

## **Power Struggle in the Gulf: A Re-evaluation of the Iran-Iraq War**

*Basra Körfezi'nde Güç Mücadelesi: İran-İrak Savaşı'nın Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi*

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to analyze the power struggle in the Persian Gulf towards the end of the Cold War from a different perspective. The withdrawal of Britain from the region created a power vacuum and this caused a regional leadership struggle between countries such as Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Facing historical problems between each other, the Iran-Iraq rivalry came into prominence with this struggle. The fray between the two countries also caused the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. This study argues that the Iran-Iraq War is a result of the Persian Gulf struggle and examines the armament activities of the parties concerned, the support they received and to which extend this support played a role in the conduct of the war. In this respect, the Iran-Iraq War concluded as a war of attrition without winners, caused the two countries to become a matter of secondary importance in the regional competition.

**Keywords:** Persian Gulf, Iran-Iraq War, Armament in the Persian Gulf

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Bu makale iThenticate sistemi tarafından taranmıştır.

DOI: 10.17550/aid.60317

**Öz**

*Bu çalışma, Soğuk Savaş'ın sonuna doğru yaşanan Basra Körfezi'ndeki güç mücadelesini farklı bir perspektiften irdelemektedir. İngiltere'nin bölgeden çekilmesinin ardından bölgede ortaya bir güç boşluğu çıkmıştır. Bu güç boşluğu bir taraftan ABD tarafından doldurulmaya çalışılırken diğer yandan Irak, İran ve Suudi Arabistan gibi bölge ülkeleri bölgesel liderlik mücadelesine girişmiştir. Bu mücadelede aralarında tarihsel problemler de bulunan İran-İrak rekabeti ön plana çıkmıştır. İki ülke arasındaki mücadele, 1980-1988 yılları arasında gerçekleşen İran-İrak Savaşı'na neden olmuştur. Çalışma İran-İrak Savaşı'nı Basra Körfezi'ndeki güç mücadelesinin bir sonucu olarak değerlendirmekte ve bu güç mücadelesinde tarafların silahlanma faaliyetlerini, almış oldukları destekleri ve bu desteğin savaşın gidişatındaki rolünü analiz etmektedir. Bu bağlamda galibi olmayan bir yıpratma savaşı olarak değerlendirilen İran-İrak Savaşı'nın sonucunda bölgesel rekabette iki ülkenin de geri plana düştükleri görülmektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Basra Körfezi, İran-İrak Savaşı, Basra Körfezi'nde Silahlanma

## **Introduction**

Middle Eastern countries in general and the countries located in the Gulf in particular were those affected in the post-1967-War period by the declaration of Britain to withdrawal its military presence from the Gulf in 1968. Britain's new approach, which exerted political, economic and later military control from the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards over countries like Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Oman, Qatar and especially Bahrain lead to a power vacuum in the region. Regional actors attempted to fill the power vacuum created in the Persian Gulf after Britain's eventual withdrawal of its troops from Bahrain in 1971. The Shah regime in Iran and the Baath regime in Iraq saw an opportunity in the new conjuncture, tended towards an intensive armament policy for regional leadership and extending their influence. In this respect, Iran tried to improve its relations with the US and with the Western Bloc while Iraq signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR in 1972.

As Iraq improved its relations with the USSR, Iran strived and succeeded to a great extent Baghdad to be perceived in the eyes of the US administration as the Soviet's "Trojan horse". In this context, Iran backed by the US, provided intensive military support to the Kurdish groups, opponent to the Saddam regime. Iran's essential policy in this period was to increase its relative power by fraying out Iraq. Iran assumed in a manner that it can establish its sphere of influence in the Gulf especially at Shatt al-Arab waterway without any trouble or that at least Iraq would not hinder these steps (Pelletiere, 1992: 7-8).

## **Iran's Armament Activities in the Shah and Post-Shah Era**

After Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf, Iran became the most important military power in the region after a short time because of the increasing oil prices after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. This situation deeply influenced the historical problems between Tehran and Baghdad and the power struggle in the region. The per capita income was \$180 prior to the 1973 War and reached \$1,500 shortly after the high increase in oil prices (Hetherington, 1982: 362-3). As the price of a barrel of crude oil was \$2 in 1971, it increased to US 12\$ after the embargo imposed in the 1973 War. The oil revenues of the Shah regime skyrocketed from \$2.3 billion in 1972 to \$18 in 1974 because

of the increase in the oil prices (Limbert, 1982: 103). The increase in the oil revenues directly affected Iran's armament policy. Shah's aim to transform Iran to an industrial state and his policy to turn the country into the most important military power in the Gulf resulted to a region-wide reaction against him. Besides, by the year 1975 Iran successfully coerced Iraq to make concessions with respect to Shatt al-Arab. Tehran's military superiority played an important role in Iraq's accepting the Iranian demands.

1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
113	397	519	2,157	4,373	3,021	1,688	5,803	3,000	2,625

**Table-23: US Arms Sales to Iran (1970-1979)**

**Source:** MERIP Reports, "U. S. Arms Sales to Iran, No. 71, October. 1978, p. 22-23.

Regarding the data provided in the table above, it can be argued that the US played a significant role in arming an Iran, which already engaged itself in an arms race after the increase of oil revenues. Thus, 60 per cent of arms purchased by Iran between the period of 1970-1974 and 81 per cent between the periods of 1975-1979 were provided by the US (Stork-Paul, 1983: 15). In this context, only in 1974, the arms deals it made with the US reached a total value of \$4.373 billion. This number was beneath \$520 million in 1972 and around \$2.157 billion 1973. The total value of arms agreements between the US and Iran reached \$6 billion by the year 1977 (MERIP, 1978: 22-3).

Considering the American arms transfers to Tehran, it can be maintained that during the Nixon era it attributed Iran a dominant role in its Persian Gulf policy. With its soldiers settled in the military bases and harbors previously used by British forces, the US enhanced its relations with Iranian military units. In the post-1973 War era, instead of extending its military presence in the Persian Gulf the US administration gave precedence to increase the military capabilities of Iran and Saudi Arabia in order to protect its vital interests. This policy, which lasted until the Iranian Islamic Revolution, was described as Twin-Pillar Policy. However, it can be argued the roles attributed to

Saudi Arabia and Iran were not quite the same. Comparing these two countries, one can argue that Tehran was seen as a more important ally with regard to its population and military capacity. Within this scope, in order to maintain its interests in the region strengthening Iran's military potential gained primacy in the US' defense approach. In other words, in order to protect its interests in the Persian Gulf the US supported Iran as a strategic ally. In this context, US policy of supporting Iran's armament continued in the post-Nixon period. When Jimmy Carter was elected as President in 1976, America continued to sale sophisticated arms to Iran. Between the period of 1977-1979, the total value of arms sales agreements between US and Iran exceeded \$10 billion.

Consequently, the US was the major factor behind Iran that transformed her to have an effective arsenal in the 1970's. Iran not only purchased its weapons from the US, but also from countries like Italy, Western Germany, France and the Netherlands. In this respect, tanks and air defense systems were in the foreground of the trade agreements it made with Britain. As an example, during this period Iran acquired some 1.000 tanks and thousands of rapier type surface-to-air missiles. Helicopters and naval defense systems came mostly from Italy and Western Germany (SIPRI-ATD).

### **Iraq's Arms Procurement Efforts**

Iraq had to struggle with Iran's offensive policies just after the Baathist coup d'état in 1968. The Baath regime prioritized to develop its military relations with the USSR against the US backed Iranian threat. Within this context, the Iraqi administration attempted to struggle against Shah Reza Pahlavi who demanded to change the 1937 treaty over Shatt al-Arab in favor of Iran and continue to put a claim for it. Because of the Iran backed Shiite opposition in the south and the rising military antagonism against Kurdish elements in the north, the Baath regime had to sign an agreement to grand autonomy to the Kurdish groups led by Mustafa Barzani in March 1970. Fundamentally, these circumstances made the Baath regime to increase its efforts to extend Iraq's military capabilities. It was quite intricate for Baghdad with its current military capacity to withstand an Iran, which received intense weaponry supply from the US within the framework of the Nixon doctrine. Iraq's tendency towards military capacity and power

was boosted when Saddam Hussein was compelled to sign the Algiers Accord in 1975, which ended Iraq's privileged position in the Shatt al-Arab.

Despite it joined the arms race in the Middle East after Israel, Egypt and even Syria, Iraq became one of the most actively armed Middle Eastern country in the 1960's due to the arms cooperation it facilitated with the Soviet Union after 1958 coup. Iraq, enjoyed a strategically important position in the steps taken by the US and Britain (active in the country since its establishment) after World War II in order to confine Soviet activities in the Middle East. For this reason, Iraq's military capacity was improved under Britain's control although Baghdad did not allowed to acquire sophisticated weapons system until the fall of the Monarchy in 1958. That's why Iraq's acquisition of sophisticated arms from the Western Bloc was very limited and none from the Eastern Bloc.

In fact General Qassim initially tried to acquire arms from the Western Bloc but refusal of its demands by the US and Britain and their rejection of the delivery of previously agreed arms sales facilitated the arms connection between Moscow and Baghdad. That's why Iraq started to buy arms from the Soviet Union just after the 1958 coup and USSR became the sole arms supplier of Iraq from 1958 until the war in 1967. Concordantly, Soviet arms sales to Iraq in 1958 were very comprehensive in type and scope. For example, Iraq ordered 86 airplanes, including transport, bombardment and combat fighters, and 320 tanks from the Soviets in the last five months of 1958. USSR gave a \$500 million loan to Iraq so that it could make the payment for the arms. Even most of the deliveries were made by 1963, Baghdad continued to make new arms agreements. With these orders, including Mig-19 and Mig-21s, the most developed supersonic combat fighters of its time, and tanks with essential operational capability like the T-54, Iraq purchased 400 tanks and 193 (consisting of 42 transport- 21 bombardment- 25 trainer and 105 fighter airplanes) military airplanes in total until 1967 (SIPRI-ATD).

In that period, the Soviet Union provided financial aid within the framework of the military agreements in order to make it easier for Iraq to purchase arms. The total sum of unrequited aid Iraq received

from the Soviet Union between 1958 and 1968 came to an amount of \$470 million (CIA, 1969). Whereas, Syria received \$388 million from the USSR between 1955 and 1968. However, keeping in mind that the USSR provided the military aid to Syria, which became a part of the United Arab Republic, indirectly through the Cairo, it can be argued that after Egypt, Syria and Iraq were the top recipients of Soviet aid.

With the growing Iranian threat in the beginning of the 1970's, the Iraqi administration was obliged to concentrate more on its armament policy. Because of their prestigious and deterrent effects, Iraq placed a particular importance on ballistic weapons and thought to use these missiles effectively in case of a war. Iraq added to its stock 48 Scud-B type ballistic missiles for the first time in 1975 concurrent to the agreement it made with USSR in 1974. Because of Moscow's imposed limitations regarding arms transfers and technical assistance, Baghdad began to diversify its sources and began to design its own missiles by modifying those it received. By working on the 800 Scud-type surface-to-surface (SSM) missiles Iraq received from the Soviets in the 1980's, it succeeded to manufacture mid- and long range missiles like el Husain, el Hicara and el Abbas and the el Fahd and el Samud short range ballistic missiles. Iraq's particular interest in long-range missiles at these modifications is direct result of the Iran-Iraq War. In this context, despite the psychological devastation it had on Iran, the fact that 'only' 14 of the 39 missiles launched by Iraq against Isfahan in Spring 1985 was perceived by the Baghdad administration as a failure. On the other hand, the range of the missiles controlled by Iraq were too short to hit Tehran. Whereas Iran stroke Baghdad, with Scud missiles located near the Iranian border, it obtained from Libya. Consequently, Iraq tried to extend the range and accuracy rate of the missiles it had in its stock. For instance, Baghdad developed missiles able to reach ranges up to 600 km by amplifying the fuel tanks (Hippler, 1991: 28).

Iraq materialized the chemical weapon project alongside its conventional weapons program in order to resolve its disadvantageous position in the military balance vis-à-vis Iran. The Baath regime were developing its chemical capacity since the beginning of the 1970's. In the early 1980s it attained various forms of chemical agents and constructed facilities to produce them. Baghdad began to use these chemical weapons in the front line against the Iranian forces as of

1982. Iraq constituted a complex corporation network to attain the necessary material for expanding its chemical weapon technology from the international markets. This initiative combined with the raw material and the transfer of advanced technology supplies presented by European companies made it possible for Iraq to produce chemical weapons without difficulties.

Iraq began its endeavor regarding chemical weapons in the 1970's and build its first pesticide factory in 1979 supported by an Italian company for \$50 million. This factory was under attack of Mossad agents from the day on it was build and could not operate at the desired level (Al Isa, 2003). Baghdad succeeded to produce its first chemical toxins in the beginning of the 1980's. Iraqi experts along with foreign technicians made significant progress in the field of chemical production admixture of its components. The production largely depended on importing the raw materials, whereas Western German, French, Italian and British companies played a substantial role in technical assistance and providing the raw material.

### **Continuation of the Foreign Supported War of Attrition for Eight Years**

Parallel to the growing strength of the Shah regime in the 1970's, the solution of the Shatt al-Arab issue against Iraq created significant disturbances in Baghdad. Iraq was a weak state as the Algiers Accord was signed in March 1975. Yet in 1980 as Iraq increased its military and economic power, Iran was dragged in to internal turmoil in tandem with the revolution process. Therefore, the strategic balance between the countries started to change in favor of Iraq. In the course of the revolution, 85 generals serving in the command echelon of the Iranian army were executed and hundreds of top-level officers where either arrested or forced to retire. Khomeini established revolutionary guards army (Pasdaran) apart from the Shah era's regular army in order to prevent a possible counter-coup. Pasdaran's ties were systematically cut off with the command level with the regular army during the course of its establishment. The Iranian army faced a serious division especially in June 1980 when over 500 officers were arrested and accused with treason felony. In September 1980, the number of soldiers who were part of the Iranian army but discharged after the revolution reached



12.000. Consequently, Iran lost half of its command elements at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War. People bound to the revolution yet far away from any military knowledge took the place of the discharged officers. These policies were a major blow towards Iran's military capabilities at the start of the war (Karsh- O'Neill, 2002: 19).

Half of the fighter pilots serving in the Iranian air force were removed as result of the Khomeini administration's policies and this caused the gap between combat fighters and pilots. The discharge of one fifth of its air force officers, besides the fighter pilots, Iran's superiority in air power gave way to the vulnerability vis-à-vis Iraq. Accordingly, Shah-era Iran, which possessed the strongest army in the Gulf in terms of capacity and combat capability, was now far away to threaten any regime in the region. The number of soldiers fall by half from 300,000 to 150,000 due to the liquidation process that began with the revolution. While, the number of soldiers in Iraq increased to 200,000 during the same period (Karsh- O'Neill, 2002: 19). The Iraqi army was upgraded to 12 division equipped with high technology as Saddam assumed power, whereas the number of division in the Iranian army dropped to six without top- level officers to command them.

Significant changes in favor of Iraq can be observed when the military capabilities in the 1970's and 80's of Iraq and Iran are compared. Iraq possessed 2,750 battle ready tanks whereas Iran obtained 1,735, from which half of them had spare parts problems. The Iraqi army had 920 high explosive cannons whereas the number of these dropped to 500 in the Iranian army. As the strategic balance was in favor of Iran during the Shah era, the supremacy turned towards Iraq as an outcome of the revolution. Iran also lost its superiority in the air. The most developed fighter plane in the Iranian air force was the F-14 as the delivery of 160 F-16 fighters, which were planned to be obtained during the Shah era, were cancelled with the revolution. The expulsion of 50,000 American advisors and suspension of pilots and other air force officers accused of being anti-revolutionary created major problems in the field of spare parts, technical maintenance and raised the question of who was going to aviate the fighter planes. Because of these, in 1980 Iran was able to deploy only half of its combat fighters (Karsh- O'Neill, 2002: 20). The problems witnessed in the air and ground forces were also present in the naval forces. Accordingly, the strategic superiority in those three fields changed dramatically in favor of Iraq.

It is hard to say that the Iran was prepared for a war, which started with the sudden attack of the Iraqi forces. Iraq, as did Israel in 1967, tried to disable Iran's air force with *Blitzkrieg*-like tactics by attacking 10 Iranian airbases simultaneously. As these attacks proved to be unsuccessful, Iraqi ground forces penetrated from the Iranian border and started to occupy strategic areas. Normally the Iranian army possessed the capacity to confront the Iraqi forces but the discharges after the revolution, problems within the regime, actions of anti-revolutionary elements and the spare part issues hindered its resistance. Nevertheless, in the first days of the war the Iranian air force responded by attacking USSR build reactors near Baghdad, Iraqi oil fields and military units. Iraq's strategy, was based on to ensure a line of defense by concentrating on the occupation of the Khuzestan region and achieving progress around the Zagros Mountains and Qasr-e Shirin route, where it expected quick results, (Pelletiere, 1992: 35). In late October, Iraq took over the capital of Khuzestan, Khorramshahr. It occupied 14,000 km of Iran's land and assumed control over both sides of Shatt al-Arab. One of the reasons why the Iranian forces could not succeed to deter the Iraqi attacks was the lack of coordination between the central army and Pasdaran. The disintegration of the command echelon affected the coordination of the subunits. The regular army and the Pasdaran resisted Iraqi attacks in line with their own plans.

As the war became more expensive and unsustainable for both parties, they had to announce a ceasefire. Thus after eight years the war came to an end without a winner or loser. It has to be underlined that the war would not last for so long if there were no arms transfers to Iran and Iraq. Interestingly an embargo was imposed on Iran with the beginning of the war. As Iran broke away from the US which was its main arms supplier, other Western countries owning American spare parts and weapons were also criticizing Iran because of the hostage crisis and they also were unwilling to transfer weapons to Iran. However, Iran still managed to procure arms from Greece, Israel, Syria, Taiwan, South Korea, Algeria, South Africa and Argentina in the first three years of the war. Countries like Israel and Syria sold arms to Iran mainly because of strategic reasons while the others considered economic causes. Iraq, on the other hand, could not purchase comprehensive arms from the Soviet Union in the first three years. However, Western Germany,

Czechoslovakia, Egypt, Spain, Poland, Austria, Jordan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco meet the Iraqi arms needs. (Mofid, 1990: 85). Among those, some suppliers had strategic motives while some had only economic concerns.

One of the most interesting features of this war is the fact that certain countries sold arms to Iran and Iraq at the same time. The US, Soviet Union, Britain, France, West Germany and East Germany were among the 26 countries who sold at least once arms and spare parts to both countries (Mofid, 1990: 87-8). Especially US supply of Iran with 260 Hawk-type surface to air missiles and 1,000 Tow-type anti-tank missiles via Israel erupted a scandal which was labeled as *Irangate* (SIPRI-ATD).

### **Conclusion**

The Iran-Iraq War was different in many aspects from the Arab-Israeli wars occurred during the Cold War. Above all, the war lasted longer than those before and no third party (super powers) took strong steps to end the conflict. The human and economic cost of the war, which lasted for eight years and ended on 20 July 1987 when Iran accepted the UN Resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire, was quite high. The war left 450,000 dead and 600,000 injured on the Iranian side with an economic cost of US \$644 billion. Iraq lost 150,000 of its citizens and 400,000 were injured while the economic cost for Iraq was at least some US \$450 billion (Mofid, 1990: 130). A significant difference of this war is that civilian areas were also attacked. These attacks were not just made with conventional weapons but chemical agents and ballistic missiles were also used for the first time since World War II (Karsh-O'Neill, 2002: 85). There were no border alterations despite the high costs, which arose for both sides.

Considering that, Iraq started the war by assuming that post-revolution Iran lost most of its military capability and failed to provide its internal integrity, it is interesting that Tehran ensured its domestic stability just because of this conflict. As Iraq lost its military superiority in the first two years of the war, it tried to balance its disadvantages with regard to Iran with the help of chemical agents and SSM missiles. Because it was a long lasting war, unlike other wars erupted in the Middle East, the population factor came into the forefront. Iran tried to

balance its shortcomings in the field of armaments by using its population factor, especially by trying to regain its captured territories. Despite the high number of civilian casualties it was relatively successful.

The role of arms suppliers who acted with various strategic and economic concerns was indicative in the armament of Iran and Iraq. For example, the Soviet Union who was Iraq's main source before the war, did not supply any advanced weaponry unless Iraq regressed with regard to Iran. Another example could be given related to the American and Israeli attitude. Under normal circumstances, the US would not sale any commercial product let alone arms to Iran which confined US activities in the region. The US, which saw the augmentation of the war and the exhaustion of both sides in line with its strategic interests, transferred arms t to Iran through Israel, which caused significant reactions in the USA. Israel also sold arms to Iran during the war. Israel sold Sidewinder-type air to air and Tow-type anti-tank missiles to Iran in 1985 and 1986 despite its strained relations with Tehran after the downfall of the Shah and Khomeini's anti-Semite discourse (SIPRI-ATD). A greater threat perception expectation in case of an Iraqi victory can explain Israel's arms sales to Iran contrary to its threat perceptions from Iran.

The defense and armament expenditures Iran and Iraq made during the war influenced both countries post-war policies. Iran strived to straighten the economic derogation with its own resources and weigh more importance to the ravages the war caused rather than to rearm itself. Iraq did the contrary and made rearmament its prime policy while trying to solve its economic problems in a different way, like the invasion of Kuwait.

The outcome of the war for the region is that the threat perceived by the Gulf countries from Iran was deterred for at least 10 years. It is clear that this threat perception was prevented by Iraq. The Gulf countries founded the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with the war as regional security mechanism with the intention to prevent Iraq losing the war and sustain it with economic aid. The Gulf countries tried to expand the GCC's institutional mechanism but boggled to include Iraq, which prevents the Iranian threat, into the Council. An economically injured but militarily strong Iraq was taken into account in the Gulf's

threat perceptions after the war. Another outcome is that Egypt got rid of the imposed isolation and engaged in regional politics. The engagement of Hosni Mubarak, who visited Iraq alongside all Gulf countries in October 1988, into regional policies was realized through the Arab Cooperation Council, which was founded in 1989 under the leadership of Iraq. However, Egypt would never be in the position as it was in the 1960's in terms of regional leadership.

Consequently, all global powers and certain regional actors were likeminded that post-revolution Iran constituted a threat. The war initiated by Iraq, who received arms transfers implicitly or explicitly and economic aid, was sustained because of this consensus. Iraq's victory could lead the country gaining absolute advantage in the region. This situation caused concerns over Baghdad. The best alternative for the regional countries and global powers was the attrition of both countries. The purpose of arming both countries was that none of them should gain superiority over each other. The desired outcome was fulfilled; neither Iraq nor Iran won the war militarily or economically. The regional countries who perceived threat from Iran and those powers who kept the region under their controls through arms trade were the winners.

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