

Nationalism vs. Utopianism: The War in the Persian Gulf

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An extraordinary religious zeal and a 1200-year history fuel the war between Iran and Iraq. The recent conflict has claimed over a million casualties and billions of dollars in resources. It is fast on its way to claiming the involvement of the rest of the world.

The Iran-Iraq war is in its eighth year. Last summer, when the United Nations Security Council asked for a cease-fire, the war pounded on. Iraqi war planes bombed Iranian targets, the Iranians retaliated by shelling the port city of Basra, and both attacked supertankers in the gulf. The United States stepped up its involvement in the area by reflagging Kuwaiti tankers and attempting to protect them with its fleet. Several European powers, as well as the Soviet Union, sent their navies to patrol the area.

This escalating war was begun by two Middle Eastern powers with diametrically opposed worldviews: the nationalism of Iraq and the theocracy of Iran. It is further complicated by the age-long ethnic and religious rivalries of Arab and Persian nations.

Persia (Iran) was one of the first empires to succumb to the advancing Arab armies in the middle of the 7th century. The majority of its people embraced Islam, the religion of the conquerors. But the Persians soon became dissatisfied with the founders of the first Arab-Muslim empire in Damascus. They threw in their lot with the Shi'ites, the followers of Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad. These dissenters from Orthodox or Sunni Islam developed a distinctive theological and political tradition. As a persecuted minority within the Muslim world, they looked forward to the coming of a messianic person who would rule the world in righteousness through the spread of Shi'ite Islam. While waiting for the appearance of this leader known as the Imam, Shi'ites have sought, from time to time, to build their theocratic states by armed struggle.

During the last 200 years, the Middle East has come under the influence of Western thought. As a result, its peoples, who were predominantly Arabic speaking, began to entertain nationalistic dreams. First, they sought a greater degree of autonomy within the Ottoman Turkish Empire. During World War I, they fought with the Allies against the Turks and were promised full independence after the war. But they were terribly disappointed when they discovered that the British and the French had divided the area between themselves. To make things worse, Palestine was declared a national home for the Jews with the full blessing of the League of Nations!

European colonialism added fire to Arab nationalism. It was not until the end of World War II that Arab countries became fully independent. In their attempts to build modern states, nationalistic leaders in Iraq and other Arab countries adopted policies which sought to harmonize traditional Islam and the

borrowed ideologies from the West.

Meanwhile, in the early '20's, Reza Khan, an officer in the Persian army, led a coup against his government. He was animated by nationalistic ideals. He changed the name of his country to Iran and assumed the position of shah or king. During World War II the Allies dethroned him for his pro-German sympathies. He was succeeded by his son Mohammad Reza. The new shah continued the nationalistic policies of his father and further alienated the religious leaders of Iran. He sought to make Iran the most powerful nation in the Middle East. He built a strong army and ruled the land in an extremely authoritarian way. His relations with the mullahs and the ayatollahs (the religious leaders of the country) deteriorated to such an extent that they advocated civil disobedience.

By the mid-'60's Iran had become the stronghold of a Pan-Arab nationalistic movement known as the Baath (Renaissance) Party. During the '70's the Iraqi government settled its border dispute with the Shah of Iran. To show its friendly intentions towards its neighbor, the Baath regime in Baghdad ordered Ayatollah Khomeini to leave the Iraqi city of Karbala where he had been residing after being exiled from his native Iran. This embittered the Iranian leader. While residing near Paris the Ayatollah launched his Islamic revolution through fiery messages smuggled into Iran.

When the Shah lost his throne in 1979, Khomeini was ready to become the undisputed political and spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He began a barrage of propaganda against the Iraqi regime and called for the establishment of a radical Islamic state among his neighbors to the west. The Iraqi leaders were fearful of seeing their land become a battlefield between its Sunni and Shiite population. They decided on a preemptive strike against Iran with the hope of bringing down the Khomeini regime. The fact that the war has continued to the present, clearly testifies to the grave miscalculation of Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq.

How can we understand the willingness of the revolutionary guards to rush to their death in their fight against the "godless" Iraqi regime? Undoubtedly, the masses in Iran are fired with an extraordinary religious zeal. But we must also remember that the Shi'ite brand of Islam has always emphasized the importance of martyrdom in the cause of Allah. Young warriors who face death on the battlefields are convinced that they will never be the losers. They will either defeat Iraq or achieve Paradise!

The war with Iraq came at a very opportune time for Khomeini and his fellow clergymen. It enabled them to consolidate their power and to galvanize the energies of the Iranians in a holy war against Iraq. They are inflamed with one consuming passion: the total destruction of the Baath government. No matter how costly the war may be, it cannot stop until victory is won. However, we must not imagine that all the Iranians are united in their desire to continue the struggle. The country has its "draft dodgers." Thousands of young Iranians have fled their country and sought refuge in Turkey, Pakistan and Western Europe.

What is the explanation for the revival and spread of radical Islam today? The poverty stricken masses in many parts of the Muslim World are disillusioned by the failure of nationalistic ideologies to solve their problems. In their

desperation, they embrace the utopian promises of radical religious leaders and expect the coming theocratic state to save them.

As noted earlier, the Iran-Iraq war is a struggle between two irreconcilable worldviews: the nationalistic and the theocratic. This does not mean that the Iraqi regime, for example, completely ignores the teachings of Islam. But it does not hesitate to borrow from the outside world ideas and tools which serve in the modernization of Iraqi society. Meanwhile, the Khomeini regime in Iran is establishing a theocratic state where Shari'a or Islamic Law becomes the absolute rule of faith and life for the people of Iran. Furthermore, it is not content with keeping the revolution at home, but would export it to the entire Muslim world.

The war machine on both sides is fueled through the sale of oil. The Iranians rely on the Gulf and on foreign supertankers for their exports. Having lost the use of Basra, Iraq manages to export its oil through pipelines to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have been helping Iraq with generous cash donations. They fervently hope that in this way they can keep Islamic radicalism from spreading across their borders.

Arms have been flowing to Iraq and Iran from all over the world. At the writing of these words, there is no indication that Khomeini will settle for anything less than the fall of the Baath regime in Baghdad. On the other hand, the Iraqis are determined to fight to the end rather than to allow their country to become a satellite of Iran.

This war has already claimed more than one million casualties. The material losses have reached over 100 billion dollars. The United States, Western Europe, Japan and the Soviet Union would have their interests best served if the radicals in Tehran were prevented from achieving victory over Iraq. This requires their fullest cooperation in stopping the arms flow to the combatants. A special effort of the international community must be made to aid in the reconstruction of the devastated areas in Iraq and Iran and the rehabilitation of the lives of the thousands who are the victims of this savage war.

During the remaining years of this century, Islamic nations need all their human and economic resources to face complex problems such as illiteracy, population explosion, rapid urbanization, under-development and severe unemployment. The spread of Islamic radicalism, with its utopian worldview, would mark the greatest setback in their modern history. To the rest of the world, it will usher in a period of unprecedented turmoil in international affairs. Our shrinking planet will become a very unstable home for its five billion people. The Christians of the free world must make their voices clearly heard through their political leaders. The problems of the Islamic world should receive the attention they deserve. And in our relations with the nations of the Middle East, we must cast aside all duplicity and deal with them justly and fairly. The situation is urgent; time is running out.