

Iran: Which Side Is It On?

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Brief Analysis



f all the states in the Middle East, Iran's policy has been the most confusing and mysterious. Yet a close examination shows that Tehran has followed a consistent, predictable, attitude toward the Gulf crisis.

From Tehran's standpoint, the current situation is the obverse of that prevailing during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). During that period, the United States watched two states fight without feeling much sympathy for either side. Given the combatants' mutual antipathy toward U.S. interests, many Americans thought that the longer the war continued, the better. A victory for either camp could result in the conqueror's dominance of the Gulf. Despite their greater sympathy for Iraq, both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had a similar view and subsequent events have proven them correct.

Now Iran sees a confrontation between two states it regards as dangerous enemies: the United States and Iraq. Iraq's conquest of Kuwait was bad for Iran since, sooner or later, a more powerful Saddam Hussein would again try to attack Iran. If Baghdad became the center of the Arab world, it would strengthen the anti-Iran coalition. If Iraq obtained nuclear weapons or improved chemical arms, Iran feels it would likely be the first target for their use.

Conversely, Iran's attitude towards the U.S. was developed by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and, although some Iranian leaders may be more realistic, it remains official doctrine. America is still seen as the Great Satan, seeking to suppress Islam and dominate the Middle East. Thus, the presence of U.S. forces in the Gulf would be used for these nefarious ends. If the United States succeeded in defeating Iraq, Iran would be the next target.

Accordingly, Iran's leaders prefer an ideal solution, the mutual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia and Iraq's army from Kuwait with the local states brokering a solution. This would both weaken Iran's two main enemies and put it in the position of protector of the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Iran's Balancing Act

Iran's leaders understand, however, that they cannot have their preferred outcome and must cope with the difficult task of balancing the dual threats they perceive coming from Baghdad and Washington. The question is which, at any particular time, Tehran considers the greater danger. Obviously, the Islamic republic was happy to receive Iraq's promise to return land occupied during the war and the tens of thousands of prisoners still held over two years after the cease-fire. But it has not yet received the promised concessions and is also unwilling to give anything in

exchange. Moreover, Tehran cannot forget that after eight years of war Baghdad is promising to live up to a 1975 agreement which it broke, at the first opportunity, in 1980.

There have been many rumors of Iraq-Iran cooperation since Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz's visit to Iran, yet none of these tales about oil swaps and massive violation of sanctions have been confirmed.

Iran certainly is a major beneficiary of higher oil prices. But large-scale violation of the anti-Iraq sanctions is another matter entirely. Tehran's government wants Western investment and an escape from its isolation. These quiet efforts were underlined by the reestablishment of British-Iranian relations, which would have been restored two years ago if not for the Rushdie affair. Siding too openly with Iraq would not only strengthen Saddam Hussein, it would also make Iran liable for a return to the pariah status it wishes to escape.

The declaration by Iranian leaders of a jihad (holy war) against the U.S. presence in the Gulf is also consistent with this strategy. It was a specific response to Secretary of State James Baker's talk about a post-crisis security structure in the area, which Tehran read as involving the permanent presence of tens of thousands of American troops near its borders. The true test is not what Iran says in this regard but whether it actually takes any such anti-American actions. Anti-Iraq language present in the same statements was largely ignored in the U.S. media.

Another test will be Iran's attitude toward Western hostages still held in Lebanon. These kidnap victims no longer serve any Iranian interest and many of them were being kept to obtain the release of imprisoned Islamic fundamentalist terrorists in Kuwait. These prisoners have either, depending on the report, been freed to fight against Iraq or murdered by the invaders from Baghdad.

In another example of the strange bedfellows created by the Kuwait crisis, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad went to Tehran, September 22-25, to persuade the Iranians to take a friendlier stand in regard to the multinational force in Saudi Arabia. While the joint communiques issued after Assad's visit did not break new ground, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati began making some remarkable statements. "We think that the best solution for this crisis is the peaceful solution," he told CNN on September 27. And the main basis for a peaceful settlement is the observing of all the UN resolutions . . . And if this peaceful solution doesn't work, I think there is no other way but military solution, unfortunately."

The Iranian pro-government newspaper Kayhan International commented that Assad's alignment with the West against fellow Arab Iraq, "is due to national self-interest. It is but natural that whatever Iran decides to do will also be in accordance with the country's best interests." The Rafsanjani regime does not define these interests as spreading Islamic fundamentalist revolution or fighting American influence at all costs but rather as protecting Iran's sovereignty and the regime's survival.

Iran's military weakness -- it has obtained almost no new weapons in the last two years while Iraq has spent an estimated \$5 billion on arms during the same period -- makes it an unlikely threat to the Gulf in the near future. But, of course, Iran and Iraq have already changed roles twice in the recent past. Iraq was the radical, destabilizing threat between 1968 and 1979, and again since 1988. Between those two eras, Iran actively sought regional hegemony and the overthrow of America's regional allies. The United States has now had ample experience of the dangers in seeking to turn extremist states into allies.

Whatever Mr. Rafsanjani's personal predilections or his reading of Iran's development needs, his government is not in a position to re-establish relations with the United States. It does not wish to follow a pro-Western course. But in practical and shorter-range terms, if Iran is willing to continue observing sanctions and avoid helping Iraq, it will objectively be strengthening the anti-Saddam coalition.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notable, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in*

Egyptian Politics (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO. ❖

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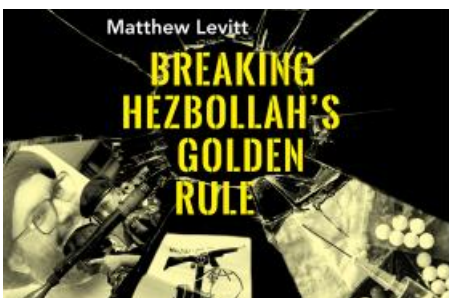
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