Revolution and War: Saddam’s Decision to Invade Iran

Chad E. Nelson

There are two main motives ascribed to Saddam Husayn’s decision to invade Iran in 1980. One motive is that he invaded for geopolitical gain when international factors worked in his favor. The other is that he invaded to prevent Iran from fomenting revolution in Iraq. This article argues the decision was taken due to the latter, that the decision to invade Iran was primarily due to the fear of spillover effects from the Iranian Revolution, and considers the broader implications for why revolutions can sometimes lead to war.

Why did Saddam Husayn invade Iran in September 1980? The Iran-Iraq War resulted in probably around 400,000 deaths, cost hundreds of billions of dollars in destruction and forgone revenue, and yet ended with a return to the status quo ante bellum.1 The war also played a role in consolidating the Iranian Revolution and shaped the strategic landscape of the Persian Gulf, leading directly to the 1990 Gulf War and subsequent conflicts. There are two predominant explanations for Iraq’s invasion of Iran. One explanation is that Saddam struck Iran while it was weak in order to gain geopolitical concessions. Another is that Saddam feared that spillover from the Iranian Revolution was destabilizing his regime and saw war as a means to neutralize the revolution’s influence. Some scholars have argued for one factor or the other,2 while others have written that both motivations played a role.3

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1. It is commonly asserted that there were a million deaths in the Iran-Iraq war, but this is unlikely. For a discussion of the casualty figures, see F. Gregory Gause III, The International Relations of the Persian Gulf (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 45fn1.


These motives coincide with two of the leading explanations for why revolutions often lead to inter-state war, which are rooted in different perspectives on the factors that drive relations between states. One tradition in the study of international politics, dating back to Edmund Burke’s response to the French Revolution, asserts that heterogeneous systems where “states are organized according to different principles and appeal to contradictory values” are more conflict-prone. Revolutions increase the probability of conflict by changing the ideological composition of the international system. A principal cause of such conflict is when a new way to legitimate power and organize domestic politics is seen as presenting a threat to the status quo. In contrast, the realist tradition asserts that international relations are driven by the distribution of capabilities. From this perspective, revolutions that alter the power of the revolutionary state can prompt opportunistic invasions.

What, then, caused war in 1980? Can the two potentially complimentary motives be distinguished? There is not only an inherent interest in explaining the origins of the Iran-Iraq War but a larger theoretical significance. Using primary sources — Iraqi records that were captured by American forces in 2003, including recordings of Saddam Husayn’s deliberations with his advisors; American intelligence reports regarding Iraqi war preparations; and interviews with former Iraqi generals — I argue that the cause of the war was primarily Saddam’s fear that the Iranian Revolution would threaten his own regime, rather than that he was using the opportunity of a weakened Iran to further his geopolitical aims. I first examine the possible motives for invading Iran and then assess the empirical evidence for the two motives. I conclude by examining the implications this case has for the broader issue of why revolutions can cause war.

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CONTEXT AND MOTIVES FOR WAR

One possible motive for Saddam’s invasion of Iran stems from the ideological shift brought on by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which saw the rise of a new regime in Iran that threatened the internal stability of Iraq. The new Islamic Republic of Iran, in contrast to the ethno-nationalist secular monarchy that preceded it, became a model for Islamist revolutionaries seeking to overthrow existing regimes. The new Shi’i theocracy also served as a platform for spreading revolution abroad, in contrast to the Pahlavi regime, which had refrained from interference in Iraqi affairs since 1975. Iraq was particularly vulnerable since Arab Shi’a were a majority of its population and had been marginalized throughout the country’s modern history. In the 1970s, as political Islam was becoming more popular throughout the region, Iraqi Shi’i opposition groups that embraced Islamism grew in strength, number, and degree of radicalization. The level of discontent was made manifest in 1977 when there were large-scale protests against the Iraqi regime that bordered on revolt.

Iraqi Shi’a even had a figure of a stature resembling that of Iranian Revolution leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini: Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a highly respected and politically active cleric whom Khomeini was familiar with from his 13 years of exile in Najaf, Iraq. In addition, the new Iranian leadership did not hide its intentions. Iran beamed Arabic-language radio broadcasts into Iraq that called on Iraqis, including members of the military, to rise up and overthrow Saddam Husayn. These activities were thought to go beyond just talk. Most spectacularly, Iraq saw Iran’s hand in an assassination attempt on Deputy Prime Minister Tariq ‘Aziz in 1980.

With these threats to the security of his regime, one of Saddam Husayn’s plausible motives for war was to coerce Iran to stop interfering in Iraq’s internal affairs. In the face of Iraqi military superiority, the Iranian regime would be forced to back down. Better yet, from Saddam’s point of view, the invasion could lead to a collapse of the regime, being discredited by an Iraqi victory.

The more opportunistic motives for Saddam’s invasion of Iran stem from the dramatic decline in Iran’s military power because of the revolution. Prior to 1979, the rivalry between Iran and Iraq had been characterized by Iranian dominance, according to every indicator of power: Iran had a population and economy more than three times larger than that of Iraq.

the size of Iraq’s and a military over twice as large. Moreover, geography blessed Iran with strategic depth, with the Zagros Mountains separating most of Iran from the Iraqi border while Iraq’s population centers lay in the Mesopotamian plain, making them more vulnerable to Iranian attack. And, at least before the onset of the 1978 protests in Iran, the country was comparatively more politically stable.

This imbalance was evident in 1975, when Iraq conceded its claims in a long-standing territorial dispute over the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway. Literally meaning “the Arabs’ shore” in Arabic, and known in Persian as Arvandrud (“the swift river”), the Shatt al-‘Arab extends 120 miles to the Persian Gulf from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. A 1937 treaty between Iran and Iraq delineated the last 65 miles of the Shatt al-‘Arab as the border between Iran and Iraq, but it granted Iraq sovereignty over the river itself — with the notable exception that the thalweg principle (i.e., that a border should be along the median of the navigable channel) apply across from the Iranian cities of Abadan and Khorramshahr.12 In 1968, when the British announced they would withdraw from the Gulf, the shah looked to renegotiate the boundary in Iran’s favor so that the thalweg principle would apply to all 65 miles of the border along the Shatt al-‘Arab. Frustrated with negotiations, he unilaterally abrogated the 1937 treaty and declared Iran’s right to navigate the river with a display of force. A low-level conflict between the countries ensued, with Iran supporting a rebellion by Kurdish separatists in Iraq, while Iraq expelled thousands of ethnic Persians from its borders.13 Given Iran’s strength, Iraq eventually acceded to Iran’s demands. The two countries signed the Algiers Accord in 1975, wherein both countries pledged not to interfere in one another’s internal affairs and Iraq formally agreed to accept the thalweg principle for the entire stretch of the Shatt al-‘Arab border.14

The Iranian Revolution rapidly reversed this imbalance of power. Iran’s economy started stalling in 1977 and continued to slide in the wake of the political instability that escalated dramatically in fall 1978. The shah fled Iran in January 1979. There was political turmoil in the capital, uprisings in the periphery, and large-scale desertions in the military. One of the first actions of the revolutionary government led by Khomeini was a purge of the armed forces.15 Though initial accounts of their total collapse were

12. This dispute actually stretched back to competing claims of Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. For an overview, see Richard N. Schofield, Evolution of the Shatt al-‘Arab Boundary Dispute (Outwell, UK: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1986).
exaggerated, the armed forces were significantly weakened by the revolutionary chaos. Iraq’s position was unprecedented; its armed forces were probably superior to Iran.\textsuperscript{16}

This provided Iraq a chance to reverse its territorial loss and perhaps expand. Saddam Husayn could now assert full control of the Shatt al-‘Arab. More ambitiously, Saddam could take Iran’s historically Arab-majority province of Khuzestan (known in Arabic as ‘Arabistan or Ahwaz). The province had significant oil deposits and occupying it would put Iraq on both sides of the Shatt al-‘Arab, providing a less vulnerable route to the Gulf. Iraq could also use a victory in a war with Iran as a means to advance Saddam’s regional ambitions, bolstering Iraq’s claim as a leader of the pan-Arab cause, particularly since Egypt had been marginalized after signing a separate peace treaty with Israel in 1979. More specifically, victory against Iran would inspire Arabs and prepare the Iraqi military for an eventual war with Israel.

The motives described are both plausible. Is there evidence that suggests one motive was more compelling than the other? What ultimately made Saddam decide to escalate the border skirmishes to an outright invasion? I assess each motive in turn.

\textbf{ASSESSING THE CASE FOR AN IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT}

One of the main points of evidence for the claim that Saddam’s initiation of war was driven by fear of revolutionary spillover from Iran, rather than geopolitical opportunism, is the timing of the decision to invade Iran.\textsuperscript{17} The basic argument is that the weakness of the Iranian regime did not prompt Iraqi aggression, as one would expect given the realist “opportunistic invasion” argument. Instead, the decision for war corresponds not with the weakening of Iran but with its attempts to export the revolution. The evidence suggests that Saddam only took action against Iran when he became convinced that the Iranian regime was taking direct action to overthrow him.

From the time the first major protests began in Iran in 1978 until Iranian-Iraqi relations began to collapse in summer 1979, Iran’s military capabilities first gradually and then rapidly deteriorated. After a lull in early summer, escalating protests in the fall of 1978 led to cities beginning to fall from the government’s control by the end of the year. A dual government developed first between the shah’s government and the revolutionary coalition and, after the shah’s ouster, between the provisional revolutionary government and revolutionary committees. The military suffered increasing desertions in the fall and winter of 1978/79.\textsuperscript{18} Yet Iraq showed little sign of taking advantage of this weakness,\textsuperscript{16} A detailed comparison of their forces and military advantage at the time is found in Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, \textit{The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 65–84; Cordesman and Wagner, \textit{Lessons of Modern War}, pp. 56–70.

\textsuperscript{17} Both of the scholars that put a primacy on Saddam’s fear of spillover from the Iranian Revolution emphasized this logic, see Gause, “Iraq’s Decisions to Go to War” and the misleadingly titled article, Karsh, “Geopolitical Determinism.”

\textsuperscript{18} One estimate from Iranian military intelligence is that the desertion rate “rose from 3 percent per week to 8 percent in September–December 1978, and by February 1 the rate was up to 20 percent.” John D. Stempel, \textit{Inside the Iranian Revolution} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 151. On January 23, 1979, Chief of Staff ’Abbas Qarabaghi “estimated that the armed forces were only at 55 percent of their strength, though the tone of his comments suggests that this number may have been picked more for effect than for accuracy.” Charles Kurzman, \textit{The Unthinkable Revolution} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 115.
maintaining the good terms that had existed with the shah since the 1975 Algiers Accord by cooperating on Gulf security measures and abiding by the shah’s October 1978 request to expel Ayatollah Khomeini to France. There were no attempts to exploit the shah’s difficulties to, for example, renegotiate the Algiers Accord.

After Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979, the armed forces waffled before finally committing to the new regime. Desertions continued and an initial wave of purges began. In March and April, revolts began on the Iranian periphery, most importantly in Kurdish-majority areas and among Arabs in Khuzestan. Following the shah’s ouster, Saddam — who was still vice president, though he held most of the power in Iraq — made clear that he was willing to work with the new regime, provided the relationship continued on the basis of nonintervention in one another’s domestic affairs and respect for each other’s sovereignty. Saddam publicly announced, “A regime which does not support the enemy against us and does not intervene in our affairs, and whose world policy corresponds to the interest of the Iranian and Iraqi people, will certainly receive our respect and appreciation.” Privately, he told his advisors at the same time that Iran’s “stability and unity will be something positive for us, if Iran is not hostile to the Arab nation.”

In the early days of the revolution, there were uncertainties about the character of the regime that would emerge, but the Iraqi government was willing to work with it, and said so both publicly and privately. Saddam and other Iraqi leaders dismissed Khomeini as an old man that would have a largely ceremonial role in the new regime. Iraq welcomed the new government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, particularly after its withdrawal from the Western-aligned Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), and invited him to visit Iraq in order to improve relations between the two countries. But this honeymoon was to be short-lived. While Saddam drew a distinction between the Bazargan government and clerical forces, the former did not control the latter.


20. Exactly how weakened Iran was by these events is not clear even in hindsight, but it was obviously significant. The Iraqi leadership was no doubt aware what was going on, although there do not appear to be surviving records of their assessment of Iranian political and military developments from this period, besides an April 1979 report from the Iraqi military attaché in Tehran observing Iranian soldiers’ low morale. See Murray and Woods, The Iran-Iraq War, p. 78.


22. “Saddam and High-Ranking Officials Discussing Khomeini, the Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict, the Potential for Kurdish Unrest, and the Iranian Economy,” February 20, 1979, CRRC, SH-SHTPA-000-851.


25. Iraqi foreign minister Sa’dun Hammadi, in an October 1980 speech before the United Nations Security Council, detailed Iraqi efforts to reach out to the Bazargan government, only to be rebuked by the Khomeini faction that was actively working to undermine the Ba’th regime. See Tareq Y. Ismael, Iraq and Iran: Roots of Conflict (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), pp. 203–12.
After an initial period of dual sovereignty, the Bazargan government was increasingly marginalized from spring 1979 onward. As clerical forces gained an upper hand in Iran, relations with Iraq deteriorated, especially as revolutionary forces began to impact Iraqi domestic politics.

Ever since Khomeini’s return to Iran in February 1979, there had been a smattering of protests in Iraq. Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was soon the focus of attention from both the opposition and the regime. Word of his communications with Khomeini prompted demonstrations in support of both men in Najaf and elsewhere. Khomeini sent a message to Sadr, urging him to stay in Iraq.26 In June, Sadr issued a fatwa forbidding Muslims from joining the ruling Arab Socialist Ba’th Party (from ba’th or “resurrection,” referring to the supposedly moribund Arab nation). He was arrested, which prompted riots in several cities. Sadr was released but subsequently put under house arrest. Shi’i groups within Iraq formed an umbrella organization called the Islamic Liberation Movement with the goal of overthrowing the Ba’th regime.27 Also at this time, key figures from the earlier Kurdish insurgency crossed into Iran and received aid.28

These activities had a clear effect on Iraqi-Iranian ties. In a meeting between Saddam and his advisors in the late spring, relations with Iran were already clearly tense. However, the group ruled out war with Iran and considered the possibility that Iran was beginning to fragment in such a way that could break the country apart in the next several years.29 The implication of the discussion was that, hopefully, the problems Iran was posing would solve themselves. Despite the consensus against war, the first military confrontation between the two countries occurred in early June, when, in the context of ongoing protests in Iraq, Iraqi planes attacked several Iranian border villages, killing six.30 The attack presumably targeted Iraqi Kurdish guerrillas but may have been an attempt to send a message to Iran. The Iraqi state newspaper Al-Thawra warned Iran against “playing with fire.”31 Khomeini protested Sadr’s arrest and the border incidents, praying for the “independence” of Islamic countries.32 The Tehran International Service in Arabic was more explicit. It issued a call to rise up against the “Tikriti gang.”

27. Wiley, Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi’as, p. 54.
referring to the town that Saddam and much of the top Ba’th leadership hailed from. Al-Thawra warned Iran of “the consequences of repeating the game played by the shah against Iraq,” i.e. interfering in the internal affairs of Iraq.

Saddam responded to unrest among Shi’a with a carrot as well as a stick. He poured aid into Shi’i-majority areas and began incorporating Islamic symbols that cut across sectarian lines in his rhetoric. He even resurrected the idea of a popularly elected national assembly (which would obviously be Shi’a-dominated) mentioned in the 1970 constitution but never convened. Tensions remained high, however, with more arrests, executions, and sporadic guerilla activity. Islamist groups received an influx of members. The most significant of these was that of the Islamic Da’wa Party (from da’wa, meaning “invitation,” but connoting Islamic proselytization). These groups formed military wings, and a member of Da’wa’s militant wing tried to assassinate Saddam.

Attempts by the Iraqi regime to coerce Grand Ayatollah Sadr into denouncing the Iranian Revolution failed. Instead, Sadr smuggled messages to his followers that called for a violent uprising against the regime.

Relations between Iran and Iraq somewhat simmered after the border clashes in June 1979. However, Saddam solicited a meeting at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Havana, Cuba, that September with Iranian foreign minister Ebrahim Yazdi, who told him that Iran’s provisional government did not have the authority to ratify the Algiers Accord. In October, Saddam began to call the accord into question, complaining about territory that had not yet passed into Iraqi hands as per the agreement and demanding a renegotiation of the Shatt al-‘Arab border. Saddam now demanded full sovereignty over the river, though he continued to abide by the agreement. In a token effort to gain support among the Arab states, the Iraqi regime also called for the return to the United Arab Emirates of three disputed islands in the Strait of Hormuz that Iran had claimed in 1971.
After the Bazargan government fell in November and clerical strength increased, the anti-Ba’th rhetoric in Iran heated up. By 1980, some Iranian government officials were again explicitly calling for the Ba’th regime’s overthrow. In March, Iraq expelled the Iranian ambassador for allegedly interfering in the country’s internal affairs. The Iraqi government passed a law on March 31 sentencing all past and present members of Da’wa and its affiliates to death. A day later, a member of a Shi’i opposition group attempted to assassinate Deputy Prime Minister Tariq ‘Aziz as he spoke at a university in Baghdad. During the funeral procession for those that were killed in the attempt against ‘Aziz, a bomb was thrown, according to Iraqi reports, from the window of an “Iranian school.” The response from Iran was hardly conciliatory. Commentary on the Tehran International Service radio in Arabic noted that the assassination attempt was not an isolated incident, but part of the general national struggle against imperialism and the criminal regime in power. It is not a bomb that missed its target, but part of a big explosion in Iraq these days that is bound to hit all its targets soon and uproot imperialism and that dictatorship.

Saddam responded to these developments with the unprecedented step of executing a grand ayatollah, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, as well as his activist sister Amina, known as Bint al-Huda. The regime began to expel from the country tens of thousands of Shi’a that were considered disloyal. Gregory Gause noted that Saddam’s rhetoric underwent an immediate change, from warning the Iranians not to interfere in Iraq’s internal affairs to verbally attacking the Iranian leadership and threatening war. This was matched by a chorus of Iranian senior political and religious leadership calling on Iraqis and members of the Iraqi military to rise up against the regime, asserting that if they did so, they would receive Iranian assistance. Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had previously been the voice

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Present Iranian Regime,” October 12, 1979, FBIS-MEA, Vol. V, No. 199, p. E1. In the aforementioned late spring meeting, one of Saddam’s advisors mentioned raising the issue of the islands as a means to convince other Arab states of the danger of the Iranian regime. See “President Saddam Hussein Presiding Over a Meeting with the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council to Discuss the ‘Arab Stan [sic] Crisis,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-404.


of relative moderation in the Islamic Republic, was no exception. In a statement confirming the martyrdom of Sadr, it declared: “we will not rest until the final overthrow of the criminal, imperialist and Zionist-agent regime of the treacherous Saddam Husayn . . . it is up to the Muslim nation of Iran to assist and render succor to the Muslim Iraqi nation with all its might.” Iranian radio was also broadcasting calls for Da’wa to rebel.

This series of events seems to have convinced Saddam Husayn that there was an orchestrated attempt by Iran to overthrow his regime and that he had to strike back. Even considering works written before internal Ba’th sources were available, most scholarship places the Iraqi decision to go to war with Iran in the aftermath of these events in April 1980. It was only at this stage that Saddam told the Iraqi military to start preparing for war. This is also when Saddam appears to have consulted with several Gulf countries about his intention to invade. The captured records do not show exactly when Saddam decided on war because coverage of this period is fragmentary. It is clear, however, that in the meeting in the late spring of 1979 Saddam and his advisors had explicitly ruled out war and that in mid-September 1980 the leadership’s approval was given.

There is a significant source that asserts Saddam decided to go to war shortly after the date of the aforementioned 1979 meeting. George Cave, an officer in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), claimed to have been given intelligence in the form of satellite imagery of troop movements in the summer of 1979 that indicated Saddam was planning to invade Iran and that he, along with Bruce Laingen, the chargé d’affaires in Tehran, briefed Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi and Deputy Prime Minister


51. Cordesman and Wagner, Lessons of Modern War, pp. 38–39fn25–26; Ramazani, Revolutionary Iran, p. 60.

52. “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” September 16, 1980, CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
‘Abbas Amir Entezam with this information on October 15, 1979. This intelligence has been repeated in print and in several “critical oral history” conferences on the Iran-Iraq War. It is one of the major new “facts” to emerge concerning the war’s origins.

There are, however, several reasons to suppose that this intelligence was fabricated, even based simply on American sources. The first reason is that few American government officials seem to have been aware of this information. A June 1979 National Intelligence Estimate entitled “Iraq’s Role in the Middle East” did not even mention the possibility of an Iraqi invasion of Iran, despite the superiority in capabilities it enjoyed over Iran, and characterized the Ba’ath regime as “cautious and pragmatic.” In the same month, the US Interests Section in Baghdad suggested that one option available to Iraq was a “quick punch-out of an infeeble [sic] Iran,” but concluded that the Iraqi government would probably “search for a means to avoid conflict with Iran.” Officials that should have had access to information indicating that Iraq was preparing for war with Iran — like Gary Sick, the National Security Council official responsible for Iranian matters, and Harold Saunders, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs — have asserted they knew nothing of such intelligence. Howard Teicher, an analyst for the Pentagon, had been trying to raise the alarm bells about Iraq as early as March 1979 based on growing Iraqi capabilities and Ba’thist ideology. He was unaware of the intelligence when he wrote a report in November 1979 that predicted an Iraqi invasion of Khuzestan. Both Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski rejected Teicher’s predictions, apparently unaware of intelligence the CIA had that Iraq was preparing for an invasion. If there was such information, it is implausible that, in a region closely watched in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolu-


54. It appears the only officials on record as having been aware of the intelligence are Cave, Lain- gen, and two anonymous CIA officials interviewed by Mark Gasiorowski. Cave reported that David Newsom, the Under Secretary of State, was also aware of the intelligence. Gasiorowski conjectured that Newsom was the official behind the initiative to share intelligence with the Iranians, though Newsom told Malcolm Bryne that he could not recall it. Gasiorowski, “US Intelligence Assistance to Iran,” pp. 618fn14, 620fn19; 621fn20.

55. Director of Central Intelligence, “Iraq’s Role in the Middle East,” National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-1-79 (June 21, 1979), p. 11.


57. Sick and Saunders reported they were not aware of such intelligence when Cave discussed the exchange with the Iranians at “The Carter Administration and the ‘Arc of Crisis.’” At the conference both Sick and Henry Precht, who was the State Department Director of Iranian Affairs in 1979, expressed skepticism about the intelligence. Precht’s interpretation was that the intelligence was cooked up to help establish a relationship with the Iranians. Cave responded that, if that had been the case, he was misled.

tion, none of these figures knew about it. In fact, even as the Iraqis readied themselves for invasion, the Americans were caught unaware. The Director of Central Intelligence himself, Stansfield Turner, at a National Security Council meeting 10 days before the war broke out, predicted that Iraq would not invade.\textsuperscript{59}

Cave’s intelligence is disputed by another American source. Wayne White, who was then an Iraq analyst at the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, asserts that it was clear in the satellite intelligence he was monitoring that there was no preparation for war with Iran until after the assassination attempt against ‘Aziz and subsequent execution of Sadr in April 1980. According to White, it was apparent that in 1979, Saddam’s top priority was maintaining the ability to quickly transport armor to a potential frontline at the Syrian-Israeli armistice line in the Golan Heights rather than Iran. Even through spring 1980, nearly all Iraqi military movements continued to follow routine yearly exercise schedules for key units in training areas far from the Iranian border.\textsuperscript{60}

Moreover, there was a motive for fabricating evidence. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, American officials recognized that the shah was gone for good and strained to ensconce their influence within the relatively moderate Bazargan government.\textsuperscript{61} Providing valuable intelligence to the new government was a means to this end. When Laingen cabled Saunders in June 1980 asking him to supply intelligence to the Iranians, he included an example of what might be provided: the aforementioned analysis of the US Interests Section in Baghdad that suggested a “quick punch-out” was possible.\textsuperscript{62}

In September, CIA headquarters sent a cable to the Tehran station concerning Soviet support for Iranian Kurdish guerrillas. According to Mark Gasiorowski, “The station chief replied that he was not aware of any evidence of this, but that if such evidence existed, it would be ‘ideal’ for use in discussions with [Amir] Entezam.”\textsuperscript{63} It is not hard to fathom that someone in the US administration decided that such “evidence” did not need to exist at all. And, in fact, given the evidence against the claim that Iraq was preparing for war in 1979, it seems highly probable. Cave may have briefed the Iranians on Iraqi developments as an attempt to curry favor with the Iranians, who had serious suspicions of the Americans,\textsuperscript{64} but the intelligence does not appear to have been based in reality.

\textsuperscript{60} Wayne White, e-mail message to author, April 13, 2013.
\textsuperscript{62} US Interest Section in Baghdad to Secretary of State, “Iraqi-Iranian Relations.”
\textsuperscript{64} There is evidence that the Iranians did not find the American claims credible, either. Amir Entezam’s meeting with Cave on October 18 did not follow up on their claims about an Iraqi invasion, but instead said that the briefings “were not precisely what the Bazargan government needed.” What they wanted was “tactical information on the Kurdish situation and political intelligence on who was supporting Kurds and why.” Yazdi also did not appear to follow up on the matter when he met with the Americans on October 16. See the US diplomatic memos captured by Iranians in the storming of the [Continued on next page]}
From spring 1980 on, both Iran and Iraq called for the downfall of the other side and engaged in a long string of border skirmishes and incursions into each other’s airspace. Iraq’s domestic opposition continued. In May 1980, Iraq notified the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, that members of Da’wa had met with Iranian officials in the Iranian city of Qom, the center of the Islamic Republic’s ascendant clerical rulers, and were plotting to overthrow the Iraqi regime. There was a smattering of attacks against government officials, including a June 1980 assassination attempt on Saddam during an air force procession by Iraqi airmen led by a Da’wa member. The suppression continued. Iraq’s director of intelligence, Fadil al-Barrak, declared that the government would deport any Iraqi who supported the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It was, however, not until September that Iraq unleashed a full-scale invasion, a delay attributed to the war planning process and also the wait to see if the so-called Nowzheh coup plot — an attempt by Iranian exiles in Iraq to overthrow the regime in July 1980 — would succeed. Saddam actively backed the attempt, in contrast to his caution toward Iran the previous year.

However, some scholars specifically argued that the fear of revolutionary spillover destabilizing the Ba’thist regime was not a motivation for Saddam’s invasion. Their strongest argument was that, by the time Saddam invaded Iran, the spillover threat had been averted. Subversion by Da’wa and other Shi’i groups had already been dealt with, proven by the fact that Iraqi Shi’a largely remained loyal (or at least not openly subversive) for the entirety of the Iran-Iraq War. The problem with this argument is in its hindsight bias, assuming Saddam knew that the threat had passed.

Based on Da’wa’s own admissions, Amatzia Baram noted that the Ba’thist regime had indeed at least temporarily suppressed opposition so that street protests were not viable, as evidenced by the lack of demonstrations following the April 1980 execution of Grand Ayatollah Sadr. However, clandestine opposition continued, such as the aforementioned assassination attempt on Saddam. The regime could not be confident

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US Embassy in Tehran, available in [Documents of America’s spy nest], vol. 10 (Tehran: Daneshjuyan-e Mosalman-e Peyrow-ye Khatt-e Emam, 1980). Cave reported in the aforementioned Wilson Center conferences that Yazdi’s response to the assertion that Iraq was preparing for an invasion was: “they wouldn’t dare.” Yazdi indicated to James Bill that he and the other Iranians later speculated on the hidden agenda for the meeting, see *Eagle and the Lion*, p. 292.

71. There were unconfirmed reports of aborted coups and a network of senior Shi’i officers was uncovered that was said to be responsible for five attempts on Saddam’s life. Twelve officers and 200 others were executed by firing squad. See Colin Legum, Haim Shaked, and Daniel Dishon (eds.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, Vol. V, 1980–81 (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), p. 585.
that these covert attempts would not be successful and that more overt, large-scale demonstrations would not reemerge. This continued concern is evident in the fact that it was after the events of early April 1980 — the assassination attempt against ‘Aziz and the subsequent execution of Sadr — that the regime began to deport tens of thousands of Iraqis deemed disloyal. In speeches in February and June, Saddam even raised the possibility that Iraq could split apart. As Baram stated, “the Shi’i opposition in Iraq had burned out, but with Khomeini as a source of inspiration,” — and, I might add, with direct Iranian aid — “it could rise from the ashes.”

It was this perception of a threat that was the catalyst for the Iraqi invasion, as indicated by its timing. Each of the two major steps that ratcheted up Iraqi hostility toward Iran — first, in June 1979, when Iraq first took limited military action against Iran and openly threatened to widen it, and second in April 1980, when Saddam decided on war — was associated with domestic turmoil that Iran was perceived to be culpable for. Saddam had said in 1975 that the greatest strategic threat to Iraq was when an external power backed a “local power,” i.e., a group within Iraq. Given the influence Iran could exercise in Iraqi politics, it is clear that Saddam saw such interference as intolerable.

Why did Saddam decide on war in April 1980 rather than June 1979? One possible answer is that, by 1980, the Iranian regime was more diplomatically isolated. Iran’s relationship with the US was particularly strained, given revolutionaries’ storming of the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis. However, Saddam perceived the US as a perennial enemy that had backed Khomeini. Another possibility is that the Iranian regime was weaker militarily by 1980, though it is not clear just how much more weakened Iran was or how much the Iraqi leadership had perceived Iran had weakened since the previous year. These may have been facilitating factors, but a more notable difference was that a new regime had solidified its control over Iran and was not only calling for revolution in Iraq but promising Iranian assistance to bring it about. That assistance was, from the Iraqi perspective, made manifest in the April 1980 assassination attempt against ‘Aziz.

Saddam believed that a limited invasion could coerce Iran to stop interfering in Iraqi affairs. Better yet, he seems to have hoped for the toppling of the regime by discrediting its legitimacy and showing its inability to defend the country. He had

72. See Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 148. Ofra Bengio noted in 1985, “That the regime’s fears of al-Da’wa have not subsided [since the 1980 crackdown] is evident from the discussions during the Ba’th party’s Ninth Congress held in June 1982 which concentrated on this party and attacked it ferociously,” see her “Shi’is and Politics in Ba’thi Iraq,” p. 6. The intensity of the crackdown on internal opposition during the period in 1980 may be seen as the opposition’s impotence, but it also revealed the fears of the leadership that the threat of the opposition was to be taken very seriously.


74. “Seminar Attended by President Saddam Hussein to Study the Kurdish Case,” June 1975, CRRC, SH-MISC-D-000-508.

75. “Saddam and His Inner Circle Discussing Relations with Various Arab States, Russia, China, and the United States,” November 4–20, 1979, CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-559.

76. This is indicated in “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835. Saddam was more explicit about this in a conversation just after the war started, see “Record of Meetings of the General Command of the Armed Forces and Saddam Hussein,” October 1980, CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-574.
strained to have good relations with the shah and the Bazargan government. Had a regime emerged after the toppling of the shah that respected Iraqi rights and did not act as both a platform and a model in undermining his regime, there is no indication Saddam would have chosen to invade Iran.

**ASSESSING THE CASE FOR AN OPPORTUNISTIC WAR**

Proponents of the opportunistic motive for invasion argue that several geopolitical goals became salient to Iraqi decision-makers during Iran’s sudden transition in power. These included Iraq’s long-standing desire to claim the entire Shatt al-‘Arab, supposed plans to annex Iran’s Khuzestan Province, and Saddam’s larger regional ambitions for Iraq. Each of these goals will be examined in turn.

Iraq justified its invasion of Iran in September 1980 on the grounds that Iran had violated the Algiers Accord, thereby nullifying the agreement. Saddam’s claims to the entire Shatt al-‘Arab certainly made it appear that this war was about geopolitical expansion. The strategic significance of the border change Saddam was demanding, however, is easily exaggerated. Moving the border from the middle of the river to the Iranian shore would not resolve Iraq’s strategic vulnerability. The scholarship that stresses the significance of the Shatt al-‘Arab as a reason in itself for war does so largely on symbolic grounds — that it would reverse the humiliation Iraq was forced to bear by publicly conceding to Iran in 1975 or that Saddam was using territory as a symbol to achieve his other goals.77

A more compelling geopolitical goal is Saddam’s purported plans to annex Khuzestan Province or even larger portions of Iranian territory. However, there is no evidence that Saddam had any explicit plans to annex the province or was going out of his way to create the conditions to enable such an annexation. Iraq was widely suspected to have played a role in the disturbances in Khuzestan by Iranian Arabs demanding autonomy in the aftermath of the revolution. There is evidence for this in captured Iraqi documents, but Iraq appeared to be exercising relative caution on the issue rather than aggressively pursuing it. Just before the rebellions broke out in Khuzestan in April 1979, Iraqi leaders specifically declined to diffuse propaganda throughout the province out of fear it would create tension with the Iranian government.78 In a meeting after the uprising commenced, Saddam and his advisors clearly stated their lack of involvement up to that point. Taha Yasin Ramadan, a member of Iraq’s Revolutionary Command Council, suggested that Iraq should be ready to seize “‘Arabistan” if Iran were to break up but that, if not, Iraq should have a presence that they could leverage if Iran started interfering with Iraqi Kurds. But the consensus was that Iraq should proceed cautiously, perhaps sending only volunteer non-Iraqi Arabs and unidentified light weapons into the province to reduce the

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77. Daniel Pipes strongly stated that “The Shatt al-Arab dispute alone is serious enough to induce either party to go to war,” though his analysis stresses the importance of national pride over the issue, see his “A Border Adrift,” p. 23. For territory as a symbol for other goals, see Will D. Swearingen, “Geopolitical Origins of the Iran-Iraq War,” Geographical Review, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Oct. 1988), pp. 405–16.

chances of war. In November 1979, Saddam told his advisors that he supported autonomy in Khuzestan but that the initiative lay with Arabs there. Part of the Ba’thist leadership’s reserve was due not just to the possibility of inciting conflict with Iran but also to the population in Khuzestan. The shah had long realized the vulnerability of the valuable province and had worked to “Persian-ize” the area. Only 40% of its residents were Arab, and those Arabs were Shi’a. Whether even they would be loyal to Saddam’s regime was questionable.

In a meeting Saddam had with a group of advisors a few days before the invasion, there were discussions of retaking the Shatt al-‘Arab but no mention of plans to conquer further territory. Importantly, what they say in their discussion implies they had no ambitions on Khuzestan. One of Saddam’s advisors, onetime Syrian vice president and former Ba’th deputy secretary general Shibli al-‘Aysami, stated that international public opinion would be on Iraq’s side if the regime emphasized that “we’re retaking what is rightfully ours, that there is no aggression, and that this is not because we’re a powerful nation or because Iran has a weak military. No. It is all about our rights that were extorted.” Saddam concurred and stated that they needed to quickly resolve the matter — to force the Iranians’ hand and only escalate if Iran did not concede. While discussing plans to take full control of the Shatt al-‘Arab, another advisor (and cousin) of Saddam’s, ‘Ali Hasan al-Majid, even worried about the implications of having to occupy the waterway’s Iranian shore. Surely, the Iraqi leadership knew that attempting to annex Khuzestan would not be seen as anything but Iraqi aggression, and they probably knew that, militarily, taking Khuzestan would not be a quick fait accompli.

In fact, from the very beginning of the war, Iraqi leaders and media explicitly stated that Iraq did not covet any Iranian territory other than the land that was “usurped” by Iran. In a press conference in ‘Amman on the fourth day of the war, September 26, 1980, Tariq ‘Aziz was specifically asked what would happen if “Arabistan” were liberated. ‘Aziz responded that “Iraq’s goals were made clear” by Saddam’s September 17 speech that abrogated the Algiers Accord. “Iraq has no designs on a single inch of Iranian soil.” ‘Aziz also declared that Iraq was willing to negotiate with Iran to end the conflict, provided that Iran respect Iraq’s sover-

80. “Saddam and His Inner Circle Discussing Relations with Various Arab States,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-559.
81. “President Saddam Hussein Presiding Over a Meeting with the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council to Discuss the ‘Arab Stan [sic] Crisis,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
82. “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
eighty, not interfere in Iraqi internal affairs, and end its occupation of Arab islands
in the Gulf. Throughout the first weeks of the conflict, Saddam and others repeated
these demands and their willingness to negotiate. The Iranian territory that Iraq did
seize was likely being used as a bargaining chip, and Iraq was willing to negotiate
far before the leadership could have hoped to seize Khuzestan Province. This is
consistent with what the internal documents indicate: Iraq never desired Khuzestan
in the first place.

My argument that Saddam was motivated to invade Iran because of the threat of
the revolution spreading and not to assert Arab rights in Khuzestan is not an assertion
that he was a status quo player lacking regional ambitions. Saddam saw himself as a
great historical figure who would lead the Arabs to unite against Western imperialism
and Zionism. The captured Iraqi records highlight a consistent hostility towards and
distrust of the US, even when Iraq was receiving American aid. 85 Saddam viewed his
aspirations to correct the perceived injustices imposed on the Arab peoples — divid-
ing them into petty states and backing the Zionist regime — as inevitably leading to a
confrontation with Israel. 86 But, as the records have also indicated, he was patient and
cognizant of how long it would take to achieve these aims. 87 Saddam styled himself as
a pragmatic revolutionary, like Vladimir Lenin. 88 He would work methodically towards
his goal. He had a vision of upending the status quo to his west — Syria and Israel —
and of maintaining essentially defensive goals in the east.

This should not be construed as Saddam having launched the Iran-Iraq War as
a rehearsal for confrontation with Israel. Hal Brands argued, based on captured Iraqi
documents, that a secondary motive for Saddam’s decision to invade Iran was that “a
war on Iraq’s eastern flank would help it prepare for an eventual turn to the West,” as
a “military and psychological preparation for a later conflict with Israel.” 89 There is
little support for this perspective. In fact, the evidence seems to point in the opposite
direction. In one conversation years after the war started, Saddam did mention that
the war was giving Iraqis valuable experience in warfare, the kind of experience
Israel has and fears that Iraq would get. He remarks in the same dialogue, “countries
learn how to fight through fighting in actual wars. Previously I was not aware of

85. Hal Brands and David Palkki, “‘Conspiring Bastards’: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic View of
86. Hal Brands and David Palkki, “Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?”
87. In regard to Israel, for example, he outlined a vision that war would not come in the next five
years, but at some point Iraq would gain nuclear weapons, march to the border of Israel, and patiently
nibble at Israel’s territory. See Brands and Palkki, “Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb;” “Revolutionary
Command Council Meeting after the Baghdad Conference in 1979,” March 27, 1979, CRRC, SH-
SHTP-A-000-553. Saddam cautioned officials on more than one occasion to avoid the mistake made
by Egyptian president Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser in 1967 of getting into a conflict before one was ready.
88. See the discussion in “Revolutionary Command Council Meeting after the Baghdad Confer-
ence in 1979,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-553, where Saddam asserted that, like Lenin, one has to be
flexible and sometimes concede in order to maintain power.
Hussein, the United States, and the Invasion of Iran: Was There a Green Light?” *Cold War History*,
this fact.”90 There is no evidence that gaining such experience in battle so that they could better face the Israelis was even a subsidiary motive when he was considering initiating war with Iran.91 On the contrary, there is evidence that the Iraqi leadership was concerned that conflict with Iran would divert Iraq from its aims against Israel. For example, in a meeting with Saddam over the 1979 uprising in Khuzestan, one participant suggested that it might be an American conspiracy to involve Iraq in a war to exhaust it and keep it from playing a leading role in the Palestine issue.92

Beyond the question of whether the conflict would prepare Iraq to face Israel, there is a larger issue of whether Saddam initiated war with Iran in order to vault Iraq’s position in the wider Arab world. In the meeting with his advisors just before the outbreak of war, Revolutionary Command Council vice chair ‘Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri claimed, “If this action is to be done successfully until the end, it will put Iraq in a prominent and significantly effective position. Through this, in the future, Iraq can take big strides in accomplishing its goals nationally and in the Pan-Arab region.”93 There was a notion then, at least from Duri, that success in taking the Shatt al-‘Arab would not only have a beneficial effect “on our domestic people,”94 but also improve Iraq’s image among Arabs as a whole. But was this a side benefit of a war initiated for other reasons or a cause in itself? The same may be asked about the acquisition of the Shatt al-‘Arab. Saddam no doubt desired full sovereignty over the waterway, but the question is whether this goal drove his decision to invade Iran or was merely a bonus for a war he had decided to launch for other reasons.

91. Brands cited three additional documents, including a conversation a few days before the Iraqi invasion where Saddam predicted the conflict would “inspire ‘all the people who have extorted land,’” referring to Palestinians or Arabs more broadly. Brands claimed Saddam was referring to the Israelis when he said that “getting your land back will scare them,” though given the context he seems to be referring to those regimes that were hostile to Iraq that had land occupied but had not retaken it — Syria and, arguably, Egypt. Brands, “Why Did Saddam Invade Iran?” p. 883; “Saddam and His Advisors Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835. In another conversation, Saddam remarked that Israel “cannot tolerate Iraq walking out [of the war] victorious because there will not be any Israel.” This was several years after the war started and does not suggest Iraq initiated the war in part to strengthen its capabilities to then turn on Israel, see “Saddam Meeting with His Cabinet to Discuss the 1982 Budget” circa 1982, CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-635. In another conversation several months after the war started, Saddam suggested that the war would give Iraq “a lesson in the broadest sense by fighting for two months,” see “Saddam Meeting with the General Command of the Armed Forces about the Iran-Iraq War,” October–November 1980, CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-566. Around the same time, Saddam suggested that the war would encourage Arabs to defy Israel, see “Record of Meetings of the General Command of the Armed Forces and Saddam Hussein,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-574.
92. “President Saddam Hussein Presiding Over a Meeting with the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council to Discuss the ‘Arab Stan [sic] Crisis,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-404. See also “Transcripts of General Command of the Armed Forces Meetings during the 1st Gulf War and Correspondence with Other Arab Leaders,” October 1980, CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-573.
93. “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
94. This is Baram’s translation of “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835, cited in Saddam Husayn and Islam, p. 154. Baram assumed that Duri was speaking for Saddam, and he wrote that “our domestic people” “undoubtedly meant the Kurds and the Shi’is, and the latter more than the former.”
In a meeting that Saddam had with a group of advisors a few days before the invasion, he suggested that Iraq had been forced to accept the Shatt al-ʿArab border in 1975 due to weakness, but now that it had the opportunity to take the waterway back, it would. “Anyone who takes our land, be it the Shah of Iran or Khomeini, we would do the same thing against them.” He did so, however, in the context of discussing how to sell the war:

All the Arab people will tell you to get [the Shatt al-ʿArab] back. These are facts and the citizens will not disagree on this. However, if we tell them who started this, that the Shah is one thing and Khomeini is another thing, and why did we give it up at the time of the Shah, and why do we want to take it at the time of Khomeini and so on . . . then surely you would find that the Arab public opinion has some parties that do not understand the correct historical path regarding what we have to do and regarding what position we should take.95

Saddam needed to justify his change of course because it would bring up Iraq’s 1975 concession. At that time, in addition to there having been criticism within the Ba’th Party in Iraq, the rival Ba’th regime in Damascus lashed out against “the Tikriti regime” for “renouncing . . . Arab land.”96

And yet, as long as there was hope for neighborliness, Saddam showed no signs of pressing either the shah or Iran’s new revolutionary government for a revision of the Algiers Accord. Only after relations deteriorated with the Iranian government did the accord come into question, and Saddam placed an emphasis on the territory he claimed was usurped by Iran. Saddam had a domestic political reason to do so: retaking lost territory provided a justification for war beyond preventing Iran from spreading revolution to Iraq. And just as the change in the border of their common waterway, albeit a small change, had symbolized Iranian dominance in 1975, changing the border back would be symbolic of Iraq’s rising star. The message was that Iraq could coerce Iran. As Saddam said in the meeting a few days before the invasion, “we will force their heads into the mud to enforce our political will on them, which can only happen militarily.”97 Saddam did not explicitly mention either a Shi’i threat or Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs in that meeting but he did not have to. This was not an extensive debate over whether to go to war; that decision had been made months before.

The main catalyst for war was not reversing the Algiers Accord to obtain the Shatt al-ʿArab. It was to get Iran to cease interference in Iraq’s internal affairs, whether through coercion or precipitating regime change. A realist emphasis on the shift in power between Iran and Iraq is important as a necessary condition. Iraq would not have the option of pressuring Iran via military force if it was as weak vis-à-vis Iran as it had been in 1975. Saddam’s plan to coerce Iran obviously depended on it not being able to withstand Iraqi military might. From his discussion with his advisors immediately prior to the invasion, Saddam was sure Iraq would be able to do that, given weakened Iranian

95. “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
97. “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
capabilities. Although Iran’s weakness was a necessary condition for Iraq to coerce it, this is not sufficient for explaining why Iraq wanted to coerce Iran. What drove the conflict was preventing Iran from interfering in the domestic affairs of Iraq.

CONCLUSION

In an interview with the Federal Bureau of Investigation after his capture by American forces, Saddam Husayn was asked whether his decision to invade Iran was based on Iranian threats or designs to reclaim territory. He responded with an analogy: One day, a neighbor’s son beats up your son. The next day, the neighbor’s son bothers your cows. Then the neighbor’s son disturbs your irrigation system, damaging your farmland. A warning to your neighbor would usually be sufficient, but this approach did not work for Iraq with Iran. When asked what the war’s objective had been, Saddam responded, “Ask Iran. They began the war.” When the question was repeated, he responded, “to have Iran not interfere in our internal affairs.” Of course, such a defensive interpretation is self-serving and what we might expect him to say, but the evidence supports his basic claim.

I have argued for what is a minority position in the scholarship on the origins of the Iran-Iraq War — that Saddam’s decision to invade Iran was primarily driven by concerns of the preservation of his regime from the threat of spillover from the Iranian Revolution. A greater number of scholars have argued that Saddam invaded for opportunistic reasons, and even more have argued that his decision was motivated by both. The change in the distribution of power between Iran and Iraq was certainly a prerequisite to Saddam’s decision to invade, but not a sufficient condition. Iraq’s hostility toward Iran is correlated with the consolidation of a new radical Iranian regime and subsequent threat it posed to Iraq, not the weakening of the Iranian state. There is no evidence that Iraq sought to seize Khuzestan Province while Iran was weak; in fact, there is evidence to the contrary. There is no evidence that Saddam was motivated to initiate the conflict in order to prepare for a conflict with Israel. Saddam’s close advisor did claim a war could catapult Iraq to a position of leadership in the Arab world, and there is evidence that Saddam wanted reverse the territorial concessions Iraq was forced to grant Iran in 1975. But that was not what drove the conflict. These were the side benefits of a war launched for other reasons. Saddam himself emphasized the territory for political reasons. The main cause for war was upholding another aspect of the Algiers Accord: noninterference in Iraq’s internal affairs.

What can be said about how this case relates to the broader phenomenon of why revolution sometimes causes war? First, the Iran-Iraq War does not provide compelling evidence for the realist argument that changes in relative military power precipitates opportunistic invasion following a revolution, despite being cited as an exemplar of this argument. There are reasons to doubt that shifts in power alone prompt opportunistic war, such as the finding that civil wars do not often prompt wars

98. “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Iraq’s Decision to Go to War with Iran,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-835.
of opportunism.  

Indeed, if it is only power that keeps states from invading their neighbors, it is a puzzle that states have weak neighbors. A potential additional condition could be that states with previous territorial disputes are especially vulnerable to opportunistic invasions. However, in the case of the Iran-Iraq War, even that was not sufficient to incite conflict. This is not to say that wars caused by opportunism following a revolution have never occurred. But it is not likely to explain many of the cases of revolutions that lead to war.

The mechanism that probably best explains many, but not all, of the cases of wars following revolutions, as well as much of the variance in the level of disruption revolutions cause to the international order, is when it is feared or hoped that a revolutionary ideology will spread. This is distinct from the perspective that similar states will cooperate and unlike states will conflict. That perspective has not gained a large following in the study of international politics, in part because there are too many examples of unlike states cooperating and vice versa. Relations between Iran and Iraq that are covered in this article also rebut this general argument. The Persian monarchy was just as distant to the Ba’thist regime ideologically as the Islamic Republic. But the Islamic Republic was legitimized by political Islam, which threatened Saddam’s Iraq in a way that the Persian monarchy did not.

Revolutions are often embedded in a larger transnational ideological struggle over how to organize domestic politics. The Iranian Revolution was both a product of and a bolster to the rise of political Islam as a revolutionary ideology in the region. The origins of the Iran-Iraq War are rooted in the response to this ideological challenge rather than changes in the distribution of power.

