

Iran's attack blowback

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Here we go again. As Iran becomes increasingly isolated and under pressure from both western powers and its Arab neighbours in the region, the battle-lines are drawn.

For many Iranians the signs are both ominous [1] and all too familiar. On 22 September 1980, Iraq attacked western Iran, launching what would become the longest conventional war (1980-88 [2]) of the 20th century. Saddam's Iraq had the backing of many western powers during the war. Equally, several Arab monarchies - such as Kuwait - were fearful of their own potential demise in a domino-effect Iran-style revolution, and offered the Iraqi regime financial assistance.

That the United States gave considerable assistance to Iraq during the war is well documented. The US wanted to see Iran overpowered, fearing it would overrun or inflame other oil-producing states and export its Islamic revolution. Saddam Hussein's grip on power in Iraq was supplemented by German dual-use technology and French weaponry, which experts say ended up underpinning Iraq's chemical- and biological-warfare programmes.

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[Kenneth Pollack](#) [10], a former member of the US National Security Council and at one time a principal working-level official responsible for implementing US policy on Iraq, has set out in

detail what happened in his book *The Threatening Storm* [11]: "Washington began passing high-value military intelligence to Iraq to help it fight the war, including information from US satellites that helped fix key flaws in the fortifications protecting al-Basrah that proved important in Iran's defeat."

He adds: "By 1982, Iraq accounted for 40% of French arms exports", while "Paris sold Baghdad a wide range of weapons, including armoured vehicles, air defence radars, surface-to-air missiles, Mirage fighters and Exocet anti-ship missiles." Pollack additionally points out that: "German firms also rushed in without much compunction, not only selling Iraq large numbers of trucks and automobiles but also building vast complexes for Iraq's chemical warfare, biological warfare and ballistic missile programmes."

The lesson

The west sponsored [12] Saddam's regime, even when there was clear evidence as early as mid-1983 that Iraq was using chemical weapons against Iranian forces. Today it is hard to deny that the war against Iran was crucial in strengthening the power base of the radical clerics, because even those Iranians who opposed the Islamic Republic moved to Ayatollah Khomeini's camp in defence against foreign aggression.

During the early days of the revolution [13], radical factions of the clergy took over the mosques - evicting countless clerics from their "parishes" - and set up *komiteh* (committees) throughout Iran. What ensued was chaotic looting and destruction (much as in Iraq after the fall of Saddam), since the mosques had been the only organisations capable of coordinating social activity in a context where political parties had been ruthlessly suppressed for decades.

The *Komiteh* were the morality police: they would verify your devoutness before you were offered a job or they could have you dismissed from your post for any perceived shortcomings - and this applied to anyone from the dean of a university to the local postman.

The *Komiteh* could pay for your hospital bills or your daughter's wedding and it could also act as judge, jury and assassin when dealing with neighbourhood infidels. The *Komiteh* pretty much controlled every facet of life. But they became even more powerful during the Iran-Iraq war, when all opposition was silenced. The *Komiteh* was granted its own paramilitary units, the basij [14], which acted as recruiting bases for the frontline and were responsible for distributing wartime food-rations.

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians were used as cannon-fodder in "human-wave" attacks on Iraqi artillery positions. Yet one need only walk through the Muslim, Armenian, Assyrian and Jewish cemeteries of Iran and read the gravestones of the young men who died defending their country to grasp the degree of patriotism towards a homeland and a heritage that goes back thousands of years [15]. Some may view such national attitudes as yet another sign of our extremist position. Be that as it may, Europeans need not look further than the patriotism that sustained the great war of 1914-18, or the war after that.

Unlike most countries in the middle east, Iran's borders are not lines in the sand drawn on the impulse of 19th- and 20th-century European colonialists. So-called American think-tanks can think themselves blue in the face, but Iran will not be balkanised [16].

The Henry Kissinger model [17] of negotiating with Iran from a position of strength by pitting *Sunni* Arab regimes and Israel against *Shi'a* Iran may be proving lucrative to arms-dealers who are enthusiastically capitalising on the fears of countries such as Saudi Arabia. But these divide-and-conquer tactics also refuel the poisonous sectarian war in Iraq, and will prove equally

catastrophic if they help spread such intensifying hostilities - unprecedented since the 17th century - throughout the middle east.

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But even if [25] war with Iran is not being actively planned, the war of words and the extensive military build-up in the area form an accident waiting to happen (see Paul Rogers, "[The United States and Iran: the logic of war](#) [26]", 1 February 2007).

What would be the result within Iran? People are unhappy with the regime, as evident in the December 2006 election and in the street demonstrations by thousands of students chanting against their leaders. But in the period before war with Iraq, it was not uncommon to see tens of thousands [27] of people of various different currents on the march against the then-dawning theocracy. Under the blackout of war, the protests disappeared overnight and most political groups were effectively gagged by being labelled as traitors. Many others recognised that their country faced a greater external enemy, and voluntarily took an oath of silence for the sake of unity.

The logic - psychological, political, emotional - in Iran today will be the same: an armed attack involving strategic air-strikes by the United States will not provoke a popular uprising.

The result

So why is the US once again at the same juncture [28] with Iran as it was in relation to Iraq under Saddam Hussein in 2003? Everyone is aware of the brutality and wrath that has been unleashed by the invasion of Iraq. But what calamity or ogre would emerge from yet another war in the region? Will Israel become further barricaded in a mode of relentless conflicts with its neighbours that would make the 2006 war with Lebanon look like neighbourly banter; will a Saudi Arabia armed to the brim fall under the control of al-Qaida [29]; will a nuclear Pakistan [30] end up in the hands of *ihadists*? How certain is the United States of the stability of such countries?

It may be worthwhile to remember that on the last day of 1977, only a year before the Iranian revolution, the prevailing US intelligence assessment of Iran at the time may well have impelled the then-president Jimmy Carter to call Iran [31] "an island of stability" in a troubled region.

A military confrontation with Iran will serve only to revive the fortunes of the country's infamous president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and fortify the Islamic Republic's last [32], desperate grab for a rebirth. In particular, the United States' military option will have no consequence but to bolster [33] a regime and a leadership it professes most bitterly to oppose. A better, peaceful way forward is urgently needed.

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