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Iran’s Regional Foreign and Security Policies in the Persian Gulf

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Some three decades into the life of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian regime has yet to devise and implement a coherent national security policy or even a set of guidelines on which its regional and international security policies are based. In relation to the Persian Gulf region and the country’s immediate neighbors, this has resulted in the articulation of regional foreign and security policies that at times have seemed fluid, changeable, and even inconsistent. The discrepancy between appearances of Iranian policy and its substance is primarily a function of the populist rhetoric through which most Iranian political leaders, particularly President Ahmadinejad, employ to enunciate Tehran’s position on various international and regional issues. As the foregoing analysis will demonstrate, however, Iranian foreign and national security policies, both in relation to Iran’s immediate neighborhood and in the larger global arena, are influenced far more by pragmatic, balance-of-power considerations than by ideological or supposedly “revolutionary” pursuits.

Appearances to the contrary, therefore, Iranian foreign and security policies in relation to the Persian Gulf region have featured certain consistent themes, or, more aptly, areas of continued attention as well as tension. The first feature revolves around the broader military and diplomatic position that Iran occupies in relation to the Persian Gulf itself. Equally influential in Iran’s regional diplomacy is what Tehran sees as “the Saudi factor,” namely Saudi Arabia’s posture and pursuits in the region. Iran’s regional security policy, in the meanwhile, is largely determined by the role and position of the United States in what Iran considers as its rightful sphere of influence. By extension, for Tehran, questions about Saudi diplomatic and American military positions and intentions bear directly on the nature and direction of Iran’s relations with Iraq and Afghanistan.¹
Also important are Iran’s relations with its neighbors to the south, with a number of whom—namely Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates—relations have been tense and cooperative at the same time. The most problematic of these have been Iran-UAE relations and the tensions surrounding contending claims by both countries over the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tombs. Again, both in relations to Iran-UAE tensions and Iran’s regional diplomacy toward the other Persian Gulf states, the Saudi and American factors, especially the latter, are quite important.

This chapter examines Iran’s regional foreign and security policies from the perspective of Iranian policy makers. While recent years have seen a proliferation of both thematic and empirical studies on Iranian foreign policy, the underlying visions and the pursuit of policy objectives as crystallized within Iranian policy circles remain understudied and therefore little understood. This chapter traces the evolution and outcome of some of the most important debates that have shaped Iranian policy toward the country’s Arab neighbors and in the Persian Gulf waterway. The ultimate outcome of these debates, the chapter argues, has been a steady trend toward pragmatism in Iranian diplomacy, both within the region and beyond, despite the sharp populist rhetoric that often emanates from Tehran.

In examining the task at hand, the chapter begins with an effort at outlining the overall contours of Iranian foreign policy, looking more specifically at the two contradictions—one ideological and the other structural—that figure prominently in the ideals and outcomes of Iran’s diplomatic endeavors. The chapter then turns its attention to the Persian Gulf region, examining the broader contexts of Iran’s relations with its Arab neighbors and its position within the waterway. Finally, three case studies are chosen in order to better illustrate the uneasy yet
pragmatic relationship between Iran and its neighbors, namely Iranian-Iraqi, Iranian-Saudi, and Iranian-Emirati relations.

**Deciphering Iranian Foreign and Security Policies**

One of the most prominent features of Iran’s regional posture is the securitization of its foreign policy over the last three decades or so, itself a direct product of the militarization of the country’s immediate environment. Given the preponderance of open hostilities and military conflicts in the Persian Gulf region, many of which have either involved Iran directly or have occurred right in its immediate boarders, the two issues of Iranian military and diplomatic positions in the Persian Gulf cannot be fully decoupled. When it comes to Iran’s broader global pursuits, particularly more recently in parts of Africa and Latin America, clear distinctions can be drawn between those endeavors traditionally considered as diplomatic—strengthening alliances with Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, for example—and those pursuits and alliances that are part of national security calculations, such as Iran’s position in southern Lebanon and its relations with the Hezbollah.\(^2\) In relation to the Persian Gulf region, however, given the steady securitization of the region’s politics since the 1980s, for both Iran and also for the other Gulf states, foreign and security policies are hardly separable.\(^3\) Insofar as Iran’s position in and relations with other Persian Gulf states is concerned, the US military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf, Iran’s dispute with the United Arab Emirates over three islands in the Gulf, and the potential for spillover from internal conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have all combined to create an environment in which security and diplomatic issues are intimately interconnected. At least for the foreseeable future, therefore, any analysis of Iran’s regional foreign policy needs to also take into account its security and strategic calculations.
Iranian foreign and security policies in the Persian Gulf may be intertwined, but determining exactly what they are is not an easy task. There are, as mentioned earlier, two interrelated complications, one ideological and the other structural. Ideologically, the Iranian constitution simultaneously pledges that Iran will not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries but also commits Iran to support “the just struggle of the oppressed against oppressors in any part of the world” (Article 154). The constitution further stipulates that while Iran rejects “all forms of domination” by outside powers, it will come “to the defense of all Muslims” whenever necessary (Article 152). Similarly, “in accordance with … the Qur’an, all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world” (Article 11).

In practice, states seldom base their foreign policies according to the ideals that are espoused in their constitutions. But in the context of Iran, where processes of political development and legitimation continue to evolve and to unfold, and where competing political factions often bitterly vie for power and legitimacy, resort to the original ideals of the 1979 revolution as articulated in the country’s constitution is not uncommon. This is particularly the case given the vibrant and often-changing factional landscape in Iranian politics, in which various factions advocate what often amount to radically different approaches to foreign and national security policy issues.4

A further complicating factor is Iran’s dual executive, which is split between the offices of the Supreme Leader and the President. Although the 1989 Constitution created an “executive presidency” with substantially enhanced powers, it also kept largely intact the powers and
decision-making purview of the Supreme Leader. Theoretically, foreign policy issues are deliberated and decided upon by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose head reports to the cabinet and the president. In practice, however, the Office of the Leader contains within it a number of influential foreign policy and national security advisors, and those issues deemed central to the long-term health and stability of the Islamic Republic system—such as the nuclear file and relations with the US—are not acted upon without the Leader’s advice and consent. Also consequential in the decision-making process is the Supreme National Security Council, which is headed by the President and includes the heads of the two other branches, commanders of the armed forces, two representatives appointed by the Leader, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Intelligence, and the head of the Plan and Budget Organization.

While the Supreme National Security Council can serve as a mediating institution, much of the substance of Iranian foreign and national security policies—if not the style of their presentation to the outside world—depends on the nature of the relationship between the persons occupying the offices of the President and the Leader. According to former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, for example, during his tenure in office from 1989 to 1997, the Leader—i.e. Ali Khamenei—was seldom consulted about routine foreign policy issues and was brought in only when relations with such important actors as the US or Egypt were concerned. Nevertheless, during the Rafsanjani’s presidency, although tensions surrounding Iran decreased as a natural result of the end of the war with Iraq, the basic nature and substance of the country’s foreign policy did not undergo substantive changes. Instead, it was only during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, from 1997 to 2005, when Iran’s relations with the outside world, and particularly with its neighbors to the south, improved substantially. Although Khamenei did not directly contradict or rebuke Khatami in his efforts to improve Iran’s relations with such
traditional adversaries as the United States and the European Union, he neither did much to
strengthen the President’s hands nor did he try to silence Khatami’s innumerable and influential
critics.9 Ultimately, the emerging détente between Iran and the southern states of the Persian
Gulf was less a result of Khamenei’s support for Khatami’s so-called “charm offensive” and
more a product of a policy consensus among Iranian elites that the best way to counter the effects
of the US-imposed “dual containment” is by improving ties with neighboring states.10 The
Ahmadinejad presidency has seen a level of like-mindedness between the President and the
Leader that is unprecedented in the life of the Islamic Republic, perhaps a product both of the
two men’s ideological affinity as well as their mutual need for one another in the face of faltering
popularity.11

The continuing legacy of the revolution, the securitized international and regional
environments within which Iran finds itself, the institutional features of the Islamic Republic
system, and the factional competition that characterizes Iranian politics have all combined to
create two broad clusters of opinion concerning the country’s foreign policy. On the one side is a
perspective that may be labeled as normative or idealist. The key principles of this normative
foreign policy perspective include the promotion of norms and values that are consistent with the
tenets of Islam, help in the global strengthening of Islamic solidarity, and give priority to policies
that are based on justice and fairness.12 Underlying the whole approach is a strong sense of
obligation—the obligation to oppose cruelty, foster Islamic unity, and spread justice.13 Since a
foreign policy thus guided is bound to encounter the ire of great powers such as the United States
and Britain, this normative foreign policy pursuit is also imbued with a fair measure of
militarism, frequently emphasizing such themes as “defense against enemies” and the need for
constant vigilance.14
On the other side of the spectrum stands the pragmatic perspective of Iranian foreign policy. This perspective’s emphasis is on the role and importance of diplomacy, cooperation and confidence-building, détente, and accommodation. What Iranian diplomacy needs, argue the proponents of this perspective, is a realistic assessment and “conceptualization” of the highly securitized international and regional environments surrounding the country. This includes an accurate reading of America’s strengths and limitations both domestically and internationally; careful use of Iran’s strategic depth and soft power through resort to its cultural, geographic, and historical affinities with its neighbors and with others; not over-estimating the degree to which Russia, China, and the European powers are willing to part ways with the United States over Iran; maximizing the use of existing political and diplomatic venues to enhance Iran’s international image and posture; and creating an atmosphere of trust and confidence through the promotion of such initiatives as civilizational dialogue and alliance. The “paradox” of Iranian foreign policy in giving equal priority to both normative, internationalist pursuits and more pragmatic, national interests cannot be denied. What Iranian policymakers need to do is to recognize that such a paradox does indeed exist and to determine when and what conditions call for prioritizing one mandate over another. Needless to say, Iran’s current predicament dictates greater attention to the country’s national interests.

According to R. K. Ramazani, a seasoned observer of Iranian foreign policy, “these encouraging developments echo historical antecedents.” For the Islamic Republic, the upshot of these two at times highly contradictory perspectives has been what one observer has termed as a “pragmatic idealism” that has run through the republic’s foreign policy pursuits ever since its establishment. As the rise of Iranian “Principlists” showed in the 2005 presidential elections, capped by their implementation of populist domestic and foreign policies, many observers of
Iran, Ramazani included, were too hasty in declaring the eclipse of ideologically-driven foreign policy emanating from Tehran. In describing his ideal international order, for example, Manochehr Mottaki, Ahmadinejad’s Foreign Minister, calls for a complete restructuring of the bases on which the international system is currently organized:

Some fundamental shift must take place. Epistemologically, [there must be a] switch from positivism to constructivism, from micro international history to [a] global one, from high politics to deep politics, and from the past to the future…. My argument is that to solve current challenges at the global level, we should think of an order that is based also on justice.20

Style and substance should not be confused, however, any more than rhetoric and deeds are, and, Ahmadinejad’s speeches notwithstanding, a measure of pragmatism has also characterized the foreign policy agendas of Iran’s resurgent Principlists. The Iranian President’s 2006 letter to George W. Bush, and later his congratulatory message to Barack Obama on the occasion of his victory to the American presidency, are but two of the more notable examples of a pragmatic streak that is all too often masked by bombastic rhetoric.21 For a country like Iran to be able to realize its foreign policy ideals and its self-ascribed obligations to the global Muslim community, it needs to have far deeper logistical power and capability than is realistically the case.22 Therefore, a consensus has indeed emerged among Iranian foreign policy elites that when a threat poses itself to Iran, the country’s interests and its national security take priority over all else.23 The ultimate outcome, therefore, has been for Tehran to “adopt an elastic attitude to foreign policy, sometimes generating quick fixes to what are often structural problems, and other times producing inconsistent, even contradictory, responses to presumed or actual threats.”24

Iran and the Persian Gulf Region

Although détente and the pursuit of more pragmatic policies by the Khatami administration from 1997 to 2005 greatly reduced tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors, areas of friction, as
well as deep-seated mistrust, continue to characterize Iran’s relations with the other states of the Persian Gulf. Much of the tension and mistrust can be traced to the early years of the Iranian revolution, when Tehran was universally perceived to be an exporter of revolutionary religious extremism and a source of regional instability. With its war with Iraq as the backdrop, Iran was viewed as directly complicit in the unsuccessful coup attempt in Bahrain in December 1981, responsible for riots in Mecca by Hajj pilgrims in 1981 and 1982, behind the unrest among Kuwaiti Shi’ites in 1983, and having a hand in the attempted assassination of the Emir of Kuwait in 1985.\textsuperscript{25} Almost overnight, Iran image changed from being seen as a guardian of regional security and stability before the revolution to an existential threat to the region’s regimes and a disruptive force in one of the world’s most vital shipping lanes.\textsuperscript{26} Beginning in the 1990s, the Iranians were no longer seen as keenly interested in exporting their revolution, but by the early 2000s it was their nuclear program that became a source of worry for the regional states.\textsuperscript{27} Prodded mostly by the United States, starting in 2005 occasional statements of concern about the Iranian nuclear program have been heard from various Persian Gulf capitals, although the regional actors, for their own different reasons that will be discussed in the next section, have deliberately shied away from coordinating efforts aimed at containing an alleged “Iranian threat”.

Clearly, Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have fundamentally different conceptions of the security threats that face each of them individually and all of them collectively. For Iran, the biggest security threat in the Persian Gulf is the existence of foreign military and naval forces stationed across the region and in the waterway itself.\textsuperscript{28} In Tehran’s view, this is part of a broader effort by the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council to marginalize Iran and to harm its interests. Neither the presence of outside military powers nor the
collective military capabilities of the GCC states on their own can guarantee the safety and security of the Persian Gulf region. Instead, Tehran argues, what is needed is a new security architecture for the region, either under the existing rubric of the GCC or in some other fashion, which also entails the military participation and cooperation of Iran with its neighbors to the south and with Iraq. In the words of one Iranian analyst,

Iran considers the Persian Gulf its own “backyard,” and it gets worried whenever the region experiences instability. From Iran’s perspective, its interests are best served when the Persian Gulf continues to remain an open, international waterway that guarantees the free and unfettered passage of ships from everywhere. Iran has repeatedly expressed its interest in joining whatever collective security arrangement that ensures the stability of the region and recognizes Iran’s rightful role and power in the Persian Gulf.

Threat perceptions in Tehran grew exponentially in the aftermath of the post-9/11 US posture, and especially after the fall of Baghdad and Iraq’s occupation by American forces. Overnight, Iran, now branded as a member of an “Axis of Evil” by the US President, found itself at the center of a storm brewing in its own immediate neighborhood, and the many initiatives it undertook to improve its image and to help the US in its fight against the Taliban—including pledging hundreds of millions of dollars toward the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan and an offer to help rescue American servicemen stranded near its border in Afghanistan—did little to allay fears that it might be the next target of President Bush’s War on Terror. A “new insecurity” began to grip Iran’s foreign and national security policy elites as they witnessed the country’s “complete encirclement by a pro-U.S. security belt comprised of Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Iraq.” Housing one of the largest US airbases in the world and the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet respectively, Qatar and Bahrain can also be added to this list. Further compounding Iran’s fears was the possibility, though remote, of the Gulf states
cooperating with Israel militarily and providing possible cover for an Israeli military attack on Iran.33

The possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran, and the more tangible military and diplomatic alliance of all GCC states with the United States, makes US-Iranian tensions an inseparable part of the calculus of Iran’s relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors. Not surprisingly, in Iranian policy circles, there is keen awareness of and deep sensitivity to the overwhelming US military presence in the region. Sensitivity to the issue does not mean unanimous agreement over the most prudent approach to it, and the US role in the Persian Gulf has emerged as one of the key points of contention between the different factions within the Islamic Republic. In fact, America’s role in the Persian Gulf—and the broader issue of US-Iranian relations—is one of those lingering areas of tension between the normative and the pragmatic strands of Iranian approaches to foreign policy. Broadly, Principlists and other so-called hardline radicals do not see any legitimate role for the US anywhere in the Persian Gulf region, whereas pragmatists—regardless of their political label as “conservative” or “reformist”—call for some sort of accommodation and *modus vivendi* that takes into account the regional interests and concerns of both Iran and the United States.34

There is a general consensus in Iran that there are a number of internal, structural shortcomings in the region’s “microstates” which necessitate their entry into some sort of collective security arrangement.35 There is also consensus, as mentioned above, that Iran should play an important role in this collective security umbrella. What there is disagreement over is what role is there for the United States alongside Iran and other regional players. Much of how this question is ultimately settled depends on the posture and policies of the United States itself and the extent to which it remains open or opposed to Iran’s active role in the Persian Gulf
region and beyond. Similarly consequential are changing alignments and the position of Iranian factions in the country’s political constellation. As became amply evident in 2005, the outcome of one election can dramatically alter perceptions about Iran’s policies and intentions, and, as conventional wisdom has it, in diplomacy perceptions often become reality.

There is, nevertheless, circumstantial evidence that seems to suggest a subtle shift in Tehran toward an acceptance of an American role in the Persian Gulf. According to Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, formerly a high ranking commander in the Iranian armed forces and the mayor of Tehran since 2005, a figure generally associated with the conservative right, “the new geopolitics of the Middle East” requires innovative thinking and a new, dynamic approach on Iran’s part.

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran at certain stages has unnecessarily reacted to the hegemonic strategies of extra regional actors in the Middle East. The aggressive policies of the United States during the [early] period of the revolution [resulted in great mistrust, which was expressed through] Iran’s foreign policy. No longer does the Islamic Republic need to be confrontational because it now has all the ingredients of power and the necessary confidence to deal with its neighbors and to compete with regional and international actors. Rhetoric cannot be a substitute to policy, and it cannot lead to a realistic understanding of geopolitical capabilities and limitations. Therefore, the desired capacity to defend Iran’s national interests can only be sustained through realizing domestic capabilities along with a dynamic diplomacy. Under these circumstances, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is in need of adopting a non-rhetorical view of its geopolitical exigencies. More importantly, Iran’s foreign policy must take into consideration the reality of the presence of other powers in the region while it incorporates its own capabilities and limitations into the larger skeleton of the Middle East.

How representative Ghalibaf’s thinking is in relation to other Iranian politicians on the right of the political spectrum is difficult to tell. But his call for accommodating “external powers” comes amid a chorus of academic arguments that see the relations with the United States as key to enhancing Iran’s position and interests in the Persian Gulf.
Even if the US-Iranian non-relationship of the Clinton and Bush administrations turns into dialogue and negotiations during the Obama presidency, the structural chasm that divides American and Iranian positions over the Persian Gulf is far too wide to be easily bridged. The stationing of US forces across the region, US and Iranian positions and intentions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran’s strategic priorities and capabilities in the waterway and in the Strait of Hormuz, and deeply entrenched feelings of mistrust and suspicion among all the actors concerned are some of the highly contentious issues that divide US and Iranian policymakers over the Persian Gulf. For now, there is broad agreement in Iran over the need to engage in building trust and confidence with the country’s neighbors to the south through proactive diplomacy and various forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

**Neighborly Relations**

In the absence of multilateral relations between Iran and the rest of the Persian Gulf states through collective forums such as the GCC, attention must be paid to bilateral relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors. Of these, Iran’s relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates merit particular attention. With all three countries, Iran has had relations that have been complex, multi-layered, and often bitterly acrimonious, at times in fact even violent. Significantly, however, the precise nature of the relationships that have existed between Iran and each of these three regional actors—and with the other states of the GCC for that matter—have depended more on the immediate domestic and international conditions which each actor has faced rather than on larger ideological concerns and pursuits. Even when Iranian foreign policy was normatively driven, in the 1980s, the imperative to consolidate revolutionary authority domestically and to curtail the Arab states’ staunch support for Iraq during its war with Iran was as big a factor in Iran’s regional policy as was exporting the Islamic revolution abroad. A
detailed examination of Iran’s relations with each of its neighbors, Arab or otherwise, reveals a principal logic guiding the country’s foreign policy behavior, namely the maximization of national interests in a volatile region that all too frequently features rapid, often unpredictable change. Clearly, Iranian policymakers view their country as one of the region’s most powerful states in the region, if not its preeminent power. Within this context, Iran’s relations with its Arab neighbors are not based on any clearly delineated foreign policy doctrine. Instead, they are determined more by the ebb and flow of regional power politics, and by Iran’s attempts to play the role of a regional superpower, than by anything else.

Iran-Saudi Relations

Perhaps nowhere is the flexibility and changeable nature of Iran’s foreign relations more evident than in its relations with Saudi Arabia. As two of the three most populous and most powerful states in the Persian Gulf region—the third being Iraq—by virtue of their larger regional and international aspirations, their decidedly different political cultures and their domestic politics, and interests and priorities that have not always converged, the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia have often been characterized by tension and friction. Although a number of observers, particularly in the popular media, have ascribed a religious aspect to this competition, with strong undercurrents of age-old rivalries between Sunnis and supposedly reawakened Shi’ites, there is little evidence to suggest that at least in their mutual interactions, Iran and Saudi Arabia use religion for anything other than instrumentalist purposes. Instead, there is every reason to believe that the primary motivating factor for Iran and Saudi Arabia in formulating their policies toward one other is ensuring that the other side does not threaten its interests, domestically, regionally, and globally. Moreover, as regional superpowers, the two countries
compete over defining the terms and conditions under which regional security is achieved, again motivated by balance-of-power considerations.

The rivalry between the two powers is nothing new and predates the establishment of the Islamic Republic. In fact, up until the late 1960s, indeterminate borders and territorial disputes constituted a main area of friction between the two countries. By 1968, however, after negotiations that at times were difficult, a formal agreement was reached and the issue was finally settled. From that point until the Islamic revolution in 1978, Iran-Saudi relations steadily improved, driven by mutual interests to contain the spread of a number of common threats, chief among which were the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, the radical policies of the People’s democratic Republic of Yemen, and the spread of Soviet influence in the region and beyond. This alliance was further cemented with Iran and Saudi Arabia forming “two solid pillars supporting the building of a conservative and pro-Western policy in the region.”

Iran’s 1978-79 revolution led to the dissolution of its marriage of convenience with Saudi Arabia. Throughout the 1980s, gripped with revolutionary fever and locked in a bloody war with Iraq—whom the Saudis supported with generous financial and diplomatic assistance—Iran-Saudi relations deteriorated. When in 1987, in the midst of the so-called “tanker war” and in response to Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti tankers carrying Iraqi oil, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait invited American military forces to protect their tanker fleet from Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini denounced the move as “disgraceful” and called on Iranian pilgrims performing the hajj in Mecca to protest against the Saudi-American military alliance. When some 400 pilgrims died in the mayhem and the police attacks that followed, a senior Saudi official declared that “the Kingdom hopes, praise be to God, to remove from Iran the authority which sends the people of Iran to their deaths.” With Saudi support for Iraq continuing even after the war’s end, and with
Iranian authorities boycotting the Hajj for three years and accusing Saudi authorities of gross incompetence in being custodians of Islam’s holy sites, tensions between the two countries continued into 1990.

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, its erstwhile ally in the war against Iran, once again changed the region’s strategic balance, and with it the nature of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Throughout the 1990s, the relationship between the two states improved steadily, starting with an end to the Iranian boycott of the Hajj in 1991, restoration of diplomatic relations the same year, high ranking visits by senior officials to each other’s capitals, and Iranian President Rafsanjani’s state visit to Riyadh in 1997. The trend toward warmer relations deepened with the election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency that same year. Also critically important in the deepening rapprochement was the rise in the prominence and influence in Riyadh of Prince Abdullah after King Fahd, his half-brother, suffered a stroke in 1995, and left most affairs of the state to others. Locked in a battle for succession and eager to demonstrate his relative independence from the US and to emphasize his Islamic credentials, one of Prince Abdullah’s main goals was to improve relations with Iran. As one observer has commented, “it takes two to tango. It is not at all clear that the rapprochement would have occurred between Fahd and Khatami as it has between Abdullah and Khatami. The impetus came as much from Saudi Arabian as from Iranian leadership.”50 In 2001, the two countries signed a symbolically important security agreement, designed to increase cooperation over border surveillance, combating money laundering, and the administration of water and territorial matters.

Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 may have brought back the gruff rhetorical style of Iranian diplomacy reminiscent of the earlier days of the revolution, but it did not substantially change the nature of Iranian-Saudi relations or the overall positive trend between the two.
Despite increased American efforts to further isolate and marginalize Iran over its nuclear program, and despite the Iranian President’s often incendiary and frequently insensitive remarks, Ahmadinejad made a highly publicized state visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2007.  

A brief glance at Iranian-Saudi relations in the context of and in relation to OPEC further demonstrates the underlying pragmatism that characterizes the relationship between the two countries. In broad terms, insofar as OPEC production and pricing is concerned, Saudi Arabia and Iran, which constitute the cartel’s first and second largest oil producers, follow somewhat opposing logics. Saudi Arabia often champions a position favored by its Western allies and by the many smaller oil sheikhdoms that are also members of the organization—namely Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman—advocating higher levels of production that would result in sudden spikes in the global price of petroleum and petroleum-related products. Many of the less wealthy OPEC members, on the other hand, chief among them Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Venezuela, and Libya, favor tighter controls over the global supply of oil through stricter production quotas that would, in turn, keep prices higher and more favorable to the producers. Not coincidentally, the latter group of OPEC producers happens to have less friendly relations with the West and is thus less likely to opt for economic policies that are favored by the European powers and the United States.  

Based on their overall preferences within OPEC, Iran and Saudi Arabia have frequently found themselves bitterly at odds over production quotas that effect oil prices globally. As far back as 1973-74, the Shah of Iran privately complained that the Saudis were basing their oil policy solely on American preferences. Nevertheless, there have been a few critical instances when Iran and Saudi Arabia have seen eye-to-eye on the pricing issue and have sided together despite pressure from others to break rank. In 1987-88, for example, amid an alarming fall in oil
prices, Iran persuaded Saudi Arabia to lower its production in order to help prices up. Similar instances of Saudi-Iranian cooperation within OPEC could be seen in December 2008, when oil prices suddenly plummeted in the face of a global recession. This willingness on the part of the two states to side together when circumstances and interests dictate demonstrates the overall pragmatism that characterizes their foreign policies in general and their mutual interactions in particular.

While common interests have drawn the two countries steadily closer together over the last couple of decades, Iran and Saudi Arabia do, nevertheless, hold fundamentally different visions of the security architecture best suited for the protection of the Persian Gulf. Motivated largely by deep-seated distrust of Iran and the prospects of lingering instability in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, Saudi Arabia sees the continued presence of American military forces in the Persian Gulf and in the littoral states as integral to regional security. Despite the move of the US airbase from the Saudi desert to Qatar in 2003, the Saudi leadership still considers the benefits of a close military alliance with the United States as outweighing the domestic political costs that it entails.

In Iran, on the other hand, few voices do not criticize America’s heavy-handed military presence in the Persian Gulf. From Tehran’s perspective, the US military’s continued presence in the Persian Gulf has two deleterious effects. First, there is the short-term prospect of the United States launching an attack on Iran, which, at various points during George W. Bush’s presidency, was a very real possibility. With time, this threat appears to have receded, but it does continue to remain somewhat of a possibility. What is far more harmful, the Iranians maintain, is the widespread instability and tensions that result from the stationing of US forces across the region. Regional security is a regional issue, and it cannot be made possible, as is currently the
Therefore, any meaningful Persian Gulf security architecture has to necessarily include Iran, something which the United States, with Saudi acquiescence and support, has persistently, and so far effectively, opposed.

Despite the persistence of disagreement over the Persian Gulf’s security architecture, the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia is likely to continue in the future, at least in short and medium terms, as emerging dynamics within the Iranian polity are likely to strengthen the impulse toward greater regional cooperation and better relations with neighbors. As the Ahmadinejad presidency has so far demonstrated, even a return to the rhetorical populism of yesteryears has not changed the truism that Iran simply does not have the capability to take on the United States and its regional allies all at the same time even if it wanted to. Ahmadinejad may have resurrected slogans such as “death to the Great Satan” that were beginning to die down under Khatami’s watch, but he has been careful not to condemn monarchy, much less Iran’s neighboring monarchies, as corrupt and unIslamic, as was also popular in the early days of the revolution. Again, the instrumentalist use of slogans and radical rhetoric has not translated into commensurately “revolutionary” foreign policy pursuits, neither with the outside world at large nor especially in relation to Saudi Arabia.

Iran and Iraq

Equally complex and multi-layered has been Iran’s relations with Iraq. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran’s relations with its neighbor to the west can be divided into three phases. The first phase lasted from 1979 until Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and was punctuated by what turned out to be the longest war in the twentieth century, namely the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. The scale of the costs of the conflict, both in human lives and physical infrastructure, was equally staggering—the highest up until the US war on Iraq in 2003.
According to conservative Western estimates, the war dead included some 262,000 Iranians and 105,000 Iraqis, with the total number of casualties on both sides amounting to one million.  

According to one analyst, the aggregate costs of the war for Iran amounted to $627 billion and $561 for Iraq.

The causes, process, and outcome of the war have been well-documented already. The Shah’s departure in January 1979 had unleashed a frenzied race among contending revolutionary factions to consolidate power and eliminate opponents. Following the monarchy’s collapse, the consolidation of revolutionary power entailed two main elements. One was a compelling revolutionary ideology imbued with strong elements of Iranian nationalism and Shi’ite messianic radicalism, and the other the systematic dismemberment of the Pahlavi state and its replacement with a new, increasingly theocratic one. The ensuing revolutionary frenzy gave the region’s conservative rulers cause for alarm. Meanwhile, the turmoil and power vacuum in Tehran gave Iraq’s Saddam Hussein the perfect opportunity to emerge as the new leader of the Arab world with what he assumed would be a lightening victory over Iran’s crumbling armed forces. But the war was anything but quick, and victory eluded Saddam Hussein to the bitter end.

Despite Iran’s acceptance of UNSC Resolution 598 in July 1988 that brought a formal end to the hostilities, it was not until Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 that relations between the two countries began to change for the better. Thus began a second phase in the relationship between Iran and Iraq, lasting approximately from September 1990 until the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, during which the two former enemies maintained formal, though at times tense and difficult, relations.

In order to secure the country’s eastern borders, in the early days of the invasion of Kuwait Saddam gave Iran a series of concessions, chief among which were the recognition of the
1975 Algiers Accord, withdrawal of all Iraqi troops from Iranian territories, an immediate exchange of prisoners of war, the establishment of full diplomatic relations, and an offer of $25 billion as reparations. For its part, Iran pursued a two-track diplomacy during the war, condemning Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and also calling on foreign forces to leave the region as soon as the hostilities were over. Once the war was over, Iran-Iraq relations were marked by mutual distrust but also by a recognition of the need to keep disagreements to manageable levels. Each side, for example, continued to provide sanctuary to the other’s main opposition group, with the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) being based in Tehran and the armed Mujahedeen-e Khalq Organization (MKO) operating out of Iraqi desert areas near the Iranian border. At the same time, depending on the temperature between them, Iran would either turn a blind eye to Iraqi oil smuggling operations (in defiance of UN Security Council sanctions) or would intercept tankers carrying Iraqi oil.

The US invasion of Iraq and the collapse of the Saddam regime ushered in a third phase in Iranian-Iraqi relations. For Iran, the significance of the elimination of a major regional rival, and the subsequent political ascendancy of Iraqi Shi’ites, cannot be over-emphasized. Tehran is keenly aware that the US invasion of Iraq has presented it with a host of new security challenges, as well as with tremendous opportunities to advance its national and regional interests. Ethnic and sectarian strife, the real danger that Iraq might break up into smaller, unstable pieces, the potential for the spill-over of insurgent activities into Iran, and the presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops within striking distance of Tehran are among the most serious threats that Iran faces as a result of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. At the same time, however, the emergence in Baghdad of Shi’ite political leaders sympathetic and even friendly to Iran has increased Iranian influence across the region and has, more broadly, redefined the
hostile strategic landscape that seriously threatened Iranian interests since September 11. Thus Iran has proceeded with extreme caution in the new Iraq, aware of the multiple pitfalls that can entangle it into a quagmire of its own were it to overplay its hands or, alternatively, to let its guards down.

This carefully calibrated foreign policy amounts to a deliberate, two-pronged approach, one geared toward longer term objectives and the other designed to address more immediate concerns. The first approach, which informs Iran’s long term objectives toward Iraq and marks the most consistent feature of its policy toward its neighbor, has been to encourage the emergence of a viable, pluralist, and stable central government in Baghdad. This policy serves Iranian interests on multiple levels. A stable central government in Iraq ensures that the country remains intact, that the insurgency is contained, and that the American occupation forces are likely to withdraw from the country sooner rather than later. Not surprisingly, despite earlier concerns, Iran did not object to the signing of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and Iraq in November 2008, which formalized the withdrawal of US troops from the country by 2011 and the stationing of a small US force afterwards. At the same time, an Iraqi government elected through pluralist means ensures continued Shi‘ite political dominance on the one hand and the relative weakness of the central state—the hallmark of which is a highly fractious parliament—on the other hand. Iran’s forceful advocacy of democratic pluralism in Iraq would also “contain the unruly ambitions of the Kurds and marginalize Iran’s Sunni foes.”

As Takeyh rightly points out, in the long term Iranian leaders are not interested in seeing another replica of the Islamic Republic in Iraq. Nor do they seek to turn Iraq’s two main Shi‘ite political organizations, SCIRI and the D’awa, into surrogates of Iran. Instead, they hope that
the “promotion of Shi’ite parties will provide them with a suitable interlocutor” and will result in
the emergence of “voices who are willing to engage with Iran.”73 This is pragmatic policy is best
evident in the nature of Iran’s relationship with Iraq’s highly influential Grand Ayatollah Sistani.
Unlike Iran’s ruling clerics, Ayatollah Sistani rejects the notion of direct clerical involvement in
politics. However, Iranian leaders have maintained very close, respectful relations with him,
“and do not harbor illusions that he would serve as an agent for the imposition of their theocratic
template on Iraq.”74

The strategic advantages for Iran of a pragmatic alliance with Iraqi Shi’ites are
significant. Through cultivating close ties with Iraq’s moderate Shi’ite forces, Iran can transform
its traditional rivalry with Iraq into a relationship based on “balance of interests,” one that would
enable the two countries to pursue complementary strategic objectives in relation to the rest of
the region.75 With a powerful adversary having turned into a sympathetic ally, Iran can not only
alleviate a number of regional pressures, especially exerted on it by the United States and its
allies, but can, potentially, greatly enhance its own strategic goals and objectives.

While Tehran’s long-term objective is to help ensure Iraq’s territorial integrity and
political stability, its short-term strategy has been to ensure that the United States does not use
Iraq—or Afghanistan for that matter—as a base for attacking Iran militarily. This deterrence has
been accomplished through moral and financial support for the irregular Mahdi Army militia and
the radical Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who heads it. The United States has often accused Iran of
also training and arming the Mahdi Army and other groups that often oppose the US presence in
Iraq, although no conclusive evidence of Iranian arms shipments to Iraqi insurgents has ever
been presented.76 Nevertheless, Iranian influence among some of Iraq’s powerful non-state
actors cannot be denied. For example, in March 2008, when a week-long battle broke out in
Basra between the Mahdi Army and Iraqi government forces, the fighting was brought to an end only through the intervention of the Iranian government, and, reportedly, through the specific mediation of the commander of Iran’s secretive Quds Forces, Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani. According to one report,

The Basra ceasefire also confirmed Iran’s immense influence in Iraq, and the extent to which Suleimani’s organization has penetrated the country, from the leadership down to the grassroots, especially in the Shi’ite dominated south.

In December 2008, weeks before the Bush administration’s tenure in office was to end, none other than the US Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, claimed that Iran’s interference in domestic Iraqi politics had declined sharply. For its part, Tehran has long maintained its desire to see a stable and prosperous central Iraqi government. Whether or not Tehran is to be taken at its word, it is obvious that Iranian foreign and national security policies toward Iraq have been guided by pragmatic realism and by a sober assessment of the threats and the opportunities that have been presented to Iran as a result of the US occupation of Iraq.

*Iran and the United Arab Emirates*

For the past two decades, Iran’s relations with the UAE have been marked by tension over contending claims to ownership over three islands in the Persian Gulf, namely the Lesser and Greater Tunbs and the islands of Abu Musa. Both Iran and the UAE have contending claims to the three islands and often point to different historical sources to justify their competing claims, or, alternatively, they interpret the same legal and historical sources differently in order to reach conclusions that best support their positions. Britain maintained control over the three islands, and upon its withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, the government of Iran, citing historical and legal justifications, took over the two Tunbs on November 30, 1971. A few weeks earlier, Iran and Sharjah had signed a Memorandum of Understanding in which they had agreed to the
joint administration of Abu Musa Island and its division into areas of equal access to citizens from both countries. Oil revenues accrued from the island’s subsoil and subsea resources were also to be equally shared. Each country hoisted its flag on its side, and both, at least nominally, laid claim to the whole of the island.⁸¹

For much of the 1970s and the 1980s the issue of the islands lay mostly dormant. At the height of the Iranian revolution, realizing the weakness and chaotic nature of the Iran’s nascent post-revolutionary government, in 1980 and 1981 the UAE submitted two letters to the UN Secretary General in which it asserted its sovereignty over the three islands and rejected claims by Iran that they were integral parts of Iranian territory.⁸² For much of the remainder of the decade, however, prompted mostly commercial and strategic considerations, the relationship between the two sides improved steadily, and the UAE often found itself at the forefront of the GCC-Iran rapprochement.⁸³

Beginning in 1992, however, all three islands, particularly Abu Musa, once again became a major source of contention over an incident which remains, quite typically, shrouded in mystery. According to the Iranian narrative, in April 1992 Iranian authorities arrested a number of armed non-UAE nationals, including a Dutchman, trying to enter the island from the UAE side. The following August, a boat carrying (mostly Arab) migrant workers from the UAE to the island was refused permission to dock and was turned back on grounds that the migrant’s entry into the island contravened the terms of the 1971 MOU. Not surprisingly, the government of the UAE views the situation quite differently, maintaining that the Iranian government unilaterally abrogated the 1971 MOU by expelling the island’s Arab population. Since Iran had fortified its military presence on the island earlier, its takeover was premeditated and part of a new, aggressive posture in the Persian Gulf.
Whatever the precise nature of the incidents that took place in 1992, the context within which they unfolded and their consequences ever since are key to understanding Iranian-UAE relations. With Iraq having been ejected from Kuwait and its military capabilities practically destroyed by the United States, the Gulf states remained quite concerned about a rising Iran and its military and hegemonic aspirations. In the meanwhile, the growing presence of the US military across the Persian Gulf, solidified through the signing of various military cooperation treaties between the United States and the various littoral states, gave the UAE the necessary confidence to press its case against Iran whenever and wherever possible. The Clinton administration’s “dual containment” policy, and perceived weaknesses in Iran’s regional and international diplomatic positions, appears to have further encouraged the UAE in its repeated denunciations of Iran’s “occupation” of the islands in various international forums, especially in the GCC and the Arab League. In addition to raising the issue at the United Nations, the UAE has sought to take the matter before the International Court of Justice, a measure Iran has so far rejected in preference over bilateral discussions and negotiations. Both sides, meanwhile, remain steadfast in their conviction that the islands have been integral parts of their respective territories and, as such, remain inseparable.

Paradoxically, there is another, equally significant aspect to the relationship between the UAE and Iran, namely the commercial trade between them. According to one estimate, the volume of trade between the two countries, both officially and unofficially, was around $11 billion in 2007. There are an estimated 500,000 Iranian residents in Dubai alone, of whom some 10,000 are registered owners of businesses. Dubai has emerged as perhaps the most significant entrepot used by Iranian businesses in their attempt to circumvent US and Western economic sanctions on Iran, with good routinely re-exported from Dubai to various destinations.
in Iran. Not surprisingly, by some accounts Iran has emerged as Dubai’s biggest trading partner. Despite persistent tensions over the disputed islands, therefore, relations between the two remain generally amicable because of their economic and commercial ties.

**Conclusion**

In many ways, Iranian-UAE relations are emblematic of Iran’s relations with its other Arab neighbors, whether Iraq or Saudi Arabia or, for that matter, the other Sheikhdoms of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. A history of territorial and other disputes, often made all the more intractable by the advent of the modern state and by age-old cultural and linguistic differences, has resulted in deep-seated mistrust, suspicion, and acrimony between Iran on the one side and its Arab neighbors on the other. At the same time, the two sides have multiple points of convergent interests, not the least of which are strategic and commercial. Ultimately, as this paper has demonstrated, pragmatic concerns and pursuits, rooted in on-going assessments of Iran’s capabilities and needs, have guided the country’s foreign and national security policies, both in relation to the larger world and, particularly, insofar as the Persian Gulf region is concerned.

With pragmatism as its primary guiding force, the substance and underlying logic of Iran’s relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors, and with the outside world at large, have remained largely consistent since the mid- to late-1990s. This is despite the tenure in office in Tehran of two very different presidents, one championing the cause of “dialogue among civilizations” and the other a radical rhetoric reminiscent of the early days of the revolution. This begs the question of why, then, did Iran’s relations with the European Union and the United States deteriorate so dramatically during Ahmadinejad’s presidency despite the continuity of his policies with those of Khatami? The answer has to do less with Iranian foreign policy than with
larger international developments occurring around the time of changing administrations in Tehran, particularly significant improvements to US relations with a number of European powers that had become strained in the run-up to the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Since France and Germany, and even Russia and China, among many others, had so doggedly opposed America’s single-minded march toward war with Iraq in late 2002, early 2003, they were reluctant to enter into another row with their traditional ally over Iran’s nuclear program. In the meanwhile, Ahmadinejad’s tactless speeches and his confrontational personality made it significantly easier to vilify Iran and to present it as “a menacing threat” regionally and globally. In fact, at times Bush administration officials appeared far more concerned about Iran’s threat to its neighbors than the neighbors themselves. In short, it was not the substance and nature of Iranian foreign policy or is security posture toward the Persian that changed from Khatami to Ahmadinejad. Rather, it was American foreign policy objectives, and with it the evolving nature of America’s relations with its allies in Europe and in the UN Security Council, that underwent dramatic changes before and after 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq.

The future of Iran’s relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors cannot, therefore, be examined without also considering Iran’s relationship with the United States. It is difficult to imagine US-Iranian relations darkening any worse than they had during the administration of George W. Bush. Any reduction of tensions between Iran and the United States is likely to be welcomed by the regional states, many of whom worried, with good reason, about the potential fall-out of any open conflict between Tehran and Washington. But many regional actors also worry about the possibility that a warming of relations between Iran and the United States may lessen their luster in Washington’s eyes. A domestically weakened and internationally castigated Iran may be the preferred option of its neighbors, but whether this is a more likely scenario than
an Iran which is more integrated into the international community, perhaps led by a different
president, depends as much on larger international developments as it does on Iran’s domestic
politics and policy preferences. Changes are surely in the offing. What remain to be seen is their
degree, intensity, and direction.

1 Iran-US tensions, or relations for that matter, also largely determine the nature of the relationship—or more accurately the degree and nature of the tensions—between Iran and Israel. For more on the dynamics that characterize the tense relationship between Iran and Israel see, Trita Parsi. *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).


3 Gregory Gause makes a similar point about Saudi foreign policy, whose “fundamental goal” is “to protect the country from foreign domination and/or invasion and to safeguard the domestic stability of the Al Saud regime.” F. Gregory Gause III. “The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia”, Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds. *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 193.

4 Kamrava. “National Security Debates in Iran”.


14 For example, Ayatollah Khamenei’s message on occasion of the Hajj in 2008 included the following passage: “The wounded enemy will resort to all sorts of means and methods [to achieve its ends]. We must be alert, wise, and courageous so that the enemies’ efforts bear no fruit. In the last thirty years, the enemy, meaning principally the United States and Zionism, have done all they can [to harm us], but so far they have not been successful. God willing, the future will see more of the same.” *Etela’at*, No. 24357, (December 7, 2008), p. 1.


17 Ibid. p. 69.


26 Ibid. p. 137.


28 According to Kamal Kharrazi, Iran’s Foreign Minister from 1997 to 2005, “the widespread presence of foreign military personnel in Iraq, and America’s repeated threats to some of the countries of the region, is inimical to the security and stability of the Persian Gulf. Undoubtedly, threats to Persian Gulf security and stability endanger the interests of those countries that export oil as well as others that have invested in the region.” Kamal Kharrazi. Siyasat-e Khareji-ye Ma (Our Foreign Policy). (Tehran: Daftar-e Motale’at-e Siyasi va Beinolmelal, 1384/2005), p. 430.


31 A concise summary of US-Iran tensions in the aftermath of 9/11 and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, including Washington’s frequent references to “regime change” in Iran, can be found at Mehran Kamrava. “The United States and Iran: A Dangerous but Contained Rivalry”. Middle East Institute Policy Brief, No. 9, March 2008.


33 Jafari Valdani. Ravabet-e Khareji-ye Iran (Iran’s Foreign Relations). p. 86.

34 For a full discussion of the national security positions of the different Iranian factions see, Kamrava. “National Security Debates in Iran: Factionalism and Lost Opportunities”.


39 Naturally, US-Iran differences over the Persian Gulf cannot be settled in isolation from other issues dividing the two. As one Iranian observer has commented, “it would seem that no matter how the United States and Iran cooperate on functional issues related to their common interests at the Middle Eastern level and around the neighboring countries of Iran, in the absence of an attitudinal change on the part of Tehran toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there will be no breakthrough in the relations between the two countries.” Mahmood Sariolghalam. “Iran’s Emerging Security Doctrine: Domestic Sources and the Role of International Constraints”. The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. The Gulf: Challenges of the Future. (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2005), p. 179.


42 It would be inaccurate to completely dismiss the importance of religious differences between two neighboring states, one of which considers itself the cradle of orthodox Shi’ism and the other a bastion of Wahhabism. According to one Iranian diplomatic historian, “undoubtedly, religious differences have been the most important source of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century.” Hamid Ahmadi. Ravabet-e Iran va ‘Arabestan dar sadeh-ye Bistom (Dowreh-ye Pahlavi) Iran-Saudi Relations in the Twentieth Century (Pahlavi Era). (Tehran: The Center for Documents and Diplomatic History, 1386/2007), p. 241. Nevertheless, as we shall see shortly, and as Ahmadi himself recognizes—pointing to improvements in Iranian-Saudi relations beginning in the 1950s (p. 242)—the pursuit of national interests by both sides began trumping concerns over religious differences, a trend that continues to this day.

43 As Gregory Gause has observed, “In the Persian Gulf, states worry about conventional power threats and neighbors interfering in their domestic politics. Outside analysts tend to concentrate too much on the former kinds of threats and ignore the importance of the latter in regional foreign policies.” F. Gregory Gause, III. Middle East Policy. Vo. 14, No. 2, (Summer 2007), p. 122.


47 Although the amount of Saudi and Kuwaiti assistance to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war has never been fully disclosed, estimate generally put the figure at around $50 to $55 billion. Dilip Hiro. The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 250.


51 Causing his hosts considerable international embarrassment, in a media interview while attending a summit of leaders from the Muslim world in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Ahmadinejad made the following statement:

If the European countries admit to the fact that they killed the Jews in World War II and Hitler was responsible for burning and annihilating the Jews, why then they won’t give a part of Europe to Zionists to set up any government they wish? Europeans believe they should support the forces which occupies Qods, since the Jews were victimized in World War II. We, however, don’t accept this. It is one thing for Europe to continue to insist on this point, but why should it try to give part
of the Palestinian land to them? Germany and Austria can give two or three of their provinces to
the Zionists regime, so it can set a country. This would be a real solution to this problem. Why the
Europeans insist on supporting a tumour in the Middle East through imposing their will on other
powers. This will prolong the conflict and tension.


52 Ahmadi. Ravabet-e Iran va 'Arabestan dar sadeh-ye Bistom Iran-Saudi Relations in the Twentieth Century. p.
53 Spencer Swartz. “Saudi Arabia pushes OPEC for deep production cut”. The Globe and Mail. (December 17,
54 Okruhlik. “Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations”. p. 121.
57 Kharrazi. Siyasat-e Khareji-ye Ma (Our Foreign Policy). p. 430
58 Kamrava. “National Security Debates in Iran”.
59 In Fred Halliday’s words, “we are witnessing the collision of two aspirations for regional hegemony, and for
the shaping of the future of the region—that of the US and its allies, especially Israel, and that of Iran.” Fred Halliday.
“Iran’s Regional and Strategic Interests”. Walter Posch, ed. Iranian Challenges. (Brussels: Institute for Security
60 Dilip Hiro. The Longest War. p. 250.
61 Ibid. p. 251.
62 In addition to Hiro’s The Longest War, a small sample of the excellent works available on the Iran-Iraq War can
be found in two volumes: Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp. Iran and Iraq at War. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press,
1988); and Lawrence Potter and Gary Sick, eds. Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War. (Basingstoke: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2006).
63 Takeyh rejects this line of argument and instead sees the Iran-Iraq war as one “waged for the triumph of ideas,
with Ba'thist secular pan-Arabism contesting Iran’s Islamic fundamentalism”. Ray Takeyh. “Iran’s New Iraq”. The
Middle East Journal. Vol. 62, No. 1, (Winter 2008), p. 16. It is my contention, however, the war was less of “a
spiritual mission seeking moral redemption” and more a product of attempts by both Iraqi and Iranian leaders to
manipulate nationalist sentiments for purposes of political legitimacy and consolidation at national and regional
levels.
The Algiers Accord had demarcated the disputed Shat al-Arab river boundary between the two countries according
to the thalweg line. In the lead-up to the invasion of Iran, Saddam had torn a copy of the Accord and had declared it
null and void. After examining the evidence, however, Shaul Bakhash has concluded that Iran’s initial euphoria over
the Iraqi offers was misplaced and there was no clear giveback on this point. See his chapter, “Iran: War Ended,
Hostility Continued”. Amatzia Baram and Barry Rubin, eds. Iraq’s Road to War. (New York: St. Martin’s Press,
1993), pp. 219-231.
66 A statement made by the Iraqi defense minister at the time, Saadun al-Dulaimi, who was on an official visit to
Tehran in July 2005, epitomizes the fundamental change in Iranian-Iraq relations. “I have come to Iran,” he said, “to
67 Kayhan Barzegar. Siyasat-e Khareji-ye Iran dar ‘Araq-e Jadid (Iran’s Foreign Policy in the New Iraq). (Tehran:
69 Ibid. p. 61.
71 Takeyh. “Iran’s New Iraq”. p. 27.
72 Ibid. p. 24.
73 Ibid. p. 25.
74 Ibid.
75 Kayhan Barzegar. “Iran’s Foreign Policy in Post-Invasion Iraq”. Middle East Policy. vol. 15, No. 4, (Winter
2008), pp. 56-57.
76 Gareth Porter. “Evidence Fails to Support U.S. Claims about Iranian Weapons”. Inter Press Service. (May 22,
2008).

It is important to keep in mind, of course, that there are unique and different issues surrounding each of the three islands, and that it is an over-generalization to lump all three together. Also, while the federal government of the UAE maintains a single policy toward Iran in relation to the islands, each of the individual Emirates historically linked with the islands also have their own preferences and level of urgency—or lack thereof, as in the case of Dubai—insofar as the dispute with Iran is concerned.


During a visit to the UAE in January 2008, for example, President Bush remarked: “Iran’s actions threaten the security of nations everywhere. So the United States is strengthening our long-standing security commitments with our friends in the Gulf, and rallying friends around the world to confront this danger before it's too late.” Quoted in, Verma. “Bush Rallies Gulf Allies Against Iran”. p. 35.