The Impact of Systemic Factors on Iran-Gulf Arab Relations

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Since the Persian Gulf Arab states became independent in the 1960s and the 1970s, their relations with Iran have been mostly fraught. In particular, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations with the Persian Gulf Arab states have deteriorated. Demographic and geographic imbalances, often clashing ideologies and world views, diverging security interest, competition for regional influence, plus ethnic and sectarian differences between Iran and the Arabs, have been responsible for the fraught state of Iran-Gulf Arab relations. However, systemic factors both at international and regional levels, have also deeply affected these relations. At the regional level, the Israel factor and the evolving nature of intra-Arab politics have been especially significant. At the international level, the character of the international political system, especially the balance of power among its key actors, plus the policies of the major international players have had the greatest impact. This pattern is likely to continue in future as well.

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Introduction

Persian Gulf Arab states, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, gained their independence in the 1960s and the 1970s. Kuwait was the first Gulf state to become independent in 1962. Since then, relations between Iran and some or all of the Gulf states at one time or other have been fraught. This was the case during the monarchy and has been even more so after the 1979 Revolution.

A variety of factors have determined the character of Iran-Gulf Arab relations. Some of these factors relate to Iran's and Gulf Arab states' geographic and demographic characteristics. Others, which also affect Iran's relations with other Arab states, include ethnic and sectarian differences and the legacy of the long history of Arab-Iranian interaction, including cultural rivalry within Islam.

Geographically, Iran is the largest of the Persian Gulf littoral states. Gulf Arab states, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, are much smaller than Iran. Iran also has a demographic advantage over the Gulf states. Moreover, all Gulf states, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, have small indigenous populations, and foreign nationals and expatriate workers make up a large percentage of their populations.

These geographic and demographic disparities between Iran and the Gulf states Iran have long been a source of anxiety for the latter. They fear that potentially Iran could dominate the region, unless it is contained by some external power or a coalition of local states. Over the last several decades, this underlying anxiety about Iran's potential and thus its intentions has been a key factor in preventing real understanding and

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cooperation across the Persian Gulf. In future, too, this misgiving is likely to remain a barrier, albeit not insurmountable, to better relations.

However, not all Gulf states to the same degree fear Iran's potential and intentions. For reasons peculiar to each state, some of them view Iran more negatively and are more suspicious of its intentions. In the case of Saudi Arabia and, more recently, the United Arab Emirate, clashing ambitions and rivalry for regional supremacy have been largely responsible for difficult relations with Tehran.

General Determinants of Iran-Arab Relations: The Legacy or the Past

Throughout their nearly 3,000 years of interaction, Iran and the Arabs have gone through periods of friendship and conflict. During the pre-Islamic era, despite periods of tension and conflict, their relations were mostly friendly.

The Arab conquest of Iran in 642 C.E. and its consequences changed this basically friendly pattern of interaction. It left a legacy of mutual resentment and mistrust, which still colors their perceptions and affects their relations. Because of this legacy, in modern times, periodically, some Arabs have used Iran as the hostile "other" for purposes of nation-building. Iraq did this in the 1930s. More recently, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, has tried to do the same (Hunter, 2019; Al Rasheed, 2018).

But because Iran is an ancient nation, despite some Iranians' resentment of aspects of their history with Arabs, it has not used Arabs as an "other" for the purpose of nation-building. Since the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian leadership has pursued Islamic universalism, has worked against Iranian nationalism, and has sought closeness with the Arab world (Hunter, 2014). Nevertheless, the weight of history has been difficult to lift and ethnic resentments have acted as a barrier to better Iran-Arab relations.

Iran's Islamization did not bring the two sides closer. Under the Safavids (1501-1736 C.E.), Iran became predominantly Shia, while Arabs remained overwhelmingly Sunni, thus adding a sectarian divide to their other differences. Until the 1970s, sectarian divisions did not significantly influence the character of Iran-Arab relations. Their impact increased after the rise of political Islam and the emergence of Sunni Islamist movements in the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia's propagation of Wahhabi Islam with its strong anti-Shia dimensions, and finally, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (Hunter, 2013).

The US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 brought a Shia-dominated government to power in Baghdad and increased the impact of sectarian divisions on Arab-Iranian, especially Gulf Arab-Iran, relations. The following reasons explain this development: (1) Many Gulf Arab states have either Shia majority population, as in Bahrain, or large Shia minorities, like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; (2) the leaderships of these states is Sunni and; and (3) most of these states' Shia populations feel disenfranchised. Because of Iran's religious bonds with Gulf Arabs' Shia minorities, their leaderships have always feared that at some point Tehran might use them for its own political ends and for destabilizing their states. These fears soared after the 1979 Revolution.

Iran's revolution was not sectarian. Iranian revolutionaries saw their revolution as applicable to all Muslim and third world countries. But because they used Shia themes and imagery in their discourse and propaganda, especially during the Iran-Iraq War, the revolution acquired a sectarian tinge and deepened the sectarian divide across the Gulf. Moreover, throughout the 1980's, Iran tried to export its revolution to neighboring areas, including by subversion. By the 1990s, Iran's behavior did become less revolutionary. Moderation of Iran's behavior, however, was not deemed sufficient by the Gulf Arabs and did not dispel their anxieties.

New Divisions

By the 1950s, ideological differences emerged between Iran and some Arab states regarding their social and political systems and in their world views. Some Arab states adopted varieties of socialism, while others preferred Western practices. Divergence in their perspectives led them to choose different regional and international allies. As Iran and some Arab states made different choices, divergence in ideology and pattern of alliances partly determined the character of their relations. Until the 1979 Revolution, Iran's relations with conservative and pro-Western Arab states were relatively good and with radical and pro-Soviet Arabs hostile. After the 1979 Revolution, this pattern was reversed.[1] But divergence in Iran's and the Arab states' world views continued and influenced their relations.

The Impact of Systemic Factors

The state of Arab-Iranian relations has also been affected by the characteristics of the international and regional systems. The character of the Middle East regional system, including the dynamics of intra-Arab politics and the centrality of the Israel factor in regional dynamics, has been especially influential. The dynamics of great power relations and their policies towards regional and international issues largely determine the characteristics of the international system. In recent times, the systemic influence of key regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), plus Israel, has increased. But the impact of great power policies is still stronger.

The following factors explain the vulnerability of Arab-Iranian relations to systemic forces: (1) Iran and Arab states' economic and military weakness; (2) the Middle East and the Persian Gulf's importance to great powers since the dawn of the 19th century and their rivalry over the control of this region; and (3) the great power policy of divide and rule towards local actors. Systemic factors have had largely negative consequences for Iran-Gulf Arab relations, including leaving a legacy of unresolved territorial disputes.

The British Legacy

Between the 1830s and 1968, Britain dominated the politics of the Persian Gulf, although after the end of WWII, the US increased its presence and influence in the region. Therefore, British policies towards Iran and the region's Arabs determined the underlying dynamics of their relations. Before the discovery of oil, British interest in the Persian Gulf derived from its desire to protect India from its rivals, especially the Russian Empire. To block Russian access to land and sea approaches to India, Britain believed it had to dominate both shores of the Persian Gulf.

Britain pacified and dominated the southern shores of the Gulf, known at the time as the Piracy coast, and renamed it Trucial Coast. Dominating the Gulf's northern shore, which constituted Iran's maritime borders, proved more difficult. Iran, despite its weak state, was an independent country bordering the Russian Empire. Any effort to dominate it directly would have elicited a Russian response. Instead, Britain adopted a policy of weakening Iran's central government by sponsoring local leaders, including in provinces bordering the Persian Gulf, preventing its economic development (Issawi, 1971), and nibbling on its eastern frontiers bordering Afghanistan and today's Pakistan.

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[1] See Hunter (2019), various chapters dealing with individual countries.

In the Persian Gulf, Bahrain's fate reflects this British strategy. By the early 19th century, Iran had lost effective control over Bahrain, although it had retained its claim. Occasionally, even the Sheikh of Bahrain recognized the justness of Iran's claim.[2] In 1892, Britain signed a treaty with the Sheikh of Bahrain, which turned the island into a British colony. After that, Iran lost any hope of reclaiming Bahrain. In 1971, Tehran agreed to a referendum, whose results were pre-arranged, and thus officially gave up Bahrain.

Bahrain's loss was hard for Iran, especially since after independence Bahrain, in effect, became Saudi Arabia's colony. After the 1979 Revolution, some revolutionaries, who had accused the Shah of having sold out Bahrain, made irredentist comments, which caused fears among Arabs that Tehran might retake the island by force or by subversion.

The British policy towards Iran and Arabs reflected the general attitude of great powers towards larger regional states with greater power potential and their preference for smaller entities. Needing a counterweight to larger neighbors, smaller entities, including those in the Persian Gulf, are more willing to accept great power protection and follow their lead in regional and international affairs.

Another negative British legacy is the question of the three disputed islands of Abu-Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. This dispute has poisoned relations between Iran and the United Arab Emirates since 1972 and has been a major barrier to better Iran-Gulf relations, given that the UAE has made any improvement in Iran-Gulf relations contingent on the prior resolution of this dispute.

During its control of the region, Britain had changed its mind on the question of the islands' ownership, and even in 1971-1972, it did not openly settle the issue. Yet Iran's dispute was with Britain, the colonial power, since until 1972, there was no UAE. Thus, London could have easily and openly settled the ownership issue. Instead, Britain let Iran know that, if it took over the islands, Arab reaction would be muted (Hunter, 2019). This diagnosis was wrong and the islands issue has remained a barrier to better Iran-Gulf and even Arab-Iran relations.

This aspect of British policy reflects the great powers' preference for a degree of tension among regional actors. This situation enables them to maximize their own influence. Thus, keeping a cause of discord between Iran and the Arabs suited Britain.

The United States has basically followed British policies in the region. After Britain decided to leave the East of Suez in 1968, Washington could have created a regional security system with Iran's and Arab states' participation under its own leadership. Such a system could have fostered habits of consultation and cooperation across the Persian Gulf.

At the time, Iran was willing to enter into different kinds of security arrangements and did not object to the participation of non-littoral states, such as Pakistan. Saudi Arabia, however, refused to collaborate with Tehran.[3] The US, meanwhile, did not encourage Riyadh to change its attitude. Instead, it entrusted Iran, or it so appeared, with a security role, which frightened the Gulf Arabs and increased their distrust of Tehran's intentions. Soon, however, the US withdrew support from Tehran and, during the 1970s, encouraged a degree of competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The US had another chance to help set up a security system in the Persian Gulf after the 1991 Gulf war with Iran's participation, later to be extended to Iraq (Hunter, 1992).[4] But it failed to do

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[2] For an Iranian perspective on the island's ownership, including some correspondence between Iranian authorities and the Shaikh of Bahrain, see Adamiyat (1955).
[3] On Iran's willingness to enter into cooperative relations and Saudi refusal, see Faisal Bin Salman (2003).
[4] There were several suggestions made in the US for a Gulf security system, all of which excluded Iran, thus showing the unrealism of their promoters.

so. Instead, it chose the dual containment strategy, which culminated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[5]

The Cold War, the Israel Factor, Intra-Arab Politics, and Iran-Gulf Relation

From the 1950s until the USSR's collapse in December 1991, the international system was defined by the rivalry between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the West and their respective allies known as the Cold War. Most of the world's economic and military power was concentrated in these two coalitions, thus making the international system bipolar. The Cold war was an all-encompassing and zero-sum competition. The third world, including the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, were major areas where the rivalry was played . Thus, Cold War dynamics also shaped the character of regional sub-systems; they mirrored Cold War divisions and largely determined the pattern of regional, including Iran-Arab, relations. As a rule, states identified with one of the two blocs had reasonable relations among them.

Middle East Sub-system

In the Middle East, to Cold War dynamics were added the impact of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Perhaps more than any other factor, this fact shaped the Middle East's political dynamics, including Iran-Arab relations.

For historical and geographic reasons, especially its fraught history with Russia and its proximity to the Soviet Union, from 1953 until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran saw Moscow as its main security threat. To counter this threat, Iran joined the Western camp. Because of their geographical distance from the USSR and the lack of experience with imperial Russia, Egypt, and other Arab states, like Syria and post-revolution Iraq, did not consider the USSR a major security concern.[6] For them, Israel and its great power patron, the United States, were the immediate threats. Therefore, they gravitated towards the USSR. Consequently, Iran and some Key Arab states found themselves on the opposite sides of the Cold War divide. This division became a complicating factor in Iran-Arab relations.

Moreover, pro-Soviet Arab states adopted the socialist model of development and a revolutionary world view with an added dose of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism. Arab radicals viewed Iran and Arab monarchies as reactionary forces and as barriers to the achievement of Arab goals. Iran's position on Israel aggravated its problems with Arab states, including with those conservative Arabs, which were on the same side with it in the Cold War dispute. Some even saw Iran as Arabs' enemy.[7] Yet, Iran's relations with Israel were a function of its concern with the USSR and its regional allies. Iran established ties with Israel, partly to please America, and partly to balance the Arab revolutionary front. But this reality made no difference to Arabs.

Arab Revolutionaries' View of the Persian Gulf, Intra Arab Politics, and Iran-Gulf Relations

Arab revolutionary states viewed Persian Gulf Arab states and Iran as reactionaries and lackeys of Western imperialists. They also coveted Persian Gulf Arabs' oil wealth, believing that it belonged to all Arabs.[8] To access this wealth, they tried to dominate the Persian Gulf region. Nasser's adventure in Yemen following the

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[5] The Clinton Administration adopted the dual containment strategy devised by Martin Indyk (1992). The ultimate goal of the strategy was to bring down Iraq's and Iran's governments. When this did not happen, the US decided to attack Iraq. Had Iraqi operations gone well Iran would have been next.

[6] On the diverging perceptions of Arabs and Iran of the USSR, see Lenczowski (1958).

[7] This sentiment was clearly expressed by Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan in 1984, when he said that Arabs have two enemies, Israel in the West and Iran in the East.

[8] For a discussion of these issues and related bibliography, see Hunter (1984).

1962 Revolution was a prelude to trying to replace the Saudi monarchy. Iraq's claims on Kuwait, as soon as it gained its independence in 1962, also reflected this basic view of Arab revolutionaries.

Gulf Arab monarchies at the time were militarily weak. Thus, Arab revolutionary regimes saw Iran as the main regional impediment to achieving their objectives. As early as the mid-1950s, they worked to undermine Iran's relations with Gulf Arabs. In the 1960s, Egypt and Iraq tried to prevent trade between Iran and Kuwait by claiming that oranges imported from Iran had come from Israel!

At the time, the Palestinian issue was very important in Arab politics, and Arab states' position towards the Palestine problem was an element of their political legitimacy. Until the 1991 Persian Gulf War, there were large numbers of Palestinians in Persian Gulf states. Given Iran's Israel ties, revolutionary Arabs used Palestinian communities to prevent good relations between Gulf Arabs and Iran. They also used these ties to portray Iran as an enemy of Palestinians and Arabs, and potentially a threat to the Gulf Arabs' security.

In reality, however, the revolutionary Arabs wanted the Gulf for themselves and marketed themselves as defense against Iran's threat. In this way, they extracted financial benefits from Gulf Arabs. Good relations between Iran and the Gulf Arabs would have eliminated such opportunities. This pattern of using Iran as an enemy figure by countries, like Egypt, has continued, with the interlude of Anwar Sadat's rule (1970-1981). In fact, various Arab states at different times have used the Iran factor to balance intra-Arab relations, a practice which has continued after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Iran, too, has used dynamics of intra-Arab politics, but not as effectively.[9]

Palestinian groups' ties to the USSR intensified Iran's fears of being surrounded by pro-Soviet states. This made it more difficult for Tehran to cut its ties to Israel. Nevertheless, after the 1967 War and Israel's capture of more Palestinian territories, Iran's position changed.[10] The Shah condemned Israel's occupation of Arab territories. During the Rabat Summit of the Heads of Islamic States held following attacks on the Masjed al Aqsa in 1969, the Shah told Yasser Arafat that, if the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) stopped its support for the Iranian opposition, Iran would adopt a more pro-Palestinian posture. Because of the PLO's relations with the USSR and radical Arab states, Arafat rebuffed the Shah's advances.

Nevertheless, the Shah continued his efforts to improve relations with revolutionary Arab states and the PLO. By 1974, Iran had reached out to the PLO and had improved relations with Syria; in 1975, Hafiz al Assad visited Tehran. But Iran did not reap any benefits from these efforts. Instead, its overtures to Arab radicals elicited Israeli suspicions and caused it to question Iran's value as an ally. Iran's agreement with Iraq in 1975, which resolved the Shat al Arab dispute and ended active hostility between the two states, angered Israel. It feared that Iraq would now be ready to shift its attention to its western front. Thus, it concluded that the Shah was an unreliable ally.

Israel always favored a degree of tension between Iran and the Arabs, so that it could manipulate both sides to its own ends. This is why Israel resented the Shah's efforts to reduce discord with radical Arabs. Therefore, as early as 1975, Israel worked to weaken Iran-US relations. By 1975, critical voices were heard in the US Congress about Iran's policies, especially its purchase of arms, plus its hawkish attitude on oil prices. Given Israel's influence in the US Congress, the change in Israel's attitude towards Iran was instrumental in harnessing congressional opposition to the Shah.

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[9] For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Hunter (2019).

[10] On the evolution of Iran's position on Israel and the Palestinians, see Ramazani (1978).

Even after Iran adopted a pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel stand after the 1979 Revolution, relations with Arabs did not improve. In the following decades, as Arabs moved towards reconciliation with Israel, Iran's anti-Israel stand became a cause of discord. In short, in one form or another, the Israel issue has been a source of discord between Iran and Arab, including Gulf, states.

The US Moves Away From Iran

Doubts about Iran emerged during the Ford Administration. The US Secretary of the Treasury, William Simon, was angry about Iran's position on oil prices and called the Shah a jerk! The US also became unhappy with the Shah's more independent policies, although Iran remained pro-West. But it was the Carter Administration with its human rights policy, applied in a skewed manner, that undermined the Shah.

The Iranian revolution had internal causes. Nevertheless, the Carter Administration's signal that, if the Shah were to be replaced, Washington would not object, emboldened the opposition. Therefore, as put by Richard Cottom, the Carter Administration was the catalyst that triggered the Islamic revolution (Cottom, 1979, 12). At the time, the US thought that the Shah would be replaced with a secular liberal government, which would remain America's ally but without the Shah's ambitions and independence.

The negative consequences of the Iranian revolution for the Middle East and South-West Asia were enormous. Even today, these regions are suffering from its aftershocks. Some Arab states, and not just the radicals, wanted the Shah out. However, it was the US' actions that determined Iran's fate. As a key player within the international system, by its action the US shaped the trajectory of the Persian Gulf's politics, including the character of Iran-Arab relations for the next four decades and beyond. An important consequence of the change of leadership in Tehran was Iraq's invasion of Iran and the eight year-long war that ensued and its consequences.

Cold War's Restraining Impact

Despite its negative aspects, the Cold War had a restraining impact on the great powers' and their regional allies' behavior. States allied with one of the main protagonists often kept their differences within certain bounds. For instance, Iran and Gulf Arab states' membership in the Western bloc attenuated their differences. Therefore, as long as Tehran and Washington were on good terms, Saudi Arabia, despite its hostility towards and rivalry with Iran for regional dominance, kept its animosity within certain limits.

The USSR might have restrained Iraq's aggressive impulses. After the 1958 Revolution, Iran's relations with Iraq became conflictual and they embarked on occasional brinkmanship over the Shat al Arab and supported each other's opposition. Nevertheless, they avoided large-scale military conflict. Iran's alliance with the US before the 1979 Revolution might have deterred Baghdad from attacking Iran and, instead, forced it to seek compromise. When after the Iranian revolution US-Iran ties deteriorated, coupled with turmoil in Iran, Baghdad felt safe to invade Iran. Some observers have claimed that Iraq received a green light from Washington to attack Iran (Aburish, 2000; Consortiumnews.com, 2015).[11] Even if there was no green light, given the ongoing hostage crisis, Baghdad knew that Washington would not object if it attacked Iran.

After the Iraqi attack, the big powers and the United Nations did not condemn Iraq. Only after Iraq attacked Kuwait in 1991, did the US and UN officials acknowledge Iraq as the aggressor. Had the UN

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[11] Also, the investigative journalist, Robert Perry, has claimed that General Alexander Haig wrote in a memo that President Carter had given the green light to Saddam Hussein to attack Iran through Prince and later King Fahd.

interfered at the beginning of the conflict, Iran's internal developments and the trajectory of regional relations would have been more positive. At least, Iraq would not have attacked Kuwait a decade later.

The Cold War moderated big powers' tendency to directly engage in local conflicts or take unilateral actions, especially if it involved the use of military power. In the Iran-Iraq War, their involvement was limited to helping Iraq militarily and otherwise. Until 1987, the United States did not directly participate in the conflict, fearing that Iran might turn to the USSR. It was after Gorbachev started his reforms and sought détente with the US that Washington became directly involved. It reflagged Kuwaiti tankers and attacked Iranian oil platforms and ships. American intervention was one of the main reasons that Iran agreed to a ceasefire in August 1988.

The USSR's Collapse, End of Bipolarity and America's Ascendance

Gorbachev's reforms were supposed to reinforce the Union by revitalizing its economy and moving its foreign relations into a more peaceful direction. Instead, reforms caused economic downturn, ethnic clashes, rise of independence movements, and finally, the USSR's dismantling.

Despite widespread perceptions at the time, after the USSR's collapse, the international system did not become unipolar. Russia, the most important successor state to the USSR, still retained enormous military power, including nuclear. Although still behind the US economically and otherwise, China was beginning to loom as a formidable power in the near future. European countries, too, retained considerable economic and military weight.

However, without the Soviet counterweight and with no power willing to assume a similar role, the United States became ascendant within the international system and acquired greater freedom of action. Washington felt free to embark on more risky ventures, including reshaping the international system according to its own values and preferences, by altering existing political regimes. The Clinton Administration pursued this goal mostly through non-military means, although it occasionally used air power. To perpetuate its ascendancy, the US, or at least some influential circles in Washington, tried to prevent the emergence of any potential rivals especially in sensitive strategic areas, like South-West Asia.[12] The USSR's collapse also altered the US' appraisal of regional states.

A major loser in this context was Iran. Historically, great powers' interest in Iran derived from its position as a buffer against Russian/Soviet expansion towards the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. After the USSR's collapse, Iran lost its value as a buffer. Therefore, Western powers did not need to placate Iran out fear that it might turn to the USSR. Instead, Western states saw Iran as a potential rival. Iran is a large country with a relatively large population and considerable natural and human resources. Thus, in theory, it could become a serious middle power. Such an eventuality runs against Paul Wolfowitz' vision of preventing the emergence of any rivals to the US.

Israel, too, did not want a strong Iran as rival even if Tehran abandoned its hostile posture. The so-called dual containment strategy was designed in part to prevent Iran's revitalization. Thus, throughout the 1990s and beyond, Washington rebuffed Tehran's overtures for better relations (Hunter, 2010).[13] Instead, except for a brief period during the Persian Gulf war of 1991, when it sought to enlist Iran on its side, Washington adopted a

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[12] The main theoretician behind this concept was Paul Wolfowitz. He developed his ideas in the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance. In it was stated that a main US goal was to prevent the emergence of a new rival, at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/show/iraq/etc/wolf.html.

[13] In a letter in 2003, Iran declared its readiness to discuss regional matters, including the issue of Hizbollah.

policy of containing and isolating Iran, a policy which began under George H. W. Bush and has continued ever since. Had the US chosen a different approach, today, Iran's and the Middle East's conditions and the state of Iran-Gulf Arab relations would have been better.

The USSR's collapse also affected regional states' approach towards Iran. Without the Soviet threat, they, too, saw Iran more as a rival than as a useful buffer. They and some other Arab states, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, did not favor US-Iran reconciliation. They feared that such a reconciliation could reduce their own value to Washington (Hunter, 1989). Therefore, they actively campaigned against it.

Most of all, Israel worked against US-Iran reconciliation as did its supporters in the US Congress. Israel insisted that Iran first accept all of its conditions, including abandoning support for the Palestinians, knowing that Iran's domestic politics would not allow this. Israel's supporters in the US Congress were instrumental in convincing Washington to refuse the Iran-Conoco deal in 1994 and to impose new sanctions. The latest example of this Israeli strategy was Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018. Other factors contributed to this decision. But, as he has claimed, Benjamin Netanyahu influenced Trump's decision (Times of Israel, 2018).

The USSR's collapse did not much change Gulf-Russia relations beyond allowing more extensive interaction between Moscow and the Gulf capitals. The Gulf Arabs security reliance on the US and some European states continued. This continued reliance, plus Gulf states extensive financial and economic links with Western states, prevented them from acting independently on major regional issues, especially those related to Iran. This, plus the hardening of US policy towards Iran, made it more difficult for Gulf states to reach a modus vivendi with Tehran. Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not want accommodation. But Oman and, at times, Kuwait and Qatar, which are less hostile towards Iran, could not risk alienating the US by accommodating Tehran, even when Iran was helpful to them.

9/11, the Militarization of US Foreign Policy and the 2003 Iraq War

The geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, including Iran-Gulf relations, might have settled into a more quiet pattern had it not been for the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington D.C., on September 11, 2001.

This event provided an opportunity to those favoring a more aggressive US policy towards the Middle East in order to transform its political map through regime change in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, and Sudan, to determine American policy.[14] The perpetrators of attacks on the World Trade Center were linked to Al Qaeda based in Afghanistan. Therefore, on October 1, 2001, the US attacked Afghanistan and less than two years later, on March 3, 2003 it invaded Iraq. Had Iraq operations gone well, the US likely would have attacked Iran and Syria, too. But expectations of turning Iraq into an example of democracy were not realized and Iraq plunged into civil war and it became the scene of proxy warfare among regional actors.

The Iraq War and Iran-Gulf Arab Relations

When the US attacked Iraq, Iran's relations with the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, had not sunk to the low levels that they did in the following decades. The destruction of Iraq's military structure, the severe undermining of its social and political institutions, and its growing economic problems, affected the regional

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[14] For example in 1998 a number of former officials wrote a letter to President Bill Clinton asking for a more aggressive policy towards Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Among them were Zalmay Khalilzad and Paula Dobrianski.

balance of power. It created the perception that the balance had shifted in Iran's favor. Thus, many Gulf and Arab states, plus Turkey, tried to reverse Iran's perceived influence. As Tehran tried to consolidate its new-found influence, the result was intense competition and a kind of proxy warfare between Tehran and some Gulf states.

Arab and Gulf states were also concerned about a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. They feared that their own Shias might become restive. The result was increased anti-Shia sentiments in Arab states, even those with few Shias.[15] Saudi Arabia, possibly the most anti-Shia state, was especially angry about Iraq's developments. In addition to supporting Sunni extremists in Iraq, some of its princes, notably Bandar Bin Sultan, made inflammatory statements about the Shias (Cockburn, 2014).[16] Many Arab governments wrongly viewed Arab Shias as Iran's pawns. Thus, anti-Shia and anti-Iran sentiments became conflated and adversely affected Arab-Iranian and Iran-Gulf relations (Beirutbeltway.blogs.com, 2006).[17] King Abdullah of Jordan introduced the concept of a "Shia Crescent" extending from Iran to Syria, which encapsulated Arabs' anxieties about a Shia coalition dominated by Iran.

Yet none of these developments would have taken place had it not been for changes in the nature of the international system. Systemic changes after the Soviet collapse enabled Washington to act unilaterally to alter the Middle East's map. The worsening of Gulf-Iran relations was one of its outcomes.

Promoting Arab-Iranian Tensions and Sunni-Israeli Alliance

A major goal of US Middle East policy has long been to guarantee the security of the state of Israel established in 1948. Israel's priority for the US Middle East policy was the reason for its problems with Arab states and some Arab states' gravitation towards the USSR. In addition to safeguarding Israel, Washington wanted to gain Arabs', including Palestinians', acceptance of Israel and the recognition of its legitimacy. Initially, the US used mediation to achieve this goal, exemplified by the Egypt-Israel peace in 1979.

In the 1980s, Washington tried to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians. But only in the 1990s and after the USSR's fall did the PLO become receptive to mediation efforts. The Oslo Accords of 1993, mediated by Norway and endorsed by Washington, was a significant step in the process. However, after Itzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995, successive Israeli governments failed to implement it. After 9/11, Washington used military force to change political regimes of states opposed to Israel in order to facilitate reconciliation. One US motive in attacking Iraq was to establish a political setup in Baghdad more accepting of Israel. Failing that the US wanted an Iraq which could not threaten Israel. This motive also explains the US insistence on Syria's Bashar al Assad's departure. Had Assad agreed to surrender Golan and agree to peace, no one would have insisted on his departure (Salem, 2008).[18] Changing regime in Iran is also largely for this purpose.

Meanwhile, by 1987, Israel lost hope that the new Iranian regime would resume old ties. After the USSR's collapse, it also felt less need to reconcile with Iran. Instead, it reassessed its peripheral strategy, and adopted

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[15] For example, there were attacks on Shias in Egypt and even Turkey.

[16] In a talk with the head of the British intelligence services, he said that the Shias would become like the Jews in Nazi Germany with nowhere to hide.

[17] For example, Hosni Mubarak said that Arab Shias are more loyal to Iran than their own countries. This statement infuriated Arab Shias.

[18] In the 2000s, the so-called Syrian option was actively considered. Had Syria gotten the Golan back, it would probably have agreed to peace with Israel.

the Arab option.[19] After the US attack on Iraq in 2003, Israel saw conditions ripe to follow its new strategy more vigorously and it enlisted US support (Sick, 2007).[20]

Iran as the Justification for Arab-Israeli Reconciliation

Historically, Israel used Iran to balance the Arab states. Therefore, it preferred that Iran-Arab relations remained tense. After the Islamic revolution, as Iran turned against Israel, this balancing act became impossible. As long as the Cold War persisted and the USSR remained a major actor in international affairs, Israel had to observe a certain limit in undermining Iran. After the USSR's collapse, Israel felt no such need. Its policy towards Iran hardened and its supporters in Washington successfully prevented US-Iran rapprochement.

However, Iran's hostility towards Israel did not gain Arabs' sympathy. Arabs were becoming more open to compromise with Israel, plus they saw Iran's revolutionary discourse to be a more serious threat than Israel. Thus, a degree of convergence of view on Iran gradually emerged between Israel and Arabs. After the 2003 Iraq War, Israel used Arabs' fear of Iran and rising Sunni-Shia tensions to get close to Arab and Gulf states. Both George W. Bush and Donald Trump supported this strategy. The Obama Administration in its last two years tried to have a more balanced approach towards Iran and other regional players.[21] The outcome of this shift in the US attitude was the July 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Moreover, as early as 1992, the US needed a new enemy figure to replace the USSR, especially in the Middle East and post-Soviet space, and used some of Iran's policies and its harsh rhetoric to portray it as a mortal threat to Middle East and Persian Gulf states. Washington ignored Tehran's military and economic shortcomings and its limited ability to project power beyond its borders. Ironically, when Washington began its policy of isolating and demonizing Iran, Tehran was reassessing its past behavior and wanted to improve its relations with Western and regional countries. The US unwillingness to respond positively to Iran, emboldened its regional rivals, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to harden their positions and to rebuff Iran's overtures for better relations. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah called on the US to "cut the head of the snake", thus advocating military attack on Iran (Colvin, 2010).

Widespread protests in 2011 throughout the Arab world, including in at least one Persian Gulf Arab state, Bahrain, intensified tensions with Iran. The outbreak of civil war in Syria and Iran's siding with Bashar al Assad's government, while Arab states and Turkey supported different Sunni armed groups, exacerbated both sectarian and Arab-Iranian tensions.

The US policy of regime change in the Middle East, which began under George W. Bush, was partly responsible for the worsening of the Syrian civil war. The US and other Western states insisted on Assad's removal and trained, armed, and funded his opponents. They did not support wholeheartedly the UN's peace plan negotiated by Kofi Annan, which included constitutional reform and free elections (Reuters, 2013). Had they supported this plan and not held out for Assad's removal as a first step, Iran and Arab states would not have become involved in this civil war. As in Iraq, the US policy of regime change destroyed Syria without removing Assad. Nevertheless, Syria is no longer a challenge to Israel, as the latter's annexation of Golan illustrates.

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[19] The famous Israeli journalist and strategist, Zev Schiff, was the first initiator of this concept. He first introduced this concept in 1987. But it took some years for the Israeli establishment to embrace this strategy.

[20] In this interview Sick confirms that the Bush Administration is trying to form an Israeli-Sunni alliance by using the Iran/Shia threat.

[21] Hillary Clinton earlier had sabotaged a US-Iran agreement mediated by Turkey and Brazil. She was for harsher policy on Iran and first coined the phrase "crippling sanctions".

Donald Trump and Maximum Pressure on Iran

Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, were not happy with the JCPOA, although it limited Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons. They feared that the agreement could lead to US-Iran reconciliation and thus reduce their own importance to Washington. They had hoped that the next administration would be tougher on Tehran.

Although Trump had criticized the JCPOA, it was only in May 2018 that the US withdrew from the accord and imposed more sanctions on Iran. Netanyahu, and probably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, influenced his decision.

After the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, tensions between Iran and the US worsened and raised the possibility of a war either by design or accident. When in September 2019, Saudi oil installations were hit by missiles claimed to have originated from Iran, the risk of US-Iran military confrontation rose. Later, when on January 3, 2020, US forces assassinated General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Quds force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, a military conflict between Tehran and Washington seemed very likely (Hubbard, Karasz, & Reed, 2019; Soleimani, 2020). A devastating conflict was avoided, partly because Iran and the US acted cautiously. Gulf Arab states, notably the UAE, realized that they, too, would suffer from a US-Iran military confrontation. Therefore, there was no demand from the Gulf states for direct American retaliation against Iran.

Trump's maximum pressure policy on Iran, his efforts to bring about peace between the Palestinians and Israel, and failing that, to get Gulf Arab states to normalize relations with Israel, meant that Gulf states had no incentive to reconcile with Tehran. Consequently, they did not respond positively to Iran's outreach, including the Hormoz Peace Initiative (Tehrantimes.com, 2019). Some aspects of Iran's peace initiative, especially the provision that non-littoral states could not be involved in regional security arrangements, were unrealistic. Nevertheless, Iran's plan offered a framework for talks and confidence-building measures. But US opposition to Iran-Gulf Arab dialogue made any progress impossible. In fact, because of the Gulf states' security dependence on the US, improvement in Iran-Gulf relations is impossible without a US green light. Meanwhile, none of the other major international actors, such as Russia and China, are willing to promote Iran-Gulf reconciliation. They, too, benefit from Iran-Arab rift and use it to sell arms and to create economic and military footholds in the Persian Gulf.

Conclusions

Throughout the last six decades, factors peculiar to Iran and Arabs have mostly determined the state of their relations, including in the Persian Gulf. The geographic and demographic characteristic of Iran and the Gulf states have influenced their respective perceptions on security and international affairs and thus the state of their relations. However, the character and dynamics of the international political system, the Middle East and intra-Arab sub-systems, the Israel factor, and especially, the policies of the great powers have exerted significant and mostly negative impact on their relations. In particular, in the last three decades, US policies towards Iran and other regional states have basically determined the character of Iran-Gulf Arab relations.

However, the impact of systemic factors would have been less adverse, if it were not for some fundamental fault lines in Iran-Arab relations. Arabs' negative view of Iran, even when Iran was not a revolutionary government, has led them to react more negatively to Iranian actions and to view them largely in

a negative light. For example, while Turkey and Iran, before 1979, had relations with Israel, Arabs treated Iran much more harshly than they did Turkey.

For the foreseeable future, systemic factors, especially US policy towards the region, Israel's efforts to insert itself into Persian Gulf politics and to weaken Iran, and power ambitions of such Arab states as Saudi Arabia and the UAE will largely determine the trajectory of Iran-Gulf Arab relations. A less hostile US policy towards Iran would be necessary for improvement in Iran-Gulf Arab relations.

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