

# A Rational Theoretic Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the case of Iran – Iraq War under Charles Glaser’s Rational Theory of International Politics (RTIP) framework and seeks out how does this approach provides an explanation concerning the initiation of the conflict. Firstly, the research portrays a literature review of the existing theoretical understandings the Iran – Iraq War and shows that these conceptualizations have rather narrow lenses. Secondly, the paper describes Glaser’s RTIP theorizing, its assumptions and variables, and shows that this theoretical standpoint is an attempt to fuse Realist, Liberal, and Constructivist interpretations into a workable framework. Thirdly, the study then analyzes the Iran – Iraq War through the perspective of Rational Theory, portraying that state motives based on greed and security seeking, capability determinants based on offense-defense balance and security dilemma, and mutual hostile perceptions due to each state not knowing the others’ motives were crucial triggers for the war.

**Keywords:** Iran, Iraq, Middle East, Rational Theory of International Politics, Iran – Iraq War

## İran-İrak Savaşı’nın Rasyonel Teorik Bir Analizi

**Öz:** Bu makale İran-İrak Savaşı örneğini Charles Glaser’in Rasyonel Teori (RTIP) çerçevesinde analiz etmekte ve bu yaklaşımın çatışmanın başlangıcına ilişkin nasıl bir açıklama sağladığını incelemektedir. İlk olarak bu araştırma, İran-İrak Savaşı’na ilişkin mevcut teorik anlayışların bir literatür taramasını ortaya koymakta ve bu kavramsallaştırmaların oldukça dar merceklerle sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. İkinci olarak bu makale, Glaser’in RTIP kuramlaştırmasını, varsayımlarını ve değişkenlerini açıklamakta ve bu teorik bakış açısının Realist, Liberal ve Konstrüktivist yorumları uygulanabilir bir çerçevede birleştirme girişimi olduğunu göstermektedir. Üçüncü olarak bu çalışma, İran-İrak Savaşı’nı Rasyonel Teori perspektifinden analiz ederek savaşın tetikleyicilerini bu iki devletin açgözlülük ve güvenlik arayışlarına bağlı motivasyonlarında, hücum-savunma dengesi ve güvenlik ikilemine dayalı güç değişkenlerinde ve karşılıklı düşmanlık algılarının ışığında birbirlerinin motivasyonlarını kestirememeleri durumlarına bağlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Irak, Orta Doğu, Rasyonel Teori, İran – Irak Savaşı

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## **Introduction**

This paper tests Charles Glaser's conceptual approach, framed as the 'Rational Theory of International Politics' or RTIP (Glaser, 2010), on the case of Iran-Iraq War, and observes how such a theoretical attitude interprets the drivers of this conflict. The first part of the paper gives an IR Theory based critical literature review on the works that examines the causes of the Iran-Iraq War and argues that even though there exist diverse and comprehensive explanations, the theories have missing points which can be supplemented under RTIP. The second part describes the foundations of the Rational Theory, while the final section provides an interpretation of the Iran-Iraq War through that theoretical perspective. The research reaches the conclusion that states' individual aggressive motives, factors concerning power, and the mutual perceptions of both states towards the other as being greedy and labeling each other as antagonistic, had an impact on the war's initiation.

## **Literature Review**

The existing International Relations Theoretic literary works on the Iran-Iraq War is impressive and diverse, and this situation can be attributed to the developments that reside at the theoretical domain (Marr, 2012, pp.360-361). The war's temporal sphere, that is the 1980s, corresponds to the emergence of new IR approaches, such as Constructivism, Leadership Trait Analysis, Ideology-Religion Studies, Historiographical Analysis, and Military Approaches, as well as new methodologies, such as the development of data sets and computational and statistical programs (Sprinz & Wolinsky-Nahmias, 2004 ; Singleton & Straits, 2010). Accordingly, it is observed that apart from the dominant theoretical paradigms of Realism and Liberalism, these novel approaches also constitute the main body of works that have scrutinized the conflicts of the 1980s. Therefore in the light of this overview, this section aims to provide a coherent literature review on

the works that have examined the initiation and causes of the Iran – Iraq War, before arguing that these works have certain limitations or missing elements in their elaborations of this conflict that can either be supplemented by and fused into Glaser’s approach called the Rational Theory.

### ***Historical Analysis***

It is primarily observed that the largest body of works that touch upon the causes of the war are the ones that examine the conflict historically, that is, the literature that tries to form a causal mechanism based on inter- or intra- state historical developments that go back to many centuries. These historical perspectives focus on the deeper historical background of the so-so Iran-Iraq relations that stem from the political, economic, and social interactions, and display that a long-lasting rivalry, territorial matters, religious issues, and complex ideological relations having a regional effect were the factors that stimulated the war (Ismael, 1982, p.22). For instance, to display the entangled situation of the Iran-Iraq territorial border line dispute, the works within this approach date back to the Ottoman-Safavid Wars, and show that the conflict prone Mesopotamian boundary between the Ottoman and Persian Empires had left a confusing heritage for the successor states; thus, stipulating that the roots of the Iran-Iraq conflict is the outcome of ripple effect of the centuries old territorial instability (Sigler, 1986, pp. 424-436 ; Hiro, 1985, pp. 30-39). To reveal the roots of the Iran-Iraq hostility and their territorial disputes, the historical studies show that cases such as the vagueness of the 1911 Border Agreement between the Ottomans that and Iran, the inability of forming a waterway commission, Iraq’s withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact in 1959, Iran’s renunciation of the 1937 Frontier Agreement in 1960s, Iran’s deployment of armed outposts on the disputed territories and seizure of several Gulf islands in the 1970s, Iraq’s involuntary signing of the Algiers Agreement following a Kurdish uprising in 1975, and the cross border skirmishes subsequent to the 1979 Iranian

Revolution disrupted the uneasy relations between the two states and paved the way to war. These historical approaches also stipulate that the long-term ethnic and sectarian cleavages, implementation of societal fragility as a leverage in state interference, and using religion in subversive activities have always stood in the delicate historical agenda and eventually triggered the war (Hiro, 1985, pp. 175-185).

### *Military Analysis*

The other mainstream literature that examines the Iran-Iraq War is the Military Approaches. These studies scrutinize the initiation of the war by using large data sets and empirical-statistical models to test their conflict-centered hypotheses' degree of validity and plausibility. For these theoretical attitudes, purely strategic qualifications, mainly military and economic data, as well as shifts in capability balances, security issues, and military parameters are the focus (Segal, 1988; Sabin, 1987; Talmadge, 2013). It is observed that this literature either directly examines the Iran-Iraq War or inspects it as an empirical case study. For instance, Donovan uses Power Transition Theory before arguing that the war occurred from "the Iranian desire for Pan-Shi'ism and the Iraqi fears for domestic security and stability set a context from which a conflictual and escalatory conflict cycle emerged" (Donovan, 2011, p.108), while Geller & Singer (1998), using the Correlates of War Project data set and an empirical-statistical model, argues that war was likely, since the two states had a common border, both were nondemocratic regimes, both were economically underdeveloped, both had a long-lasting rivalry, the capability balance had shifted towards Iraq, and that both states were revisionist (pp.150-155).

### *Constructivism*

Another body of International Relations Theoretical perspective on the causes of the Iran-Iraq War is the Constructivist approach. Bringing up issues such as identity, religion, norms, beliefs, intersubjectivity, and

culture, Constructivists have a pure ideational approach towards the war and they look at how the identity attribution of states have triggered the war (Wright, 1987, p.110). For instance, Marr (2012) describes that the “clash of identities” and “cultural differences” reside at the core of the conflict and “to cultural [and identity] differences, must be added religious differences” (pp.291-292). Additionally, Marr (2012, p.291) also examines how “language, literary traditions, and religious schism”, have created a hostile mutual relationship, which is then argued to have influenced Saddam Hussein’s perceptions (or misperceptions) on initiating the conflict (Lai, 2006 ; Wright, 1987). Still under the Constructivist framework, Adib-Moghaddam (2007), focusing on the creation of perceptions and “enemy images”, argues that through “contextualizing the empirical facts about the war with a narrative that appreciates the impact of norms, images, institutions, and other invented cultural artefacts”, the Baathist leadership’s decision to attack Iran rests “within the inter-subjective context of Iraqi-Arab nationalism, its anti-Iranian precepts, and the regime’s internalized self-perception as the indispensable pan-Arab force in the region” (p.64). The Constructivists therefore point out that “socially engineered cultural inventions came into play when Saddam Hussein decided to invade Iran” (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007,p. 64).

### ***Liberalism***

Apart from these previous approaches, it is observed that the Liberal International Relations arguments tend to focus on domestic dynamics, domestic politics, regime survival, and leadership preferences to explain the causes of international crises (Moravcsik, 1997). To formulate the Iran – Iraq War under this approach, Tripp & Chubin (1988, pp.4-5), for instance, state that the liberal argumentation of war is obtained through “the close examination of the political units in question, the definition of their interests, and how those interests are seen to intersect with the interests of others”. To complement, Wright (1985), in conjunction with other Liberal studies (Renfrew,

1987) argue that to delineate the escalation to war, the analysis should be on Saddam Hussein's acts to consolidate his regime and reinforce his political survival, which the war with Iran was the last phase (others being the July 1979 purge, deportation of Iraqi Shiites to Iran, and assisting the July Plot in Iran) of his deliberate actions. According to the Liberal IR perspective, Saddam's domestic motive with regards to an "internally stable Iran" would correspond to a stable Baath regime where there is minimal Kurdish insurgency, less clandestine activity of the Shiites, and lower possibility of great power intervention; thereby a more stable governance (Renfrew, 1987, p.102). In parallel, Makiya (1998, p.151) displays the importance of domestic politics and ideology, and points out that the Baathist regime's "mood had nothing to do with rancor over possessions, competition for economic assets, territory, or alleged Iranian intentions", arguing that "the Baathist motives were singularly political, derivative from ultimately deeply held ideological tenets". As in line with the abovementioned argumentations, Takeyh (2010, p. 356) also notes that the war's background lies within ideology and domestic politics, thence, asserting that "this was not an interstate conflict fought for territorial adjustment or limited political objectives", but rather, "a contest of ideologies" and that for both sides, "to wage war was a way of demonstrating one's commitment" to their respective "divine" aspirations.

### ***Realism***

The last main body of work within the International Relations literature that examines the Iran-Iraq War is the Realist Approach, which takes into consideration material factors, gain-cost analysis, relative distribution of capabilities, issues such as security, threat, and survival, as well as the regional balance of power. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the available Realist approaches on the Iran-Iraq War are twofold, that is, they are either Offensive Realist or Neoclassical Realist. Offensive Realists give great emphasis on the

ever-present competitive environment created by the anarchic international system, the gain-cost analysis of states or state leaders, and assume that states are always power or security maximizers with hegemonic aspirations as their main goal and material capabilities as main drivers (Mearsheimer, 2001). To depict its reflection on the Iran – Iraq War, Cohen (1986, p.146), points out that “[among Iran and Iraq] we see a pattern of suspicion and preparation for war, fears and resentments, competition for allies, and jockeying for advantages”, while Gause III (2002, p.50) describes that “with Iran bogged down in its own internal problems, it seemed a perfect time for the ambitious new president of Iraq to reassert Iraqi border claims, teach the new Iranian regime a lesson, and establish Iraq as the dominant regional power in the Gulf”, as “Saddam saw few risks in and enormous gains to be made by going to war”. Further, for the Offensive Realists, it was mainly Iraq’s security maximization that have prompted Saddam to attack his neighbor, as Iran’s decrease in its military potential after Khomeini’s purges -which increased Iraq’s utility in attacking Iran- and the opportunity of a “chance for Iraq to reclaim the Shatt, Khuzestan, several strategic Gulf Islands, and to overthrow the Islamic regime” where crucial triggers (Cohen, 1986, p.146 ; Gause III, 2002, 50).

Neoclassical Realists on the other hand have a more diverse approach, that is, they try to incorporate material variables with a leadership analysis and come with arguments defending that in conjunction with military capability, the decision makers’ perspective also matters in shaping foreign policy (Rose, 1998). The Neoclassical Analysis and the decision maker standpoints concerning the Iran-Iraq War is mainly built around the figure of Saddam Hussein, and arguments such as “the quest for power and prestige, an expansionist intention, a power vacuum generated by internal political convulsion, and a concern for the regional balance of power” are given as main reasons for his attack perceptions over Iran (Levy & Froelich, 1985, p.130). To be concise, it is

observed that the Neoclassical argument on the Iran-Iraq War revolves around the following framework: Saddam Hussein wanted Iraq to be the main power in the Gulf and in the Arab world; however Iran, with its solid material capability and policies towards Syria and the Gulf countries, barred the Iraqi area of maneuver, thereby decreasing the Iraqi likelihood of achieving Saddam's regional intentions. Yet, the military purges, provincial unrest, breaking up of the United States arms supply line due to the hostage crisis, and its regional isolation following the 1979 Revolution weakened the relative military capabilities of Iran with regards to Iraq, and altered Saddam Hussein's previously pessimist perspectives of challenging its neighbor for regional dominance, and prompted him to take the opportunity for regional revisionism and engage in war (Karsh, 1988; Gause III, 2002; Tripp, 2008; Satterfield & Seligman, 1994; Karsh & Rautsi, 1991; Razi, 1988)

### **General Remarks for the Literature Review**

What are the argumentative deductions that we can infer from this review? Firstly, it is possible to say that the evident main theoretical works on the Iran-Iraq War consists of five categories; these are the Historical and the Military Approaches, Constructivism, Liberalism, and Realism. Secondly, it is revealed that although the theories that examine the Iran-Iraq War have distinct and different agendas, it is possible to contemplate and assume that they can borrow from each other to enhance their explicability and build upon each other's works to provide systematicity as well as knowledge accumulation within the discipline. This subjective observation is deemed to be significant, since Glaser's RTIP attempts to accomplish just that, by fusing Realist & Military perspectives on one hand and Neoclassical Realist and Liberal standpoints, along with Constructivist lenses, to provide a coherent analysis which takes into consideration state (or leadership) motives, military-systemic factors, and information variables regarding reciprocal perception (Glaser, 2010).



It is monitored that all five approaches concerning the Iran-Iraq War have drawbacks, or in other words, are open to criticism. For instance, it is obvious that the Historical Approaches have certain shortcomings, as they are mainly descriptive, have minimal subjective argumentation, and disregard making inferences, thereby leaving deductions to the reader. However, the Historical Approaches are still vital, if they are used amid, or in concurrence with, a theoretical perspective to describe the background of a particular strategic interaction. Secondly, the Military Approaches, although suitable for examining wars, is observed to have a complex methodological framework that is based on empirical-statistical models with a regression or computer assisted analysis that renders following the research design impossible without an appendix of explicit parameters of the data set; thus limiting the comprehensive expectation of qualitative researchers. Glaser's Rational Theory of International Politics, on the other hand, although possessing a military approach, displays a much more concise research design with limited amount of abstractness, and with a clearer delineation of military and capability variables to explain wars.

Constructivism, similarly, also has complications; since it focuses on the ideational exchanges and intersubjective processes without considering the potency of the existing material factors, namely the actual present military parameters, which, in itself influences the creation of the ideational structure. Secondly, these works give minimal attribution to Iraqi or Iranian intersubjective understanding regarding the other's military stance postures. It should be noted that material variables are still crucial in determining the foreign policies of Middle Eastern countries, since security, survival, self-help, and relative gains are still on their state agendas; thence disregarding them may weaken the depth of the analysis for wars of the Middle East. Glaser's Rational Theory of International Politics approach, on the contrast, does attempt to fuse material and ideational variables, hence

enabling a more “complete” picture of the mutual understanding and perceptions between states (Glaser, 2010, pp.166-171).

The Liberal approach is also open to criticism. Liberal argumentations, for instance the ones of Makiya (1998, p.151) and Takeyh (2010, p.365), that argue on linking the causes of war to “regime survivability” and “political ideology” rather than “a competition over possessions or regional ambitions”, seems too naive for a Middle East war that has a long background of regional antagonism over border and territorial security issues. It is possible to argue that regime security is also linked with territorial security, since stable and uncontested borders mean a more secure internal regime. Thus, the Liberal perspective seems incomplete by disregarding the pressures coming from the states’ outside environments. Glaser’s Rational Theory of International Politics framework attempts to include and refine Liberal assumptions within its theoretical framework by incorporating domestic actor preferences with the capability and strategic perception variables of Neoclassical Realism (though accomplishing it in a narrower way, labeling it simply as “motives”), as central determinants in examining state foreign policy (Glaser, 2010, pp. 161-166).

The Realist works, similarly also have certain missing elements, which can be refined through additional scrutiny. The major flaw within Offensive Realism is that the theory takes competition due to anarchy as ever present and security maximization as given, that is, it does not consider variation in state motives that can deviate from becoming a regional hegemon. Glaser’s perspective attempts to develop these assumptions by building upon an argumentation that, rather than pure power and security maximizing, states may have different motivations concerning their foreign policies (Glaser, 2010, pp.152-156). Neoclassical Realism is observed to produce the most coherent, systematic, and plausible explanations for the Iran-Iraq War. This standpoint, within its framework, includes all levels of analysis, though, this theory’s elaboration of systemic constraints is still faint,

since it pays negligible attention to “structural modifiers” such as the offense-defense balance and the degree of security dilemma (Taliaferro, 2000) which are crucial in rivalry environments, hence, it is open for the addition of these variables with a new conceptualization.

Consequently, this literature review evaluated the available works that have examined the Iran-Iraq War, showed that their limitations can be supplemented by Glaser’s Rational Theory of International Politics framework, which combines the main variables of these approaches into its own structure, and provides a base for a powerful research design that examines international relations in a more holistic way. The following section presents Glaser’s Rational Theoretic perspective and puts forward how this particular theoretical standpoint provides an explanation for the sparking of the Iran – Iraq War.

### **The Rational Theory of International Politics (RTIP)**

#### ***Basic Assumptions of RTIP***

Glaser’s RTIP, developed in 2010, is a relatively new approach within the International Relations discipline (Glaser, 2010; Lake & Powell, 1999; Glaser, 2004; Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998; Glaser, 1997; Glaser, 1997; Glaser, 1994; Glaser, 1992). To place it in the map of International Relations theorizing, his perspective can be juxtaposed between Neoclassical Realism and Defensive Realism; hence, it is an attempt to combine both theories’ main variables together with the addition of Constructivist and Liberal lenses. Nevertheless, the theory conforms to the basic assumptions of the Realist and Rational Choice Paradigms, and accordingly, stipulates that the international system is anarchic in nature and states are rational actors (Glaser, 2010, pp. 28-32). The theory basically argues that rather than examining a single type of variable through a particular level of analysis, it opts for the elaboration of different layers of variables, noting that “both a state’s goals and the international situation it faces may influence the state’s choice between cooperative and competitive strategies” (Glaser, 2010,

p. 23). Therefore, Glaser's theoretical organization mainly tries to understand how the variation in state's motives, its power balance relative to its neighbors, and the degree of information concerning the state and its international environment determines its foreign policy (Glaser, 2010, pp.3-6).

### *Variables and Hypotheses*

The theory identifies three independent variables. These are state motives, power, and information parameters. The theory's main domestic variable elaborates on the scrutinization of state motives. According to Glaser (2010, p. 3), "motives embody what a state values, capturing its fundamental interests and goals" and point out that "the types of states are distinguished by their motives". Relatedly, the theory argues that states may have three kinds of motives: security seeking, greed, and mixed (Glaser, 2010, p. 40). States that are only driven for the purpose of achieving a sense of security are called "pure security seekers", if they are driven by motives of expansionism for the sake of domination than maintain security, then they are labeled as "purely greedy", and if they are driven by both security seeking and expansionist greed, then they are called "greedy security seekers" (Glaser, 2010, p. 33). In Rational Theoretic terms, a pure security seeker state engages in wars if via military conflict, it can increase its security by "decreasing its adversaries' security, eliminating its adversary, providing a buffer zone, or to acquire more defensible borders"; pure greedy states participates in wars if they desire to "increase their wealth, territory, prestige, or to spread their political ideology or religion"; and that greedy security seekers involve in armed hostilities if there is a combination of the two motives (Glaser, 2010, pp. 36-37).

Power variables are a refined version of the military variables of the other Realist-Military Approaches. The Rational Theory has two determinants that define this variable, these are the "state's ability to perform military missions", which depends on how "a state's military

power (relative size and quality) compares to the military that an adversary can build or has”, and the offense-defense balance, which refers to the conditions of geography, military capability, and military doctrine determining whether attacking or defending is advantageous in a war (Glaser, 2010, pp. 40-46). Accordingly, if there is a high discrepancy between states’ military performances in implementing military missions and in their relative capabilities, and if the states’ international environment provides an offense dominance then, under these conditions, the likelihood of war is expected to be high.

Thirdly, the information variable is concerned with the degree of uncertainty between states and examines whether their reciprocal perception and motive attribution for each other are accurate or not (Glaser, 2010, p. 47-50). This variable is important, since the Rational Theory assumes that international politics is an imperfect information game which limits accurate decision taking of states. The information variable is similar to reading international politics via Constructivism, but rather than focusing on shared ideations or intersubjective beliefs, this theory argues that actually, beliefs, in international politics, are only subjective, thus noting that there is only signaling to understand the type or posture of the other state (Glaser, 2010, pp. 47-50). According to Rational Theory, war is more likely to occur when states’ perceptions towards each other hold the opposite of their actual types or if they have difficulty reading the other’s motives. In addition, if states perceive each other as purely greedy then their reactions or measures concerning their own protection would be instant, thereby triggering a pre-emptive war to ensure their securities if the offense-defense conditions present such a window of opportunity.

## **Rational Theory and the Iran-Iraq War**

### *The Research Design*

The empirical examination of RTIP’s explanatory potential in this paper is an example of a theory testing case study, with the causes of

Iran-Iraq War as the main center of its scrutiny. Taking note that a Middle Eastern case has not been elaborated before by a Rational Theoretical approach, but US-Soviet Relations during the last years of the Cold War, Post-Cold War Europe, China-Japan Relations, and Nazi Germany in 1930s, this paper also attempts to provide a contribution to the Rational Theoretic studies and on the existing International Relations Theories which have already examined the Iran-Iraq War (Glaser, 2010, pp. 207- 227). The empirical application of RTIP is designed to be built upon secondary sources, and it embraces a temporal dimension of 1979-1980 that is the just after the Iranian Revolution. This investigation, to analyze the reasons of the Iran - Iraq War, moves on through three steps: firstly, it examines the motives of Iranian and Iraqi states, secondly, it analyzes the material variables, and thirdly it looks at states' information variables.

### ***State Motives***

Through a Rational Theoretic examination of Iran and Iraq's motivations prior to the war, under Glaser's terminology, given the statements of its leading-elite, Iran possessed purely greedy motives, while Iraq was a greedy security seeking state with mixed motives. Iran is considered as having such motives since it was apparent that it sought expansion not for security reasons but for the cause of spreading the revolution, Islamic statehood, Shiism, and anti-secular rhetoric, and it was observed that its foreign policy reflected just that, as it meddled in the affairs of Gulf states and Iraq, and even Lebanon by stationing revolutionary guards there which clearly had nothing to do with pure security motivations. On this point Levy & Froelich (1985, pp. 134-135) mention that "reinforcing the Arab fears was the expansionist mission of the revolutionary Islamic regime", and their goal of exporting the revolution through concrete programs of agitation, radio broadcasts, assassinations, and calling for the annexation of Bahrain". Iran's such ambitious and aggressive motives targeted Iraq for several reasons, these were linked with Iraq's

majority of the population being in the same sectarian lines with Iran, “Tehran’s hopes of Iraqi Shiites would emulate the Iranian example, the secular nature of the Baath which opposed the notion of Islamic political order, the geostrategic location of the Shiite holy cities”, as well as “Iraq’s position as the major obstacle to the Iranian quest for regional hegemony, and the Iranian perception that the combination of these factors would create a powerful weapon in the hands of their Islamic state” (Karsh, 1987, p. 29).

Iraqi motives on the other hand were both security oriented and greedy, that is, Iraq wanted to take territory for security reasons rather than for pure voraciousness, but it also possessed pursuing ambitions for other non-security intentions via the grabbing of limited strategic territory. On this issue, “the reassertion of Iraqi sovereignty in the Shatt al-Arab was a matter of national honor and a sacred mission for the nation and its leaders; at the same time Iraq also made claims on the province of Khuzestan” (Chubin & Tripp, 1988, p. 225), and that “the objective of Saddam Hussein to gain for Iraq a position of predominant power in the Persian Gulf” display the greedy nature of Iraqi mixed motives (Levy & Froelich, 1985, p. 131). Iraq’s security seeking aspiration under its greedy motives were captured by the limit of its initial military operations which solely aimed at securing “the Khorramshahr-Ahvaz-Susangerd-Messian line” rather than a broad territorial operation along its 700km border with Iran (Karsh, 1987, p. 92), or its desire to liberate Khuzestan, which created a “buffer zone” between Iran and Iraq (Renfrew, 1987, p. 103). This interpretation displays that both countries had strong intentions to go to war with each other by possessing greedy motives that delineated a dangerous atmosphere around the Gulf.

### *Power Variables*

Considering power variables, that is, the combined material and offense-defense balance parameters, it is evident that Iran with its size,

population, and geography, and with its defense minded military doctrine, seemed advantageous for a long attrition war. It has a large territory thus a deep strategic depth, in which its main cities are beyond direct Iraqi air and land attacks, and its border with Iraq is largely mountainous (except near the Gulf) with the terrain favoring defense within Iran. However, considering material capabilities it should be noted that Iran's geographical advantages were negated by its poor quality and quantity of its armed forces which declined after Khomeini's purges, and its oil exporting and agriculture dominant economy with little capacity to produce and develop modern conventional arms, had lowered its capacity for a total war. Just before the conflict in 1980, "Iran possessed 150,000 active personnel with 1735 tanks, 1700 armored vehicles, and 1000 artillery pieces"; its air force, due to poor maintenance, was unfit for a military confrontation and consisted of ~200 aircrafts (Herzog, 1989, pp.255-269). Iran's revolutionary guard and Basij militias were audacious, but were poorly trained in open combat tactics, therefore, these units had an inclination for ambush, roadblock, and urban warfare, which favored defense (Talmadge, 2013, p. 193). Since Iran was diplomatically isolated right after the revolution, it also had few regional allies other than Syria, and had to rely on Far East states such as North Korea and China for arms purchases. Iran though, at least had one material superiority over Iraq in military quality terms, and that was the condition of its navy, with still maintaining a strong operational capacity.

Iraq on the other hand, although having a disadvantage concerning geography and demographics, possessed a high quality and quantity material capability, which allowed for the embracing of mobile-offensive warfare with advanced weapons systems purchased from the Soviet Union. Iraq's armed forces were larger and more capable with "2750 tanks, 1400 artillery pieces, 4000 armored vehicles, and 340 aircraft"; however, since its economy was not industry based but built



upon oil export and agriculture, it had problems replacing its losses, thus relying on foreign arms purchases through the loans lent from the Gulf countries (Talmadge, 2013, p. 193). Doctrinally, Iraq's ability to perform military missions were higher than that of Iran since it possessed a "Central Revolutionary Command Council" with Saddam Hussein directly involved in controlling the war, whereas Iran, right before the war, did not possess a central command which would determine its coherent military strategy, thus "suffered from the confusion and power struggle between the Revolutionary Guards the Armed Forces" (Herzog, 1989, pp. 255-260).

Regarding the perception of power variables, both states were aware of these facts and parameters, thus it was apparent that Iraq's attack, if intended, would be very limited along the mountainous frontier but would mainly be delivered along the southern Gulf area, where geography favored offense and included strategically valuable territory. Whereas Iran, also aware of its capabilities, refrained from offensive actions and followed its defense minded doctrine around the areas of defense dominance, such as in cities and around rugged terrain. Thus, it is apparent that there was a large discrepancy between Iranian and Iraqi potential military performance capabilities, which is considered by Rational Theorists as a critical factor that triggers war between states, and even though the offense-defense balance favored defense in the overall war, geographical permittance allowed an offensive advantage in the southern front near the Gulf which might have prompted an Iraqi greedy security seeking attempt to conquer territory to obtain a strategic buffer, strategic depth, more access to the gulf, push Iran out of the Shatt al Arab region.

### ***Information Variables***

How did both states perceive each other, and did they have an inkling regarding each other's motives which impacted the war? Did both states perceive each other similar like their actual motives or due to the

mere presence of an uncertainty that war occurred? To be apparent, there did not exist a hazy fog of war, since, right after the revolution and just before the war, there already existed a low intensity-subversive conflict in which, cross-border shelling, assassinations, agitations, and influencing religious and minority groups were examples of an ongoing asymmetric war, thus both states perceived the other as antagonistic with having non-security destabilizing motives and had already produced a dangerous environment that an inter-state war seemed imminent.

Concerning the perception of each other's actual state motives, things were slightly different. Iraq, it seems, had accurately read Iranian motives as Levy & Froelich (1985, p. 135) quote Iraqi Foreign Minister's speech in October 1980 United Nations Security Council, where he clearly states that Iraq was aware of Iran's greedy motives, since "Khomeini has unmasked the true intentions of his Islamic revolution by deciding to export it to Iraq and decided to overthrow our government through subversion, sabotage and terrorism", and argue that Ayatollah Rouhani's speech in September 1979, "calling for the annexation of Bahrain and exporting the revolution to the Persian Gulf", had already revealed Iran's greedy motives to Iraq, thus Iraq was sure that its eastern neighbor was volatile and dangerous. Considering Iran, it should be noted that the Islamic Republic was only partially aware of Iraq's mixed (security & greed) motives, and had read Iraqi ambitions as being purely greedy. Iranian side of information variables were evident in their response to the 1982 Iraqi ceasefire attempt, in which Saddam sought to start negotiations concerning the status of the Shatt al Arab region, but the speaker of the Iranian Assembly, Rafsanjani declined, fearing that even after a truce, Iraq would "not hand over"(Razi, 1988, p. 711), instead, might "expand or stay on conquered territories", or even "strengthen them for a later invasion" towards Iran, thus labeling Iraq as a ravenous state with greedy ambitions (Farroukh, 2011, pp. 365-369). This

interpretation stipulates that both states new that they were residing in a dangerous environment where their reciprocal perceptions towards one another reflected that the other was definitely antagonistic and greedy, thereby signifying a severe security dilemma situation that enhanced mutual fear and hostility and showed that war was imminent.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This paper analyzes the background factors behind the initiation of the Iran-Iraq War through a new perspective. After observing that the existing interpretations of the war had limitations in explanatory potential, it attempts to refine and fix their argumentations by trying to re-use their variables within a framework called Rational Theory which to some extent incorporates Liberal, Realist, Military, and Constructivist approaches through state motives, power determinants, and information variables to understand state foreign policy decision choices. Implementing a theory testing case study, the results imply that the causes of the war, according to this particular theoretic lens, lay with both states having individually greedy motives, with Iraq also seeking security by aiming to use its military advantage and attack via the Basra area for a possible buffer for the Shatt where the offense-defense balance favored offense, and at the mutual hostile insight of both states concerning the other as purely greedy with having antagonistic aspirations.

Still, it can be argued that individual state motives had the highest impact on Iran and Iraq's decisions in engaging in the conflict, where their greedy aspirations and desire to expand were significant. The impact of other variables, power, and information, seems to be more moderate, since the overall offense-defense balance favored defense, thus signaling states that offensive operations would be too costly, and there already existed a dangerous environment that influenced both states to perceive each other as expansionist and antagonistic. As a

whole, the Rational Theoretic analysis of the Iran-Iraq War has revealed that the theory performs well in incorporating Neoclassical-Liberal and Realist-Military variables in reaching arguments concerning foreign policy decisions, and provides a contribution to the available International Relations Theoretical works on the Iran-Iraq War by displaying what kind of argumentative deductions would rise if the mainstream approaches' variables were fused into a single theoretical framework.

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