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TERM PAPER: THE CAUSES OF THE IRAQI INVASION OF IRAN IN 1980

HI383: MIDDLE EASTERN WARFARE

SECTION E6

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On 9 September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran.¹ This was the beginning of a war that lasted eight years and cost many lives. What led Iraq to invade Iran, starting such a long and brutal war? Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, made the decision to invade Iran because he wanted to establish himself as the hegemon of the Arab world, he saw Iran as vulnerable due to its recent revolution, the new Iranian regime was so hostile towards Ba'ath rule in Iraq, and he wanted to make territorial gains.

After the Camp David Accords, most Arabs felt betrayed by Egypt and began to isolate Sadat, giving Saddam an opportunity fill this power void and make Iraq the new hegemon of the Arab world² by casting himself as the protector of the Arabs. He wanted to be their defender against Israel and the West but, more importantly for the near future, against radical Shi'ism with its ideological nexus in revolutionary Iran. Saddam wanted to portray the war as being between Arabs and Persians in order to win more Arab support. After the Iranian Revolution, Saddam began to try to organize a united Arab front to prevent Iran from exporting its revolution.³ On 25 September 1980, the Saudi ruler, King Khalid ibn Abdul Aziz, telephoned Saddam to express "his interest and good fraternal feelings", as the Saudi Arabian media reported it. The Iraqi News Agency took it a step further and reported that he had "affirmed the support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in its pan-Arab battle."⁴ This was a large exaggeration. However, Saddam wanted to cast Saudi Arabia as a firmly pan-Arab state in support of his war with Iran. This would reinforce Iraq's identity as the protector of the Arabs, especially Arab

¹ Gordon, 149.

² Gordon, 152.

³ Karsh, 88.

⁴ Hiro, 76.

Muslims. Gaining the support of Saudi Arabia was an important step in gaining the support of Arab Muslims since Mecca and Medina are in Saudi Arabia.

Saddam also took advantage of Arab hatred for Israel by associating Iran with Israel. A 1980 publication by the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that “Khomeini’s collaboration with Israel is no longer a secret” and quoted *Newsweek* as saying, “Israel is secretly selling ammunition to Iran for use in the Persian Gulf War.”⁵ Realistically, other Arab states probably gave little credence to this accusation, but whether or not other Arab states believed him, it is clear that he was trying to link Iran to Israel through propaganda.

One propaganda technique used by Saddam was to associate Iran with pre-Islamic Persia. He would refer to Iran as “Persia even though that it had called itself Iran since the 16th century.”⁶ This had the effect of emphasizing the expansionist nature of pre-Islamic Persia. Shortly before the outbreak of the war, the Ba’ath regime published a book called *Ta’rikh al-hiqd al-Farsi ‘ala al-‘Arab* (The History of Persian Hatred of the Arabs).⁷ In a speech on 20 October 1980, Saddam called the war the “Second Qadasiya”, referring to the Battle of Qadasiya in 637 where an outnumbered Arab Muslim army defeated the Zoroastrian Persian army.⁸ This also had the effect of emphasizing the pre-Islamic nature of Iran and its hostility towards Arabs. Saddam called the soldiers who had been killed fighting “the Persian infidels” “martyrs” because they had died for Islam.⁹ However, the fact that he called the Iranian Shi’a Muslims “infidels” was probably detrimental to his goal since the population of Iraq was mostly Shi’a.

⁵ Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19.

⁶ Bengio, 139-140.

⁷ Bengio, 142.

⁸ Hiro, 44.

⁹ Hiro, 53.

When Saddam attacked Iran, it had just come out of the Iranian Revolution and its government and military were still in disarray. Saddam believed that he had an opportunity to strike Iran while it was weak. Iran was very weak diplomatically because it had no strong allies. The Iranian regime had made an enemy of the United States by deposing the American-backed Shah and holding American hostages in November of 1979.¹⁰ Ayatollah Khomeini's calls to rebellion under the banner of Islam caused riots in Gulf nations other than Iraq that had major Shi'a populations, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain.¹¹ By causing internal problems in these countries, the Ayatollah increased their enmity towards Iran. During the Cold War, it was common for the US and the USSR to support opposing sides in third-world conflicts in order to balance each other out. However, in the Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet Union was bogged down in a costly occupation of Afghanistan and was in no condition to give support to Iran and had no real reason to do so.¹² Iran had also lost the American support that it enjoyed under the Shah by seizing American hostages, so neither superpower supported Iran.

In addition to being weak diplomatically, Iran was weak militarily. The new regime saw the military as an instrument of the Shah's oppression and began a systematic purge in addition to creating the Pasdaran revolutionary guard as a counterweight.¹³ The army had lost over half of its officers between the ranks of major and colonel and the air force had lost half its pilots and 15-20 percent of its officers, NCOs, and technicians.¹⁴ Numerically, the Iraqis had every advantage over the Iranians at the beginning of the war: 200,000 Iraqi troops to 150,000 Iranian troops, 2,750 Iraqi tanks to 1,735 Iranian tanks

¹⁰ Aburish, 192.

¹¹ Aburish, 184.

¹² Gordon, 13.

¹³ Karsh, 89.

¹⁴ Karsh, 89.

(not all combat effective), and 2,500 Iraqi armored fighting vehicles to 1,735 Iranian ones.¹⁵

Saddam also made the decision to invade Iran because the Iranian regime was so openly hostile towards his rule. In the early 1980, Tehran Radio used terms like “a puppet of Satan” and “mentally ill” to describe Saddam. His top government officials were described with terms like “fascist butchers” and “the gangsters and tyrants of Baghdad.”¹⁶ A week after assuming power, he said he “wanted Najjaf”, a Shi’a holy city in Iraq.¹⁷ Iran was hostile to the Baath regime in deed as well as in word. The Iranian government conducted terrorist attacks against key members of the Iraqi ruling regime, including a failed assassination attempt on the Iraqi Deputy Premier, Tariq Aziz, on 1 April 1980.¹⁸ In response to Saddam’s pledge to take revenge for the assassination attempt, Khomeini called on Shi’a Muslims in Iraq to overthrow “Saddam’s government” on 9 June 1980.¹⁹

Iran made their intent to instill Islamic revolution in other nations clear. Ayatollah Khomeini said that Iran would “export [their] revolution to the four corners of the world” on 11 February 1979.²⁰ In April 1980, Khomeini encouraged revolution in Iraq by saying “[t]he people and army of Iraq must turn their backs on the Baath regime and overthrow it.”²¹ Iran began to develop non-conventional ways to project their military power throughout the Middle East including, most notably, the Pasdaran, a

¹⁵ Karsh, 89.

¹⁶ Wright, 82.

¹⁷ Aburish, 167.

¹⁸ Karsh, 87.

¹⁹ Karsh, 88.

²⁰ Hiro, 32.

²¹ Hiro, 35.

revolutionary guard militia.²² Iran also showed their hostility towards Iraq by supporting the Kurds in their revolt against the Iraqi government. When Khomeini came to power in Iran, he began exporting Iranian arms to the Kurds, a continuation of the Shah's old policy.²³

A major proximate cause of Saddam's decision to invade Iran was to gain territory along the border between the two countries, especially the Shatt al-Arab. Early in the war, Iraqi First Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan had an interview with the French newspaper *Le Monde*, in which he said that Iraq wanted "to force Iran to recognize [Iraq's] rights and respect them."²⁴ He defined Iraq's rights as sovereignty over the entire Shatt al Arab, a waterway that had been disputed for years, and several over several other regions including three islands in the Persian Gulf and Khuzistan, also called Arabistan.²⁵ At the beginning of the war, a book published by the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said "if [Iran is] truly against Colonial dominance, why do they not withdraw from the three Arab Islands in the Arab Gulf which were occupied in 1971 by the Shah through the use of force only to perpetuate Colonial policies in the region?"²⁶ There is probably little substance to this claim in the eyes of other states in the region, however, since "Colonialism" was associated more with Israel and the West than with states like Iran. Khuzistan had been disputed by Iran and Iraq for years. Iraq wanted it because its population is mostly Arab and it contains the most important oil reserves and refining facilities in Iran.²⁷ The Shatt al-Arab, the waterway between Iraq and Iran where

²² Karsh, 89.

²³ Gordon, 152.

²⁴ Gordon, 157.

²⁵ Gordon, 157.

²⁶ Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19.

²⁷ Swearingen, 406.

the Tigris and Euphrates empty into the Gulf, was another major territorial dispute that lead to the war. Until an agreement in 1975, the Iraqi border extended all the way to the Iranian shore.²⁸ On 6 March 1975, the two nations signed the Algiers Agreement, which moved the boundary to the *thalweg* (i.e. median) of the waterway in exchange for Iran agreeing to stop supporting the Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq.²⁹ Iraq was humiliated by having to sign this treaty and before the war, Saddam abrogated the 1975 treaty and declared, “This Shatt shall again be, as it has been throughout history, Iraqi and Arab in name and reality.”³⁰ An Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs Publication expresses the importance of the Shatt al-Arab by saying, “The Shatt al-Arab is Iraq’s sovereign territory since older times. It is Iraq’s only outlet to the Arabian Gulf and from there to the open seas.”³¹

The 1980 Iran-Iraq War was the longest conventional war of the 20th century. Will Swearingen, a prominent scholar, has called the war the “bloodiest and most destructive military conflict since World War II” and said that the war cost each side as much as \$1 billion per month.³² Although there were underlying causes of the war that both sides were responsible for, the proximate cause of the war was Saddam’s invasion of Iran, a decision he made out of ambition, opportunism, and, perhaps, necessity.

²⁸ Gordon, 30-31.

²⁹ Karsh, 86.

³⁰ Swearingen, 408.

³¹ Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19.

³² Swearingen, 405.

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