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ʿARAB V. ARAB-IRANIAN RELATIONS IN MODERN TIMES

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Modern Iran's relations with the Arab states began during the inter-war period. Since Iran was preoccupied with the consequences of prolonged Anglo-Russian rivalry and domination and the lack of centralized government, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of modern Turkey and new Arab states following World War I changed Iran's regional environment without affecting its foreign relations in any major way (R. K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran, 1500-1941*, Charlottesville, 1966, pp. 82-107). The military coup of Reżā Khan (1921) and his accession to the throne (1925) resulted in sufficient governmental capacity to conduct foreign affairs effectively. Reżā Shah's good-neighbor policy addressed three major problems with Iraq (for the historical background during the Ottoman period, see ibid., pp. 117-215, 258-66): (1) The migration of Kurdish tribes that had been taking refuge in Iraq to escape Reżā Shah's central control was regulated by an agreement signed in 1932 (Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Survey of International Affairs, 1934*, London, 1935, pp. 184-85). (2) In a case before the League of Nations, Iran claimed for its citizens the same capitulatory privileges enjoyed by British nationals in Iraq; the dispute was eventually resolved outside the League and became moot once Iran and Iraq abolished

capitulatory privileges for all foreign powers (*League of Nations Official Journal*, 1924, pp. 1345-46, 1598). (3) Most important, ancient border disputes between the Ottoman and Persian empires revived around the location of the boundary line in the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab ; Iraq claimed *de jure* control over the whole body of the river while Iran insisted that the frontier should follow the thalweg (course of the main channel) according to the principles of international law. The dispute was referred to the League of Nations but resolved independently with a bilateral treaty signed on 4 July 1937 (*League of Nations Official Journal*, 1935, pp. 196-97; *League of Nations Treaty Series*, CXC, pp. 256-58). Four days later, Iran and Iraq joined with Afghanistan and Turkey in the Saʿdābād Pact, which was probably intended to deter the perceived threat of Italy to the Middle East; if there were similar designs to resist pressures from Moscow, the alliance had no effect, since the Soviet Union invaded Iran in 1941.

The dynamics of Arab-Iranian relations since the end of World War II reflect dramatic changes in the international, regional, and domestic environments of Iran and the Arab states; they can be surveyed in five distinct phases.

(1) The shah's return to power after the overthrow of the Moṣaddeq government in 1953 resulted in far-reaching foreign policy changes. The Iranian dispute with Iraq over the terms and implementation of the 1937 treaty had been dormant, while amicable relations had been maintained with Egypt, where Prime Minister Moṣṭafā Naḥās hailed the crusade of Moṣaddeq against the British during the oil nationalization crisis. With the rise of Jamāl ʿAbd-al-Nāṣer, the monarchies in Iran and Iraq perceived a common threat to their rule at home and influence in the Middle East. Rebuffed by Nāṣer, United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles persuaded the "Northern Tier" states of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan to join an alliance against the Soviet Union (R. K. Ramazani, *The Northern Tier: Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey*, Princeton, 1966). Iran and Iraq also perceived this alliance as a coalition against Egypt (just as Turkey and Pakistan saw it as a coalition against Greece and India, respectively).

Both the "Arab Cold War" and the "Arab-Iranian Cold War" paralleled Soviet-American competition for power and influence in the Middle East (see M. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1967*, 2nd ed., London, 1967; Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role*, Charlottesville, 1972). The pan-Arab "revolutionary" Nāṣer regime led the so-called "progressive" Arab states against "reactionary" Arab regimes: Syria and Yemen joined Egypt against Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and

Lebanon. At the same time, the shah's close ties with the United States, and especially his "discrete entente" with Israel, embittered his relations with Nāṣer (M. G. Weinbaum, "Iran and Israel: The Discreet Entente," *Orbis* 18/4, 1975, pp. 1070-87). Although the shah's regime supported the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal Company and denounced the 1956 invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel, it joined the Suez Canal Users' Association that was opposed by Egypt. Iran regarded free and uninterrupted navigation through the canal of "vital importance;" seventy-three percent of its imports and seventy-six percent of its exports were transported through it (for details, see U.S. State Department, *The Suez Canal Problem, July 26-September 22, 1956*, Washington, D.C., 1956, pp. 127-30).

Iran's relations with Syria fared no better. The close relations of Damascus and Cairo with Moscow and of Tehran with Washington were not the only sources of the Arab-Iranian Cold War; the shah's reassertion of Iran's old claim to Bahrain in 1957 also contributed to it. Amid mutual denunciation, Damascus claimed Bahrain as part of the "Arab nation," while Tehran regarded it as a "fourteenth province" (Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role*, Charlottesville, 1973, 2nd printing, p. 45).

(2) The 1958 Iraqi revolution intensified the Arab-Iranian Cold War. The shah's regime perceived the destruction of the monarchy in Baghdad, the withdrawal of Iraq from the Baghdad Pact (thereafter the Central Treaty Organization), the friendly overtures of the Qāsem regime to Moscow, and its tolerance of the Iraqi communists as ominous signs of the twin threat of Arab revolution and Soviet communism. The shah's previous concern with Cairo and Damascus as centers of revolution and Soviet influence shifted primarily to Baghdad. The Baghdad-Tehran antagonism revived the old Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab dispute in 1959. President Qāsem, who repudiated the 1937 treaty on grounds of undue British pressure to sign, regarded the whole river as subject to Iraqi control. Iran revived its historical claim that the boundary line should be the main course of the river channel (ibid., pp. 42-45; idem, *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973*, pp. 399-407). Except for a few military skirmishes, the conflict did not extend beyond a mutual show of naval and air power in the Persian Gulf. After ʿAbd-al-Salām ʿĀref came to power in 1963, the relations of the two countries began to improve; ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān ʿĀref, who took power in 1966, held a summit meeting with the shah in Tehran, but the basic differences remained unresolved.

Tehran's relations with Cairo and Damascus also deteriorated alter 1958.

President Nāṣer broke diplomatic relations with Iran in 1960, ostensibly because of the shah's reference in an interview to Iran's previous *de facto* recognition of Israel. Psychological warfare between the two countries deepened at a time when Tehran's relations with Moscow were at their lowest ebb since the departure of Soviet troops from Iran in 1946. The failure of Iran and the USSR to conclude a long-term non-aggression pact in 1959, coupled with Iran's signing of a bilateral defense agreement with the United States in the same year deeply embittered Soviet-Iranian relations (Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, 1941-1973, pp. 253-324). The greater the antagonisms with Moscow and the revolutionary Arab regimes, the more useful Israel appeared to Tehran as a regional strategic asset. The Iraqi revolution intensified the Arab-Iranian Cold War particularly in the Persian Gulf. Egypt and Syria sought to extend their power and influence into the Gulf to counter Iraqi and Iranian ambitions and British hegemony. Iran's concern with the extension of Arab revolutionary propaganda and activity centered at the time not only on the trucial states of the Gulf, but also on its oil-rich province of Ḵūzestān, which in 1965 the Syrian regime called "an integral part of the Arab Homeland" (Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role*, Charlottesville, 1973, 2nd printing, p. 49).

(3) The third phase of Iran's postwar relations with the Arab states was marked by three major events: the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, the British decision, announced the following year, to withdraw its forces from the Gulf by 1971, and the 1968 Baʿthist coup in Iraq. In their wake, while the cold war between Iran and a few Arab states continued, relations with others began to improve. Contrary to a generally held view, the amelioration of relations between Tehran and Cairo began before and not after Nāṣer's death. This change can be attributed to the decline of his power following the 1967 defeat. As seen from Tehran, the Israeli victory diminished the Nāṣer regime's prestige and power in the Middle East and forced Cairo to terminate Egyptian military intervention in Yemen and revolutionary propaganda and activities elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula. The perceived change in Egyptian strategy after the "War of Attrition" with Israel from war to peaceful diplomatic means, the cooling of Cairo-Moscow relations, and Nāṣer's acceptance of the Roger Peace Plan induced the shah's regime to improve relations with Cairo. Diplomatic relations were resumed before Nāṣer's death, and there was further rapprochement with the presidency of Anwar al-Sādāt, particularly after the expulsion of Soviet forces from Egypt in 1972 (Ramazani, "Emerging Patterns of Regional Relations in Iranian Foreign Policy," *Orbis*

18/4, 1975, pp. 1043-69).

Britain's decision to withdraw its forces from the Persian Golf prompted the shah's regime to strengthen Iran's friendly ties with the region's conservative Arab states. Solidly supported by the United States government, which did not wish to fill the power vacuum left by the British, the shah sought to maintain regional security, collectively with other Gulf states if possible and unilaterally if necessary (Ramazani, "Iran's Search for Regional Cooperation," *Middle East Journal* 30/2, 1976, pp. 173-86). The shah's principal objective was to protect his own regime from perceived domestic and external threats, which, as he saw them, were equally directed against the stability and security of Iran and the Persian Gulf. To this end, the shah's regime removed the two major obstacles to strengthening ties with conservative Arab states: The old dispute with Riyadh over the continental shelf boundaries was swiftly settled by mutual agreement in October, 1968, and was followed by the shah's state visit to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; the dispute with Britain over Bahrain was settled through the United Nations secretary-general in 1970 (Ramazani, "The Settlement of the Bahrain Dispute," *Indian Journal of International Law* 12/1, 1972, pp. 1-14). When Bahrain officially declared its independence in 1971, Iran was the first country to recognize it.

While these settlements helped improve Iran's position in the region, the landing of Iranian forces on three small Gulf islands known as Abū Mūsā and the two Tumbs in 1971 intensified Arab suspicion of Iran's ambitions. The emirate of Sharjah claimed sovereignty over Abū Mūsā, despite a prior agreement in favor of the Iranian landing there; the emirate of Raʾs-al-Ḵayma never reached an agreement with Iran on the two Tumbs. Suspecting collusion between Iran and Britain, Iraq broke diplomatic relations with Iran and through the Arab League tried to persuade other Arab states to do the same (Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role*, pp. 56-68). Although Arab states complained to the United Nations and demanded the withdrawal of Iranian forces, Cairo's new friendship with Tehran prevented the League from taking any other action.

The announcement of the impending British withdrawal from the Gulf coincided with the Baʿthist coup in Iraq, which further aggravated Tehran's relations with Baghdad. The previous Shah-ʿĀref summit understandings were aborted, and the old Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab dispute reemerged with unprecedented bitterness. In 1969 the al-Bakr regime declared the river an "integral part" of Iraq, attempted to check the vessels moving up the river, ordered ships flying

the Iranian flag to lower it, and threatened to use force if its demands were not met. Iran retaliated by declaring the 1937 treaty null and void and, in defiance of Iraqi demands, escorted merchant ships with naval vessels and jet fighters (ibid., pp. 42- 45). Neither side wished to go beyond the threat and show of force at the time, but the tensions between them, already aggravated by the Iranian military presence on the three islands and the rupture of diplomatic relations by Iraq, reached a new height in 1972, when Baghdad signed a comprehensive friendship treaty with Moscow.

(4) The principal catalyst of an improved fourth phase of Arab-Iranian relations was the October, 1973 war, which, from Iran's standpoint, reduced the strategic importance of Israel and increased Arab power and influence. Relative Arab success in the war, the resulting surge of Arab self-confidence, a new, favorable American attitude toward moderate Arab states, Egypt's progressively reduced dependence on Moscow and reorientation toward the West, the diplomatic isolation of Israel and the weakening of its domestic political and economic strength, and the prospect of the reopening of the Suez Canal reinforced Iran's earlier positive disposition toward Egypt and other moderate Arab states. These growing sympathies found concrete expression in the 1973 war (in the 1967 war, its aid had been more symbolic than material): In addition to providing medical aid (as it had in 1967), Iran sent pilots and planes to Saudi Arabia, permitted the overflight of Soviet civilian planes carrying military equipment to Arab states, and disallowed the transfer of Jewish volunteers from Australia to Israel via Tehran (Ramazani, "Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Middle East Journal* 32/4, 1978, pp. 413-28; idem, "Emerging Patterns of Regional Relations," pp. 1043-69).

Backed up with new oil revenues, Iran's dollar diplomacy first of all favored the like-minded Sādāt regime. In 1974 Tehran signed a billion-dollar economic agreement with Cairo and made other promises for reconstructing Port Said, widening the Suez Canal, and participating in joint Egyptian and Arab ventures and multinational projects to construct an oil pipeline from Suez to Port Said. As expected, Iran provided aid to such friendly monarchies as Jordan and Morocco, but even the less moderate Syrian regime was not overlooked: Damascus was promised $150 million worth of credits for joint ventures.

Far more important was Iran's changing attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. From the signing of the first Sinai agreement in November, 1973, to the end of his regime in 1979, the shah totally endorsed the Egyptian

peacemaking efforts. This policy was usually compatible with the American position, but not always—Tehran sided with Cairo and criticized Henry Kissinger for the breakdown of negotiations in March, 1977—and the shah's position clashed increasingly with that of the Israeli government. As early as the end of the 1967 war Iran had consistently called upon Israel to withdraw its forces from Arab territories; after 1973 the shah called for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces in spite of the contrary American position. Regarding the Palestinian problem, Iran voted in 1947 with Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen against the partition of Palestine and favored the minority plan for a federated Palestinian state. Afterwards, it consistently supported "the legitimate rights of the Palestinians," in both the earlier sense of repatriation and the subsequent one of self-determination; it endorsed the 1974 Rabat Conference formula recognizing the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, favored the participation of the PLO in United Nations deliberations, and considered PLO participation in the peacemaking process essential. The shah's regime also denounced Israeli settlement policies on the West Bank, regarded the Begin negotiating position as "intransigent," and opposed Israeli control of non-Jewish holy places in Jerusalem.

The most dramatic change in Arab-Iranian relations during the fourth phase took place in the Persian Gulf area. The further strengthening of ties with Saudi Arabia after the assassination of King Fayṣal, the agreement with ʿOmān for the joint patrol of the Strait of Hormoz, and greater improvement of relations with the Union of Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait contributed considerably to improved Arab-Iranian relations in the Gulf area, especially within the context of Tehran's cooled relations with Tel Aviv and reapprochement with Egypt and Syria.

The sudden settlement of the ancient Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab dispute between Iran and Iraq surpassed all other conciliatory developments. As a result of the active mediation of Algeria, Tehran and Baghdad agreed on 6 March 1975 to settle all outstanding differences. The agreement was impressive because war between the two countries had seemed imminent, and especially because there had been centuries-old Ottoman and Iraqi opposition to the principle of thalweg in determining the boundary line in the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab. In return for Iraqi acceptance, Iran promised to relinquish its support of the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq (which had been extended first with covert American aid but after 1974 without it; see *New York Times*, 26 January 1976). Yet, the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab dispute

remained more a symptom than the source of the Iran-Iraq conflict; the basic power rivalry between the two neighboring states was not resolved in 1975.

(5) The fifth and latest phase in Iran's relations with the Arab states began with the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. The domestic conditions of Iranian society rather than external circumstances continue to be the main factor behind Iran's foreign policy. While the revolutionary forces opposed to the shah's regime clearly sought to eradicate perceived American domination in Iran, the influence of the United States had been more a function of the shah's domestic politics than of American imposition. He invited and cultivated American support for his regime as soon as he ascended the throne in 1941, long before the American-backed coup in 1953, and he continued to do so long afterwards as well (Ramazani, *Iran and the United States: The Patterns of Influence*, New York, 1982; idem, "Who Lost America? The Case of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 36/1, 1982, pp. 5-21).

Just as the shah's reliance on the United States had far-reaching implications for his regional policies, the hostility of the revolutionary regime toward America, especially alter the seizure of the United States Embassy (4 November 1979), has been reflected in Iran's relations with regional states, including the Arab countries. During the shah's regime, America's regional friends were perceived to be Iran's friends as well; since its downfall the opposite has generally been true. Today, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are regarded as enemies of revolutionary Iran, while Syria, Libya, and South Yemen are considered friends. The regime's hostility toward Iraq is attributed in part to Baghdad's collusion with Washington in the invasion of Iran, yet Iran's friendly relations with such "pro-American" states as Pakistan and Turkey demonstrate that the Ḵomeynī regime selects its allies according to pragmatic considerations as well as ideological predisposition.

Today, as in the historical past, Iran's relations with the Arab world center on the Gulf states, though the revolution has interjected a new ideological factor into the traditional power rivalry. The Iraqi invasion of Iran (22 September 1980), followed by the Iranian counterinvasion of Iraq (13 July 1982), has resulted in an unprecedented war between the two states; as always, the conflict is attributed to disputes over land and river boundaries. Before its full-scale attack, Iraq revived its historical claim of sovereignty over the entire Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab and charged that Iran had failed to relinquish certain Iraqi frontier lands in return for Iraq's acceptance of the thalweg as the river boundary line under the 1975 accords. In fact, the start of the war by Iraq and its

continuation by Iran reflected basic power and ideological conflict. Ṣaddām Ḥosayn resorted to military force at a moment when Iran appeared to be weakened by revolutionary chaos and Western economic sanctions occasioned by the hostage crisis. Ṣaddām Ḥosayn's Baʿthist, socialist, and secularist ideology clashed with Ḵomeynī's militant Islamic millenarian beliefs; his aspirations to power in the Gulf region collided with Ḵomeynī's vision of an Islamic world order spearheaded by Iranian power.

Iran's relations with the other Arab states of the Gulf region have generally been marked by cold-war conflicts also shaped by power and ideological rivalries. The fear of the export of the Iranian Revolution has concerned conservative Arab states in varying degrees, with Saudi Arabia emerging as the primary opponent in the Arab-Iranian cold war. Ideologically, Ḵomeynī's "*mostażʿaf*" Islam (Islam of the meek) is opposed to the "*mowaḥḥed*" Islam (unitarian Islam) of the House of Saʿūd; Ḵomeynī's revolutionary Islam is as much in conflict with the Saudis' conservative Islam as it is with the Baʿthists' secularism. Likewise, Iran's quest for power in the Gulf region has clashed as much with Saudi Arabia's bid for hegemony in the west coast of the Persian Gulf as it has with that of Iraq throughout the Gulf region.

In May, 1981 Saudi Arabia led the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in order to contain the spread of the Iranian Revolution and the effects of the Gulf war in particular (Ramazani, "The Gulf Cooperation Council: A Search for Security," in W. L. Dowdy and R. B. Trood, eds., *The Indian Ocean, Perspectives on a Strategic Arena*, Durham, N.C., forthcoming). The creation of the GCC partly reflected a longstanding search for regional cooperation; more importantly, it represented the desire of the House of Saʿūd and other Arab leaders in the area to resist the Carter Doctrine pressures for positioning United States military equipment in the area in anticipation of a possible showdown with the Soviet Union over the security of Gulf oil supplies (Ramazani, "The Genesis of the Carter Doctrine," in G. S. Wise and C. Issawi, eds., *Middle East Perspectives: The Next Twenty Years*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 165-80). Despite the anticommunist and anti-Soviet stance of Saudi Arabia and, in varying degrees, of other GCC states, none wished to get caught in the superpowers' competition.

The underlying conflict between Riyadh and Tehran has manifested itself in a variety of ways, several times in bitter quarrels over the function of pilgrimage in Islam. Iran has insisted dogmatically that *ḥajj* is a "religio-political" occasion, and hence Iranian pilgrims have the right to engage in

political activities, which they have done. Saudi Arabia has adamantly limited the *ḥajj* to a matter of "religious ceremony" and on occasions of conflict, has expelled Iranian pilgrims from the country.

The positions of Iran and Saudi Arabia are also diametrically opposed in their attitudes toward the United States and Israel. Iran has joined the ranks of the so-called "rejectionists," opposing the "special relationship" between Saudi Arabia and the "Great Satan." It also rejects any Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative, such as the Fahd, Regan, or Fez plans; the Ḵomeynī regime insists that the conflict with Israel must be settled by force, since diplomacy cannot result in the establishment of a Palestinian state and the "liberation of Jerusalem."

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