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*Iran and the Postwar
Security in the Persian Gulf*

Nikola B. Shahgaldian

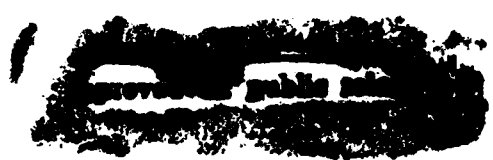
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Nikola B. Shahgaldian

*Prepared for the
Under Secretary of Defense for Policy*

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Preface

This report examines key elements of Iran's present foreign policy attitudes and its likely future direction over the next few years under the impact of recent domestic Iranian political changes and the emerging postwar security environment in the Persian Gulf region. As such, it identifies prevailing trends and tendencies in Iran's regional and international behavior and highlights Iran's attempts to define a new regional role for itself. The report includes an assessment of the significance and likely impact of the Soviet Union's disappearance on short-term Iranian policy calculations and discusses the implications of these developments for U.S. policy in Iran and the Persian Gulf region. The research findings of this report should be of interest to policy planners and analysts concerned with political developments in Iran and Southwest Asia.

This work was conducted within the International Security and Defense Strategy Program of RAND's National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center supported by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff.

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Summary

The U.S.-led coalition's 1991 military victory against Iraq, and the looming prospects of further political and economic disruptions in what remains of the former USSR, have combined to present Iran with a long-delayed opportunity of again becoming a key player in Southwest Asia. Iran was quick to seize upon this opportunity. While establishing a new posture of moderation in their foreign-policy behavior, Iranian leaders have also embarked on a policy of military modernization. In the process, Iran will inevitably reassert itself as a major military power in the region within the next few years.

The swift unfolding of events since the winter of 1991 and the emergence of new changes in alliances, allegiances, political objectives, and economic arrangements among many states in the Persian Gulf region have also forced Iran to reevaluate its behavior toward the United States and to hammer out the details of its response to the issue of U.S. presence in its immediate vicinity. Although, thus far, only some outlines of possible Iranian reactions have emerged, various formal and informal utterances coming out of Tehran since the Gulf War point to the fact that a major change in Iran's relationship with the United States is still unlikely to occur in the near future.

As in the past, Tehran has adamantly resisted American presence in the region because of its lingering fears that such a presence might be used to reassert American political or military influence inside Iran. However, by and large, Iran has not automatically opposed American policies elsewhere in the region, despite rhetorical assertions to the contrary. Similarly, the mere presence of U.S. forces close to Iranian borders has not pushed Tehran, and is not likely to in the future, into adopting a sufficiently hysterical anti-U.S. position that it would resort to violence or acts of subversion. Indeed, Iran's cooperation in efforts to release western hostages in Lebanon suggested that future Iranian behavior will be different.

Since the crisis in the Persian Gulf, Iranian decisionmakers have been clearly impressed by U.S. determination to act against regional aggression. At the same time, and after a lapse of over a decade, they have apparently come to view the future dangers—or benefits—of American presence in the area as substantial and real. This phenomenon, together with radical geostrategic changes occurring in the southern areas of the former Soviet Union, has strengthened the elements of

pragmatism in the conduct of Iranian foreign policy. Such changes have also mandated caution, circumspection, and vigilance as essential elements in Iran's foreign policy, both in the Persian Gulf region and in northern Iranian borderlands. Moreover, under the new circumstances, Tehran has come to recognize clearly that continuing the Khomeyni era's blanket opposition to U.S. positions in the region is counterproductive.

Iran and Regional Security

Since the end of the Gulf War, Iranian decisionmakers have pondered the details and weighed the requirements of various plans for long-term security arrangements in the Persian Gulf region. Within this process, the following seem to constitute the linchpins of Iranian policy regarding the security of the region.

First, Iran clearly views any Western-led "collective security" arrangement as unacceptable. Based on their assessment of the historical record, Iranian leaders cannot imagine that any large coalition of regional Arab or non-Arab states could, in the foreseeable future, cooperate effectively within one umbrella organization without facing a direct military threat at least equal to that posed by Iraq in 1990 and 1991. At the same time, Iran is convinced that any viable security system for the Persian Gulf region has to take Iranian interests and aspirations fully into account.

Second, although not to its liking, Iran can tolerate bilateral security arrangements between local Arab states and the United States and can live with the corresponding American presence in the Gulf region. However, Iran should be expected to actively contest and oppose any arrangement that may, in the future, become a means of beefing up Saudi Arabia's offensive military capability and/or elevating that desert kingdom to a new status of regional hegemony.

Policy Toward Iraq

Iraq's military defeat has prompted Iran to adopt considerable flexibility and pragmatism toward the issue of the future of Iraq. The result has been the adoption of a multipronged policy that seeks to secure maximum possible advantage in the postwar situation and the advancement of Iran's longer-term aspirations in Iraq. The ingredients of this policy include the following:

First, contrary to Arab and Western perceptions, there is little evidence that Iran is willing to push hard for the establishment of an Islamic regime in Baghdad, especially since it has no credible means of achieving such an objective. Instead,

Tehran would like to see a domestically fractured, militarily weak, but territorially unified Iraq. At the same time, Iran remains anxious that Iraq should not be so weakened as to invite foreign intervention in internal Iraqi affairs. Iranian mistrust here is directed in particular against Turkey, in light of that country's repeated military incursions inside Iraqi territory. Tehran remains equally skeptical about the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq. Although Iran supports Kurdish claims for self-determination and is likely to continue to assist the Kurdish coalition against Baghdad, the creation of a Kurdish state (though unlikely) remains unacceptable to Iran.

Second, regarding Iran's present and likely short-term future behavior toward the Shia problem in southern Iraq, the Rafsanjani government seems to realize that the great opportunity for a successful Islamic uprising there has already passed. It also recognizes that the pro-Iranian element is internally fractured, that it has a limited influence among Iraq's Shia population, and that this population feels more Arab than Shia. In view of this, Iran has been encouraging its Shia supporters inside Iraq to join other anti-Saddam opposition elements in the hope of forming a pluralistic future government in Baghdad. It is also endeavoring to foster relations with as many Iraqi domestic actors as it can; in the absence of a more satisfactory alternative, Tehran tends to support the formation of a coalition government in Iraq that would also involve the residual elements of the present Ba'thist leadership.

Third, since the early 1980s, Iranian leaders have been persuaded that the Iraqi military machine poses a long-term threat to Iran. Saddam's defeat in the recent Gulf War has not diminished this perception. For this and many other related reasons, Iran has, in the postwar period, embarked on an all-out campaign to strengthen its armed forces, especially through rapid modernization of its air force with Russian weaponry. This policy can be expected to continue.

The Russian Relationship

The emergence of several newly independent states in the southern regions of the former USSR has inevitably introduced a new and perhaps long-lasting twist to historical Russian-Iranian relations. Thus far, Tehran has adopted a cautious policy of support for the formerly Soviet Asian republics, while it continues to count on maintaining normal ties with the Russian Federation. This approach fits well with the current posture of the government in Moscow and is welcomed by these new states. To the extent that the collapse of central Soviet power signifies an end to Russia's traditional imperial ambitions in Iran, Moscow seems

to have come to appreciate a closer relationship with a strong, neutral, and prosperous Iran.

In turn, for the Iranian leaders, the recent Soviet changes could not be more desirable. For one thing, the diminishing Russian threat has increased Tehran's options for further moves toward the Western powers. It has also boosted Iran's historical role as a key player in Central Asia and parts of Transcaucasia and in Afghanistan. Despite the growing normalcy, the course of future Russian-Iranian relations is likely to be determined by several developments in the former Soviet Union that may bring Iran face to face with pressing short-term policy considerations. For example, as the prospects of economic or political chaos grow in some of these newly independent states, particularly in Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, it may come to affect the settlement patterns radically and thus alter the demographic character of these Muslim-populated states. Iran will hardly remain indifferent to their plight, particularly when and if other regional powers (particularly Turkey, but also Saudi Arabia) attempt to extend their own influence in these regions.

A second pressing policy consideration Iranian leaders currently face comes in the wake of changes in the former USSR: the future of Soviet arms supplies to Iran. Since 1986, but especially after June 1989, Iran has increasingly sought to procure Soviet weapons as a major source of its military requirements. But the continuing disruptions in Russian arms production industries may open to question Moscow's ability to keep up a more or less steady flow of armaments to Iran. The continuation of such difficulties might come to affect Iran's entire defense arrangement directly. In the face of this development and because of the continuing refusal of many Western powers to supply military hardware to Iran, authorities in Tehran currently seem to be reviewing Iran's entire military strategy for the post-Cold War era.

U.S. Policy Options

Iranian leaders remain united not only in seeking to become key players in the future developments in the Persian Gulf region, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and in parts of Transcaucasia but also in considering this role as a natural Iranian right and prerogative. As far as the Gulf region is concerned, they consider their recent posture as representing Iran's minimum demands, which should be recognized by outside players as legitimate Iranian entitlements. For the continuation of such "moderation," Iran expects to receive many compensatory benefits from the West, particularly economic benefits and mainly from the United States. In view of the radically different security and political

environment in the Persian Gulf region and the southern borderlands of the former USSR, the United States should consider the following as a possible basis for a prudent U.S. policy toward Iran.

First, the United States should recognize that the present Iranian government has already adopted a fairly consistent and moderate policy in its internal social, economic, and foreign activities and that there is considerable anti-U.S. and hard-line opposition inside Iran that would instantly reverse any policy moderation if and when it succeeded in coming to power. Thus, the political environment in Iran requires the United States to make comparable goodwill gestures and possibly more tangible payoffs. In the absence of these steps, Tehran's present course is likely to be seriously weakened, and the present leadership may not be able to sustain itself.

Second, the United States should take the initiative and seriously consider reestablishing some kind of working relationship with Iran. At the same time, Washington should view the current political atmosphere in U.S.-Iranian relations as "transitional" and begin laying the groundwork for eventual resumption of ties. The United States, for example, could promise to lift all economic and trade sanctions against Iran, and unfreeze Iranian assets in the United States, if Iran further moderates its attitude toward the U.S. presence in the Gulf region. The United States might also pledge to assist in economic reconstruction efforts currently under way in Iran in return for Tehran's complete abandonment of all anti-American postures and acts.

1. Introduction

For extended historical periods, Iran has been to the South, Southwest, and Central Asia what Greece and Rome were to Western civilization. While increasingly challenged in the twentieth century by its contemporary younger neighbors—whether Arab, Turkish, or other—this notion of its historical role is shared by most Iranians and forms an integral part of the national character of its population.¹ Indeed, no matter how the Iranian state evolves in the coming years, it will certainly retain a critical importance for the regional actors in the Middle East, as well as for the major European powers and the United States. This is because of its large size (seven times that of the United Kingdom), population (now the largest in Southwest and Central Asia), oil (traditionally the second highest producer in the Middle East), natural gas (among the top three producers in the world), strategic location, wealth of other minerals, industrial muscle, and highly developed cultural level.² Iran also serves as the religious core of the world's 150 million Shia Muslims. In addition, Iranian ethnolinguistic, religious, and cultural groups spill over into most of its neighboring countries, and several of these constitute the bulk of the population in the southern regions of the former USSR. These and many other related reasons, in turn, make Iran an important factor in Russia's management of its future relations with the newly emerging power centers in Central Asia and Transcaucasia.

On the surface, the Islamic Republic has come out of the recent Persian Gulf War a winner, both at home and abroad. On the foreign front, President Hashemi Rafsanjani has been able to demonstrate effectively that Iran is ready and is committed to a policy of neutrality. He also was able to convince the United States and its allies that Iran followed the United Nations resolutions on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, including the boycott, and at the same time worked for a peaceful solution to the crisis. He kept his word that Iraqi aircraft that had taken refuge in Iran would not be permitted to return and take part in the war. In addition, Iran reportedly instructed guerrillas and underground Shia elements

¹Banuazizi (1977), pp. 210–239; Arberry (1953), pp. 318–358; Wilson (1929), p. 311; and Arasteh (1964).

²According to the latest official Iranian statistics, about 75 percent of the population is literate; the literacy rate reaches 85 percent in the urban areas, where about two-thirds of Iran's total population of 60 million currently reside. These are impressive figures by Middle Eastern and Asian standards. For details see *Kayhan* (London), No. 384, December 19, 1991.

operating outside Iran but under its control to actively oppose potential Iraqi terrorist attacks against the West during the war.³ At home, Tehran's present government has thus far been able to restrain the hard-liners who attempted without success to portray the Gulf War as a conflict between believers and infidels and to bring Iran into the fray on the side of Iraq.⁴ These developments, and the accompanying changes—in both substance and style—have come to characterize Iran's foreign policy conduct under President Rafsanjani. They suggest that, after suddenly finding out that it had won the Iran-Iraq War through no action of its own, Iran is determined to win the peace, too, by asserting itself as a major regional force for postwar stability in the Persian Gulf.

This report provides a brief analysis of the main elements of the evolving present and likely behavior of Iran in the Persian Gulf region in the near term. This analysis includes a discussion of the changing internal political situation in Iran and the context in which its foreign policy behavior is conducted. The impact of recent events in the former Soviet Union and the implications of these developments for Iran's policy behavior are also briefly discussed. In doing so, the report focuses on several key sets of questions and briefly attempts to answer the dominant policy-relevant issues in each case. These include the following:

- How has Iran reacted to the peacetime U.S. presence in the region, a presence that is relatively small but larger than before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait? How likely is Iran to alter its present posture in the Gulf?
- How does Iran view the evolving security arrangements for the defense of the Arabian Peninsula? What type of a security system would Iran like to see for the region, and how does it envision its own potential role in such arrangements?
- What are Iran's present policies and possible near-term objectives with regard to Iraq?
- What are the implications of the Soviet disintegration for Iranian regional behavior? Will this or other related developments in Iranian-Russian ties affect Iran's posture and future policy calculations in the Persian Gulf region?
- What elements should constitute the basis of the future U.S. policy toward Iran in the next few years?

³"Risk Assessment Information Service (RAIS)," *Business Risks International*, March 5, 1991.

⁴"Iran's Rafsanjani Leads Country Out of Isolation," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 30, 1991, p. 4.

In addition to concentrating on the above and related issues, this report also examines various policy options and alternatives that might be detrimental to regional security prospects.

2. Internal Developments

With the coming to power of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as Iran's powerful executive president, and especially after Iraq attempted to gobble up its own one-time ally, Kuwait, on August 2, 1990, a combination of domestic and regional factors has effectively prompted Iran to follow a more pragmatic and less bellicose course of international behavior. The record so far indicates that this change of course will not substantively deviate from nonalignment and neutrality with regard to the major powers, including the United States. At present and in the foreseeable future, Tehran will judge these powers according to their support for or opposition to Iran's political and geostrategic interests, especially in the Persian Gulf region. Before examining various aspects of Iranian foreign behavior, it is prudent to outline recent domestic political developments in that country, the underlying reasons for this new course of action, and the present status of the regime in Tehran.

The foundations for a major change in Iran's political dispositions were originally laid in July 1988 when Iran agreed to a cease-fire in its war against Iraq. The most far-reaching change, which went almost unnoticed in the West at the time, was that the Ayatollah Khomeyni effectively ceased to be the fountainhead of political decisionmaking in Iran. This had important implications for the balance of factional clerical forces within Iran itself, since Khomeyni's decline inevitably meant that the radical revolutionary groups and other extremists lost any opportunity for significant political influence. This was so precisely because the radical political doctrines of these groups were motivated by and mirrored those of Khomeyni himself.¹ They believed that the war against Iraq had to continue until final victory and that only this conclusion would guarantee the new Islamic era throughout the Islamic world.² In contrast, the more centrist and pragmatic top leaders of Iran had by early 1987 already come to believe in the practical impossibility of Iraq's military defeat.

Their resolve was strengthened by the lack of any tangible success from yet another major Iranian offensive on the outskirts of Basra in the winter of 1986

¹Hunter (1987), p. 79.

²For a summary of positions of the extremist camp on various domestic Iranian issues and foreign policy matters, see Shahgaldian (1989), pp. 52-57.

and 1987.³ In the meantime, Iranian leaders perceived the growing American naval presence in the Persian Gulf as a serious threat, and apparently realized the country was neither militarily nor psychologically prepared for any military confrontation with the United States.⁴ At about this time, minor clashes started to occur between U.S. naval forces and Iran's Revolutionary Guards stationed in the Persian Gulf. Following one of these clashes, on July 3, 1988, the *USS Vincennes* mistook an Iranian civilian passenger plane for an attacking jet and downed it, killing all 290 persons on board.⁵

The shootdown had major internal repercussions for Iran. The moderate camp became convinced that the continuation of the war would thereafter pose a serious threat to the stability, even survival, of the regime. Thus, those who wished to end the armed hostilities against Iraq, led by Rafsanjani, seized upon the dramatic incident, eventually convincing Khomeyni that a cease-fire was the best course to follow. This would also allow Iran to get moving again on its internal agenda.⁶ Among many other developments, this change strongly affected the support bases of the more radical factions within the clerical establishment. For example, these forces were no longer able to exploit the war with Iraq for justifying their Islamic doctrinaire social policies and austere economic measures.⁷ Consequently, the formal governmental apparatus that had been the focus of power and a stronghold of the radical factions found itself almost unable to manage the economy. This and many similar problems led to a series of divisive debates and disagreements within the extremist camp throughout 1988 and in the first half of 1989. Thus, the new political and military circumstances became especially favorable to the clerical politicians belonging to the pragmatist camp; in turn, the latter became more outspoken, visible, and assertive in policy matters.

It was under these circumstances that Khomeyni died on June 3, 1989. Although his death left many ordinary Iranians stunned and uncertain about their future and that of their country, it did not plunge Iran into a chaos.⁸ On the contrary,

³For a comprehensive study of the Iran-Iraq war, see Chubin and Tripp (1988).

⁴For Khomeyni's policy statements on this issue, see *Jomhuriyeh Eslami* (in Persian) May 16, 1988; Rafsanjani's remarks appear in *Iran Times*, April 28, 1988, pp. 2-3.

⁵See "U.S. Downs Iranian Airliner Mistaken for F-14," *New York Times*, July 4, 1988, p. 1, and "Iran F-14s Said to Have Passed a U. S. Ship," *New York Times*, July 8, 1988, p. 1.

⁶This was first pointed out by Sick (1988). Also see Weinrauch (Winter 1989-1990), pp. 15-28.

⁷The disarray among the extremists reached a high point in early September 1988 when the Iranian premier, Mir Hoseyn Musavi, was forced to resign. See *Iran Times*, September 9, 1988, pp. 1, 14.

⁸Long before, the ruling clerics had reportedly prepared elaborate security measures to prevent any possible disturbances by the regime's opponents when Khomeyni died. For example, one such emergency plan was given a trial run in Tehran in early February 1985. The measures included the

Khamenei was named as the new spiritual leader within a few days, while Rafsanjani won the country's presidential election on July 28. In the same election, the constitution was amended by a referendum that reframed the president's power, putting him in effective charge of the executive. Similarly, the office of prime minister and its subordinate apparatus, which served various economic and administrative functions, were abolished altogether and their prerogatives passed to the president.⁹

Since this election, the moderate pragmatists, on the whole, have gradually succeeded in developing their internal political position through carefully constructed alliances with other religious and political leaders. For example, Rafsanjani has strengthened his ties with some economically conservative and centrist power blocs and has reinforced his long-established support bases among the bazaar merchants and government workers.¹⁰ Similarly, Rafsanjani has apparently secured the close cooperation of Ali Khamenei, who has considerably mellowed his originally hard-line positions on various domestic and foreign issues. The two men have often worked as a team. Rafsanjani has also succeeded in drawing into his orbit Khomeini's only surviving son, Ahmad, who had become a popular leader among many centrist and less extremist hard-line factions since the demise of his father.

Even though the more moderate forces have gradually consolidated their positions, they are still often hampered in controlling the political process in Iran. As a result, the Rafsanjani government has faced considerable difficulty in resolving urgent domestic and foreign problems. These include reining in the rampant inflation, which Tehran says is at an annual rate of about 30 percent, although independent economists say it is several times higher; eliminating severe shortages created largely by the war and the earlier nationalization of the private-sector economy; and reconstruction of the war-shattered economy. The urgency has been highlighted, however, by the growing popular realization in Tehran that the gap between the resources Iran commands and what it needs is so wide that it cannot be bridged without foreign assistance.

closure of that city's major airports and positioning of specially trained units on all approaches to the capital. Other armed units were also dispatched to take over major thoroughfares and government ministries in the capital, ostensibly to discourage any possible lawlessness. For details see *Taheri*, 1986, p. 296; also *Kayhan* (London), No. 76, December 12, 1985, p. 23.

⁹For details, see *Iran Focus*, Vol. 2, Nos. 5-8 (May-August 1989).

¹⁰This is indicated by the growing visibility and public prominence of many conservative politicians who have been appointed to many administrative and diplomatic positions since 1989. For a complete list of these appointees, consult *Iran Focus*, Vol. 2, Nos. 1-5 (January-May 1990) and Nos. 2-3 (February-March 1991). Also see *FBIS-South Asia*, February 24 and May 18, 1990; and November 11, 1991.

In the meantime, the hard-liners have continued to publicly contest and often slow down many of the government's reform measures. This is facilitated somewhat by the fact that Rafsanjani must contend with an influential minority of as many as 130 hard-liners in Iran's 270-member parliament, which still wields considerable influence over executive policy. The hard-liners in parliament and the newspapers they control, like *Kayhan* and *Abrar*, have criticized what many describe as "Hashemi's perestroika." This includes Rafsanjani's advocacy of consumerism, his often-stated preference for private enterprise over state-owned management of the economy, his view that it is time for Iran to normalize its ties with the West, and his emphasis on the work ethic over ideology.¹¹

Although clerical rivalries have continued to disrupt Iran's internal situation, it is possible to discern a more or less consistent trend in the internal balance of forces. It should be stated at the outset that if the pragmatists headed by Rafsanjani fail to hold on to power, the prospects for a balanced and enlightened political system will be poor. As mentioned earlier, the most likely contenders for power within the clerical establishment are currently the two extremes of Islamic revolutionary hard-liners on the left and the religious conservatives on the right.¹² The opposition to the current government, however, tends to come from the hard-liners. Throughout 1991 and 1992 they seemed to be frustrated by Rafsanjani's further trimming of revolutionary practices.¹³ In particular, the radical hard-liners want a strongly centralized and government-controlled economic system, which Rafsanjani does not endorse. They also seek various radical and egalitarian social policies—demands that the Council of Guardians, which has to ensure that all laws passed conform with Islamic law, has consistently rejected.¹⁴

¹¹The issue of the work ethic, in particular, has repeatedly caused drawn-out ideological conflicts. Rafsanjani and his supporters have repeatedly called on Iranians to rid themselves of the notion that poor is beautiful; he has argued that Iran's poor men can never be free, remaining forever subject to humiliation and exploitation by other states. Such views, as the radicals have pointed out publicly, are obviously at odds with the tenets upon which Khomeyni built his revolutionary model of power of the dispossessed, strongly emphasizing the happiness and rewards of an afterlife. For Rafsanjani's views on this point, see, for example, his Friday speech of September 29, 1989, *Kayhan* (in Persian), September 30, 1989, pp. 1-2.

¹²Within the context of Iranian politics, conservative clerics are usually true believers on matters of Shia religious doctrine but are often willing to tolerate other opinions on social and economic issues. As a whole, they consider the Islamic Republic well entrenched and argue that the regime should routinize its political processes, abandon revolutionary excesses, address the country's shortcomings, and allow exiles to come home.

¹³Such measures have recently come to include sweeping changes in the makeup of various governmental censorship boards active in the cultural, educational, and artistic fields. Indeed, as a rule, some of the more dogmatic Islamic fundamentalists have been replaced by officials who are younger, better educated, and, at least by comparison with their predecessors, open minded. For a Western report on such trends, see the *New York Times*, August 15, 1990 and May 21 and October 8, 1991.

¹⁴Some of the functions of the Council of Guardians were transferred in 1991 to a newly formed body named the Council for Determination of Exigencies. Even though seats in the new council were

Despite the current weakness of the radicals at the institutional level and their insulation from crucial organs of political decisionmaking, it should be pointed out that the stands of hard-liners remain, in general, well thought out and are intellectually and ideologically attractive to many Iranians. At present, their strength is felt among some semigovernmental organizations and some neighborhood revolutionary committees, especially in the slum areas of Tehran and other major cities.

Although the radicals and other opposition elements of the present government appear too weak to seriously threaten the government, certain underlying factors may yet work in their favor. To begin with, despite Rafsanjani's efforts to keep the economy ticking, he has thus far been unable to bring about the needed socioeconomic improvements. The problems unleashed by inflation, high unemployment, and war-stricken internal refugees also remain largely unsolved. In part, because of these difficulties, the present domestic situation has become even more unsettled than a few years ago.

Indeed, new splits among the Shia hierarchy have appeared concerning the elevation of Khamenei to the status of Grand Ayatollah. Thus far, the open criticism by many senior clergy of the government and the general discontent and economic frustration have resulted in scattered clashes, limited public demonstrations, numerous house arrests, and the emergence of a number of new clerical power centers.¹⁵ The April 1992 elections confirmed earlier indications of a political edifice under considerable and growing domestic strain. While elections were free, the choice of candidates was limited by the Council of Guardians, which "performed its duty decisively in preventing undesirable persons and assisting deserving ones in entering the majlis."¹⁶

Some 1,100 candidates were rejected in this process. Many of them were militant Islamists. The selection process, rather than the election itself, favored the more moderate candidates, enabling Rafsanjani to advance his moderate agenda.

Both the government and its various opposition forces maneuvered themselves into new positions to expand their sources of support and modify their domestic

allocated to representatives of all factions, the conservative-centrist alliance has a clear majority. Later, President Rafsanjani succeeded in becoming its chairman as well.

¹⁵ Among the various reports of rising unrest and public discontent, see *Kayhan* (London), Nos. 382 and 383, December 5 and 12, 1991; *Iran Focus*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2 (November-December 1991); *Iran Times*, November 29 and December 6, 1991; also "Iran Tries to Decentralize Economy," *New York Times*, April 9, 1991, p. 10.

¹⁶ FBIS, NESA, April 2, 1992, p. 37.

and international orientations to further solidify their positions before the elections.¹⁷

¹⁷Responding to growing internal pressures, Rafsanjani rallied in December 1991 against the U.S.-devised peace talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Robed and wearing his traditional white turban, he looked out on delegates to the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Dakar, Senegal, and told them "the continuation of multifaceted *jihad* (holy war), strengthening the *intifada* (uprising) and continuous struggles are the only ways to regain the rights of the oppressed people of Palestine." Overreliance on the arrogant powers, the United States in particular, he said, contradicts the "lofty interests" of the Muslims. A week later, Rafsanjani was in Khartoum, hailing the fundamentalist government of the Sudanese president Omar Hassan Ahmad Bashir and, according to some reports, nailing down an agreement to arm Bashir's military. For details, see "Iran's Rafsanjani Guarding His Political Flanks, Steers a More Militant Course," *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1992, p. 9; also *Iran Times*, Vol. 21, No. 39, December 13, 1991.

3. Attitude Toward American Presence in the Gulf

Since the Islamic revolution of 1978–1979, Iran has often posed acute problems for the United States in the Persian Gulf region and elsewhere.¹

After nearly a decade and a half, these problems still appear far from resolution. The United States has neither been able to develop a stable relationship with the Islamic Republic nor has it been able to oppose it outright. It still appears that, in addition to the dilemmas all revolutions invariably impose, Iran's has presented the United States with particular difficulties, especially in the Persian Gulf region.

Many reasons account for this situation. On one hand, as elsewhere in the Middle East, there has been a tendency in Iran to regard the United States as anti-Islamic and to blame the ills of the region upon western political, military, economic, and sociocultural influences. The perceived experience of American presence and regional policy are often behind such attitudes. Thus, the United States has long ceased to be regarded as the symbol of decolonization and freedom. Rather, it has come to be viewed by large sectors of Iranian and Arab public opinion in various Gulf countries as the legatee of British imperialism and as an interventionist element in local politics.² The negative fallout from the recent Gulf War has also intensified anti-American public sentiments and increased the enormous challenge faced by regional policymakers to engage one another constructively in their attempts for resolving many of the postwar political and military issues in the region.

On the other hand, Iran's behavior toward the foreign presence in the Persian Gulf has necessarily continued to reflect its Islamic character. Despite occasionally registering uncommon rhetorical swings, Iranian policy has been based on the fundamental principles of Khomeyni's political philosophy and is colored to a considerable degree by Iran's historical legacy of interaction with the superpowers. The combination of these elements, together with the general

¹For a detailed analysis of the intricacies of Iran's relations with the United States in the postrevolutionary period, see Bill (1988); see also Rubin (1985), Sick (1985), Hiro (1985), and Ioannides (1984).

²See Eilts (1985), p. 41.

characteristics of all revolutionary regimes, has produced a "historical vision" that is acutely sensitive to great-power rivalries, especially to their occasional military presence in or around Iran.³

Recognizing that the presence of great powers in the vicinity has historically represented a major threat to Iran's territorial integrity and national independence, and faced with such potentially intrusive concerns, successive policymakers in Tehran have firmly refused to associate or identify with any great power blocs or their policies, much less their actual presence in the region. In turn, the rejection of the great powers, framed officially as "neither West, nor East, but Islam," has come to be regarded as the fundamental foreign policy principle of the Islamic Republic.⁴

Opposition to the great powers, however, has never led to the cutoff of oil sales or to a decline in the importation of food, military hardware, and machinery. In time, antisuperpower campaigns, especially the one against the United States, became a central symbol of Iranian freedom and sovereignty. Today, this policy reflects the historically deep-seated quest of successive generations of Iranians to oppose the dependency of their country on superpower protection and goodwill. Thus, the "neither East, nor West" maxim, which is also enshrined in Articles 152 and 154 of the constitution, reflects a sort of "national contract." In view of this reality, it is safe to assert that Iran's body politic will not tolerate any substantial deviation from it for the foreseeable future.

The combination of this phenomenon with the often harsh criticism of U.S. policies around the globe, repeatedly voiced by Iranian leaders in and out of government throughout the past decade, has apparently led a number of observers to conclude erroneously that Iran's hostility to the United States should be viewed as a central component of that country's foreign policy and official ideology and that it will always remain a serious obstacle to normalization. In reality, it is prudent to recognize that many distinct, but unequal, reasons have come to account for Iran's anti-American bias. For one, Iranian leaders have often attempted to make it known that their opposition to the United States is first and foremost a direct consequence of the perceived undue influence the United States exercised in Iran under the Shah and of the imperative to make sure that it will not be repeated in the future.⁵ The implication of this is obvious: "Mischievous and arrogant" U.S. behavior in the region is less important to U.S.-

³See Menashri (1988).

⁴For official Iranian elaborations on this theme, see Mohajeri (1982) and Mohammadi (1987).

⁵For a collection of statements of various Iranian clerical leaders related to this issue, see Mehrabi (1990), pp. 118-245; also Davari-Ardakani (1984) and Ruhani (1982).

Iranian ties than the possibility of future U.S. attempts to limit the political freedom of Iranian decisionmakers.

The foregoing points out the overall policy framework within which Iran has behaved thus far toward the U.S. presence in the Gulf and is likely to continue in the near term. The essential ingredients of this framework include the following.

First, Iranian leaders have repeatedly asserted that if the American presence, no matter how large or small, is ever used in a way that suggests the reassertion of U.S. political influence in Iranian domestic affairs, the Iranian leaders will adamantly resist and do their best to frustrate all attempts.⁶ Indeed, this often underreported but deep-seated Iranian concern about U.S. motivations has characterized most editorials in the Iranian press throughout the postwar period. Given Iran's lingering suspicions of this sort, it is to be expected that any U.S. moves that Tehran might perceive as supportive of various Iranian religious or secular anti-government opposition forces active inside or outside Iran would immediately prompt Iran's Islamic authorities to revert back to their earlier radical opposition to the United States.

Second, despite their harsh criticism of U.S. policies, especially in regard to the Palestinian issue, Iran has not automatically opposed American political, economic, or military undertakings elsewhere in the Middle East or in the Persian Gulf region in the period since Iraq's defeat. Instead, as in the past, Iran is likely to continue judging these initiatives by virtue of their direct or indirect support for or opposition to Iran's basic national interests. Similarly, Iranian decisionmakers tend to view the presence of foreign military forces as an unfortunate feature of the Middle Eastern political reality and blame the region's feeble Arab and non-Arab ruling elites for this situation. Thus, the mere presence of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf has not and is not likely to push Iran into adopting such an extreme anti-U.S. position any time in the foreseeable future as to resort to violence or acts of subversion.

In this connection, possible future Iranian responses should also be judged in light of how Iran has dealt with similar situations. Since 1949, for example, the United States has maintained a small military facility in Bahrain. Close to Iran, on the Gulf, Bahrain's population is some 70 percent Shia Muslim. Iran has occasionally voiced a claim that Bahrain should be one of its provinces—yet has nevertheless refrained from criticizing or condemning the U.S. presence, even in the height of its anti-American fervor of the past years. It should also not be

⁶See, for example, Rafsanjani and Khamenei's remarks to this effect in Tehran's daily newspapers *Keyhan*, April 11 and June 22, 1991; and *Abrar*, March 18, July 6, and August 3, 1991.

forgotten that, ever since the sixteenth century, Iran has been used to witnessing military and economic presence of successive foreign powers—Dutch, Portuguese, and the British—in the Persian Gulf. Realizing that these superior forces were clearly beyond its control, Iran has historically attempted to render them harmless to its sovereignty, as much as it could, by attempting to find common grounds for cooperation in each case.⁷

The swift unfolding of events since August 1990 and the emergence of new power relationships in the Persian Gulf region have in turn pushed Iranian decisionmakers to go beyond delineating their overall policy. At present, Iran is busily hammering out the details of its response to the issue of U.S. presence. Although, thus far, only incomplete outlines of possible future Iranian reactions have emerged, various formal and informal policy utterances coming out of Tehran leave little doubt that Iran's ruling elite is clearly impressed by U.S. determination to act against regional aggression. This has been repeatedly pointed out to vindicate Iran's own position as a victim of Iraqi aggression in the course of the 1980–1988 war with Iraq.⁸

At the same time, and unlike before, the United States has come to be taken very seriously in Tehran, as elsewhere in the Middle East. Torn between historical suspicion of neighboring Arab states and its lingering mistrust of American intentions, Iranian decisionmakers have apparently concluded that the future dangers or benefits of American presence in the immediate region are henceforth going to be substantial and real. This realization has in turn mandated caution, circumspection, and vigilance as indispensable elements in the future conduct of Iranian foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region.

Iranian decisionmakers have also come to recognize that, under the postwar military and political circumstances in the region, their blanket opposition to the U.S. presence makes little sense. In view of this new reality, the Iranian state-controlled media have gradually become much less forceful in their anti-American rhetoric. Thus, the new circumstances have prompted Iranian leaders, in effect, to adopt the religiously sanctioned, and culturally accepted principle of "kiss the hand, if you cannot cut it." It should be remembered that such behavior, widely practiced in everyday interactions, forms an important element

⁷For accounts of Iran's contemporary and historical responses to foreign naval presences in the Persian Gulf, see Masudi (1967 and 1973), Neshat (no date), Ramazani (1972), Wilson (1959), and Marlowe (1962).

⁸Assertions of this nature can be found in various speeches of President Rafsanjani and his foreign minister, Velayati. Some characteristic pieces appear in *Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 3–5; FBIS-NES, *Daily Report*, August 28, 1991; and George Nader, "An Exclusive Interview with Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati," *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 7, No. 5, pp. 6–9.

of the traditional Iranian political *modus operandi* and an operative principle of public conduct in Iran.⁹ As such, it is regarded as an indication of political maturity and flexibility and does not carry a negative connotation. For this and many other reasons, Iranian public opinion has apparently come to accept the Islamic leadership's considerably less bellicose posture toward the United States with more ease than otherwise expected in the West.

In view of the above considerations, Tehran is at present attempting to refine several broad distinctions in its response to the present situation in the Gulf. In this effort, it has come to adopt a multipronged policy of responding differently to each dimension. Some important elements of this policy have thus far become apparent. First, contrary to common expectations, as far as economic and commercial affairs are concerned, Iran apparently sees little reason to oppose or condemn America's present or likely future involvement and presence in the region. Instead, Tehran has publicly supported and is likely to cooperate in efforts to strengthen trade, investment, and other joint economic activities between the local Arab countries of the lower Persian Gulf coast and the United States. The same attitude also applies to Japan and the Western European powers.¹⁰ Indeed, closer cooperation between the local actors and the United States in this sphere seems to be regarded as a potentially positive outcome of the current U.S. presence and as complementary to Iran's economic objectives in the region. Many Iranian leaders seem to believe that such multilateral cooperation will extend the spill-over effects of the American economic presence to southern Iranian islands and seaports and, in time, will lead to an increased American and European presence in the region. Second, American companies will be enticed to relocate to southern Iranian ports if and when the destabilizing effects of internal political, tribal, or boundary disputes in these Sheikdoms would facilitate such relocations. Finally, as the country with the largest coastline in the Persian Gulf, Iran has, at least since the 1950s, maintained that, among the regional players, it should have the greatest say in political affairs of this region. Tehran is consequently opposed to any undue foreign political presence in the region, if that presence is judged to imply the denial of Tehran's conceived leadership role.

⁹For a discussion of contemporary sociocultural and political values and *modus operandi* of Iran's postrevolutionary leadership, see my *Clerical Establishment in Iran*, RAND, R-3788-USDP, June 1989, pp. 25-34.

¹⁰Such views have periodically appeared in the Iranian press in the past few months. See, for example, *Kayhan*, November 18, 1991; *Kayhan Havaei* (weekly) July 21 and August, 16, 1991; *Iran Focus*, Vol. 4, No. 10, November 1991, p. 3. See also Claude Van England, "Iran Looks to Europe to Counter U.S. Influence," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 1991, p. 1.

With due respect to this essential precondition, Iran can be expected to tolerate and in time accommodate with, at least unofficially, U.S. political presence in the area.

4. Gulf Security Arrangements

Since the American-led coalition's victory against Iraq, the United States and its partners have not been alone in pondering the details and weighing the requirements of a number of postwar plans for establishing longer-term security arrangements in the Persian Gulf region. During early 1992, many Iranian leaders expressed opinions that, despite their indefiniteness and occasional divergence from one another, revealed some of the essential elements in the possible future directions of Iranian policy. In other cases, such pronouncements clearly pointed to Iran's priorities, preferences, and preconditions in its calculations about specific aspects of proposed security arrangements. Regarding the proposed security alliance involving the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) together with a symbolic participation of Egypt and especially Syria—the "GCC + 2"—several elements seem to constitute the linchpins of Iranian policy.

To begin with, Iran has repeatedly asserted that the future prospects for all Middle Eastern countries would be bleak without effective approaches to regional arms control, economic cooperation, and a "just solution" to the Palestinian problem. Despite this assertion, Iran's decisionmakers seem united in considering any Western-led collective security arrangement in the Gulf region as little more than a bad joke. To them it is unimaginable that any large coalition of Middle Eastern states, particularly those in the Gulf region, could cooperate effectively under one umbrella organization short of facing a common military threat at least equal to that posed last year by Saddam Hussein.

In addition, Tehran's feeling seems to be that any regional collective security arrangements should have been attempted before, not after, the Iraqi defeat. As one Iranian observer has asserted, "for any such arrangement to succeed, the timing must be such that rewards [for the potential members] precede the burden of compliance [I]n the case of the members of the GCC, the rewards are over and the burden starts; in the case of Egypt and Syria the opposite is true, so at least economically, it must not be wise for the former to reimburse the cost of an enterprise with no imminent threat from a potential aggressor."¹ At the same time, it is inconceivable to Iranian leaders that a viable security system in

¹Quoted in *Seifzadeh*, Spring (1991), p. 101.

the Persian Gulf region can be developed without Iranian consent or participation.

Despite these convictions, Tehran seems to recognize that it lacks credible or effective countermeasures to resist American priorities for devising viable future regional security arrangements. However, various Iranian pronouncements suggest Tehran might indeed come to tolerate any future American-initiated arrangements and live with U.S. military presence in the Gulf in the foreseeable future. The dominant view in Tehran seems, in effect, to be that this presence may not, by itself, pose a threat to Iranian national interests. Instead, as seen from Tehran, the overriding problem posed by an open-ended American military presence in the Gulf is, first, its impact on the correlation of military forces in the Gulf regions, and second, the specific role that U.S. forces might play within such an alliance.

Thus, Tehran has made it known that any security arrangement should not turn out to be a vehicle designed primarily in support of Saudi Arabian interests alone. It has also asserted that if such arrangements end up augmenting the Saudi offensive military capabilities, and/or elevating that country to a new status of power as the latest "regional hegemony," Iran would unquestionably be forced to oppose it actively. To Iranian decisionmakers, the most threatening aspect of this scenario would be Saudi Arabia's attainment of a "carte blanche" to further extend its influence over the small littoral Arab states of the lower Persian Gulf.

As for specific aspects of U.S. military role, Iranian decisionmakers have thus far remained silent publicly. It would seem that they are still waiting to obtain a better sense of the future direction, shape, and form of American assistance. However, it is clear that, for Iranian authorities, the nature of the U.S. force component, plans for prepositioning and stockpiling of heavy U.S. equipment, plans for joint military exercises, and U.S. technical training of Saudi forces represent important military and political issues which should reveal America's "true intentions" in the Gulf region, especially under a new U.S. administration. Even more importantly, Tehran apparently hopes to determine the dimensions of Saudi Arabia's future military ambitions in the region through disclosure of these specificities, before responding accordingly.

Still, if and when Iran decides that the current negotiations between the United States and various Gulf Arab monarchies will not lead to the establishment of Saudi hegemony, and that there may be other tangible payoffs, it might consider joining a regional security arrangement, perhaps as an "associate" member at first. Iran has taken the position that Iran-Saudi Arabia relations must first be

straightened out before Iran can enter any collective security structures. As Rafsanjani stated during a 1991 interview, "our initial view was that bilateral relations with the regional states is what guarantees regional security. And the principal basis of our own presence in collective movements is the good relations between us and those states. If those relations reach a proper stage, naturally we will be present at collective movements."² At any rate, under the present circumstances in the Gulf region, Iran seems to feel it has little role to play in an essentially "Arab security club" where it would stand as the odd man out.

Iranian decisionmakers have appeared to prefer the "GCC + 2" formula over a "GCC + 1" arrangement that would involve Egypt as the only non-Gulf state. Neither of these options, however, is likely to be realized, although "negotiations" continued to drag on through the summer of 1992. While the Gulf states are reluctant to declare the idea dead, they have evidently had serious second thoughts about the feasibility—or desirability—of stationing non-Gulf Arabs in their territory, even in nominal numbers.

Complicating the situation is that most of the Gulf states have problems with each other, and many perceive that the most likely threats could come from within any collective Gulf security arrangement. The smaller Gulf states, for example, are apprehensive about Saudi Arabia's announced plans for enhancing its regional presence. The involvement of non-Gulf forces, they feel, might only add to the area's political and security problems by further empowering the Saudis. Internal conditions in both Egypt and Syria, as well as their own regional ambitions, are also cause for Gulf caution.

From Iran's point of view, the apparent belief is that the presence of "outsider" Arab states in any future security arrangement in the Gulf region would not only dilute the relative weight of Saudi Arabia within the proposed organization but also presumably counterbalance or perhaps reduce the latter's relatively strong political influence in the smaller Arab states of the lower Gulf. In particular, Iran favored Syrian participation, feeling that Syria's presence might turn out to be a sort of insurance policy for Iran; if worse comes to worst, Iran might possibly be able to utilize this presence as a useful "damage control" mechanism to its own interests within the new arrangement.

In this connection, many Iranian leaders tend to view Iran's strategic alliance with Syria of the last few years as providing Iran with a valuable opening into inter-Arab rivalries and possibly exploiting historical Arab regional differences

²The English text of this interview appears in FBIS-NES, *Daily Report*, August 28, 1991, pp. 23-27.

that are temporarily buried in the aftermath of Iraq's military defeat. In addition, Tehran hopes that Syria's membership in a Gulf security arrangement might also prompt the Saudis eventually to view Israel, not Iran, as the primary source of threat to their security and well-being. Despite these considerations, Iran remains opposed to the stationing of either Egyptian or Syrian combat troops in the Persian Gulf.³

At any rate, if Iran's worst fears about Saudi Arabia's military future are realized, Iran can be expected to reverse its present, evolving policy positions toward American-led Gulf security arrangements and gradually adopt a number of radically different courses of action. To begin with, it would attempt to put aside its considerable differences with Iraq and normalize its ties with Saddam Hussein or his successors. The primary goal here would be to strive for the eventual formation of a broad-based anti-Saudi coalition of regional forces. Iran's possible candidates in such an undertaking would include Yemen, Oman, Jordan, and possibly other Arab states, each of which has had long-standing grievances against the Saudi ruling family.

Concerns over Iranian intentions in the Gulf were heightened during mid- and late 1992, with Tehran's assertion of sole sovereignty over the island of Abu Musa in the Straits of Hormuz. The island has been under the dual control of Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirates, and Iran since 1971. Most worrisome, at the end of 1992 reports surfaced alleging that Iran has established SCUD-B and Silkworm sites on Abu Musa. Additionally, Iran is believed to be continuing joint development with North Korea of the SCUD-C missile and financing a longer-range missile, the No-Dong I, with North Korea.⁴

However, as far as the Arab sheikhdoms of the lower Persian Gulf are concerned, Iran will not allow itself to become the glue that might cement Saudi Arabia's relations with these states. Instead, Iran would use all its economic might, as it has attempted to do in the past few years, to wean the GCC member states from the Saudi monarchy. Finally, if worse comes to worst for Iran, its clerical leaders are likely to entirely alter their current strategic postures by entering into a close political and military relationship with China, North Korea, and Pakistan,

³For details, see Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Ali Besharati's remarks during his January 1992 trip to the United Arab Emirates appearing in *Iran Times*, Vol. 21, No. 44, January 17, 1992.

⁴"Iran Prepares Missile Sites on Abu Musa," *MedNews*, December 7, 1992, p. 5.

whereby the latter states would act as a force multiplier. Concurrently, Iran might also be prompted to develop nuclear weaponry of its own.⁵

⁵Various reports about Iran's nuclear intentions, invariably denied by Tehran, have appeared in the Western press. See for example, Elaine Sciolino, "Report Says Iran Seeks Atomic Arms," *New York Times*, October 31, 1991, p. 5.

5. Iran and the Collapse of the USSR

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and its replacement by a number of newly independent republics has inevitably introduced a new and perhaps long-lasting twist to historical Russian-Iranian relations.¹ In response to the fundamental rearrangement of Moscow's international political and military priorities, particularly in Southwest Asia, and at least for the short-term, Iranian authorities have had to rethink many problems and to reconstitute many new instruments in their management of relations with the Russian colossus.

Although only a hazy outline of official Iranian attitudes has thus far emerged, several overriding policy goals have become clearer. In general, Tehran seems to have already adopted a cautious policy of support for the formerly Soviet Asian republics, particularly for Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, and Tajikistan. At the same time, it continues to count on maintaining strong ties with the government in Moscow.² If, as it seems likely, this two-pronged approach comes to constitute the essence of Iranian behavior toward its old and new northern neighbors, such an approach would not only fit well with the current political posture of Moscow but would also be welcomed by most independent-minded former Soviet republics. To a large extent, this behavior is also anchored in several long-term considerations that are likely to affect the future course of Iran-Russia relations directly.

To begin with, Russian interest and involvement in Iranian affairs, unlike that of the United States, preceded the discovery of oil, and will surely outlive its eventual depletion in Iran and in the Persian Gulf region. Iran retains a critical importance for the former USSR and its successor states because of its large size and population; gas, oil, and other mineral wealth; and its strategic location. Its ethnic groups, several of which constitute the dominant elements in the southern republics, also make Iran an important factor in Russia's management of its ties to these potentially independent actors. Thus, to the extent that the collapse of Soviet central power signifies an end to Russia's traditional imperial ambitions in

¹For contemporary Russian-Iranian relations, see Lenczowski (1972), Yodfat (1984), Khalilzad (1984), and Atkin (1986).

²For Iranian policy statements about developments in the former USSR, see *Iran Times*, September 6 and 13, 1991; Patrick E. Tyler, "Iran is Cautious on Soviet Muslims," *New York Times*, September 19, 1991, p. 13; *Kayhan* (Tehran), December 24, 1991; and *Resalat* (Tehran), January 3, 1992.

Iran, Moscow is more than likely to come to appreciate a closer relationship with a strong, friendly, and prosperous Iran.

As seen from Moscow, the future benefits of having a friendly Iran would by far outweigh any future liability. There are many reasons for this attitude. For one, the August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow has already blurred the lines on the map. Suddenly, even the Russian-speaking population is no longer hiding its unwillingness to carry the burden of the Central Asian part of the Soviet empire. Although this reorientation has just begun, if Russia casts off that burden entirely, this region, together with Azerbaijan, will feel deserted and will look for substitute affiliations. This process has already started in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and parts of the Caucasus. One possible move for various local leadership elites in these countries would be to join and strengthen the camp of Islamic fundamentalism or, alternatively, to embrace the revival of pan-Turkism and exclusivist ethnic nationalism. Such possible developments would necessarily drag Iran and, to a lesser extent, Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia into a complex web of internal nationality conflicts and external rivalries in that region.

Faced with these future possibilities, Russia would prefer to see a cooperative Iran. More than any other Middle Eastern power, Iran could be in a position to significantly affect future developments, at least in its bordering formerly Soviet republics. In the process, Iran could come to play a positive role in support of the construction of viable partnerships with the Muslims of the former USSR and thus help eliminate relationships of one-sided dependence in those regions.

Finally, there are sound economic reasons for cooperation between Iran, Russia, and the newly independent republics. Despite its current difficulties, Russia is still in a position to satisfy many of Iran's short- to medium-term industrial and technological needs during its current drive for reconstruction. Iran, in turn, is well-poised to dramatically increase the volume of Iranian goods passing through the former USSR. It can also satisfy the most immediate economic needs of some of the republics.

While the overall course of Russian-Iranian relations in the coming years will be determined largely by these factors, several recent developments in the former Soviet Union may bring Iranian decisionmakers face to face with even more pressing policy considerations. For one thing, as the prospects of an economic catastrophe, expected in many parts of the former USSR, loom larger, it may radically affect the essential settlement patterns and thus the demographic character of the southern borderlands. Economic collapse and widespread shortages, for example, may prompt a large number of Azerbaijanis, Turkmen,

Tajiks, and other Muslims to cross the border into Iran as refugees. Iran has followed developments among these nationalities in Transcaucasia and Central Asia with immense interest as the patron and source of their culture for over 15 centuries, and it can hardly remain indifferent to their plight.

If Iran eschews revolutionary goals in favor of pragmatic state interests, it may be able to somehow deal with the resulting economic chaos and political instability in those regions. But, if pragmatic considerations come to be mixed with more encompassing historical claims, religious affinities, or revolutionary fervor, a stable basis for peace in that region and normalcy with Russia will be elusive indeed. Thus, the two-edged sword of nationality issues in Central Asia and Transcaucasia may bring Russia and Iran into either conflict or commonality of interests, depending on how Russia and these regions evolve in the future.

A second pressing policy consideration facing Iranian leaders in the wake of political changes in the former USSR revolves around the future of Soviet arms supplies to Iran. Since 1986, but especially after June 1989 when high-level contacts resumed between Iranian and Soviet leaders, Iran has increasingly sought to procure Soviet weapons.³ Having come to a dead end in their efforts to import American weaponry, it is not surprising that the Iranian leaders would come to regard their northern neighbor as a major source of their needed military hardware.

Thus, in November 1992, Iran received the first of three Kilo-class submarines at its new naval base at Chah Bahar, on the Gulf of Oman. The purchase price of the three submarines, reportedly equipped with advanced SA-16 surface-to-air missiles, was well over \$1 billion and does not include an additional \$600 million in future promised arms transfers.⁴

Despite the alarmist forecasts of some Western and Arab states about the dangerously destabilizing effects of Russian weaponry deliveries to Iran, there are many limiting factors to the continuation of this relationship. For one, the continuing disruptions in Russia's heavy industrial sector, administrative and labor chaos, and ongoing official efforts to convert large numbers of Soviet arms production factories to consumer production facilities have opened to question Moscow's ability to maintain a steady flow of armaments to Iran. It is even conceivable that a major portion of Russian arms deliveries to Iran may dry up. The likely continuation of this development could therefore directly affect Iran's

³For a list of Iran's extensive military purchases from Russia, see *Middle East Defense News*, Vol. 4, No. 23, September 16, 1991.

⁴"Iran Acknowledges More Kilos," *MedNews*, December 7, 1992, p. 5.

entire defense arrangement. Prompted by this and many other developments discussed earlier in this report, authorities in Tehran would sooner or later be forced to review and reassess Iran's military posture and strategy for the post-Cold War era. At present, there seem to be deep divisions within the leadership over how to respond to these unraveling events. Alternatives might include entering into a long-term military relationship with China or shifting and cutting forces. But as long as the outcomes of events in Russia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf region are uncertain, Iran's basis for planning its future political and military directions will remain similarly unclear.

6. Iranian Policy and the Postwar Situation in Iraq

Saddam Hussein's military defeat and the prospects for new political and security relationships in the Persian Gulf region have combined to push Iran to adopt considerable tactical flexibility and pragmatism toward the issue of the future of Iraq. Far from being a reversal of previous policy, this new moderation is essentially an attempt to achieve its regional goal of becoming a key player in the eventual settlement of Iraq's destiny without compromising Iran's fundamental foreign policy objectives. The result is the emergence of a multipronged policy that seeks to secure maximum possible advantage from the new situation while advancing a longer-term agenda for Iraq.¹

On the surface, the postwar period has thus far produced few new or startling developments in the complex arena of Iran's relations with Iraq. The strategic aims of both sides have also remained essentially unchanged: Iraq's is to force or cajole Iran into an acceptable peace; Iran's is to topple Saddam Hussein. And since neither aim has been achieved, the deep-seated enmity between the two states has remained unabated. However, despite Iranian hopes for an Iraq bereft of Hussein and the Ba'th party, Iran has apparently altered a major policy theme: It is no longer willing to actively push for the establishment of an Islamic regime in Baghdad. Instead, Iranian decisionmakers have let it be known that they prefer to see a militarily weaker but territorially unified Iraq led by a democratic new government.²

At the same time, Iranian leaders seem to be unified in asserting that Iraq should not be severely weakened to the advantage of its other neighbors. Here, Iranian mistrust has been directed in particular at Turkey. In view of the repeated Turkish air and ground assaults inside Iraqi territory following the Gulf War, Tehran is deeply anxious to prevent an expanded Turkish role in Iraq's oil-rich Kurdistan and fears that Turkey might, in the future, be tempted to occupy and

¹For discussion of Iran-Iraq relations in the modern period, see Chubin (1988), Ismael (1982), Khadduri (1988), and Tahir-Kheili (1983).

²For Iranian assertions to this effect, see Alan Cowell, "Iran's Leader Calls on Hussein to Quit," *New York Times*, March 9, 1992, p. 6; Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Iran Organizes and Arms Rebels Fighting Hussein," *New York Times*, March 20, 1992, p. 1; and Judith Miller, "Leader of Iraqi Shiites Says Rebellion Has Lost Ground," *New York Times*, March 29, 1992, p. 6; *Middle East Consulting Associates*, March 14, 1991, p. 2; *Ettela'at* (Tehran), April 20, 1991; and *Bayan* (Tehran), June-July 1991, pp. 18-22.

annex the region.³ This anxiety has grown considerably within the Iranian public amid various reports about Turkish support for some Turkish-speaking separatist Iranian elements.⁴ In the process, sources of historical strains in Iran-Turkey relations have also become exacerbated.

Since Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, Iran has remained equally skeptical about the Kurdish quest for autonomy in northern Iraq. Although, as in the past, it is likely to continue supporting Kurdish partisans fighting against Baghdad, especially those sympathetic to the Kurdish Democratic Party, the establishment of a genuinely autonomous or independent Kurdish state remains unacceptable to Iran. Although this is unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future, Tehran seems to be convinced that such a prospect would in time trigger troubles in the entire Kurdish-inhabited region, including areas in Iran.

Despite these fears, Iran's large-scale assistance to Kurdish refugees in Iraq is likely to continue unabated. The provision of food, medicine, and shelter not only shows the generosity and humaneness of Iran's government, to the West and to its own citizens, but it is viewed as a means of cementing friendly relations with a large sector of the Iraqi population, if and when they return to their homeland. In the meantime, there is some evidence that Iran is also moving some of the Kurdish and Arab refugees to northwestern Iran, near its Caucasian borders. If such moves turn out to be designed for the permanent settlement of the Kurdish element in and around Maku, Khoy, Urumiyeh, and similar towns, they will considerably weaken the significance of the Turkic-speaking element in Iran's northern borderlands.

As for the continuing Shia problem in Southern Iraq, several factors have come to determine the nature and extent of Iran's involvement in this arena. First, there are indications that, as early as in mid-March 1991, the Iranian authorities came to realize that the great opportunity for establishing an Islamic government in Baghdad had already passed because of coalition forces' refusal to support the anti-Saddam groups.⁵ Iran also recognized that the pro-Iranian and religious elements were internally fractured and had a limited influence among Iraq's Shia

³For coverage of Turkey's raids inside Iraq and its involvement in the Kurdish affair in northern Iraq, see Sam Cohen, "Turkey Makes Deal With Iraqi Kurds on Border Security," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 1991, p. 5; *International Herald Tribune*, July 13 and August 3-10, 1991; *Le Monde*, August 3, 10, and 13, 1991; and *Washington Post*, August 4, 1991.

⁴Such reports have come to be widely debated in various Iranian press organs; see for example *Kayhan* (weekly), November 14, 1991 and January 16, 1992; *Iran Times*, November 8 and 15, 1991; and *Resalat*, December 4, 1991.

⁵This was openly admitted by an Iranian-supported Iraqi Shia religious figure based in Tehran. See Miller, *New York Times*, March 29, 1991, op. cit.

population and that this population felt more Arab than Shia.⁶ Indeed, Iranian leaders have publicly admitted that, during the entire course of the Iran-Iraq war, the indigenous spiritual leadership of Iraqi Shias, except for a few individuals, did not even follow the religious instructions of Iranian ayatollahs based in Qom or Mashad, much less heed their political commands.

Pragmatic evaluation of this and many other factors has therefore pushed Iran to instruct its supporters, including Mohammad Bakr al-Hakim, the leader of the Tehran-based "Supreme Assembly of Islamic Republic of Iraq," to join other anti-Saddam opposition groups in exile and call for a pluralistic government in Baghdad.⁷ In view of this situation, Tehran is endeavoring to maintain relations with as many Iraqi domestic actors as it can. Meanwhile, in the absence of more satisfactory alternatives, Tehran tends to back the formation of a coalition government in Iraq, which would involve the residual elements of the present Ba'thist leadership, as long as Tehran's own supporters are guaranteed full representation.⁸

Despite its current pragmatism and tactical flexibility toward the issue of Iraq's future, Iran's leadership remains convinced that Saddam's military machine still poses a long-term threat to Iran. For this and many other reasons discussed earlier, Iran can be expected to engage in an all-out campaign to strengthen its armed forces. Iran's first priority in this effort seems to be the rapid modernization of its air force, followed closely by building up its naval power in the Persian Gulf.

Finally, as noted earlier, Iranian leaders also believe that they have a natural right and prerogative to become key players in future Iraqi developments. As such, they seem to consider their present policy as representing Iran's minimal demands, which should be recognized by outside powers and Iraq's neighbors as legitimate. For the continuation of such "moderation," Iranian leaders also in effect expect to receive many "compensatory" benefits from the West, particularly from the United States.

⁶See John Kifner, "Iraqi Refugees Tell U.S. Soldiers of Brutal Repression," *New York Times*, March 26, 1991, p. 1; Elaine Sciolino, "Iraq's Shiite Majority," *New York Times*, March 30, 1991, p. 4.

⁷See London's *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (in Arabic), February 11, 1991, p. 6; also Miller, *New York Times*, March 29, 1991, op. cit.

⁸See Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Says Hussein Near Victory Over Shiite Rebels," *New York Times*, March 20, 1991, p. 1.

7. Basic Trends and Policy Implications

The war against Iraq and the looming prospects of further political and economic disruptions in what remains of the former USSR have combined to present Iran with a long-sought opportunity of once again becoming a key regional player. As explained earlier, Iran will surely seize upon this opportunity, if for no other reason than that Iranian leaders have always considered their involvement in the larger regional issues to be a natural right and prerogative.

In general, if Iran continues to eschew its revolutionary goals in favor of pragmatic state interests, it may be able in the coming years to secure many possible advantages in the Persian Gulf region, as well as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the southern regions of the former USSR. In the process, it may somehow manage to deal with the expected economic chaos and political instability in these regions, thus asserting its claim to be a key force for stability there. Alternatively, if pragmatic considerations come to be mixed with more encompassing historical claims, religious sentiments, or revolutionary attitudes, a stable basis for regional tranquillity with Russia, Turkey, and/or Iraq and Saudi Arabia would be elusive indeed.

Thus far, the linchpin of Iran's policy appears to be taking the maximum possible advantage of new economic, political, and strategic circumstances and advancing its own agenda. Within this process, the following constitute Tehran's essential priorities:

- Accelerating the policy of bridge-building with the West and bringing Iran back into the world community
- Rebuilding the shattered economy through free trade and private enterprise and making good on the government's long-promised socioeconomic and political reforms at home
- Mending fences with its Arab neighbors, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the lower Gulf states
- Maintaining a cautious policy of support for the emergent formerly Soviet republics, while strengthening ties with whatever regime comes on the top in Moscow.

In addition to these policy elements, Iranian decisionmakers seem united in pursuing a long-range policy of rebuilding their comparatively weak military machine, with the intention of eventually making their armed forces at least equal in conventional strength to any other major regional power. Moreover, some recent evidence indicates that at least some of Iran's leaders may also be intent on developing nuclear weapons.

To a considerable extent, the policy parameters within which Iran is likely to behave in the international arena will largely be determined by two interrelated factors: first, the nature of Iran's future relations with the United States and, second, internal political and economic developments in Iranian society. In the first instance, if the American presence in the Persian Gulf region is ever used to reassert U.S. military or political influence inside Iran, Tehran will adamantly resist and seek to frustrate that policy. Despite rhetorical assertions, however, Iran will not automatically oppose American policies in the Persian Gulf, elsewhere in the Middle East, or in the formerly Soviet republics. Instead, it will judge these policies by virtue of their direct or indirect support for or opposition to Iran's perceived national interests. The mere presence of U.S. forces in these regions is thus unlikely to push Iran into adopting a hysterical anti-U.S. position whereby it would resort to violence or acts of subversion.

Because of Iraq's defeat, and for a long time to come, Iranian leaders are also likely to remain clearly impressed by U.S. determination to act against regional aggression. Thus, unlike before, the United States will be taken very seriously in Tehran in the coming years. Torn between its historic suspicion of Russia and Turkey, and together with its lingering mistrust of U.S. intentions, Iran is likely to consider the future dangers or benefits of American presence in the region to be substantial and real. This is likely to mandate caution, circumspection, and vigilance as indispensable elements in the future conduct of Iranian regional foreign policy. Finally, Tehran seems to recognize clearly that, under new circumstances, its traditional blanket opposition to the U.S. presence and policies in that part of the world no longer makes any sense. Meanwhile, Iranian public opinion might gradually come to accept the necessity of normalcy in relations with the United States with more ease than expected in the West. But as long as the outcome of nationality conflicts in the southern regions of the former USSR remain uncertain, and as long as long-term security arrangements in the Persian Gulf have not acquired the necessary shape, form, or meaning, Iran's basis for planning its future political and military direction will remain similarly unclear.

At the same time, several possible developments in the region could lead Iran to reverse its evolving present policy positions toward the United States and its security partners. First, if the U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf region comes to

be regarded in Tehran as a "design" for beefing up Saudi Arabia's offensive military capabilities and/or elevating that desert kingdom to a new status of power as the regional hegemony, it would inevitably plunge Iran into adopting radically different courses of action. Iran would necessarily adopt an even harsher anti-U.S. policy should a regional U.S. ally, such as Turkey or, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, start exerting undue influence in places like Azerbaijan or Turkmenistan. If such a scenario came to pass, Iran's alternative courses of action might range from attempts to form a broad anti-Saudi coalition of regional forces involving Jordan, Yemen, Oman, and others or to enter into a close political and military relationship with China, North Korea, and Pakistan. Such circumstances might also prompt Iran to concentrate its attention on Turkey as a potential threat.

As stated earlier, Iran's future foreign policy is also likely to be determined by political and economic developments on the domestic front. Despite impressive growth in Iranian GNP during the past several years, Tehran is grappling with a host of domestic challenges that are awaiting urgent policy decisions. These include rebuilding the shattered economy, repairing damages caused by the eight-year war with Iraq, and modernizing the armed forces. In view of the enormous magnitude of the internal problems facing Iran, these priorities have been the subject of sharp political disagreements in Tehran. Thus, the Rafsanjani government's success in resolving domestic problems is likely to determine whether and in what form the clerical regime survives in Iran. At present, Iran is undergoing a transitional period, where the ingredients of political radicalism compete daily with a quest for normalcy and political moderation. But if Western assistance in Iran's reconstruction efforts and reestablishment of diplomatic ties remains largely frustrated, Iran's present rulers may not be able to sustain their relatively moderate foreign-policy posture much longer.

U.S. Policy Toward Iran

Ever since April 1980, five months after the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized by Iranian militants and its American personnel were taken hostage, official U.S.-Iranian relations have been nonexistent. In view of this, it is very difficult to specify desired U.S. policy toward Iran. At any rate, the emergence of a radically new security environment in the Persian Gulf region and in the former USSR mandates the consideration of various steps that would constitute a prudent U.S. policy toward Iran.

First, the United States should take the initiative and seriously consider reestablishing some kind of working diplomatic relationship with Iran.

Washington should also view the current political atmosphere in U.S.-Iranian relations as "transitional" and begin laying the groundwork for eventual resumption of ties. Toward this end, it should reaffirm publicly, and through intermediary third parties, that any future U.S.-led security arrangements in the Persian Gulf would not be directed against Iran.

Second, the U.S. government should pledge to assist in economic reconstruction efforts currently under way in Iran in return for Tehran's complete abandonment of all hostile acts against the United States. At the same time, Washington should continue working toward the mutual removal of long-standing snags in bilateral relations. For example, it could promise lifting the economic and trade sanctions currently in force against Iran and unfreezing Iranian assets in the United States, if Iran further moderates its attitude toward the U.S. presence in the Gulf.

Finally, the U.S. should recognize that the Rafsanjani government has already taken the path of moderation in its internal socioeconomic and foreign regional activities, and that the present political environment in Iran requires comparable goodwill gestures and tangible payoffs from the United States. In the absence of such U.S. responses, the government in Tehran will be seriously weakened, and its influence over radical elements may not be sustainable over the coming years.

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