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IRAQ VI. PAHLAVI PERIOD, 1921-79

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Between the years 1921, when Britain installed Faysal Ibn Hossein as the king of a newly formed nation-state of Iraq (formerly part of the Ottoman empire) and 1979, when the Pahlavi dynasty was swept away by revolution, relations between Iran and Iraq underwent three different phases. Although there were auspicious moments of cooperation, their bilateral relationship was often shaped by their bitter territorial disputes, mutual suspicion, regional ambitions, and the policies of the great world powers toward Iran and Iraq as well as the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. In the first phase, from 1921 through 1958, when Britain dominated Iraq, bilateral relations were generally amicable but not devoid of friction. During this time, the two pro-Western monarchies signed a boundary treaty, in 1937, and participated in two non-aggression and security pacts. In the second phase, from the 1958 coup that overthrew the monarchy in Iraq through the 1968 seizure of power by the Ba'th (Baʿṯ) party, bilateral relations became increasingly acrimonious as Iraq tilted toward the Soviet Union while Iran solidified its strategic relationship with the West. In the final phase, coinciding with the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in the late 1960s, Iran and Iraq were engaged in a mini-cold war to establish regional hegemony, which pushed them to the precipice of

war. Finally, they signed the 1975 “Treaty Concerning the Frontier and Neighborly Relations between Iran and Iraq” and the “Protocol Concerning the Delimitation of the River Frontier between Iran and Iraq.” This treaty and the Protocol ushered in a fleeting period of genuine bilateral cooperation, which ended with the eruption of revolution in Iran in 1979.

FIRST PHASE IN BILATERAL RELATIONS, 1921-58

Britain emerged as the dominant power in the Middle East after World War I. It subsequently designed a grand strategy to create new states from the ruins of the Ottoman empire, to prevent communist expansion, to protect colonial India, and to expand and protect its lucrative oil investments by dominating the Persian Gulf. Within this multi-tiered strategy, both Iran and the newly created Iraq played important roles. It was no coincidence that the creation of Iraq coincided with the transition of power to a new dynasty in Iran: on 22 February 1921, Reza Khan, with British support, staged a coup that led to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925; on 23 August 1921, Sir Percy Cox installed Faysal as the king of Iraq.

When Reza Khan seized power at the turn of 1920s Persia was on the verge of economic collapse, political decay, and territorial disintegration. Reza Khan sought to save Iran from this deplorable situation (see Ghani, 1998). In the area of foreign policy, he devised a “good-neighbor” policy, signing goodwill treaties with Russia and Afghanistan in 1921, and then with Turkey in 1926. He demonstrated similar goodwill towards Iraq. Tehran and Bagh-dad, before Iran had yet officially recognized Iraq in 1929, were on the same side of many vital issues. They pursued pro-West foreign policies, were staunchly anti-communist, and cooperated to control the activities of tribes, rebels, and criminals crossing their borders (Kuhestāni-nežād, pp. 123-25). They both opposed Turkey’s demand to keep the Mosul province, which was assigned to Iraq by the League of Nations in December of 1925. Finally, they collaborated to prevent the formation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, which would have indubitably encouraged ethnic groups in Iran to seek autonomy and undermine Iranian territorial integrity.

Despite this spirit of cooperation, there were contentious issues that generated friction between Iran and Iraq. Chief among these issues were the establishment of a Sunnite-dominated Iraqi government in a country where the Shiʿites constituted a majority, the legal status of Iranians living in Iraq, and, most importantly, territorial disputes. These territorial disputes were the

legacy of centuries of conflict between the Ottoman and Persian empires over control of Mesopotamia.

Not playing the Shiʿite card. The establishment of Iraq in 1921 created a conundrum for Tehran: Should Iran play the "Shiʿite card"? After all, Iraq had a majority Shiʿite population as well as a large Persian population, including many influential Persian clerics (see x, below). This unique situation created a tantalizing temptation for Iran to exploit these two potential allies for enhancing its interests in Iraq. However, a year before Reza Khan staged his coup, and in the midst of a popular Shiʿite uprising against the British in Mesopotamia, Iran made the strategic decision not to play the Shiʿite card, and thus did not offer assistance to Shiʿite brethren in Iraq. With his eyes firmly fixated on becoming king, Reza Khan dared not alter that policy, fearing retribution by the British, who controlled Iraq and exercised substantial power in Iran. Still, the issue of Shiʿites in Iraq was potentially too explosive for Reza Khan or any other Iranian leaders to ignore.

The Shiʿites, who constituted approximately 56 percent of Iraq's population, played an important role in the early phase of the state formation in Iraq (Wiley, p. 9). In response to rumors of direct British rule, Ayatollah Shaikh Moḥammad-Taqi Širāzi, a popular and powerful Persian cleric in Mesopotamia, issued a fatwa forbidding any "non-Moslem to rule Iraq," shattering any illusion London might have about direct rule over Iraq (Wiley, pp. 15-16; Kuhestāni-nežād, pp. 94-121; Jaʿfari Valdāni, pp. 113-17; Sicker, p. 77). The fatwa did not stop Britain from imposing its Mandate over Mesopotamia in 1920, however. In protest, the Shiʿites organized a pro-independence uprising in June of 1920. Iran remained passively on the sidelines while the British spent L40 million, suffered 426 causalities, and ultimately killed some 9,000 Iraqis to suppress the uprising (Wiley, p. 17). Not long after the rebellion, Reza Khan staged his coup, and a few months later Winston Churchill chose Faysal to become King of Iraq, reportedly as a recompense for the subversion of his father against the Ottomans during World War I (Fromkin, pp. 502-7). Shiʿites welcomed Faysal, partly because Ayatollah Širāzi had earlier sent a letter to Sharif Hossein, protector of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, inviting one of his sons to establish an Iraqi government (Kuhestāni-nežād, p. 57; Wiley, p. 17). This initial enthusiasm dissipated after Širāzi's death and particularly after the signing of the Anglo-Iraq Treaty in October of 1922, which established Britain's legal domination over Iraq (Hurewitz, 1979, p. 311). The Shiʿites vociferously opposed the treaty

and demanded greater participation in the government (Wiley, p. 19; Kuhestāni-nežād, p. 97). In an effort to neutralize these dissidents, Britain strengthened its ties with the Sunnite minority and imposed harsh restrictions on Shiʿite activists. These restrictions prompted forty-four leading Shiʿite ulema, including Ayatollah Moḥammad Ḥosayn Nāʾini (1860-1936) and Sayyed Abu'l-Ḥasan EsÂfahāni (d. 1945), to expatriate themselves from Iraq to Iran. In Iran, the émigré ulema helped to form the Higher Organization of the Representatives of Iraq in order to pressure the Iranian government to support the besieged Shiʿites in Iraq (Wiley, p. 19). Reza Khan, then minister of war, decided not to assist the Shiʿites in Iraq and provided only symbolic but ultimately meaningless support for the émigré ulema by ordering his commanders to "follow the orders of the august ulema" (Kuhestāni-nežād, pp. 31-33). Eventually, the Iranian government intervened and reached an agreement with the British and Iraqi governments to allow the émigré ulema to return to Iraq in exchange for a pledge not to engage in political activities after their return (Kuhestāni-nežād, p. 34). When the ulema returned to Iraq in 1924, the Sunnite-dominated government had successfully excluded the Shiʿites from the corridors of power. Most importantly, the policy of not playing the Shiʿite card became the cornerstone of Iran's policy toward Iraq, lasting until 1979.

Legal status of the Persian community in Iraq. Although Iran was passive and did not play the Shiʿi card in Iraq, it took a much more aggressive stance toward the legal status of Persians in Iraq. Estimates place the number of Persians in Iraq in 1921 to be between 100,000 to 150,000, excluding those from mixed marriages (Kuhe-stāni-nežād, p. 10). Persians, who began to migrate in large numbers to Mesopotamia after the fall of the Safavids in 1722, enjoyed many of the privileged rights their European counterparts held in Mesopotamia. The Persian consuls, for example, exercised exclusive authority over Persian subjects in "matters of civil and criminal law" (Nakash, pp. 17-19). In the early 1920s, however, Britain signed a judicial treaty with Iraq that granted all foreign nationals, except the Persians in Iraq, highly privileged rights, including the right to be tried only in special courts with a British representative in attendance (Hurewitz, 1979, p. 311). Iran protested this judicial treaty to the Council of the League of Nations in 1924, maintaining that the past treaties signed by the Ottoman and Persian empires had granted Iranian subjects capitulatory rights in Mesopotamia which should be honored by Iraq. Iraq, backed by Britain, maintained that the Ottoman-Persian treaties were founded on reciprocity and proposed that Iran and Iraq should thus

negotiate a new judicial agreement, a proposal which Iran rejected (Ramazani, 1976, pp. 260-61). The two countries moved closer to the resolution of their legal dispute when in 1928 Reza Shah abolished the capitulatory regime in Iran, rendering it hypocritical for Iran to demand capitulatory rights for Persians in Iraq. A year later, the British government unilaterally terminated its judicial agreement with Iraq. Iran welcomed this abrogation and dropped its demand to obtain capitulatory rights for Persians in Iraq.

Territorial disputes. Territorial disputes was the *casus belli* of animosity between Iran and Iraq. Iran's main priority was to establish joint sovereignty with Iraq over the Arvand Rud (Shatt al-Arab) based on the thalweg principle, the deepest and most navigable point of a river dividing the two banks. Iran's second goal was to erect new frontier boundaries along its border with Iraq which would be more favorable to Iran than those determined in a previous agreement with the Ottomans in 1914 (see v, above). Finally, Iran sought to recover between 7,000 to 10,000 square kilometers of oil-rich land around Qaṣr-e Širin, which Iran claimed was ceded to the Ottomans under duress in 1914. To strengthen its bargaining position with Iraq, Iran first reaffirmed, prudently so, its sovereignty over the oil-rich Khuzestan province.

In early 1920s, Khuzestan, with its large Arab population, was a virtual fiefdom under the rule of Shaikh Ḵazʿal. An ambitious local Arab leader, Ḵazʿal was nominally under the jurisdiction of the Qajar king. In reality, he was protected and controlled by the British, whose 10,000-man army, the South Persia Rifles, operated with immunity in southern Iran. The British, without notifying Iran, were also providing Ḵazʿal with meager shares of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. They even considered Khazal as a possible king for Iraq or for an independent principality in southern Persia (Ghani, p. 335). Ḵazʿal was also the darling of many Sunnite Iraqi nationalists, who sought to foment dissent among Iran's Arab population by referring to Khuzestan as "Arabestān" and glorifying Ḵazʿal as its independent "Sultan" (Kasravi, 1990, pp. 188-94). Determined to prevent Khuzestan from becoming a British protectorate, Reza Khan personally commanded his forces to Khuzestan in order to "crush the neck of Ḵazʿal and his companions." Reza Khan arrested the rebellious Ḵazʿal, reaffirmed Persian sovereignty over the province, and then visited the holy shrines in Iraq, but did not meet with any Iraqi officials (Pahlavi, 1972, p. 9, and pp. 217-30). Shortly after his triumphant and necessary military expedition, Reza Khan was crowned and established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 (Lenczowski, p. 26).

With Persian sovereignty reaffirmed over Khuzestan, Iran concentrated on its territorial disputes with Iraq. Iran's initial strategy was to postpone its official recognition of Iraq in order to obtain favorable territorial concessions, naively being pollyannaish regarding British support. This optimism was based on a nebulous assurance given by the British ambassador in Tehran, in March 1929, to the Persian foreign minister that "if the Iranian government were to recognize Iraq, the British govern-ment . . . would lend assistance as regards her reasonable demands for further rectification" (Kaikobad, p. 55; Wezārat-e omur-e ḵāreja, 1990, p. 12; Jaʿfari Valdāni, p. 152). A month after this reassurance, Iran officially recognized Iraq and began serious negotiations with Iraq. Britain became indirectly involved in these negotiations, as Iraq was obligated by the 1930 "Treaty of Preferential Alliance" to consult with London on matters of foreign policy (Hurewitz, 1970, pp. 421-24). Much to Iran's dismay, Britain sided with Iraq in these negotiations.

In the early phase of negotiations, particularly after King Faysal's visit to Iran in April 1932, Iran and Iraq pledged to resolve their differences peacefully and amicably. Following Faysal's death in an automobile accident in September 1933, however, Iraq took a hard-line position and registered its territorial complaint against Iran with the Council of the League of Nations in November 1934. The most pivotal and contentious issue of this legal dispute was the status of the Arvand Rud and the navigational rights of the two countries on the strategic waterway. Nuri Saʾid Pasha, the Iraqi foreign minister, demanded Iraq's exclusive sovereignty, arguing that although Iran had an elongated coastline with multiple ports and anchorages, the waterway was Iraq's sole access to the Persian Gulf (Ramazani, 1966, p. 262; Jaʿfari Valdāni, pp. 161-65). He rejected the applicability of the thalweg principle on the grounds that the waterway was Iraq's and not an international river (Khadduri, pp. 33-41; Jaʿfari Valdāni, pp. 156-61). Meanwhile, Iran's foreign minister, Bāqer Kāẓemi, proposed joint and equal sovereignty over the waterway based on the thalweg principle (Wezārat-e omur-e ḵāreja, 1990, pp. 46-59; and Kaikobad, pp. 53-54 and 58). For Iran, joint sovereignty over the waterway was a national security imperative for protection of its major oil facilities and major cities that were adjacent to some sixty kilometers of the Arvand Rud's left bank.

The 1937 boundary treaty. Failing to resolve their irreconcilable differences through the League of Nations, the two countries revived the stalled bilateral negotiations. In August 1935, Nuri Saʾid Pasha and his team, which included the British chair of the Basra Port Authority, visited Iran. After twenty days of

exhaustive negotiations, the two sides signed the “Boundary Treaty between The Kingdom of Iraq and the Empire of Iran” at Tehran on 4 July 1937 (Jaʿfari Valdāni, p. 178).

Mohammad Reza Shah and Iraq: 1941-58. In 1941, the young Mohammad Reza ascended to the Peacock Throne, replacing his father, who was forced to abdicate by the British and the Soviet forces who occupied Iran in order to use it as a transit rout to supply Russia with American arms. For the remainder of that tumultuous decade, there was no discernable change in Iran’s otherwise amicable relations with Iraq, as Iran struggled to end occupation by British, Russian, and American troops.

Relations with Iraq, however, took a turn for the worse during Mohammad Moṣaddeq’s premiership (1951-53). During this time, he nationalized the British-controlled Iranian oil industry, triggering a ferocious diplomatic war between Iran and Britain. Tehran accused Iraq for supporting Britain and seeking to weaken Moṣaddeq’s government. Tehran condemned Iraq and Britain for supporting subversive activities by separatists in Khuzestan in the mold of Sheikh Ḵazʿal (Wezārat-e Eṭṭelāʿāt, 2002, p.15). At the time when the British were threatening to apply military force against Iran, Iraq permitted a British warship to enter the Arvand Rud, without notifying Iran as per the 1937 treaty. Tehran also held Baghdad responsible for creating an artificial crisis by massing troops along its borders with Iran (Jaʿfari Valdāni, p. 220).

Iran’s relations with Iraq became exceptionally cordial when Moṣaddeq was overthrown in a CIA-MI5-engineered coup d’état (q.v.) in 1953. Henceforth, Mohammad Reza Shah became the sole architect of Iran’s foreign policy. He changed the orientation of Iran’s foreign policy by forming a strategic alliance with the United States. He also pledged to “have good neighborly relations with all countries of the region” (Pahlavi, 1980, p. 131). Iran’s participation in the Baghdad Pact (q.v.) was one of the manifestations of these “good neighborly relations.”

The Baghdad Pact was a key component of the U.S.-initiated “Perimeter Defense Strategy,” which called for security alliances with countries bordering the Sino-Soviet block (Gasiorowski, 1991). Turkey and Iraq were the first to join the Pact, in February 1955, followed by Pakistan and Britain. Participation in the Pact posed a delicate dilemma for Iran, however. On one hand, the shah believed the Pact could neutralize Soviet expansionism and Nasserism, which he perceived as twin security threats to Iran and the West. On the other hand,

Iran was concerned about possible Soviet retaliation, as Moscow considered Iran's participation in the Pact to be a hostile act, as well as a blatant violation of Iran's traditional policy of neutrality. To allay Moscow's concerns, the shah cautiously began negotiations with the Soviets, which ultimately paved the way for a pledge by Iran in 1962 not to allow missiles or nuclear weapons to be deployed from its territory against the Soviet Union (Milani, 2002, p. 229). This concern about Soviet retaliation explains why Iran was the last country to join the Pact in November 1955, and why the United States participated in the Pact only as an "observer."

The participation of Iran and Iraq in the Baghdad Pact created a friendly atmosphere in their bilateral relations. In December 1957, King Faysal II visited Tehran, and the two nations agreed to rely on a Swedish mediator to begin negotiations regarding mutually contentious issues (Mahdawi, pp. 255-56). This encouraging step toward reconciliation was abruptly reversed when Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Free Officers of Iraq staged a bloody coup on 14 July 1958. The monarchy was abolished, a new republic was established, and Iran and Iraq began navigating uncharted waters.

SECOND PHASE IN BILATERAL RELATIONS, 1958-68

The coup, the brutal killing of the Iraqi royal family, and the radical rhetoric of the new Iraqi regime shocked the shah's regime to its core. After meeting with the shah, the American Ambassador reported that the "Shah was apparently depressed and even somewhat frightened on his return to Tehran few days after Baghdad coup . . . Palace Guard has been strengthened by transfer of tanks, which is in evidence in palace grounds" (*American State Papers*, 1999, p. 584). There was justification for this anxiety, as the CIA had not ruled out the possibility for an Iraqi-style coup in Iran (ibid., p. 585). Additionally, the shah was receiving alarming reports from SAVAK in Iraq that the Tudeh party, in collaboration with the Soviet Union, was exploring the possibility of a coup in Iran (Wezārat-e Eṭṭelāʿāt 2005, p. 76). Despite his concerns, the shah at first proceeded with cautious optimism, viewing Qasim as less repugnant than the other two alternatives: pro-Nasser Pan-Arabists or pro-Soviet communists. Thus, he unhesitatingly welcomed Qasim's declaration that improving relations with Iran was one of Iraq's top priorities (Farouk-Slugget and Slugget, p. 30). This optimism proved to be ephemeral, however, as the two countries quickly began to pursue diametrically opposed foreign policy objectives and revived their bitter, longstanding territorial disputes, embellished with crude jingoistic rhetoric.

Iraq's withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact in March 1959 was the first salvo launched in the new round of animosity between the two countries. The other four members remained pledged together, renaming the pact as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO; q.v.). The growing fissure between the two countries widened when Iraq began to tilt toward the Soviet Union. The shah was alarmed that Iraq, in tandem with Egypt and Syria, was establishing dangerous precedents for Soviet penetration of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. To neutralize this perceived threat, he asked for an explicit U.S. commitment to protect Iran against communist subversion, beyond the generalized pledge made previously by the United States as reflected in the Eisenhower Doctrine. The shah was provided with such reassurances when the United States and Iran signed The Agreement of Defense Cooperation in 1959 (Alexander, pp. 306-7).

A more confident shah thus began to take a confrontational posture toward Iraq. He called for new negotiations regarding the 1937 treaty. When Iraq rejected the offer, Iran, in November 1959, called for joint sovereignty of the Arvand Rud, accusing Iraq of pursuing "imperialistic policies" in the waterway (Jaʿfari Valdāni, p. 267). In reaction to Qasim's declaration that Iraq was pressured to "give away" five kilometers of its "own" water in front of Khoramshar to Iran in 1937, Iran announced that it would only recognize the principle of thalweg in the Arvand Rud (Mahdawi, p. 259). Iran also unilaterally instructed vessels entering its waters to be guided by Iranian pilots rather than those of the Basra Port Authority, precipitating a strike by the Iraqi workers at the port. After suffering financial losses as the result of the strike, Iran capitulated and accepted the status quo (Chubin, p. 175).

Tension between the two countries reached a dangerous level when Iraq took a number of provocative actions against Iran. Iraqi troops began to engage their Iranian counterparts in border skirmishes. Iraq once again called for "liberation" of the Khuzestan province from "Persian occupiers," and began to use the term "Arabian Gulf," rather than Persian Gulf (Dehnavi, pp. 45, 63). In an effort to intimidate the shah, Iraq became a safe haven for the top leadership of the outlawed Tudeh party, including Reza Rādmaneš and Eḥsān Ṭabari. From Iraqi soil, the pro-Moscow party freely operated a radio station to disseminate anti-shah propaganda (Wezārat-e Eṭṭelāʿāt, 2002, pp. 118, 45). In 1961, Iraq provided sanctuary to General Teymur Baḵtiār, the former head of SAVAK, Iran's intelligence agency. The shah was justifiably alarmed that the notorious fugitive would share critical intelligence about Iran with his Iraqi

masters, and even form a marriage of convenience with the exiled opposition to possibly stage an Iraqi-style coup against him. Baḵtiār ultimately was assassinated by his Iranian driver in Iraq in August 1970. In his memoirs, Asad-Allāh ʿAlam, a confidant of the shah, praised General Neʿmat-Allāh NasÂiri, the head of SAVAK, for his indefatigable work in the elimination of Baḵtiār (Alam, 1992, p. 176).

Although Iraq was deliberately interfering in Iranian affairs, the shah, like his father, refused to use the "Shiʿite card" to enhance his objectives in Iraq. Clearly, he did not wish to energize and legitimize the same forces he was seeking to undermine in Iran. The notable exception to this policy was his telegram of commiseration to Ayatollah Moḥsen Ḥakim, in Iraq, on the death of Ayatollah Sayyed Ḥosayn Borujerdi Ṭabāṭabāʾi in Qom in March 1961 (Algar, p. 244). He sent the telegram in an effort to elevate an Iraqi Ayatollah who was unfamiliar with, or perhaps disinterested in, Iranian politics as the leading *marjaʿ* (source of emulation), and at the same time move the center of Shiʿite learning from Qom, in Iran, to Najaf, in Iraq.

An unexpected lull in hostilities occurred between the two countries when Qasim was overthrown in a coup in February 1963, orchestrated by a coalition of Pan-Arabists and Ba'thists. Iran cautiously welcomed the coup, mostly because of the reports that, prior to the coup, the CIA had "numerous meetings" with the Ba'thists, who had a well-earned reputation as ruthless opponents of Nasser and communists (Wiley, p. 39). In a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson in March of 1964, the shah echoed that sentiment: "With the fall of Kassem's unwholesome regime, we welcomed with relief what we hoped would be closer ties with Iraq, thinking that since the Baδathists at once began to purge their country of communists, we had been rid of a troublesome neighbor" (*American State Papers*, 1999, p. 7). This optimism proved to be premature; although the Ba'thists slaughtered hundreds of communists, they themselves became victims of another coup, staged by Abdul Salam Aref in November 1963.

Aref, a moderate Pan-Arabist, immediately declared his intentions to alleviate tensions and ameliorate the bilateral relations of the two countries. Although he sent a delegation of negotiators to Tehran, the two countries failed to produce any tangible results. Iran held serious concerns regarding two key issues, which were stumbling blocks for improving relations with Aref. The first concern was Iraq's relationship with both the Soviet Union and with Egypt, a country with which Aref contemplated forming a union. At the time,

the shah was obsessed with the potential radicalizing impact of Nasser, to whom he referred as a “mad man” (*American State Papers*, 1991, p. 842). “Iran now has Iraq at its back,” he told Americans, “which means Nasser, and we consider him worse than the communists” (*American State Papers*, 1999, p. 575). The second key concern was Iran’s strong suspicions about Iraq’s subversive activities in Khuzestan and also among the Kurds. In a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, the shah claimed that Iran had discovered “centers of Arab espionage in Khuzestan,” which he claimed “Marshal Aref was fully supporting.” In the same letter, he lamented the Kurdish question: “Agents of international communism are making every endeavor to exploit the situation to their advantage, and Cairo is anxious to play its dubious role in any development in this situation” (*American State Papers*, 1999, p. 7). He lambasted Nasser for mediating between the Kurds and Iraq in an effort to turn the Iraqi Kurds against Iran (*American State Papers*, 1999, p. 8).

Abdul Salam Aref’s brief tenure abruptly ended when he perished in a helicopter crash. His brother, Abdul Rahman Aref, ascended to power in April 1966. He proved to be more sincere than his brother regarding the improvement of bilateral relations. He visited Iran in March 1967, and subsequently the two countries agreed to restart negotiations on a variety of issues, including the delimitation of their continental shelves in the Persian Gulf (Ramazani, p. 404; Mahdawi, p. 340). Iran gave a symbolic concession to Iraq by stating that the Palestinian conflict with Israel was not solely an “Arab” issue, but also an “Islamic issue” (Mahdawi, p. 349). Iran’s main motivation in this declaration was to change the prevalent perception among the Arabs that Iran staunchly supported Israel. This short-lived slide toward bilateral cooperation was halted in July 1968, when Colonel Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr of the Ba’th party overthrew Aref in perhaps the most consequential coup in Iraq’s short history.

THIRD PHASE IN BILATERAL RELATIONS, 1968-75

The rise of the Ba’th party coincided with the withdrawal of British forces from the Persian Gulf, a move which was enthusiastically welcomed by both Iran and Iraq. While both countries pledged to resolve their differences peacefully and to cooperate in keeping the region stable and free of foreign troops, they were also planning for regional dominance. It was precisely this motivation for regional hegemony that pushed the two countries toward a dangerous mini-cold war.

The mini-cold war began when Iran declared in early 1969 that the 1937 treaty must be renegotiated based on the thalweg principle. Iraq rejected the proposal, defiantly declaring that all Iranian ships must lower their flags while in the waterway and all Iranian personnel in such vessels must be removed and replaced by officials from the Basra Port Authority. Iraq also warned that these strict new regulations would be enforced by force, if necessary (Jaʿfari Valdāni, p. 10, Wezārat-e omur-e Ḵāreja 1969, pp. 82-83). Iran reacted swiftly and unilaterally abrogated the 1937 treaty. Iran justified its decision by citing Iran's decades of non-compliance with the treaty, and by applying the legal principle of *Rebus Sic Stantibus*, that is, a basic alteration of circumstance (Mahdawi, pp. 357-58). More importantly, Iran placed its armed forces on full alert and warned Iraq of "serious repercussions" should its flag be insulted, or if Iranian personnel were to be removed from any ships by Iraq. Iraq reciprocated by placing its armed forces on full alert as well. The two countries now teetered on the verge of open warfare.

At this point, the shah made a brilliant maneuver that irreversibly established Iran's superior regional position. In April 1969, he ordered two Iranian merchant ships, the *Ebn-e Sinā* and the *Āryā Far*, to navigate the Arvand Rud towards the Persian Gulf. Flying the Iranian flag, the two ships were escorted by both Iranian jets and Iranian naval ships. During this standoff, Iraq blinked first by neither stopping nor challenging the ships. We do not know just how far the shah was willing to escalate the crisis had Iraq attacked the Iranian ships. It is documented, however, that General Naṣiri had informed the shah beforehand that Iraq's defense minister, Hardan Takriti, had told a SAVAK representative in Baghdad that "Iraq would not go to war" (ʿAlam, *Yāddāšthā*, I, p. 174).

The flaccid reaction to Iran's challenge exposed Iraq's military vulnerability. In an effort to perhaps camouflage this vulnerability, Iraq's rhetoric toward Iran became more belligerent, and its interference in Iran's domestic affairs intensified. Iraq took Iran to the United Nations for "illegally" abrogating the 1937 treaty, increased fees of the ships entering the Arvand Rud, and expelled thousands of Iranians from Iraq. Baghdad sought to foment dissent among Iran's ethnic population by providing support to "The Front for the Liberation of Arabestan" in Khuzestan and "The Front for the Liberation of Iran's Baluchistan" (Jaʿfari Valdnāi, p. 405-6; Mahdawi, p. 432).

Iran's reaction to Iraq's provocations can only be appreciated in the context of Iran's strategy to become the dominant force in the Persian Gulf region.

Although the shah believed as early as 1957 that Iran "was the logical country to police the Persian Gulf," it was only in the 1970s that a unique convergence of regional and international alignments made that dream a reality (*American State Papers*, 1991, p. 867). Securely in power by having outmaneuvered his domestic opponents, and thanks to the phenomenal increase in the price of oil, the shah had created the region's most formidable military force, a 500,000-man army, and more importantly, a well-trained air force, equipped with sophisticated American military hardware. Regionally, the United States, engaged in the Viet Nam quagmire, was pursuing the "Twin-Pillar" policy, relegating the task of maintaining regional stability to Iran and Saudi Arabia (Bill, 1988, pp. 183-216). In practice, however, the more populous and powerful Iran played that role. Moreover, the threat of Nasserism in the region had diminished, and Iran had developed friendly relations with the Soviet Union. When Iraq signed a friendly treaty with the Soviet Union in 1972, a confident shah was no longer apprehensive, but was convinced that "Moscow would never abandon Iran for the sake of Iraq" (Alam, 1992, pp. 74, 86). The strategic configuration was so favorable that the shah pondered expanding "Iran's security perimeters" beyond the Persian Gulf and into the Indian Ocean.

In his march toward regional hegemony, the shah's only serious challenges came from Iraq. To neutralize these challenges from what he called "that miserable little dwarf," the shah implemented several premeditated maneuvers to undermine Iraq's regional power and to force it into a perpetual defensive posture (Alam, 1992, p. 82). The first maneuver in this campaign was Iran's involvement in an attempted coup against Hassan al-Bakr, staged by a group of disgruntled army officers in January 1970. After the botched coup, the shah blamed General NasÂiri: "[he] made such a mess over our plans for a coup in Iraq. For that he deserves to be stripped of his rank. Several times I warned NasÂiri not to put too much trust in the Iraqi officers who got in touch with us, but he paid no heed and as a result we ended up with something short of a disaster. We failed and as a result hundreds within Iraq were put to death. It was the British who betrayed us. They came to hear of our plan and tipped off the President of Iraq. Hassan al-Bakr may pose as an Anglophobe, but in reality he's a lackey of the British" (Alam, 1992, p. 176). Iraq reacted by immediately expelling the Iranian ambassador, a move which Iran reciprocated.

Iran's next move was implementation of a robust regional policy designed to project its new power. In an effort to befriend the Persian Gulf countries, Iran

officially recognized Bahrain in September of 1971. In November of 1971, Iranian armed forces landed on the Abu Musa and the Small and Big Tunbs islands (qq.v. at *iranica.com*), reestablishing Iranian sovereignty over those strategic islands of the Persian Gulf (Amirahmadi, 1996). In 1973, an Iranian expeditionary force estimated to be several thousand strong was dispatched to Oman, at the request of Sultan Qabus Ibn Sa'id of Oman, where they assisted the embattled Qabus in suppressing a rebellion in the Dhaffar province. The rebellion, led by the People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf (PFLOAG), had been supported by Iraq, the People's Republic of Yemen, and the Soviet Union (Lenczowski, p. 380).

As Iran's regional power increased, Iraq undertook a series of futile actions to undermine Iran. Iraq condemned the occupation of the three Persian Gulf islands and severed diplomatic relations with Iran. It intensified border clashes with Iran, called for a united Arab front against the "expansionist Persians," and expelled between 60,000 to 100,000 Iranians who were accused of being the Fifth Column for Iran (Wiley, p. 48; Mahdawi, p. 434). Iraq additionally expelled some 40,000 Fayliya Kurds, the only Kurds who are of the Shiʿite faith (Wiley, p. 48).

In retaliation, the shah decided in the early 1970s "to settle the score with these people [Iraqis] once and for all" by supporting the restless Iraqi Kurds (Alam, 1992, p. 94). Mollā Moṣṭafā Barezāni was the willing agent for the campaign to destabilize Iraq. Although he reportedly helped Iranian separatists after World War II to set up a Soviet-backed puppet republic, he became the recipient of substantial Iranian aid in the early 1960s (McDowall, p. 331). In March 1970, Iraq signed an important agreement with the Iraqi Kurds, which granted major concessions to the Kurds but came short of giving autonomy to them. Iran was thrilled when Barezeni rejected the agreement and rushed to provide generous support to the rebel leader. Toward this policy of interference in Iraq's internal affairs, a U.S.-Iran-Israel axis was formed to support the Kurds. After President Nixon's visit to Tehran in May 1972, the Central Intelligence Agency supplied millions of dollars worth of weapons and ammunition to the Kurds, funneled mostly through the Iranian government (*The New York Times*, 2 November 1975). Consequently, the Kurdish rebels became a formidable force that the Iraqi army could not quell. Kurdish rebels were allowed to freely cross the border and seek sanctuary in Iran. Medium-range artillery was installed behind the Iranian border to be used in support of the Kurds, who were also protected by the Iranian air force (McDowall, p.

33). During the inconclusive and costly confrontations between the Iraqi army and the Kurds, thousands were killed and injured. The situation ultimately resulted in a stalemate, exactly as the U.S.-Iran-Israel axis had planned.

The Algiers Protocol. Unable to win the war against the Kurds, Iraq intensified border clashes with Iran. In one major border confrontation in 1974, 41 Iranians and at least 23 Iraqis were killed (Jaʿfari Valdāni, p. 452). After this battle, Iraq appealed to the United Nations, hoping to internationalize its conflict with Iran. U.N. Resolution 348 called upon the two countries to simultaneously withdraw their forces from the border areas and to begin negotiations for peace. Iran and Iraq complied with the resolution and conducted two rounds of unproductive negotiations in Istanbul, Turkey.

A major breakthrough in bilateral relations occurred in March 1975, when the shah and Saddam Hossein, Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Command, conducted face-to-face negotiations during the summit Conference of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in Algiers, thanks to the initiative of President Boumediene of Algeria. The two leaders met twice and issued a joint communiqué on 6 March 1975, also known as the Algiers Protocol. They achieved a consensus on four significant issues. Firstly, they agreed to “delimit their river frontiers along the thalweg” principle; this was an historic victory for Mohammad Reza Shah—after more than eight decades, Iran had at last established the thalweg principle in the Arvand Rud. Secondly, they pledged to “cease all subversive infiltration from either side” (Kaikobad, pp. 134-35). This meant the end of Iranian support to the Kurds, as well as an end to Iraq’s meddling in Khuzestan and Baluchistan. Thirdly, they pledged to keep the region “free from any outside interference.” Finally, they agreed to proceed with the “definitive demarcation of the land frontier on the basis of the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 and the Minutes of the Frontier Delimitation Commission of 1914.” This point was a victory for Iraq, since Iran had consistently questioned the legality of those two documents.

After the summit, the foreign ministers of the two countries met in Baghdad. On 13 June 1975, they signed the “Treaty Concerning the State Frontier and Neighborly Relations between Iran and Iraq” and the “Protocol Concerning the Delimitation of the River Frontier between Iran and Iraq.” Together, these documents reflect the broad agreements reached earlier by the shah and Saddam Hossein in Algeria.

Iraq signed the treaty because it recognized Iran’s superior regional standing

and its own inability to score a decisive victory against the Kurds. Iraq recognized that Iran held the key to ending the Kurdish rebellion, and therefore it wisely chose the path of reconciliation with the shah. The shah frankly admitted that, “without our support they [Kurds] wouldn’t last ten days against the Iraqis. I spent four and a half hours with Saddam Hossein, and he admitted several times that the presence of our troops and artillery had been the only factor to stand between the Iraqis and total victory” (Alam, 1992, p. 414). Iranian support was so instrumental that Barezani accepted a cease-fire agreement with Iraq on 13 March 1975, only eight short days after the signing of the Algiers Protocols.

The shah signed the treaty because he had consolidated his dominant position in the Persian Gulf, had contained Iraq, and had abandoned the idea of changing the government in Iraq. He had also become somewhat apprehensive about the regional ramifications of the support of the U.S.-Iran-Israel axis towards the Iraqi Kurds. He seemed alarmed about the growing presence of Israel in Kurdistan. Supporting the Iraqi Kurds was also a double-edged sword for Iran; while it kept the Iraqi military away from the Iranian borders, it could have also led to Kurdish autonomy, which would have then incited Iran’s own restless Kurdish population and other ethnic groups to demand autonomy.

Whatever the reasons, the signing of the historic agreement was followed by a fleeting period of genuine cooperation between the two countries (Bigdeli, pp. 150-55). Saddam Hossein visited Iran, and the two countries signed numerous agreements to improve commercial, trade, and cultural ties. Direct flights were established between Baghdad and Tehran. They also coordinated their oil policies in OPEC, favoring higher oil prices.

Relations became so cordial that the shah relied on Saddam Hossein for assistance when his survival was threatened by a popular revolutionary movement in 1978. At the time, Ayatollah Khomeini, residing in Najaf, had emerged as the undisputed leader of the revolutionary movement. Upon the request of the Iranian government, Saddam Hossein expelled the cantankerous Ayatollah in October 1978 (Milani, 1994, p. 118). Ironically, four months after the expulsion, Khomeini triumphantly returned to Iran, overthrew the shah, and established an Islamic republic. A year and a half later, in September 1980, Saddam Hossein ordered the invasion of Iran, blatantly violating international law and the 1975 treaty he had signed. He sparked a devastating war that lasted eight long years and will be

remembered for its dazzling brutality and insanity.

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