

## American Support of the Iran-Iraq War: A Pyrrhic Victory

The Iran-Iraq War lasted from 22 September 1980 until 20 July 1988, cost over \$1 trillion, and resulted in anywhere from five hundred thousand to one million deaths.<sup>12</sup> This conflict caused irreparable damage to both countries and the aftershocks are still felt today. But this devastating war is often overlooked; overshadowed by the 1991 Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless this war is worth reexamining. This paper seeks to answer how heavily the United States supported both parties of the war, and whether its' long-term goals were achieved. Evidence suggests that while America publicly touted a neutral stance, it instead very clearly tilted to each country throughout the conflict. Furthermore, given over twenty years of distance and perspective, the United States' intended strategic outcomes in tampering with the war were never realized. If anything American involvement catalyzed long-term repercussions that are still grappled with today. A careful examination will support the above reasoning and draw out a cautionary lesson for future American foreign policy.

There are many facets to the Iran-Iraq war, and this essay cannot adequately cover all of it. Instead the focus will remain centered upon the United States and its' involvement in the war. This examination will begin with a brief overview of the eight year war and then move into a deeper examination of US relations with Iraq and Iran respectively. Each topic is covered chronologically, giving the necessary background and then following the developments throughout the war. Then factors which influenced America's position in the conflict will be explained, and the concluding segment will consolidate the analysis and connect the lesson of this conflict to current events.

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<sup>1</sup> Iran Chamber, [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/iran\\_iraq\\_war/iran\\_iraq\\_war3.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/iran_iraq_war/iran_iraq_war3.php)

<sup>2</sup> Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War* (Psychology Press, 1989), 1

Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 for many reasons. First, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and subsequent rise of Shia radicals in the country was seen as a grave threat to Saddam Hussein's Sunni secular Ba'athist regime in Iraq. Second, it was a power-play by Saddam to obtain control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. This river nominally sets the border between Iraq and Iran and serves as the sole outlet to the Persian Gulf. There had been previous struggles over how much of the territory was controlled by each state which had been temporarily resolved in 1975 with the Algiers Agreement, but Saddam saw this war as a chance to regain the advantage. Lastly, it was a direct challenge to Iran for uncontested regional hegemony. Saddam was best described as "motivated by fear, opportunism, and overconfidence, a mixture of defensive and offensive calculations...Iraq's decision to resort to force was a compound of a preventive war, ambition and punishment for a regional rival."<sup>3</sup> Major histories of the war all tend to agree that Saddam was the clear aggressor and imposed the war upon Iran.

Rather than describe each individual battle, it is better to divide the war into broad characterized segments. From the invasion in 1980 until 1982 Iraq's military had the upper hand and wreaked havoc inside Iran's borders. By mid-May of 1982 Iran rallied and drove the invading army back into Iraq, then took the ill-fated initiative to push across the border and continue the war. From 1982 to 1984 the war was largely a stalemate, with devastating losses on both sides. From 1984 through the end of the conflict the ground war remained stagnant, but two new developments arose at this time. First, both parties began bombing raids on cities and caused massive civilian casualties. Secondly, Iraq began targeting cargo ships moving through the Persian Gulf. This would escalate from both sides into what was later called the Tanker War.

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<sup>3</sup> Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War*, 39

While this is by no means an all-encompassing history of the Iran-Iraq War, it provides the necessary context needed for the purposes of this work.

Prior to discussing the details of the conflict, it is important to discuss the individual relationships of the involved countries. US-Iraqi relations were severed by the Iraqis in 1967, following the Six Day War.<sup>4</sup> Full diplomatic relations were not restored until November of 1984<sup>5</sup> in the middle of the Iran-Iraq conflict. Curiously, the United States did establish a special-interests section within the Belgian Embassy in Baghdad in 1972. The official reasoning for this is not explicitly stated, but it does not appear to be a coincidence that the USSR and Iraq signed a Treaty of Friendship shortly before the reopening of US diplomatic channels.<sup>6</sup> Presumably US diplomats at the time sought to counter Moscow's growing and uncontested influence within Iraq. America was nominally neutral at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, but documentation proves that it supported Iraq as early as 1981. In March of that year, "the US State Department lifted a freeze of five Boeing planes to Iraq that could easily be fitted to carry troops."<sup>7</sup> The United States tilted further to the Iraqi camp in February of 1982 when it excluded Iraq from its list of terrorist-sponsoring states,<sup>8</sup> thus allowing for economic and military aid to be delivered freely. Iraq's military advances into Iran were halted in May 1982 when the Iranian army pushed the invading forces back onto Iraqi soil. In June of that same year, a National Security Decision Directive was produced which included the statement that authorized "whatever was necessary and legal to prevent Iraq from losing the war with Iran."<sup>9</sup> One can assume that the reversal in Iraq's military successes helped encourage America's shift from neutrality. By December of

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State Country Page – Iraq, <http://history.state.gov/countries/iraq>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Country Studies – the Soviet Union and Iraq, <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/82.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Timmerman, *Death Lobby*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 80

<sup>8</sup> Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*, (St. Martin's Press 1989), 80-81

<sup>9</sup> Affidavit of Howard Teicher (Case No. 93-241, US District Court - Southern District of Florida)

1983 Iraq had won the United States over to the point that Donald Rumsfeld was sent as a special US presidential representative to visit with Saddam Hussein. Rumsfeld also met with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz, and Rumsfeld's personal notes from that event state that "the US had no interest in an Iranian victory; to the contrary, we would not want Iran's influence expanded at the expense of Iraq." Furthermore, "the behavior of Iran...is unacceptable."<sup>10</sup> He also ironically stated that "having a whole generation of Iraqis and Americans grow up without understanding each other had negative implications and could lead to mix-ups."<sup>11</sup>

Starting with Rumsfeld's visit in late 1983, the United States definitively chose their preferred combatant in the Iraq-Iran conflict. Full diplomatic relations were restored in November of 1984, and by December the United States began providing Iraq with military intelligence. One single transaction from 1984 truly exemplifies how partisan the United States had become; the sale of helicopters by Bell, an American company. Bell sold 20-25 helicopters to Iraq with the promise that they would not be retrofitted or modified for military use. America accepted this explanation and green-lighted the sale. The main issue here was that Bell sold the helicopters directly to Iraq's Ministry of Defense.<sup>12</sup> The arms trade and US support were no longer being concealed; it had become an open secret to anyone who was looking closely.

In an unlikely but most helpful fashion, the United States also began throwing huge sums of cash to Iraq through a food credits program. On paper, the US was merely giving credit to Iraq to purchase American food. In actuality, however, this credit program was "an elegant way of helping Baghdad without dipping into the State Department's foreign aid budget."<sup>13</sup> There is

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<sup>10</sup> Personal notes of Donald Rumsfeld, 1983

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Affidavit of Howard Teicher

<sup>13</sup> Timmerman, *The Death Lobby*, 126.

infinitely less oversight for agricultural aid and credits, and thus Washington was able to covertly provide much-needed economic relief to Iraq. Iraq could then redirect its limited funds towards bolstering its war-making capabilities instead of having to worry about purchasing wheat and other food items.

US-Iranian relations were much rockier; having deteriorated rapidly after the 1953 American-sponsored overthrow of Muhammad Mossadeq. The “American” Shah, Mohamed Reza Shah Pahlavi, was put in power by the US following this coup. Reza Shah ruled for the next two decades, drifting further and further towards a restrictive and stifling authoritarian rule. Temper and resentment against the Shah, his security forces, and America finally boiled over and resulted in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. These two events embarrassed America greatly on the international stage and that sting was still fresh when the Iran-Iraq War erupted. On this end, therefore, it is fairly easy to ascertain why the US was not keen on facilitating an Iranian victory. Moving from words to actions, the United States increasingly became directly involved in the Iran-Iraq conflict as time went on. Following the Islamic Revolution, the United States emplaced a strict arms embargo on Iran (Operation Staunch).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, anti-revolution officers sabotaged equipment within the military.<sup>15</sup> These events combined to put the Iranian military at a distinct disadvantage for the ensuing war. The United States had partnered closely with Iran and the Shah prior to 1979, and had delivered countless amounts of weapons and military technology. Post-1979 the Iranians were cut off from US supplies and had to purchase spare parts and equipment on the black market, with the addition of a stiff price markup.<sup>16</sup> This had a direct effect on Iran’s military capabilities; they

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security*, (Jane’s Publishing, 1987), 79

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

were forced to spend significantly more on arms and parts, and the used black-market weapons were much more likely to malfunction.

Iran's luck turned from bad to worse in April of 1983 when the US Embassy in Beirut was bombed. Over 200 Americans were killed, the most deadly attack abroad that the United States had ever withstood. Shortly after this disaster the US intelligence community determined that the perpetrators of the bombing had links back to Iran.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, "halting the spread of the Iranian revolution...was no longer an abstract concern, it had become a top priority."<sup>18</sup> This single event decisively pushed the US into the Iraqi camp, and US officials subsequently "launched 'an interagency effort, with the participation of Defense, CIA, and State,' to help Iraq."<sup>19</sup> The massive scope of the agencies involved clearly shows the intensity with which America was pursuing revenge against Iran.

By 1984 Iran's military had repelled the Iraqi belligerents and pushed even deeper into Iraqi territory. This rapid change in balance alarmed the superpowers, which led to increased support from the United States and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the Iranian advances spurred the Iraqis to begin implementing chemical weapons. Unfortunately the international community, predominantly as a result of American efforts, was slow and soft when confronting the chemical issue. The US had plenty of evidence dating back to 1979 that Iraq was building and preparing for the production and use of chemical weapons, but no action was taken. In 1984 US intelligence intercepted an Iraqi message which boldly declared that "the invaders should know that for every harmful insect there is an insecticide capable of annihilating it whatever their

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<sup>17</sup> Timmerman, *The Death Lobby*, 129

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130

number and Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide.”<sup>20</sup> The strong rhetoric makes it all too apparent that the Iraqis were openly and proudly using chemical weapons to decimate the Iranian fighters. As a result of the previous events discussed and the personal stances of the American government, Washington turned a blind eye to these attacks. Indeed, DIA analyst W. Patrick Lang would later write that “the use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern. What Mr. Reagan’s aides were concerned about was that Iran not break through to the Fao peninsula and spread the Islamic Revolution to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.”<sup>21</sup> When the issue of chemical weapons came up within the United Nations, Secretary of State George Schultz sent a cable giving explicit instructions to the US delegate to the UN on how to best frame the American response to the chemical weapon issue, and to “work to develop general Western position in support of a motion to take ‘no decision’ on Iranian draft resolution on use of chemical weapons by Iraq.” He also directed to vote in favor of the resolution only if it received “broad support and sponsorship”<sup>22</sup> from other countries. Furthermore, Schultz declared that the US delegation should emphasize that “the UN Human Rights Commission is an inappropriate forum for matters dealing with chemical weapons.”<sup>23</sup> The American bias at this stage is quite apparent; the United Nations is of course the best venue to address the employment of chemical weapons. US attempts to halt this process were ostensibly a ploy to silence the Iranian claims and aid the Iraqis.

Washington iced out Iran even further in subsequent years. Tehran found a cold shoulder even when they tried to help. In June of 1985 TWA 847 was hijacked by Hezbollah, in the hopes of gaining the release of Shia prisoners. Iran intervened and expressed its desire to resolve the

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<sup>20</sup> US Cable from William Eagleton, Document 41, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/>

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Tyler, “Officers Say U.S. Aided Iraq in War Despite Use of Gas,” *New York Times*, 18 Aug. 2002

<sup>22</sup> National Security Archive, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/iraq47.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

situation, but the United States refused to acknowledge this. Indeed, Iranian president Rasfanjani “directed (an) ambassador to pressure Hezbollah to release the hostages”, and this act would eventually result in the successful diffusion of the situation.<sup>24</sup> Despite these overtures, Americans remained unresponsive and frigid towards them. In President Reagan’s 1985 speech addressing the hijacking incident, Iran was not even mentioned once.

Moving to the latter years of the conflict, the Iran-Contra arms transfer was a watershed moment in the Iran-Iraq saga. Proper analysis and facts are rarely employed when the affair is discussed, however. Reagan did not give military arms to the newly-formed Khomeini regime. He was not in collusion with the Revolutionary Iranian government; rather Iran-Contra was a third-person deal between the Israelis and some moderate Iranians opposed to the ruling regime with the hinted condition that some hostages might be released upon transfer of the arms. In fact, the Americans did not seek out the deal to begin with, and it was initially met with hesitance and skepticism by the Reagan administration. Most warmed to the idea after some time, however. Secretary of Defense Weinberger referenced the plan in his personal diary, stating that he “met with Colin Powell (and Richard) Armitage re: NSC plan to let Israelis give Iranians 50 HAWKS (missiles) and 3300 TOWs (missiles) in return for 5 hostages.”<sup>25</sup> In a more disturbing note, Presidential Finding 1-17 at one point stated “if all of the hostages are not released after the first shipment of 1000 weapons, further transfers would cease.”<sup>26</sup> The cavalier manner in which the no-strings distribution of 1000 destructive heavy missiles is disturbing, and again highlights how indifferent Washington had become to ending the war.

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<sup>24</sup> TritaParsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, (Yale University, 2007), 115

<sup>25</sup> Secretary of Defense Weinberger Personal Diary, Document 14, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/>

<sup>26</sup> Presidential Finding 1-17, Document 13, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/>



As noted, Iran-Contra was largely pushed by Israel. Then Prime Minister Shimon Peres told Reagan in September of 1986 that “Israel and the US need to establish a broader strategic relationship with Iran.”<sup>27</sup> Israel’s interests are easily explained by their old concept of periphery doctrine; essentially to establish positive relations with countries bordering the Arab world to balance power.<sup>28</sup> “Israel was looking for inroads to the new regime...based on the assumption that Iran and Israel would continue to need one another as they faced a hostile Arab world.”<sup>29</sup> This courtship was not one-sided, Iran desperately sought out Israel for direct aid as well as for back-channels into the United States. One diplomat was quoted as saying to an Israeli that “if Iran wins this war we shall not forget to thank who helped us...you will witness a dramatic change in Tehran’s position towards Israel.”<sup>30</sup> Before the nuclear issue of contemporary times, a partnership between Iran and Israel made sense. Both states were surrounded by unfriendly countries, and both made numerous alliances and arms deals to secure their futures. Ultimately the Iran-Contra affair would become a public scandal, however, and both the Iranian moderates and the Americans involved were heavily burned by this experience.

The Tanker War, as touched upon earlier, involved military escalation by both the Iranians and the Iraqis and thus must be addressed separately here. By 1987 increased Iraqi bombings in the Persian Gulf threatened civilian traffic so much that the United States intervened and reflagged Kuwaiti cargo ships in the area.<sup>31</sup> This military activity took place under the name

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<sup>27</sup> Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 1

<sup>28</sup> Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 156

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

<sup>30</sup> Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 155

<sup>31</sup> In this context reflagging meant 1) having the civilian Kuwaiti ships fly an American flag (for identification purposes), 2) offering these ships all of the protection by the US Navy that American ships would receive, and 3) in some cases provide an American crew onboard and/or a military escort to ensure security when moving through the Persian Gulf

Operation Earnest Will.<sup>32</sup> The drastic uptick in attacks upon civilian ships during this time period is shown in Figure 1.1, and highlights the primary reason the United States was drawn into providing military support.

Table 1 *Attacks on Ships in the Arabian Gulf Region by Belligerent, 1981-1988*

Attacker	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	Total
Iraq	5	22	16	53	33	66	89	38	322
Iran	0	0	0	18	14	45	92	52	221
Total	5	22	16	71	47	111	181	90	543

Source: O'Rourke, "Gulf Ops," in U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, May 1989.

Regrettably the US-protection of Kuwaiti vessels was seen at least by the Iranians as a tacit support of Iraq. The highest US military official at the time himself declared "reflagging and convoying Kuwaiti tankers would not be a neutral action."<sup>33</sup> On the first US-escorted convoy one of the reflagged tankers, the *Bridgeton*, struck an Iranian mine.<sup>34</sup> Just weeks later American helicopters caught an Iranian vessel laying more mines, and they attacked the ship and captured the crew.<sup>35</sup> In October two Iranian speedboats engaged American ships in the gulf with small arms fire. America consequently set Iran's Rostam oil rig on fire and "destroyed the Rashadat oil rig with 1,065 shells."<sup>36</sup> More amphibious skirmishes occurred between Iran and the United States in the following months. On 14 April 1988 America's USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was hit by an Iranian mine, resulting in almost \$100 million in damages.<sup>37</sup> On July 3 the USS *Vincennes*, a Navy cruiser, was providing radar coverage in the area. It "responded to a request for assistance

<sup>32</sup> Selby, Michael W. *Without Clear Objectives: Operation Earnest Will*. Naval War College, 1997.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>34</sup> Michael O'Rourke, "The Tanker War", *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (114, 1988)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Farhang Rajee ed., *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War* (University Press of Florida, 1997), 15-16

<sup>37</sup> Sabahat Khan. *Iranian Mining of the Strait of Hormuz: Plausibility and Key Considerations*. (Institute of Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, 2010), 4

from two neutral tankers being harassed by Iranian small craft. During the ensuing engagement, the cruiser would mistakenly shoot down an Iranian civilian airliner with 290 passengers aboard.”<sup>38</sup> The *Vincennes* was moving into a hostile area in a heightened sense of anxiety, but the actions are inexcusable.<sup>39</sup> Shortly after this tragic incident both the Iranians and the Iraqis came to the table, accepted United Nations Resolution 598, and fell into an uneasy peace.<sup>40</sup>

So what explains the evolution of US involvement from officially-declared neutrality to putting warships into the Persian Gulf, shelling oil rigs, and attacking aircraft? It would appear that the American President and his advisers had a large hand in pushing this escalatory agenda. As a Presidential candidate in 1979 Ronald Reagan watched the Islamic Revolution of Iran unfold, and suffered through the series of embarrassments from the Iranian hostage crisis. His stance towards Iran was made clear in his 1980 “Strategy for Peace” document, declaring that “In Iran, terrorism has been elevated to the level of national policy in the assault on the US embassy and the year-long captivity of our fellow-citizens.”<sup>41</sup> Aside from domestic and economic issues, a huge cornerstone of Reagan’s campaign was that he was a strong, assertive Republican who would not cower down or be intimidated on the international stage. Thus it would have been political suicide for him to adopt a subservient stance towards Iran, the country who had continued to humiliate and challenge America throughout his campaign. Reagan relatively stood by his rhetoric; even in his 1987 National Security Strategy towards the end of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.,18

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed minute-by-minute description leading up to the shooting, see 78-83 in chapter 14 of *The Iran-Iraq War*, Anthony Cordesman

<sup>40</sup> UNSC Resolution 598, (1988), <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/tehis/vtx/rwmain?docid=3b00f20e64>

<sup>41</sup> Ronald Reagan Strategy for Peace Address, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/Reference/10.19.80.html>

his tenure he yet again repeated his strong claim of the “use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy” in reference to Iran.”<sup>42</sup>

President Reagan’s personal rhetoric and comments after-the-fact also paint a different portrait than his National Security Strategies and official documents portrayed. His depiction in his autobiography, *An American Life*, of the Iranian Shah and his downfall in 1979 clearly show his perspective on history. Regarding the Revolution and overthrow of the Shah,

it was a terrible treatment for a man who had been our *friend* and *solid ally* for more than thirty-five years<sup>43</sup>...our government’s decision to stand by piously while he was forced from office led to the establishment of a despotic regime in Teheran that was far more evil and far more tyrannical than the one it replaced. And, as I was to learn through personal experience, it left a legacy of problems that would haunt our country for years to come.”<sup>44</sup> (emphasis added)

His read of history seems inaccurate; that a violent crackdown and continued reign under the Shah would have prevented the Islamic Revolution, or simply made it go away. This notion does not hold with past examples within the Greater Middle East. As seen in the Arab Spring, stricter authoritarian rule tends only to radicalize the repressed until a breaking point is reached. Furthermore, it is a stretch to refer to the Shah as a “friend”. He was a young and malleable American tool at the beginning of his career, which was exactly why he was selected to be placed upon the Peacock Throne.

Drawing predominantly again from his autobiography, Reagan succinctly crystallizes his thoughts and feelings during his tenure as President. Ayatollah Khomeini was described as “summarily executing hundreds of Iranians” and “trying to export the Islamic revolution to

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<sup>42</sup> Ronald Reagan. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington DC: The White House, Jan 1, 1987. [http://nssarchive.us/?page\\_id=48](http://nssarchive.us/?page_id=48)

<sup>43</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, (Simon & Schuster, 1990), 218

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 219

neighboring countries,”<sup>45</sup> which were equal sins at that point in time. Common throughout his musings were references to the looming Soviet threat and radical Islamic terrorism. America believed that the Ayatollah Khomeini was going to die soon and that this would raise the “possibility of new instability in this strategic country that the Soviets would almost certainly try to exploit.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore; “Under the Shah, Iran had played a pivotal role in our efforts to keep an eye on its neighbor, the USSR. We wanted to ensure that the next government in Teheran was moderate and friendly.”<sup>47</sup> Reagan also clearly understood Tehran’s close ties to terrorism and violence throughout the Middle East; Hizballah is described in his autobiography as “pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad” and “Iranian-dominated”, “trained, equipped, and controlled by Iranian Revolutionary Guards.”<sup>48</sup> Later on Reagan lumped other undesirables into his list; declaring that “Qaddafi is talking to Iran and Syria about a joint terrorist war against us.”<sup>49</sup>

Despite the publicly-touted notion that the United States was neutral throughout the Iran-Iraq War, it clearly chose sides twice. Gary Sick suggested that then-National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski met with Saddam Hussein just months before the outbreak of war, and hinted to Saddam that the US would “tolerate an Iraqi invasion of Iran.”<sup>50</sup> After the conflict began a top NSC staffer described how Reagan authorized “whatever was necessary and legal to prevent Iraq from losing the war with Iran,”<sup>51</sup> and published a classified National Security Directive to that effect as well in mid-1982. Colonel W. Lang, a senior and well-respected analyst within the Intelligence Community at the time, echoed this idea; stating that CIA and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid 489

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 496

<sup>50</sup> Farhang Rajaee, *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War*, 50

<sup>51</sup> Affidavit of Howard Teicher,

DIA officials were “desperate to make sure that Iraq did not lose”<sup>52</sup> to Iran. Years into the conflict, however, an Iraqi victory lost its initial appeal. By 1985, one CIA agent described the strategy at the time quite eloquently, saying that “we didn’t want either side to have the advantage; we just wanted them to kick the crap out of each other.”<sup>53</sup> It was beneficial for the United States to see its’ two major foes in the region wage a destructive campaign against each other, and they seized the strategic opportunity.

And despite the time that this conflict occurred in, the US stance cannot be explained away by the specter of the Cold War with the USSR. Conversely, the Soviet support to the combatants follows the Americans’ closely. At the outset the USSR officially declared neutrality, however there was marked “displeasure with Saddam Hussein for initiating a war that would drive the moderate Gulf States towards the United States...and provide a pretext for the further extension of US military power into the region.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time the United States was ironically concerned that “the Soviets might be able to exploit the situation to extend their reach into the Gulf.”<sup>55</sup> Moscow was not pleased with Iran either, as Iran continued to support the *mujahedin* fighting the Russian military in neighboring Afghanistan. Despite this, they allowed other countries, such as Syria, Libya, and North Korea, to deliver arms to Iran.<sup>56</sup> In mid-1982 the Soviet Union shifted its favor to Iraq, in a move that closely paralleled the American decision. Primarily, Iran’s encroachment upon Iraqi soil concerned the Soviets. Iran also increasingly cracked down upon Tudeh<sup>57</sup>, the Iranian communist party.

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<sup>52</sup> Patrick Tyler, “Officers Say U.s. Aided Iraq in War Despite Use of Gas,” *New York Times*

<sup>53</sup> George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, (Grove Press, 2003), 275

<sup>54</sup> Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 204

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence G. Potter and Gary Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, (Macmillian, 2004), 197

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 206

“Tudeh’s top political leadership...were arrested on charges of spying for the Soviet Union. This move was followed...by the formal dissolution of the Tudeh party and the expulsion of eighteen Soviet Embassy officials.”<sup>58</sup>

In retaliation the USSR began to increasingly funnel more weapons and support to Iraq and severely limited its oil-imports, which significantly wounded the Iranian economy.<sup>59</sup> Since Cold War politics did not dictate the United States’ position, the ideology and viewpoints of Reagan were instead the primary factors.

In contrast to private papers and writings, the official unclassified documents at the time exhibited a mild, non-partisan tone. Prior to 1987, the Reagan administration generally professed a non-committal and neutral stance publicly. Then, Reagan’s official stance as detailed in his 1987 National Security Strategy outlined that “economic and security assistance, together with a *prudent but responsive* policy of arm sales within the region, remains an essential part of efforts to strengthen Israel and *moderate* Arab regimes” (emphasis added)<sup>60</sup>. At this point the use of arm sales as a tool to further American interests was openly declared. Moderate Arab regimes were to be supported, but neither Iran nor Iraq at the time fit within that category by 1987. This subtly highlights Washington’s disinterest in a decisive Iraqi or Iranian victory. A desire was also expressed to “remain firmly committed to a prompt and honorable negotiated settlement of the Iran-Iraq War...until Iran ceases its efforts to prolong the senseless war with Iraq, we will work actively to block the flow of arms and military material to Iran.”<sup>61</sup>

This duplicity is jarring in retrospect, and all depictions of the conflict are quick to note the questionable approach America took. Specifically, this duplicity is between documents and reports written during/around the time of the war, and those written from 1991 onwards. The

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ronald Reagan. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, 1987

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

former category appears callous and calculating, now. For example, in 1987 Anthony Cordesman wrote “The West should continue to try to reduce the flow of arms to Iran to help ensure Iraq’s ability to obtain arms and financial support.”<sup>62</sup> Even after seven years of bloody conflict he was still advocating strategic maneuvers to further American interests. Texts from the latter categories excoriate the US for its complicity in extending the conflict, however. One such author suggests that

The absence of a strong and unequivocal international condemnation of Iraq for its use of chemical weapons, and the Western tilt toward Iraq generally...undermined international law and institutions, may have misled Saddam Hussein into believing that he would also get away with the invasion of Kuwait, and gave the impetus for Iranian programs of weapons of mass destruction<sup>63</sup>

Thomas McNaugher makes a further case that the US downing of the Iranian airbus in 1988 was a result of America’s increasing role in the conflict. He shows that the captain of the *Vincennes* fired in defense of his ship, “but his ship would not have been in danger had the Navy’s mission been confined to defending US flagships.”<sup>64</sup> This argument, although extreme, certainly bears merit. The US mission creep eventually led that Navy captain to an escalated situation with limited choices. The *Vincennes* incident is important for two reasons; it is often forgotten despite its critical importance to US-Iranian relations, and this event is the perfect capstone of US involvement in the war. This event marks the final evolution from a declared stance of neutrality to an escalated warship presence acting kinetically in the Persian Gulf.

The Iran-Iraq war could have been moderated and pacified by the international community. Instead, it was exploited to bleed regional powers and further various countries’ policies and interests. From the United States perspective, it was an optimal situation. America

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<sup>62</sup> Anthony Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security*, 157

<sup>63</sup> Potter and Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacy of War*, 152

<sup>64</sup> Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 190



held no love for Iraq or Iran at the onset of the war. When Iraq had the momentum the US nominally supported them, and when Iran struck back and encroached onto Iraqi territory the US aided Iraq further. But halfway through the war, Washington reached the decision to prolong the conflict and let both countries destroy each other. And as has been dissected, this strategy was not driven by ideological Cold War fears. It resulted from the administration's enmity for Iran at the beginning. In later years, the strategy was shaped around weakening US foes in the region. The perilous fighting was coaxed and encouraged for years to weaken regional powers and further shape the world to the liking of the West. But the desired goals of a moderated Iranian Revolution and a weakened Iraq were not realized. Since 1988 Iran has continued to engage in bitter rhetoric with the United States, and relations show no sign of improving significantly. Iraq flouted international law and invaded Kuwait just two years after the Iran-Iraq War ended, in addition to employing chemical weapons upon its own Kurdish population.

The lesson to be drawn from this case is to beware the dilemma of short-term reward over long-term risk and uncertainty. Personal grudges as well as cold strategic calculations led the United States to pursue a questionable course of action for eight years. Most concerning was the white-washing of Iraq's use of chemical weapons. While this analysis is aided by hindsight, it nevertheless presents lessons for future foreign policy endeavors. Long-term repercussions must be evaluated prior to embarking upon a strategy, even if it is particularly attractive in the short-term. The current civil war in Syria is one modern situation that this axiom must be applied to. At the time of this writing a news article just described how the current Obama administration is reconsidering arming Syrian rebels with high-powered anti-aircraft rocket launchers.<sup>65</sup> These

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<sup>65</sup> David Ignatius, "Obama Appears Ready to Expand Covert Assistance to Syrian Opposition", <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-obama-appears-ready-to-expand-covert-assistance-to->

MANPADS have been used to shoot down civilian airliners before, and there is a significant risk that the rebels may use them against such targets, or transfer them to nefarious groups which might do so themselves.<sup>66</sup> While the potential blowback of such a move should not immediately discredit this strategy, policy-makers should carefully study historical precedents before making a final decision. The Iran-Iraq War case proves that adding more weapons to a conflict in pursuit of strategic gains rarely grants the desired results.

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syrian-opposition/2014/03/27/06717e6a-b5ff-11e3-8020-b2d790b3c9e1\_story.html *Washington Post*, 27 March 2014

<sup>66</sup>“MANPADS: Combating the Threat to Global Aviation from Man-Portable Air Defense Systems”, Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/169139.htm>

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