Given these realities, Iran soon emerged as the most durable foe of the Taliban. Indeed, despite the presence of American forces in Afghanistan since 2001, the theocratic regime finds the existing configuration of power whereby Sunni militancy is largely tempered and a benign government reigns in Kabul an acceptable outcome. 59

While Iran’s relations with Afghanistan have improved over the years, its ties to Pakistan have at times been problematic. The Pakistani policy of using Afghanistan as a conduit for assertion of influence over Central Asia has greatly troubled Iran. 60 At a time when the Bush administration loudly proclaims Pakistan a valuable ally in its “war against terror,” it conveniently neglects the fact that it was Islamabad that sustained the Taliban and tolerated its al-Qaeda ally. The cynical Pakistani policy of unleashing the Taliban upon the hapless Afghan nation as a means of securing a bridge to Central Asia confronted Iran with a pronounced strategic threat. Since the demise of the Taliban, the relations between the two powers have markedly improved, since the issue of Afghanistan no longer divides them. However, Iran remains concerned about the internal stability of the Pakistani state, with its ample nuclear depositories. From Tehran’s perspective, the prospect of a radical Sunni regime coming to power in Pakistan with its finger on the nuclear button is nearly an existential threat. As such, once more stability is the guide of Iran’s policy toward yet another unpredictable neighbor.

Iran’s approach to the Persian Gulf sheikdoms and its Eurasian neighbors today is predicated on national interest designs that are largely devoid of Islamic content. The need for stability on its frontiers and the recognition of
the importance of its strategic relationship with Russia has pressed Tehran toward behaving with moderation in its immediate environment. The same cannot be asserted in the case of the Arab East; the theocratic state’s opposition to the state of Israel has deprived its policy of the nuance and flexibility that has characterized its approach to many of its neighboring states. It is likely that this central contradiction in Iran’s regional policy will persist, as Tehran may continue with its perplexing mixture of radicalism and moderation, pragmatism and defiance. In formulating its regional vision, the Islamic Republic has tried to marry two disparate strands of Iran’s identity: Persian nationalism and Shiite Islam. As a great civilization with a keen sense of history, Iran has always perceived itself as the rightful leader of the Middle East. For centuries, Persian empires dominated the political and cultural landscape of the region, inspiring a national narrative that views Iran’s hegemony as both beneficial and benign. At the same time, as a persecuted religious minority, Shiites in Iran have always been suspicious and wary of their neighbors. The reality of rising Arab states, domineering Western empires, and Iran’s religious exceptionalism has not ended Tehran’s perception of itself as the “center of the universe,” a society that should be emulated by the Arab masses. Successive Persian monarchs and reigning clerics would subscribe to this national self-perception, giving Tehran an inflated view of its historic importance. A final important factor that has intruded itself uneasily in Iran’s international orientation is pragmatism. Iran may perceive itself as uniquely aggrieved by the great powers’ machinations and it may nurse aspirations to emerge as the regional leader. However, the limitations of its resources and the reality of its actual power have sporadically led to reappraisal and retrenchment. The intriguing aspect of Iran’s policy is that it can be both dogmatic and flexible at the same time. The Islamic Republic may take an ideologically uncompromising position toward Israel, yet pragmatically deal with its historic Russian nemesis. The tensions between Iran’s ideals and interests, between its aspirations and limits, will continue to produce a foreign policy that is often inconsistent and contra
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