THE WEST ASIA AND THE UNITED STATES

What constitutes West Asia is a contestable issue. The region geographically and culturally has been used in different context and purposes. Confusion prevails among administrators, statesmen and academicians about the composition of West Asia and its characteristics. For the purpose this studies what is required to understand the region as such: its strategic, political, economic and cultural significance. To understand the region it has to be historically looked upon to relate it to Iran and the United States of America in the contemporary context of their relationships.

The region of West Asia is also called by different names like Western Asia, West Asia, Southwest Asia or Southwestern Asia. These terms are partly coterminous with the Middle East - which describes geographical position in relation to Western Europe rather than location within Asia. They are sometimes used interchangeably. The term Middle East is, however, a misnomer and the legacy of an era when points on the globe were identified with reference to the location of the seats of power of the European Empire.¹ Most of the scholars in Asia refer to the region as West Asia.² On the other hand, most scholars from Europe and America refer the region as Middle/Near East and use Middle/Near Eastern studies or oriental studies. Due to this perceived Euro centrism, international organizations such as the United
Nations, have replaced Middle East and Near East with Western Asia. This region and Europe are collectively referred to as Western Eurasia. Therefore; it is invariably called the region as West Asia. The countries which come under the West Asian territory are Syria, Arab Republic, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Kingdom of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, State of Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Sultanate of Oman, Yemen (Fig.

Sources: mapsofworld.com
This region was one unitary unit as part of the old Ottoman Empire before the First World War. With the defeat of Ottoman Empire by European countries, this region was carved out into the separate states and boundaries as existent today except for Israel which emerged as the homeland of the Jewish people and as an independent country in 1948. To comprehend the geo-strategic importance of the region in Global politics and economy, the general characteristics of the region need to be identified so as to have a better assessment of the region.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS:

The population of West Asia is distributed unevenly over the region. Given the extreme aridity of large parts of the landscape, the relative availability of water tends to determine the pattern of population density. The valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are heavily populated. Also of importance are the highland areas and adjacent plains which receive sufficient rainfall to maintain extensive agricultural centers. Coupled with the normal increase in city populations, the movement from the rural areas has resulted in a tremendous expansion of urban centers over the past few decades. In fact this has been the region which gave birth to three great religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. And today Islam is the religion of approximately 90% of the area's population and there are significant numbers of Christians and Jews living
there as well -- approximately 6 to 8% Christians, 2% Jews, and 1% other. The population of Muslims is largely Sunni. Muslims are divided into two rival sects: the Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims. Although the Sunnis have remained more uniform in their beliefs, differences in interpretation of religious law, the Sharia, led to the adherence to one or the other of the four "schools of law": Hanefite, Malikite, Shafite, or Hanbalite. The Sunni division of Islam is predominant throughout Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Shiite Muslims are also divided in many sects. Shiism is the state religion of Iran. However, the people of the region are classified as groups and subgroups based on physical type, language, religion, social order, means of livelihood, and national beliefs. The classification of the people of the region on any single criteria can be misleading, since languages cross religious and social lines, and races cross linguistic and national boundaries. Since gaining independence, West Asian people are now generally classified along nationalistic lines. Nevertheless, the criteria of languages, religions, and ways of life still do not necessarily correspond neatly with each nation's boundaries. The major linguistic groups in West Asia are Semitic and Iranian. Each of these groups, in turn, contains several distinct languages and an even larger number of dialects. Semitic languages originated in West Asia and are spoken by the majority of the area’s population. Arabic, a Semitic language, spread
from the Arabian Peninsula during the Arab conquests that followed the rise of Islam in the seventh century.\textsuperscript{7}

The Koran (Quran), the Islamic bible, standardized literary Arabic, but the spoken language splintered into many dialects. Arabic-speaking people probably constitute 55\% of the West Asian population. The major Arabic dialects are generally referred to as Syrian, Iraqi, and Arabian. There are, however, extensive variations in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation within each of these subgroups. Farsi (Persian) is the language of the largest number of Iranians and is the official language of Iran.\textsuperscript{8} Although not considered part of the Semitic language group, it is written in a modified Arabic script. Other languages of this group are Kurdish, spoken in Iran and Iraq, and Baluchi, also spoken in Iran. Hebrew, which at one time virtually disappeared as a living language, was revised and modernized by Jewish settlers in Palestine. It is now the official language of Israel.\textsuperscript{9}

Traditionally, West Asia has been divided into three life styles: those of the nomadic herdsmen, the farmers, and the city dwellers. The ancient social structure of life styles has been significantly altered in modern times. Prior to independence, modernization emerged as the result of military intervention, economic and political influences, missionary activity, educational institutions, and formal programs of change and development that were
established by Europeans or Americans and instituted by various heads of state. Since independence, the national modernization process has continued more extensively in the oil-rich countries of West Asia. The comparison of modernization to traditional elements varies considerably from one country to another. Relatively large westernized elements exist in Lebanon and Israel and within the small modernized elite in the oil-producing countries. Despite this process of modernization, a constant struggle continues between the modernizers and the traditionalists in each of the countries. The religious institution has been progressively overshadowed by political authority. Education and economic development have expanded opportunities and have altered family unity. These and other factors have caused an expansion of the middle class. This has resulted in the shifting of power away from a small segment of the upper class and in the transfer of control of major economic resources and wealth to middle class dominated governments. Modernization has not, however, won out over traditionalism. In many parts of West Asia there are signs of religious assertiveness. Some fundamentalists are challenging contemporary regimes and calling for a return to ancient society. Others advocate a greater involvement of Islam in the political and social structures of the nation.¹⁰

The West Asian boundaries are defined to the north by the southernmost ridges of the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, to the west by the
Mediterranean Sea, to the south by the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, and to the east by the eastern border of Iran. Most of West Asia is arid and flat and contains some of the largest and most barren deserts on earth. Many areas around the seacoasts, however, are mountainous and receive adequate rainfall for agriculture. One major river systems which traverse the West Asia land mass is the Tigris-Euphrate flowing from the north in a southeasterly direction through Syria and Iraq. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers join at Al Qurnah, Iraq, about 193 km from the Persian Gulf, to form the Shatt al Arab (Waterway of the Arabs). Fed by rains and snows, this river valley provides favorable locations for human settlement and development. The shorelines of the region are generally rugged and dominated by cliffs or mountain ranges. Coastal plains are found along the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the eastern Mediterranean.11

The climate of West Asia has a long, intensely hot summer and a mild winter. Temperatures vary with the location, but they may, as an example, climb to 45 degrees (°) centigrade (C) in Saudi Arabia and Iran in the summer. Winter temperatures in West Asia range from 4.5° C in the north to 10° C in the south. The temperatures in the higher mountains often drop below -17° C in the winter. Many parts of the West Asia, especially along the shores of the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas, receive an annual rainfall of about 75 centimeters (cm) attributed mostly to winter rains. Inland, the average rainfall
drops sharply. The northern countries receive about 25 cm and the plateaus about 8 to 10 cm a year. The southern and southwestern parts of Saudi Arabia lie in the monsoon zone and receive rainfall during the months of July, August, and September. Irrigation systems in the river valleys also provide for agriculture and sustain some of the most densely populated areas in the world. Geographically, West Asia is generally categorized into three zones: north, central, and south.\textsuperscript{12}

The northern sector is a zone of rugged mountains connected to the Turkish-Russian Mountains on the west and to the Himalayas on the east. It is a tangled belt of ranges running generally east to west and encloses the extensive plateau of Iran. The highest peak, Mount Damavand (5,602 meters) in the Elburz Range of northern Iran, is covered with snow in the summer as well as in the winter. Moist air from the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas flows into these mountain ranges and provides sufficient precipitation in the western area. The interior plateaus present striking contrast to the coastal plains, varying from semi desert to barren deserts of salt and alkali.\textsuperscript{13}

The central zone is more complex. It extends from the coastal area of the Sinai Peninsula, through northern Arabia and south of the Iranian Plateau, and down to the lowlands along the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf and its basin represent an area that holds the world's richest known deposits of petroleum.
On the whole, this sector is less climatically harsh than the northern and southern areas. The Lebanon Mountains along the eastern Mediterranean coast absorb most of the precipitation from the prevailing easterly winds. The Zagros Mountain Range of western Iran also absorbs some of this moist air leaving less precipitation for the Iranian Plateau. The interior areas vary from scattered evergreens and shrubs to grasslands and semi desert.\textsuperscript{14}

The southern zone is the most uniform. The Arabian Peninsula rises from the southeast to the northwest. The Asir Range in western Saudi Arabia and Yemen are the mountains that parallel the Red Sea. Southern mountains also run along the coastal area of Yemen paralleling the Gulf of Aden. The Hajar Mountains of Oman on the eastern side of the peninsula are an extension of the Iranian Zagros Range. Except for the high mountains of Yemen and Oman, the southern area is generally the most barren land in West Asia.

Strategically the importance of the region has been tied to its location and international waterways. The seas and gulfs which intrude deeply into the landmass of West Asia have been routes of trade, transport, and military operations for centuries. Control over the narrow straits that connect the waterways with each other and with the oceans is a matter of international concern.\textsuperscript{15}

The Mediterranean Sea lies between Europe, Asia, and Africa with the
Strait of Gibraltar connecting the western Mediterranean with the Atlantic Ocean. In the southeast, the Suez Canal allows ships to sail from the Mediterranean into the Red and Arabian Seas and the Indian Ocean. The Mediterranean reaches its deepest point (4,594 m) in the Ionian section south of Italy, it is about 300 m deep at the Strait of Gibraltar. This has been an important avenue for cultural and commercial exchange between West Asia and the Western world for many years. Today, oil-consuming nations rely on the international waters of the Mediterranean for movement of petroleum from the pipeline terminals of West Asian countries. The US and other aligned nations have naval fleets operating in this important area on a year-round basis. The former USSR also had a naval fleet in this area, however, the USSR was abolished in December 1991. This country is presently referred to as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Independent State of Russia will probably take over the former Soviet Navy. The future strategy of the CIS or Russian Navy remains to be seen.16

The Arabian Sea lies between Arabia and India and is considered part of the Indian Ocean. It is bordered by Iran and Pakistan on the north. The Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Persian Gulf (Arabian Gulf to the Arabs), and Gulf of Oman are considered extensions of the Arabian Sea. Several islands in the Arabian Sea are used as naval and air bases. Socotra, a possession of Yemen, had been a port of call for the former Soviet Navy. Masirah Island off the coast of
Oman presently serves as an Omani military base, and the US has access to the Masirah air base facilities. The US has similar access to the Omani mainland port of Salalah for its naval vessels.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{The Red Sea} separates the Arabian Peninsula from Northeast Africa. It is about 2,253 km long and is no wider than 354 km. It has an average depth of about 600 m and covers 433,462 km. Large reefs, which are present except in a center channel in the southern half, make the sea dangerous for vessel navigation. The shore is barren with high mountain ranges on the east. Low sand hills and rocky tablelands line the west coast which is bordered by many coral reefs.

\textbf{The Persian Gulf} separates Iran from Arabia. It is connected to the Gulf of Oman by the Strait of Hormuz. The gulf is about 805 km long and 370 km wide at its widest point. The principal islands in the gulf are the Bahrain Group and Qeshm. The Persian Gulf is one of the largest and oldest sources of the world’s pearl supply and ranks as one of the principal oil-exporting areas.

\textbf{The Suez Canal} is the longest restrictive waterway in the area. It is about 160 km long and flows from the upper Red Sea into the eastern Mediterranean. The canal is located entirely within Egypt and is owned by the Egyptian Government. The two excavated sections of the canal are separated by the
Great Bitter Lake and Lake Timsah. The Ismailia Canal joins the Suez at Ismailia and runs westward into the Nile. The Suez Canal is the most convenient and rapid water route between Europe and the East.

The Strait of Tiran marks the junction of the Gulf of Aqaba with the Red Sea. Although of little importance to world shipping, it is vital to the interests of Israel and Jordan whose southern ports lie at the head of the gulf. The Israeli port of Eilat serves as a terminal for a pipeline which transports oil to the Mediterranean. Enterprise Passage, the only safe channel, is about 1.2 km wide and can be controlled easily from either Sinai or Tiran Island. Egyptian occupation of Tiran Island on 1 Jun 67 was the final straw for Israel. It directly resulted in Israeli decision to attack the Arabs on 5 June 1967.¹⁸

The Strait of Bab al Mandeb is located at the southern end of the Red Sea. It is bordered by Yemen on the east and Djibouti on the west. The strait is divided into two channels by Perim Island, a 13 km² rock belonging to Yemen. The western channel has a width of 16 km and is the main route for transiting ships. The western channel is considered an international waterway and is governed by international law. The Strait of Bab al-Mandeb, along with the Suez Canal, is important to world shipping and provides the most direct route from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. The Soviets operated a naval base at Aden on the southern coast of Yemen, in 1989-90, the Soviets
began withdrawing from Aden. Across the Gulf of Aden, naval facilities at Berbera, Somalia, serve as a base for the US Navy.\textsuperscript{19}

**The Strait of Hormuz** lies at the southern end of the Persian Gulf and is bordered by Oman on the west and by Iran on the east. The 274 km strait averages about 80 km in width from Oman, around the tip of the Musandam Peninsula, and broadens to about 129 km at the Tunbs Islands in the Persian Gulf. Iran located its Silkworm antiship missile batteries around Hormuz (in 80 km range from Oman). Oil tankers, which make up most of the traffic through the strait, carry about 50\% of the world's oil requirements. The Strait of Hormuz is a chokepoint at which shipping from the Persian Gulf could conceivably be blocked at any time. Because the strait is too deep and wide to be blocked by sunken ships, naval and air power would be required to close it. As an international waterway, closer would impact severely on the world market. It would curtail oil shipping from Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Relatively good port and air facilities exist throughout West Asia. The international waterways provide avenues for surface movement from all parts of the world to West Asian countries.\textsuperscript{20} Air facilities have expanded significantly and have become another major means of transportation.

Economically, throughout its history, West Asia has been dependent on
agriculture for its economic survival. This situation was altered considerably during the second half of the 20th century when the oil industry expanded substantially and became the single most important factor in the economy of West Asia. The large petroleum fields in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and UAE have about two thirds of the world's known oil reserves. In addition, modest oil discoveries were made in Syria and Yemen. For many years the development of West Asian oil resources was accomplished by European and US companies which held the concessions and provided the capital for production. This included control over the exploitation, rates of development, production schedules, and pricing of oil. In 1960 the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was formed by the oil-producing countries of West Asia and by Venezuela in an effort to increase their bargaining power with the oil companies. Following the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, the OPEC governments assumed control of the industry, including the setting of prices and rates of production. In most cases, oil production was nationalized. Obtaining a greater share of the revenues was a major factor in the drive for control by the oil countries. The revenues derived from this major industry have been devoted to modernizing the oil-producing countries and have been used as a means for investing in the economies of the Western nations. This allocation has created an imbalance in the area's economy, both regionally and within individual countries. Several
nations of West Asia have little (Syria and Yemen) or no oil (Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon) wealth, others have extensive wealth derived from the production of oil products. Within the oil-rich countries, two distinct economies exist: a highly developed oil industry sector, and a marginal sector of farmers, unskilled workers, and minor industries. A concerted effort is being made to lessen these imbalances and to develop diversified economies. The ever-increasing demand for oil and the subsequent flow of wealth have given the oil-producing nations of West Asia significant world political and economic leverage. The US is partially dependent on West Asian oil, and Europe and Japan have established almost total dependence. The Russians have shown an increasing interest as well. Holding the majority of the world's proven oil reserves makes West Asia of major concern to all industrial nations.

Historically since the times of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Anatolia, West Asia has always been of extraordinary geo strategic importance. This centrally located region stretches from Atlantic coast of North Africa to the western edge of Central Asia and lies between the southern littoral of the Mediterranean and north western shores of Indian Ocean. It should be clear why it was so strategically vital. When the “known world” was restricted to the Africa, Asia, and Europe land masses. This was because the West Asia contained or bordered on the land bridges, passage ways, and narrows- the
Sinai Isthmus, the Caucasus, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles, Babel Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz- and the sheltered seas- the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian-Arabian gulf that provided the best routes connecting the different extremities of the vast Eurasian/ African continent. In addition to that unique asset resulting from the location of this region, the land in the rich river valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which came to be known for good reason as fertile crescent was so productive that, in the case of the Egypt it constituted the granary of empire from the Roman to Ottoman, and was an important source of cotton for the British and French textile industries well into the 20th century.22

The West Asia was historically vital to inter and intraregional trade, manufacture the passage of armies and fleets, finance and the transit of people and ideas. The growth of the world’s first cities was made possible by the wealth produced by the region’s rich agriculture and most importantly because of its central position astride a series of important passage ways and choke points. It was thus not surprising that a sequence of major states and empires grew up in and around this region. These started with the first known states which produced some of the greatest empires in early human history, in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Anatolia, and continued through the apogee of Phoenician, Persian, Greek, Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantenian, and Islamic Empires. All of which aspired to dominate the West Asia, whether in terms of
However West Asia was not important just because it was conducive to entrepreneurship, wealth and opulence of the traders, merchants, artisans, and manufactures of the ancient world, because of the lengthy development of its urban civilizations, the power its centralized states, its vast natural wealth, and diversity, its geographical centrality, and the ease access to land through this region. But West Asia was also the cradle of important works of law, religion, sciences, and the arts, some of the greatest products of human mind and spirit. The three monotheistic religions and much of the sciences and philosophy, literature and art, of the ancient world originated here and spread throughout this region, and from here eventually to other parts of the world.

West Asia was among the first areas of the world to develop civilization. Many empires sought control of the area because of its important location. It became a battleground from 3100 to 2500 B.C. when Egypt and Mesopotamia ruled the entire region. The area was dominated in turn by the Assyrians (910-612 B.C.), the Persians (539-331 B.C.), the Romans (200 B.C.-100 A.D.), and again by the Persians (200 A.D.). The Arab conquest occurred in 630-640 A.D. and was followed by the arrival of the first European Crusaders in 1097 and the revival of Arab power in 1200. Mongol devastation of the region followed in the 1200s. The Ottoman Turks then ruled the region from the
1500s to the early 1900s. It was during Muslim Caliphates of the Middle Ages that first unified the region as a distinct region and created the dominant ethnic identity that persists today. Most of the countries in North Africa became a peripheral area to the main Muslim centers in West Asia. By 17th century, Europe had overtaken the Muslim world in wealth, population and—most importantly—technology. The balance of power had shifted decisively in favour of the west. And in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 the Ottomans were driven out of Europe altogether, except for the city of Constantinople and its hinterland. By 19th century the Ottoman Empire was known as the "sick man of Europe", increasingly under the financial control of the European powers. Eventually, the French annexed Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1878. The British occupied Egypt in 1882, though it remained under nominal Ottoman sovereignty. The British also established effective control of the Persian Gulf, and the French extended their influence into Lebanon and Syria. In 1912, the Italians seized Libya and the Dodecanese islands, just off the coast of the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia. The Ottomans turned to Germany to protect them from the western powers, but the result was increasing financial and military dependence on Germany.

With the outbreak of World War I came the disintegration of Ottoman control of West Asia and the expansion of European influences. The Turks joined the side of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) in hopes of
regaining and controlling some of the lost Ottoman provinces. Meanwhile, the Allied Powers (Britain, France, and Italy) encouraged the Arabs to revolt against Turkish rule by promising them independence. The majority of World War I fighting in West Asia took place in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Arab nationalists rose in revolt against the Turks and sought the aid of the British. The British responded with military and financial aid, along with promises of independence after the war. At the same time, however, the British were concluding secret treaties with their French, Italian, and Russian allies for the division of the Ottoman Empire. They were also negotiating with the leaders of the Zionist movement on the Palestine issue. In 1917 Britain issued the Balfour Declaration supporting in principle a national homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people. Post World War I peace settlements established a mandate system of British and French rule in preparation, it was promised, for eventual self-government in the conquered Arab provinces. Only in the Arabian Peninsula was Ottoman rule replaced by independent Arab governments. Initially, the Arabs in Syria and Iraq resisted the mandates but were forced into submission. At this point of West Asian history, with virtually the entire area under direct or indirect foreign rule, nationalist forces began to reverse the tide. Turkish nationalists defeated foreign and domestic opponents, forced the allies to negotiate a new peace treaty, and established a nationalist, secular republic. Persia (later renamed Iran) refused to ratify the British treaty
of 1919. A military coup in 1921 overthrew the Persian ruler and instituted a strongly nationalistic and modernizing regime the first shah of the Pahlavi Dynasty of Iran.

With the disintegration of Ottomans, Britain and France soon established control over West Asia and re-arranged it to suit themselves. Syria and Lebanon became French protectorates thinly disguised as a League of Nations Mandate. Iraq and Palestine became British mandated territories. Iraq became the "Kingdom of Iraq" and one of Sherif Hussain's sons, Faisal, was installed as the King of Iraq. The eastern half of Palestine became the "Emirate of Transjordan" to provide a throne for another of Hussain's sons, Abdullah. The western half of Palestine was placed under direct British administration. The already substantial Jewish population was allowed to increase. Most of the Arabian Peninsula fell to another British ally, Ibn Saud. Saud created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. From about 1927 to 1935, a temporary calm prevailed between West Asian nationalism and European imperialism. Young Arab nationalism had failed to eject the "imperialists" and was therefore compelled to accept European control of Arab internal affairs. Although the imperial powers had conceded independence to Turkey and Iran and allowed the exercise of self-government by the Arab-speaking successor states of the Ottoman Empire, this was done with varying degrees of safeguard for the strategic and economic interests of the imperial powers. West Asia
ceased to be a major source of international tension during this period except for Palestine where Jewish-Arab rivalry led to the start of violent outbreaks. In 1938 the British Government sought a settlement of the Palestine problem through a conference with the Jews, Palestinian Arabs, and representatives of other Arab states. In this time period, the advancing menace of war in Europe preoccupied the concerns of Britain. When the conference ended in a deadlock, the British issued a White Paper promising independence for Palestine in 10 years and limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. The Jews denounced the White Paper as incompatible with the Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate of 1917. World War II, however, pushed this issue aside until 1948.²⁹

During World War II the majority of the countries of the region displayed little enthusiasm for participation in the war, preferring to remain neutral. Some of the countries declared war on the Axis powers when identity of the victors became evident. Their primary concern was gaining independence. By the end of World War II, virtually all of West Asia had formal independence, but the British still had significant economic, political, and military influence in a number of Arab states. It was not until a new wave of more radical revolutionary governments, often led by the military, overthrew the conservative parliamentary and monarchical regimes that the special position of the British ended. Just after World War II the Palestinian issue came to a
head. The Arabs and Zionist created a situation the British could neither resolve nor extricate themselves from. The rise to power of German dictator Adolf Hitler in Germany had created a new urgency in the Zionist quest to immigrate to Palestine and create a Jewish state there. In 1947 the British turned the Palestinian problem over to the United Nations (UN). A UN special committee recommended ending the British mandate and partitioning Palestine into an Israeli and an Arab state. Although the majority of Arab countries rejected any idea of partition, the proposal obtained the necessary two-thirds majority in the UN General Assembly. As British forces were rapidly withdrawing in 1948, the Palestinian Arabs and the Israelis became locked in guerrilla warfare. The Palestinian Arabs were no match for the largely European-trained Jews, who not only gained independence for Israel, but ended up with more land than the UN had negotiated. A major outgrowth of the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and one of the most persistent problems that has continued to the present, is that of the Palestinian refugees. With no land to call home, they have been displaced throughout various countries in West Asia in refugee camps. Militants among the refugees have formed guerrilla and terrorist groups known collectively as the fedayeen "men of sacrifice." Their primary goal is to prevent Israel and the Arab countries from negotiating a peace settlement that does not provide for a Palestinian homeland.

Another turning point in the history of West Asia came when oil was
discovered, first in Persia in 1908 and later in Saudi Arabia (in 1938) and the other Persian Gulf states, and also in Libya and Algeria. West Asia, it turned out, possessed the world's largest easily accessible reserves of crude oil, the most important commodity in the 20th century industrial world.\textsuperscript{32} It has been, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, of paramount economic importance to the world because of its vast oil resources. The region as well emerged as one of the conflict prone areas of the world. Prior to 1945 conflict took the form of world wars and the Ottoman suppression efforts. Since 1945 at least 20 conflicts have occurred: 15 between West Asian nations and 5 internal struggles. The major war happened in 1980s between Iran and Iraq with many implications for the region. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent regional and international responses changed the political scenario with serious implications for the region and outside. The other issue which dominated the political discourse is the Palestinian problem. The Arab-Israeli conflicts, with the participation of the majority of the surrounding Arab nations, have persisted throughout this period. Encouraging developments in the quest for peaceful solutions came about during the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt. The contest for leadership of the Arab world and the search for some form of Arab unity have been effective only when the internal affairs of the individual nations have appeared to be affected by outside influences. Otherwise, the Arab nations have had little success in unity and
have even resorted to warring among themselves on occasions. Issues of the past few decades have evolved around access to the oil regions, the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and the pressures of the international system caused by the rivalry of interested powers. The single most obvious and worrisome issue, however, continues to be access to West Asian oil.\textsuperscript{33}

The rivalry between the former USSR and the West for influence in the area has placed this strategic crossroad of the world in the forefront of international tension. Several Arab nations have openly sided with the former USSR, while others sought to seek the aid and attention of the US. Soviet intervention in modern West Asian history stemmed from the World War II (WWII) era with its attempts to regain borderlands from Iran that were rebuffed by the US through the Truman Doctrine. The Soviets occupied the five northern provinces of Iran during WWII. After the war, the Shah tricked the Soviets into withdrawing and they were afraid of US/UK intervention should they attempt to reoccupy. After Khrushchev came to power, Soviet policy gradually became oriented to more active support of various West Asian nationalist regimes and to siding with the Arabs in their conflict with Israel. An underlying factor in former Soviet interests has always been a desire to cutoff NATO access to the oil and to secure warm water ports, not only for trading purposes but to support the ever-increasing and widely dispersed former Soviet Russian navy fleets. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets was interpreted as the first stage in
a new era of Soviet involvement in West Asian affairs. The USSR was abolished in December 1991 and the CIS was formed with Russia and the Ukraine arguing over the control of the former Soviet fleet. CIS orientation toward West Asia is presently unclear and it needs to be seen if the CIS pursues former Soviet interests. It seeks to gain some influence in the region with its some support to Iran including Syria. However the Russia of the day has been marginalized to play any influential and effective role in the region.\textsuperscript{34}

The fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism in the early 1990s had several consequences for West Asia. It allowed large numbers of Soviet Jews to emigrate from Russia and Ukraine to Israel, further strengthening the Jewish state. It cut off the easiest source of credit, armaments and diplomatic support to the anti-western Arab regimes, weakening their position. It opened up the prospect of cheap oil from Russia, driving down the price of oil and reducing the West's dependence on oil from the Arab states. It discredited the model of development through authoritarian state socialism, which Egypt (under Nasser), Algeria, Syria and Iraq had followed since the 1960s, leaving these regimes politically and economically stranded turning them to Arab nationalism as a substitute for socialism. The region continues to exits with all its problems which make it potentially conflict prone. The region also remains dominated by the United States of America with no counter power to challenge. Though China tries to make inroads in the region, the US supremacy runs writ
large with some opposition from regional players like Syria and Iran.\textsuperscript{35}

**Iranian position in West Asia: An Overview**

For centuries Iran has been referred to as Persia (Pars or Fars, a province in southern Iran) by the Europeans, mainly due to the writings of Greek historians. The country, however, has been known to people as Iran (land of the Aryans). In 1935 the Iranian Government specified that it should be called Iran. In 1949 it allowed both names to be used. However, since 1979, Iran is an Islamic Republic. Majority of the Iranian population is Muslims. It is about over 85 million. About 90\% of Iranians are Muslims of the Shiite sect. The remainder, mostly Kurds and Arabs, are Sunnis. Iran's central position has made it a crossroads of migration, the population is not homogeneous, although it has a Persian core that includes over half of the people. Azerbaijani constitute almost a quarter of the population. The migrant ethnic groups of the mountains and highlands, including the Kurds, Lurs, Qashqai, and Bakhtiari, are of the least mixed descent of the original Iranians. In the Northern provinces, Turkic and Tatar influences are evident, Arab strains predominate in the southeast. Iran has a large rural population, found mainly in agrarian villages, although there are nomadic and semi nomadic pastoralists throughout the country. The principal language of the country is Persian (Farsi), which is written in Arabic characters. Other languages are Turkic
dialects, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and Arabic. Among the educated classes, English and French are spoken.36

Iran is a country of mountains and deserts. Geographically it is bordered on the north by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea, on the east by Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the south by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and on the west by Turkey and Iraq. The Shatt al Arab forms part of the Iran-Iraq border. The Iranian Plateau constitutes the heart of the country that is surrounded by the Zagros Mountains. The capital city, Tehran, lies in the southern slopes of the Elburz Mountains. It is the largest city and the political, cultural, commercial, and industrial center of the nation. Between the “core” of the West Asia and Central Asia and between Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea geographical position of Iran makes this country one of the most important political actor in this region. Iran controls the entire corridor between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. It holds the most important military-strategic position, at the same time being West Asian, Caucasian, Central-Asian and Caspian state, washed by the waters of Persian and Oman Gulfs of the Indian Ocean.37 All the local pain spots are connected to Iran somehow. All of these problems could have been seemingly solved only with Iranian help: be it purely domestic problems of certain parts, ethnic, religious, military, economic, refugee or drug trafficking question, problems of terrorism. Iran is a heartland of the West Asia. Being situated between the
Caucasus and the Indian Ocean, Iran is a strategic springboard, which, being controlled gives an ability to control the Gulf, Caspian area, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It shows that Iran is the rupture-point in the chain of American outposts of the West Asia. Moreover, Strait of Hormuz, vital artery in the system of Arabic Oil transportation is situated in Iranian territorial waters. If this artery is blocked (which has actually happened before), about 40% of the global oil deliveries would be interrupted. Currently, existing alternative routes of oil transportation can compensate 53% of all tank transit through the Strait at most. This position of Iran in West Asia is of immense importance which in matters of the region cannot be overlooked. By virtue of its geographic location in the region it is bound to play a significant role.  

Economically Iran is not very strong. However after the devastation of Iraq war it has rebuilt itself economically but still remains a weak one. In regional paradigm it is a strong economy. There are number of sectors which contribute it its economy. About 10% of the land in Iran is arable, agriculture contributes just over 20% to the gross national product and employs a third of the labor force. Of the variety of natural resources found in Iran, petroleum (discovered in 1908 in Khuzestan province) and natural gas are by far the most important. The chief oil fields are found in the central and southwestern parts of the Zagros Mountains, in west Iran. Oil also is found in north Iran and in the offshore waters of the Persian Gulf. Domestic oil and gas, along with
hydroelectric power facilities, provide the country with power. The petroleum industry is Iran's economic mainstay, oil accounts for 80% of export revenues, and Iran is a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Major refineries are located at Abadan (site of the country's first refinery, built 1913), Kermanshah, and Tehran. Pipelines move oil from the fields to the refineries and to such exporting ports as Abadan, Bandar-e Mashur, and Khark Island. It is believed that Iran to have 10% of the world oil deposits and 15% of gas deposit. According to the explored oil deposits, Iran is on the 3rd — 4th position in the world. Total amount of oil at its territory is estimated to be around 370 billion barrels (50 billion tons). Total deposits of natural gas in Iran reached 33.1 trillion cubic meters. This makes Iran the second largest gas producer in the world right behind Russia. Extracted natural gas amount have grown from 12 trillion 750 billion cubic meters in March of 1978 to 29 trillion 610 billion cubic meters in March of 2008. As of 2010, Iran was on the fifth place in the list of world oil exporters. Textiles are the second most important industrial product, Tehran and Isfahan are the chief textile-producing centers. Besides crude and refined petroleum, Iran's chief exports are carpets, fruits, nuts, hides, and iron and steel, its chief imports are machinery, metals, military supplies, food, and chemicals. Iran's chief trading partners are Japan, Germany, and Italy. Khorramshahr, on the Shatt al Arab, is the country's chief general cargo port, Bandar-e Anzali is the chief Caspian
Iran has a long and rich history. Some of the world's most ancient settlements have been excavated in the Caspian region and on the Iranian plateau, village life began, there, 4000 BC. In around 2000 BC successive Indo-European (Aryans) invaders settled in Iran and were divided into various tribes, most famous of them were the Persians (Parsa), and the Medes (Mada). For more than half a century they ruled over a vast empire with borders stretching from Afghanistan to Turkey. The Persians achieved unity under the leadership of Achaemenes, whose descendant Cyrus brought the Achaemenian Empire onto the centre stage of world history. The conquest of Persia by Alexander's armies left the Persian army in disarray. The Greeks were then in possession of the ancient world from Egypt to Indus, and from Oxus to the Danube. Alexander followed a policy of integration between the Greeks and the Persian communities, encouraging marriages and applying the formula of magnanimity and generosity, which had formerly brought success to Cyrus II. The Persian Empire founded (550 BC) by Cyrus the Great was succeeded, after a period of Greek and Parthian rule, by the Sassanid in the early 3d cent. AD and which stretched as far as the Indus. Their control was weakened when Arabs took (636) the capital, Ctesiphon, it ended when the Arabs defeated the Sassanid armies at Nahavand in 641. The conquest of Persia continued with the fall of Afghanistan (651) and then Transoxiana (674). With the invasion of
Persia the Arabs brought Islam. The Turks began invading in the 10th century and soon established several Turkish states. The Turks were followed by the Mongols, led by Jenghiz Khan in the 13th century and Timur in the late 14th century.

In 16th century the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736) was founded by Shah Ismail, restored internal order in Iran and established the Shiite sect of Islam as the state religion, it reached its height during the reign (1587–1629) of Shah Abbas I (Abbas the Great). He drove out the Portuguese, who had established colonies on the Persian Gulf early in the 16th cent. Shah Abbas also established trade relations with Great Britain and reorganized the army. Religious differences led to frequent wars with the Ottoman Turks, whose interest in Iran was to continue well into the 20th cent. The fall of the Safavid dynasty was brought about by the Afghans, who overthrew the weak shah, Hussain, in 1722. An interval of Afghan rule followed until Nadir Shah expelled them and established (1736) the Afshar dynasty. After Nadir Shah assassination in 1747, the Afshar dynasty was followed by the Zand dynasty (1750–94), founded by Karim Khan, who established his capital at Shiraz and adorned that city with many fine buildings. His rule brought a period of peace and renewed prosperity. However, the country was soon again in turmoil, which lasted until the advent of Aga Muhammad Khan who established the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925). This long period saw Iran steadily lose territory to
neighboring countries and fall under the increasing pressure of European nations, particularly czarist Russia. Under Fath Ali Shah (1797–1834), Persian claims in the entire Caucasian area were challenged by the Russians in a long struggle that ended with the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmanchai (1828), by which Iran was forced to give up the Caucasian lands. Herat, the rich city on the Hari Rud, which had been part of the ancient Persian Empire, was taken by the Afghans. A series of campaigns to reclaim it ended with the intervention of the British on behalf of Afghanistan and resulted in the recognition of Afghan independence by Iran in 1857.42

The discovery of oil in the early 1900s intensified the rivalry of Great Britain and Russia for power over Iran. Internally, there was civil war between the rival Zand and Qajar factions. The Qajar monarchs were incapable of establishing a sound fiscal policy, and to compensate for this, they progressively disposed of Iran's economic resources to foreign powers in return for small sums of money that satisfied their immediate financial needs. Increasing dissatisfaction with the incompetence and corruption of the government together with resentment of foreign political and economic control, led to the formation and revolts by various secret societies and religious groups. This social unrest ultimately focused on the demand for a constitution, which was signed by Muzzaffer-ud-Din Shah on December 30th 1906. This led to the formation of the first "Majlis" (parliament). In October
1907 the new king signed the Supplementary Fundamental Law. Together, the two documents formed the core of the Iranian Constitution. Meanwhile, the British-Russian rivalry continued and in 1907 resulted in an Anglo-Russian agreement (annulled after World War I) that divided Iran into spheres of influence. The period preceding World War I was one of political and financial difficulty. During the war, Iran was occupied by the British and Russians but remained neutral, after the war, Iran was admitted to the League of Nations as an original member. In 1919, Iran made a trade agreement with Great Britain in which Britain formally reaffirmed Iran's independence but actually attempted to establish a complete protectorate over it. After Iranian recognition of the USSR in a treaty of 1921, the Soviet Union renounced czarist imperialistic policies toward Iran, canceled all debts and concessions, and withdrew occupation forces from Iranian territory. In 1921, Reza Khan, an army officer, effected a military coup who subsequently (1925) elected hereditary shah, thus ending the Qajar dynasty and founding the new Pahlevi dynasty. Reza Shah Pahlevi abolished the British treaty, reorganized the army, introduced many reforms, and encouraged the development of industry and education. In August 1941, two months after the German invasion of the USSR, British and Soviet forces occupied Iran when it refused to expel German nationals. They arrested and exiled Reza Shah, and took control of Iranian communications and railroad. However, the British and Soviet
authorities constrained constitutional government and permitted Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, to succeed to the throne on September 16, 1941. During same time around American troop entered Iran to handle the delivery of war supplies to the USSR. In January 1942 Britain and Russia signed an agreement with Iran to respect Iran's independence and to withdraw their troops within six months after the end of the war. In 1943 Tehran Conference US reaffirmed this commitment. The USSR withdrew its troops in May 1946, this episode was one of the harbingers of the emerging Cold War.

Iran's political system began to mature. Political parties were organized, and the 1944 Majlis elections were the first genuinely competitive elections in over 20 years. In 1951, the National Front movement, headed by Premier Mussadiq, a militant nationalist, forced the parliament to nationalize the oil industry, then controlled by Britain and form the Iran’s own National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). The British blockade led to the virtual collapse of the oil industry and serious internal economic troubles but Mussadiq continued his nationalization policy. Openly opposed by the shah, Mussadiq was ousted in 1952 but quickly regained power. The shah fled Iran but returned when monarchist elements forced Mussadiq from office in August 1953 with covert US activity which was largely responsible for Mussadiq's ousting. However he became a folk hero of Iranian nationalism. In 1954, Iran allowed an international consortium of British, American, French, and Dutch oil
companies to operate its oil facilities, with profits shared equally between Iran and the consortium. Iran began to establish closer relations with the West, joining the Baghdad Pact (later called the Central Treaty Organization), and receiving large amounts of military and economic aid from the United States until the late 1960s. Iran's pro-Western policies continued into the 1970s, however, opposition to such growing Westernization and secularization was strongly denounced by the Islamic clergy, headed by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been exiled from Iran in 1964. Internal opposition within the country was regularly purged by the Shah's secret police force (SAVAK), created in 1957. In the context of regional turmoil and the Cold War, the Shah established himself as an indispensable ally of the West. He suppressed and marginalized opponents with the help of Iran's security and intelligence organization, the SAVAK, using arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, exile and torture, and exciting profound and widespread discontent which rallied around the Ayatollah Khomeini.46

In 1970s Iran’s relations, especially in the economic sphere, were established with Communist countries, including the USSR. However, relations with Iraq were antagonistic for much of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in great part due to conflict over the Shatt al Arab waterway. A number of armed clashes took place along the entire length of the border. In April 1969, Iran voided the 1937 accord with Iraq on the control of the Shatt al Arab and demanded that the
treaty, which had given Iraq virtual control of the river, be renegotiated. In 1971, Britain withdrew its military forces from the Persian Gulf. Concerned that Soviet-backed Arab nations might try to fill the power vacuum created by the British withdrawal, Iran increased its defense budget by almost 50%, and with the help of huge US and British defense programs, emerged as the region's strongest military power. Although Iran renounced all claims to Bahrain in 1970, it took control (November, 1971) of three small, Arab-owned islands at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Iraq protested Iran's action by expelling thousands of Iranian nationals. In March, 1973, short of the end of the 25-year 1954 agreement with the international oil-producing consortium, the shah established the NIOC's full control over all aspects of Iran's oil industry, and the consortium agreed (May, 1973) to act merely in an advisory capacity in return for favorable long-term oil supply contracts. In the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War of October, 1973, Iran, reluctant to use oil as a political weapon, did not participate in the oil embargo against the United States, Europe, Japan, and Israel. However, it used the situation to become a leader in the raising of oil prices in disregard of the Tehran Agreement of 1971. Iran utilized the revenue generated by price rises to bolster its position abroad as a creditor, to initiate domestic programs of modernization and economic development, and to increase its military power. Opposition to Shah, however, continued to grow to turn into an Islamic Revolution of 1979
organized around Khomeini. An anarchic situation gripped Iran. It was soon plagued by ethnic unrest as Kurds, Arabs, Turcomens and other minorities demanded varying degrees of autonomy. Shah fled Iran in the beginning of 1979. Clerics delivered extremist and threatening speeches against the United States and against its Persian Gulf allies. Khomeini returned and led religious revolutionaries to the final overthrow of the shah's government on February 11, 1979. The new government represented a major shift toward conservatism. It nationalized industries and banks and revived Islamic traditions. Western influence and music were banned, women were forced to return to traditional veiled dress, and Westernized elites fled the country. A new constitution was written allowing for a presidential system, but Khomeini remained at the executive helm as Supreme Leader. The same year in November, Iranian militants seized the US Embassy in Tehran, taking 52 American hostages. Khomeini refused all appeals, and agitation increased toward the West with the Carter administration's economic boycott, the breaking of diplomatic relations, and an unsuccessful rescue attempt (April, 1980). The hostage crisis lasted 444 days and was finally resolved on January 20, 1981, the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as US president. Nearly all Iranian conditions had been met, including the unfreezing of nearly $8 billion in Iranian assets.

The following year in September (1980), Iraq invaded Iran primarily over the disputed Shatt al Arab waterway. Fighting crippled both nations, devastating
Iran's military supply and oil industry, and led to an estimated 500,000 to one million casualties. Chemical weapons were used by both countries. Khomeini rejected diplomatic initiatives and called for the overthrow of Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein. In November, 1986, US government officials secretly visited Iran to trade arms with the Iranians, in the hopes of securing the release of American hostages being held in Lebanon, because Iran had political connections with Shiite militants in Lebanon. On July 3, 1988, a US navy warship mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian aircraft, killing all aboard. That same month, Khomeini agreed to accept a UN ceasefire with Iraq, ending the war.49

Iran immediately began rebuilding the nation's economy, especially its oil industry. Tensions also eased at that time with neighboring Afghanistan, as Soviet troops there began withdrawal (completed in 1989), after a presence of nearly 10 years. During the Soviet occupation, Iran had become host to nearly 3 million Afghan refugees. Khomeini died in 1989 and was succeeded by Iran's president, Sayid Ali Khamenei. The presidency was soon filled by Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, who sought improved relations and financial aid with Western nations while somewhat diminishing the influence of fundamentalist and revolutionary factions and embarking on a military buildup. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, 1990, Iran adhered to international sanctions against Iraq. However, Iran condemned the use of US-led coalition forces
against Iraq during the Persian Gulf War (1991), and it allowed Iraqi planes fleeing coalition air attacks to land in the country. As a result of the war and its aftermath, more than one million Kurds crossed the Iraqi border into Iran as refugees. The United States suspended all trade with Iran in 1995, accusing Iran of supporting terrorist groups and attempting to develop nuclear weapons. Several European Union countries began renewing economic ties with Iran in the late 1990s, the United States, however, continued to block more normalized relations, arguing that the country had been implicated in international terrorism and was developing a nuclear weapons capacity.\textsuperscript{50}

Iran has a long, creative and glorious history. It has been one of the richest and oldest cultures in the world. For more than three thousand years Persia was a melting pot of civilizations and demographic movements between Asia and Europe. Under Cyrus the Great, it became the centre of the world's first empire. Successive invasions by the Greeks, Arabs, Mongols and Turks developed the nation's culture through rich and diverse philosophical, artistic, scientific and religious influences. Being located at the center of the world’s largest pool of energy, it straddles prominently the global oil and natural gas checkpoints at the Strait of Hormuz. With over 9\% of the globe's oil reserves and 15\%-17\% of worldwide reserves of natural gas, the hydrocarbons resources of the Gulf's most populous state are tremendous. It provides the cheapest and the shortest transit route at the heart of the ancient Silk Road for
the transport of energy resources from the Caspian Sea basin to the world markets through the Persian Gulf, and it is the most populated country with one of the largest industrial bases in the vast region stretching from the Caspian Sea to Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, over the past several decades, history, geography and natural resources have contributed to the rise of Iran as a prominent regional power despite the fact that it has faced the difficult moments of history. A vast land area, rich resources and strategic location impart to Iran a special standing in political calculations and greater scope to attain a genuine position as a regional power as compared with other countries, like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Iran’s geo-politic, which links Asia to West Asia, Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and serves as a connecting point of four sub-regions, is a strong point that can-not be denied by any regional and global power. This situation has long invited the interference and competition of foreigners seeking to put government they desire in power.

By studying Iran’s history it becomes observable that how Iranians have usually felt deeply affiliated to their national, social, ethnic and religious heritage. Iran’s political and social movements in its contemporary history have been concentrated on keeping national sovereignty and independency. The Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged in recent years as the de facto leader of the West Asian region, which according to some western analysts also includes Syria and prominent non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah.
that created anti-American camp. Notwithstanding its close security ties to the United States, Qatar has also aligned itself with the “resistance” camp on some issues in recent years. And, the rise of the Justice and Development Party and declining military involvement in Turkish politics have prompted an intensification of Turkey’s diplomatic engagement in West Asia, in ways that give additional strategic options to various actors in the “resistance” camp.\textsuperscript{53}

It is largely being perceived that the West Asia today is deeply divided between two camps — a reality that some commentators describe as a new regional “Cold War”. On one side of this divide are those states willing to work in various forms of strategic partnership with the United States, with an implied acceptance of American hegemony over the region. This camp includes Israel, those Arab states that have made peace with Israel (Egypt and Jordan), and other so-called moderate Arab states (for example, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council). On the other side of this divide are those West Asian states and non-state actors that are unwilling to legitimize American (and, some in this camp would say, Israeli) hegemony over the region.\textsuperscript{54}

Like the emergence of the West Asia’s new Cold War, the Islamic Republic’s rise has occurred during a still ongoing period of tectonic shifts in the region’s strategic environment. These shifts include the effective collapse of the
traditional Arab-Israeli peace process, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the rise of Hezbollah and Hamas as political actors in their national and regional contexts, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and subsequent Israeli military campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza, structural changes in global energy markets and a tremendous transfer of wealth to major West Asian energy producers. All of these shifts are playing out against what is increasingly perceived, in West Asia and elsewhere, as a decline in America’s relative power and influence. But notwithstanding these strategic gains, Iran continues to face serious national security and foreign policy challenges, both regionally and internationally. Iran’s geographical position, size, economic stature and military muscle give it the potential to play a leading or pivotal role in a number of regional configurations: the Persian Gulf, Greater Central Asia and the Caspian basin, and in the West Asia. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to a new awareness in Iran of the possibilities presented by the combination of the country's strength relative to other West Asian states and its geographical location at the heart of the Eurasian continent.

United States and the West Asia: An Overview

The United States became heir to a complex relationship that developed
between Islamic society and the West over a period of 14 centuries. Although the various Islamic empires that existed during that lengthy period were sometimes allied with one or more European states, Islamic-western relations tended to be a story of conflict: the early Arab conquests after the emergence of the Islamic religion, the European-led crusades from the 11th to 13th centuries, the expansion of the Ottoman Turkish empire into southeastern Europe in the 15th and 16th, and the establishment of colonial or quasi-colonial regimes over much of the Arab world by France, Britain, and to a lesser extent Italy in the 19th and early 20th. As Arab states acquired full independence following World War II, their citizens continued to harbor strong sensitivities over anything that suggested “western imperialism.” Iran, occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union during World War II, retained similar sensitivities toward any form of interference from external powers.

The United States, a latecomer to the West Asia, enjoyed a more favorable image in the region than did its European counterparts in the 19th and early 20th centuries. With the brief exception of the Barbary wars, the United States was not involved in any regional conflict and had no discernable colonial ambitions in the region. US visitors, mainly educators, travelers, and diplomatic envoys, were well received on the whole. A high point in regional perceptions of the United States may have been reached at the end of World War I, when inhabitants of the West Asia welcomed President Woodrow
Wilson’s call for self-determination and some of them saw in the United States a potential counterweight to the colonial ambitions of France and Britain.\(^{56}\)

This period of minimal US involvement in West Asia came to an end after World War II, as the United States undertook expanded worldwide commitments and acquired three major interests in this region: maintaining access to the region’s oil resources, blocking Soviet attempts to achieve hegemony, and safeguarding the security of the newly created state of Israel. Pursuit of these interests compelled the United States to become an active player in the regional affairs and adopt periodically conflicting policies that were sometimes resented in the region. US interests in the region continued to grow to extent that it became an indispensable player in the regional politics affecting the course of events there. Ever since 1945 the United States has enjoyed an effective strategic predominance over this region. In the pursuit of this strategic objective, the United States has not only promoted and supported the authoritarian and monarchial regimes in the region but did not hesitate in resorting to military interventions and even full scale wars like Gulf War I in 1991 and Gulf War II in 2003 against Iraq to prevent regional hegemony emerging which might challenged its interests. The regional countries which became the close US ally to serve its strategic interests at one time or other have been Saudi Arabia from the very beginning, Egypt after 1978, Iran before 1979 and many smaller nations like Gulf Sheikhdoms, Jordan, and Tunisia.\(^{57}\)
The US continues to be vitally interested in the future of West Asia as it continues to remain dependent on foreign energy resources and primarily on oil generated by the OPEC countries. The centerpiece of this organization is Saudi Arabia, by far the principal provider of US oil and the country which holds about 25% of the world's total proven reserves. The US Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the loss of Saudi Arabian oil for one year would reduce the gross national product (GNP) of the US by approximately $300 billion, increase our unemployment rate by 2% and radically accelerate US inflation. It would also impact severely on the economies of Europe and Japan. For these reasons the US and its allies have a vital strategic and national interest in the oil-producing countries of West Asia. Since the revolution in Iran, the political balance in West Asia has been in a state of flux except for the position of Saudi Arabia. This has increased the importance West Asia for the US. Sixty percent of the free world's oil supply is shipped through the Strait of Hormuz, and any threat to this flow could jeopardize world peace. The US cannot afford to ignore these facts. The relationship of the US to the area will continue to be influenced by West Asian countries and the concern for possible Iranian, or outside intervention into West Asia that would be counter to vital US interests in the region. In this whole scenario the strategic position of Iran in the region and the role it has played in history and might play in future is of much significance for the events which might unfold in future.
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19. See, Anderson, Ewan W. *op.cit*

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21. *ibid. op. cit.* 249


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33. Alfred Thayer Mahan: *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, 1660-1783, Published by Boston Little, Brown1890. P-56


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