

America, Oil, and War in the Middle East

Toby Craig Jones

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.

—Jimmy Carter, state of the union address, Jan. 23, 1980

Middle Eastern oil has enchanted global powers and global capital since the early twentieth century. Its allure has been particularly powerful for the United States. The American romance began in earnest in the 1930s, when geologists working for Standard Oil of California discovered commercial quantities of oil on the eastern shores of Saudi Arabia. In the years that followed, enchantment turned into obsession. Shortly after World War II it became clear that oil was more than merely a coveted industrial commodity. The most visible and celebrated event in that history occurred when Franklin D. Roosevelt hosted Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, the founding monarch of Saudi Arabia, aboard the USS *Quincy* on Egypt's Great Bitter Lake in February 1945. The meeting permanently linked Middle Eastern oil with American national security. It also helped forge one of the twentieth century's most important strategic relationships, in which the Saudis would supply cheap oil to global markets in exchange for American protection. A bargain was made. And so too was a future tinderbox.¹

Over the course of the twentieth century, preserving the security not just of Saudi Arabia but of the entire Persian Gulf region and the flow of Middle Eastern oil were among the United States' chief political-economic concerns.² The pursuit of American power in the Gulf has been fraught with peril and has proved costly in terms of both

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¹ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York, 2008), 385–86; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Three Kings: The Rise of an American Empire in the Middle East after World War II* (New York, 2009), 19–25.

² For an alternative take on the political economy of oil and the need to protect supply, see Timothy Mitchell, "McJihad: Islam in the U.S. Global Order," *Social Text*, 20 (Winter 2002), 5. Timothy Mitchell notes that "contrary to popular belief, there is too much [oil]. Oil is the world's second most abundant fluid, so any producer is always at risk of being undercut by another. If all one wanted was a market in oil to supply those who need it, this would pose no problem. But the oil industry is about profits, not markets, and large profits are impossible to sustain under such competitive conditions. The potential rents—or 'premiums on scarcity,' as they are called—could be realized only if mechanisms were put in place to create the scarcity." See *ibid.*

blood and treasure. Oil has flowed, although not without difficulty. Since the late 1970s the Gulf has been rocked by revolution and almost permanent war. Security, if measured by the absence of conflict, has been elusive, and safeguarding the Persian Gulf and the region's oil producers has meant increasingly more direct and dearer forms of U.S. intervention.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the American military occupation there represented only the latest stage of American militarism in the Middle East. While more considerable in scale, duration, and devastation than previous military misadventures in the region, the Iraq War was the outgrowth of several decades of strategic thinking and policy making about oil. It is true, of course, that terrorism and especially the attacks of September 11, 2001, helped accelerate the drive to war in 2003, but to focus too much on 9/11 is to overlook and discount the ways that oil and oil producers have long been militarized, the role oil has played in regional confrontation for almost four decades, and the connections between the most recent confrontation with Iraq and those of the past.³ Oil and war have become increasingly interconnected in the Middle East. Indeed, that relationship has become a seemingly permanent one. This outcome was not inevitable; the United States has not only been mired in the middle, but its approach to oil has also abetted the outcome.

It is also important to understand the U.S. emphasis on security, and the contradictions of its approach to it, in a broader regional context. While this essay does not dwell on the U.S.-Israeli relationship, U.S. Persian Gulf policy and America's relationship with the region's oil producers were often at odds with the alliance between the United States and Israel. The tensions created by American policies in the Gulf have undermined U.S. claims about pursuing regional security more generally. This contradiction played out most spectacularly during the 1973 oil crisis.⁴

The Strategic Logic of Militarism

The United States is not the only Western power with a history of war in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. In a rush to secure and expand their own supplies in the region, the British landed an expeditionary force near Basra in what is now Iraq in 1914. By 1918 the British captured Baghdad and ensconced themselves and their allies there, a perch from which they projected power for several decades.⁵ American ascendance in the Persian Gulf later in the century created a new pattern of militarism and war. Unlike its predecessors, the

³ Sheila Carapico and Chris Toensing wrote in 2006 that "to hear American politicians and the commercial news media tell it, the greatest military power in world history hastily launched an ill-conceived invasion because of intelligence failures and wishful fantasies of sweets and flowers. It is as if, to paraphrase a sentiment heard in White House hallways on September 11, 2001, history really did start on that day, and nothing that happened beforehand mattered. It is as if the United States had never articulated a global vision of 'full-spectrum dominance,' acted upon hegemonic ambitions in the Persian Gulf or planned for forcible 'regime change' in Iraq." See Sheila Carapico and Chris Toensing, "The Strategic Logic of the Iraq Blunder," *Middle East Report* (no. 239, Summer 2006), 6–11, esp. 6. For the best account emphasizing the role of 9/11 in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, see F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York, 2010), 184–97.

⁴ On the tensions between U.S. policies regarding Israel and oil, see Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, "The End of the Concessionary Regime: Oil and American Power in Iraq, 1958–1972" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2011).

⁵ On Iraq and the British role there see Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York, 2000), 30–147; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Bathists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, 1978); Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, 2005); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: A History of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York, 2003); and Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (New York, 2008).

United States did not wage war out of old-fashioned imperial calculation or ambition. American oil wars have not been about establishing direct control over oil fields nor about liberation or freedom, at least not political freedom for the peoples of the region. Instead, they have primarily been about protecting friendly oil producers. The objective has not necessarily been to guarantee that Middle Eastern oil made its way to the United States, although meeting basic domestic energy needs remained a vital part of the broader calculation. Keeping prices stable (not low) and keeping pro-American regimes in power were central to U.S. strategic policy.

The pattern of militarism that began in the Persian Gulf in the 1970s has partly been the product of American support for and deliberate militarization of brutal *and* vulnerable authoritarian regimes. Massive weapons sales to oil autocrats and the decision to build a geopolitical military order in the Gulf that depended on and empowered those rulers resulted in a highly militarized and fragile balance of power. And from the 1970s on, oil-producing states have faced repeated internal and external threats, including domestic unrest, invasion, and regional or civil war, or at least the imminent prospect of turmoil. Such instability and conflict has had much to do, of course, with internal political problems, only some of which were the result of outside intervention. But the militarization that began in earnest under the United States' watch exacerbated and accelerated those uncertainties and helped further destabilize oil-producing states and the region.

The approach of the United States to oil and the Persian Gulf in the late twentieth century was both a sign of its superpower status and a demonstration of its limits. What began as an effort to build up and empower surrogates, client states in the Gulf that would do the bidding of the United States, proved instead to be the gateway for more direct projections of American military power. Jimmy Carter's warning during his 1980 state of the union address that the United States would use "any means necessary, including military force" to safeguard its "vital interests" in the Gulf has clearly come to pass.⁶

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the transformative period in the United States' approach to security and militarism in the Persian Gulf. In January 1968 the British government announced that it would end its longtime imperial presence in the region and withdraw its political and military resources. The move unsettled American policy makers anxious about a potential power vacuum. Other pressures also began to mount. In the decade leading up to the British announcement, governments of oil-producing countries had already begun to bristle against the dominating and unfair practices of the major oil companies, which had exercised monopolistic control over the means of production and pricing for much of the twentieth century. In 1960 several major oil producers established the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in a gambit to drive prices higher. OPEC achieved little in its early years. The assertiveness of the oil producers would grow by the 1970s, however, as major producers began to nationalize the operations of the oil companies.⁷

More importantly, contradictions in America's Middle East security strategy would challenge the nation's efforts to maintain friendly relations with the region's oil producers.

⁶ On the Carter Doctrine, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York, 1983).

⁷ Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Ithaca, 1988), 134. On the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), see Yergin, *Prize*; and Leonardo Magueri, *The Age of Oil: What They Don't Want You to Know about the World's Most Controversial Resource* (Westport, 2006), 93–102.

Historically, the United States struggled to balance its support for Israel with its support for the region's oil producers, who had long considered the Israel-friendly foreign policy of the United States as an irritant. In 1973 this irritation transformed into outrage during the October War, when Egypt launched a surprise attack on Israeli forces to recapture territory in the Sinai Peninsula. Gulf oil producers were infuriated when the United States helped re-equip the beleaguered Israeli military in the course of battle. Led by Saudi Arabia, Arab oil producers and oil companies orchestrated an embargo of the United States, thereby drying up supply and driving up prices. As a result of the 1973 crisis, the oil-producing countries finally seized direct control over production and pricing mechanisms from the giant Western oil conglomerates, leading to a massive increase in oil revenues for those nations. The embargo and its impact on domestic politics troubled American officials, who struggled to rebuild relations with oil-producing allies. But the anxieties generated by the contradictions of U.S. policies on Israel and oil did not lead to a reconsideration of U.S. regional security policy. Rather, the United States deepened its commitment to the regional order.⁸

In fact, after the initial shock of the embargo, the rapid spike in prices did not overly trouble American policy makers, who worked to convince leaders in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, and elsewhere in the Gulf to reinvest the revenues they were generating from the skyrocketing price of oil in the West by spending some of their newfound wealth on Western products and, most importantly, American weapons. The creation of a weapons pipeline deepened the ties between the United States and Gulf oil producers, but the waves of nationalization did help dismantle a geopolitical framework that had served American oil interests in the past. In that system Western oil companies, in cooperation with their home governments, exercised direct control over Middle Eastern oil. The relationships between these companies and the oil-producer governments were periodically tempestuous, but they were mostly cooperative. Governments of the region fought to achieve a modicum of equity in profit sharing from the sale of oil, but they remained almost entirely beholden to the companies for the extraction, refining, distribution, and sale of petroleum. It was an arrangement that enjoyed the full support of the U.S. government. Companies such as Aramco that operated in Saudi Arabia not only cooperated closely with the U.S. government, but they also often had members of the American political and intelligence communities on their payrolls.⁹

The convergence of corporate and political interests around oil had profound consequences on the character of political authority in and around the region. The companies helped forge and defend a set of relationships with Arab autocrats that American leaders since Roosevelt have considered vital to the stability of the region. The United States demonstrated its preference for autocrats in 1953, when the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated a coup to overthrow Mohammed Mossadeq, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, and bring back Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi as ruler. The oil companies did their part to strengthen authoritarians elsewhere in the region. During the

⁸ Joe Stork, *Middle East Oil and the Energy Crisis* (New York, 1975). See also James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (New York, 2011). Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (New York, 2011).

⁹ On the efforts of American policy makers to convince leaders to reinvest revenues from oil sales to the West, see Cooper, *Oil Kings*. Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Palo Alto, 2007). Aramco was the name for the Arabian American Oil Company, a consortium established by the U.S.-based oil giants Chevron, Texaco, Exxon, and Mobil. Aramco operated under their ownership until 1980, when it was fully nationalized by Saudi Arabia.

1950s and 1960s U.S. government officials and oil-company executives feared the potential power of Arab nationalists and the possibility that they might nationalize Arab oil and refuse to supplicate to American and Western interests. The companies and the U.S. government considered the possibility of such a scenario a threat to U.S. Cold War and material interests in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰

Although direct corporate and U.S. political control over Persian Gulf oil ended in the 1970s, the authoritarian regimes remained. The U.S. government sought to do new kinds of business with them, by arming them and positioning them as surrogates for American interests and power. Richard M. Nixon provided the impetus for the new militarization strategy in 1969 when he articulated a new strategic doctrine. Under pressure to guide the United States out of the quagmire in Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine called on American allies to bear a greater burden in providing for their own defense. U.S. policy makers observed the doctrine in the Gulf by keeping American military forces “over the horizon.” Without the British present to preserve the Gulf’s balance of power, the United States moved to build up local militaries to maintain regional order. The American government focused primarily on strengthening Iran and Saudi Arabia, propping them up as the twin pillars of the United States’ new regional geopolitical strategy. Between 1970 and 1979 the United States committed to over \$22 billion in arms sales to Iran, accounting for roughly three-quarters of all of Iran’s weapons purchases during the decade. Sales commitments to Saudi Arabia were more modest, at just under \$3.5 billion for the decade, still a significant amount considering that the United States only started selling weapons to the kingdom in 1972.¹¹

The Perils of Militarization

The consequences of the new militarization policy were considerable. Although the policies were not immediately destabilizing, they did help lay the foundation for the era of violence and insecurity that followed. As militarization became a regional phenomenon, it also emboldened Gulf dictators, who became increasingly assertive and threatening to one another. Rising tensions in the Gulf, most notably between Iran and Iraq, were the result of complicated domestic and regional politics. However, embattled Gulf state leaders sought security through the purchase of billions of dollars worth of weapons, which the American government and the American weapons industry were happy to provide. The result was further massive militarization of the region and a boon for the military-industrial complex. By the end of the decade the largest oil producers in the Gulf were in a full-blown arms race. The Soviet Union pitched in by committing to sell over \$10 billion in

¹⁰ On the role of U.S. experts in strengthening the grip of the Saudi royal family over its territory and resources in the twentieth century, see Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’Etat in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19 (Aug. 1987), 261–86. Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa’ud, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington, 2002).

¹¹ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill, 2002). On the United States and arms sales to Saudi Arabia, see Safran, *Saudi Arabia*, 180–214. The dollar figures are drawn from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfer Database at <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> and are presented using SIPRI’s online trend indicator values (TIVs) expressed in U.S. dollar amounts at constant 1990 prices. For an explanation of SIPRI’s arms transfer tables, see “Explanation of the TIV Tables,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background/explanations2_default.

weapons to Iraq, its main client in the region and the principal rival to Iran. But it was the United States that did the most to facilitate the militarization of the region. Between 1975 and 1979 Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia purchased 56 percent of all the weapons sold in the Middle East and made almost one-quarter of all global arms purchases. Lee Hamilton, a leading Democratic congressman, warned in a 1973 statement on the floor of Congress about the potentially excessive nature of arms sales to the region. He remarked that “the net impression left . . . is that we are willing to sell just about everything these Persian Gulf states want and will buy.” And buy they did. Iran proved particularly keen to acquire as much high-tech military weaponry as possible. The shah purchased the newest weapons systems available from American manufacturers, including seventy-nine F-14 Tomcat fighter jets, the U.S. Navy’s premier fighter, in 1974.¹² By the middle of the 1970s, the American notion of security in the Persian Gulf was based almost entirely on the ability of oil producers to purchase the machines of war.

The militarization of the Persian Gulf exacerbated existing instabilities and hastened an era of regional conflict. During the heyday of arms sales, some U.S. officials and elected representatives grew alarmed. Throughout the 1970s and into the following decade, members of Congress convened regular meetings to flesh out the potential harm of massive militarization in the Gulf. Much of the concern centered on the potential threat that newly armed Arab oil producers posed to Israel. Hamilton cautioned that “the appropriate area for justifiable concerns is in the general policy of pouring lots of sophisticated arms in an extremely volatile portion of the Middle East, known not for exemplary regional cooperation, but instead for a plethora of territorial, ethnic, familial and political disputes over the last several hundred years.”¹³

Although others shared Hamilton’s anxieties, those responsible for overseeing U.S. policy in the Gulf dismissed those concerns. The warnings expressed by Hamilton and others should have prompted caution, but few policy makers or arms manufacturers were inclined to question the stability of authoritarian regimes that had been longtime allies. Especially after the first oil boom, Gulf oil states seemed even more in command than before. Flush with billions of dollars in new oil revenues by the mid-1970s, the Gulf oil producers went on a decade-long domestic spending spree, throwing money at a range of social, economic, and potential political problems. Regimes in the region committed billions of dollars to modernization and development programs and to the expansion of cradle-to-grave social services.¹⁴

The intent of that spending was to redistribute oil wealth as a means to stave off potential restiveness. And the potential for unrest was considerable. Most of the Gulf’s autocrats came to power through conquest, alliances with imperial powers, or both. The preferred clients of the United States, the rulers of Iran and Saudi Arabia, used a combination of

¹² SIPRI Trend Indicator Values Database, www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers. Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 33. Statement by Lee Hamilton on “Arms Policy in Persian Gulf Area,” May 31, 1973, in *New Perspectives on the Persian Gulf*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Third Congress, 1973 (Washington, 1973), 191. SIPRI Arms Transfer Database and SIPRI Trade Register Database, www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers. The original sale of the F-14 Tomcats was for eighty planes. Seventy-nine were delivered between 1976 and 1978, with the United States quarantining one after the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution.

¹³ Hamilton, “U.S. Policy toward the Persian Gulf,” in *New Perspectives on the Persian Gulf*, 192.

¹⁴ Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, 2010), 41–142; Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform* (New York, 2003), 76–215; Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (New York, 2000), 401–35.

coercion and co-optation to establish and then maintain their power. But even after decades of rule, neither regime possessed much credibility or legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens. Significant domestic political fault lines were evident in each country. Although most Saudi Arabians and Iranians embraced the new wealth and the services it provided, many continued to bristle against the practices of their rulers. Both regimes assumed that the widespread redistribution of wealth would placate whatever simmering hostilities lurked beneath the surface of Saudi Arabian and Iranian society. Neither engaged in any significant reform or allowed for a greater role for their citizens in government. Saudi Arabia, with a smaller population, became less coercive, although the threat of regime violence was omnipresent. In contrast, the shah in Iran remained a brutal and cruel tyrant. Martin Ennals, the secretary general of Amnesty International, remarked in 1977 that Iran has the “highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture which is beyond belief. No country in the world has a worse record in human rights than Iran.”¹⁵ Leaders in both countries proceeded as though the spike in oil revenues and their new spending power had allowed them to renew autocracy at home. Their social programs were meant to establish a new deal with the governed, one in which the state redistributed wealth in exchange for complete political quiescence. Many inside and outside Iran and Saudi Arabia assumed that the new social contract and the influx of oil revenues had strengthened the regimes.

In neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran did the bargain hold up. Rather than emerge from the oil boom stronger, both regimes proved vulnerable to significant domestic pressures by the end of the 1970s. Saudi Arabia faced two episodes of unrest in November 1979. In the kingdom’s Eastern Province, tens of thousands of Shi’ites rebelled against Saudi rule and especially against their status as second-class citizens. Simultaneously, but in an unrelated event, hundreds of rebels seized and occupied the Mecca Grand Mosque. The rebels, who denounced the Al Saud ruling family as illegitimate rulers, held the mosque for two weeks before being rooted out by a combination of Saudi and French special forces.¹⁶

It was the oil-fueled authoritarianism in Iran, however, that proved most vulnerable. Iranian revolutionaries tossed the shah from power in 1979.¹⁷ The fall of the shah, considered unthinkable by American officials just a few years before, demolished the twin-pillar policy. From the perspective of American policy makers, the revolution radically transformed the balance of power in the region, turning Iran from America’s strategic ally to a menacing rival. Whatever the reality of Iran’s new position in the region, the revolution brought to a dramatic conclusion U.S. reliance on highly militarized local powers as defenders of the Gulf’s regional order. While they would continue to encourage and oversee the militarization of Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil producers in the 1980s and beyond, American leaders lost faith in the idea that local surrogates possessed the political capacity to safeguard U.S. interests. Anxieties that Middle Eastern oil was vulnerable to new Cold

¹⁵ On redistribution efforts in Saudi Arabia, see Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*; and Jones, *Desert Kingdom*, 1–19, 54–137. On Iran and reform, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven, 2006), 132–69. Martin Ennals quoted in Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights*, vol. I (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 13.

¹⁶ Oil-producing states elsewhere were also vulnerable to domestic pressures. See Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-states* (Berkeley, 1997). Jones, *Desert Kingdom*, 138–78. Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-‘Utaybi Revisited,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39 (Feb. 2007), 103–22. On the 1979 Mecca Grand Mosque uprising, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam’s Holiest Shrine* (New York, 2007).

¹⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, 1982), 419–529; Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 132–213.

War developments also deepened shortly after the fall of the shah, which accelerated the transformation of how the United States would project its power in the region. In December 1979 the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted Carter to make clear America's deep attachment to the Persian Gulf and U.S. willingness to use militarily force to protect the flow of oil. Even after Carter mapped out a new strategic/military vision for the region, it would not be fully realized for a few years. Nevertheless, it was here that the era of direct American intervention in the Persian Gulf began.

The Long War

The Iranian Revolution not only helped transform the regional order and reshape American policy but it also helped unleash many of the destructive forces that have plagued the Persian Gulf ever since. In September 1980, sensing weakness in Iran and concerned about potential domestic challenges to his power, Saddam Hussein ordered the Iraqi army to launch an invasion of Iranian oil facilities. Fighting between Iran and Iraq persisted until 1988, with hundreds of thousands killed and wounded. The Persian Gulf has been virtually engulfed in war ever since. Of course, American oil policy was not directly responsible for Hussein's decision to invade Iran. Hussein perceived himself to be beset by a number of domestic and regional challenges that he believed war would resolve.¹⁸ The considerations that led him down this path were partly pathological, but they were also shaped by the militarization of oil and the region in the previous decade. This intense militarization, the politics of the region's arms race, and the combination of the increasing boldness of regional powers and their growing paranoia about one another were central to Hussein's calculus for war.

While the United States claimed to have been caught off guard by Iraq's invasion of Iran, many U.S. policy makers came to see a continuation of the war as a useful way to bog down two of the region's most highly militarized regimes and to stave off short-term threats to the regional order and the political economy of oil. To this end, the United States supplied weapons, funding, and intelligence to both sides in the conflict, and acknowledged and condoned Iraq's use of chemical weapons on the battlefield and against its own citizens.¹⁹ The decision to view the Iran-Iraq War as a useful conflict, one worth abetting as a means to contain the belligerents and therefore ensure security elsewhere in the Gulf, proved to be a dangerous gambit. Ultimately, that decision would result in the realization of the Carter Doctrine and the direct intervention of the United States in Persian Gulf conflict. And it was the threat to oil shipping that finally brought the American military in to stay.

In 1986 Kuwait requested protection from both the United States and the Soviet Union from Iranian attacks on its oil tankers. The following March the United States obliged by allowing Kuwaiti tankers to fly the U.S. flag, thereby rendering attacks on tankers as attacks on American interests, and by dispatching a large naval fleet to provide direct protection. American and Iranian military forces exchanged fire on several occasions in 1987. Hostilities escalated in 1988, with the United States sinking several Iranian warships

¹⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990," *Middle East Journal*, 56 (Winter 2002), 47–70.

¹⁹ Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (New York, 2007), 37–64.

and damaging oil platforms. That summer the USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian passenger jet, killing all 290 civilians on board. The incident was a stunning blow to Iran, and one that effectively sapped its will to fight further.²⁰ That the United States became an active participant in the Iran-Iraq War, taking and causing casualties, is hardly a secret. Yet it has not been featured in considerations of the patterns of American engagement in the region or in its history of militarism in the Gulf. It should be. The war intensified American and Arab anxieties about Iranian power and ambition, worries that began with the 1979 revolution. Iran's status as one of the region's principal bogeymen and "rogue" states has endured and continues today to be one of the primary and repeated justifications for a continued American military presence in the region.

American involvement in and efforts to protract the Iran-Iraq War also shaped future conflict with Iraq. Although Iraq received substantial military, technical, and financial assistance from the United States and its Arab neighbors during the war, it emerged from the conflict mired in debt and deeply shaken. Although encouraged by its allies and its patrons to drag out the war, Iraq could not afford it. Hussein borrowed heavily from neighboring oil states to fund his war machine. Unable to pay its debts or to stimulate its economy after the war, Iraq faced domestic disaster. Saddam Hussein urgently sought a remedy, knowing that his power would be imperiled if he proved unable to steward Iraq back to the path of reasonable prosperity. Reestablishing its oil industry and resecuring a share of the global oil market might have provided Iraq a way out of indebtedness, but Iraq's oil-producing neighbors were not sympathetic. Arab lenders demanded that Iraq repay its war debts. Meanwhile, several of Iraq's neighbors, including Kuwait, were dumping excess oil onto the market, which had the effect of driving prices down, limiting Iraqi revenues, and constraining its potential recovery.²¹

The anxieties, traumas, and hypermilitarism that precipitated Iran's revolution, Iraq's invasion, and the escalation of regional insecurity in the 1980s persisted. After two years of pleading and saber rattling, Saddam Hussein once again pursued a military solution, invading Kuwait in August 1990 and precipitating an even more dramatic escalation of American military intervention in the Gulf. Much of the history of Operation Desert Storm and the 1990s sanctions regime are well known. Alarmed by the potential fallout of Iraq possessing not only Kuwaiti oil but also Saudi Arabian oil led the United States to mobilize more than five hundred thousand troops in its largest war effort since the Vietnam War. In just a few days the U.S.-led coalition drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In the decade that followed the United States oversaw a devastating sanctions regime that eviscerated Iraq's society and economy. The official American policy immediately after the war was one of containing both Iraq and Iran—keeping the region's "rogue" states from threatening the other oil producers. By the end of the 1990s, however, containment had given way to a policy of regime change, the high-water mark of direct American militarism in the region, in which the U.S. government began actively to pursue the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Even the sanctions regime, which was officially rationalized as a system designed to ensure that Iraq abandon its weapons of mass destruction program, functioned

²⁰ Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 81–85.

²¹ On U.S. policy toward Iraq and Iran in the 1990s, see *ibid.*, 88–135. Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 248–53. Iraq's neighbors dumped oil onto global spot markets and exceeded quotas set by OPEC not because they intended to harm Iraq directly; Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, the two states most responsible for overproducing oil, had economic reasons of their own to do so. Even so, Saddam Hussein saw their actions as acts of betrayal. See Gause, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War," 52–59.

instead as an extension of the policy of regime change, which was realized with the 2003 American invasion of Iraq.²²

Capturing oil and oil fields and establishing direct or imperial control over oil has not been part of the United States' strategic logic for war. But protecting oil, oil producers, and the flow of oil has been. This is a critical distinction. The period between 1990 and the end of the long war in Iraq marks only the latest stage of American militarism in the Gulf. If oil and American oil policy—rather than the behavior of Saddam Hussein, the politics of the war on terrorism, or a handful of other political factors—are kept in focus, then one can argue that this period constitutes not a series of wars, but a single long war, one in which pursuing regional security and protecting oil and American-friendly oil producers has been the principal strategic rationale. That the permanent shadow of war has settled over the Persian Gulf in the last three decades is largely the direct outcome of the ways that oil has been tied to American national security and the ways that American policy makers linked security to militarization.

An Elusive Security

It might be tempting to argue that the escalating involvement of the United States and its history of militarism and military engagement in the Gulf region have provided a kind of security for the region. After all, oil has continued to flow, the network of oil producers has remained the same, and thus the primary interests of the United States in the region have been served. But three decades of war belie this argument. War is not tantamount to security, stability, or peace. Even in the periods between wars in the region the violence carried out by regimes against their own subjects makes clear that peace is not always peaceful. The cost has been high for the United States and especially for people who live in the Middle East. In thirty years of war, hundreds of thousands have died excruciating and violent deaths. Poverty, environmental disaster, torture, and wretched living conditions haunt the lives of many in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere in the region. Of course, the burden of death and destruction does not fall entirely on the United States and its policy of militarization. The politics of war have primarily served the interests of regional leaders who have, often from a position of weakness, exported violence to deflect internal challenges to their authority. And international political rivalry, particularly during the Cold War, drew in the other global powers, most notably the Soviet Union, which also helped facilitate insecurity and disorder in the Middle East.

The region's autocrats have also remained in power. As citizens began to challenge ruling regimes in early 2011 in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman—three of the closest allies of the United States in the region—it became clear that those governments are all too willing to turn the weapons of war, purchased mostly from the United States, on their subjects. It is also clear that those regimes are hardly stable and that they are and will remain perennially vulnerable to domestic and regional shocks, which poses a real dilemma for U.S. policy. In addition to factoring in the human toll of wars and the moral dilemmas they raise, Americans trying to determine the true price of oil in the United States must take into account the financial cost of maintaining a massive military

²² For a sober and devastating account of the politics of the sanctions regime, see Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). See also Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (New York, 1999).

presence in the Gulf region. Roger Stern estimates that between 1976 and 2007 the total cost of maintaining the U.S. military in the Persian Gulf was about \$7 trillion, and that figure does not include the costs of the 2003 Iraq War.²³

The increasing willingness of the United States to use force and violence to shore up the flow of oil to global markets has not been a sign of American strength but rather of its limits. Popular political discourse in the United States often posits Americans and their government as unwitting victims of an unhealthy and unsustainable addiction or as dupes of duplicitous oil producers. It would certainly be wise to break this addiction to oil, but to do so requires coming to terms with the history of that addiction and the multiple costs it entails. But it is hardly clear that any such reconsideration is happening. Instead, the United States appears set to continue along a familiar path. Having crafted a set of relationships with oil and unstable oil producers and having linked the fate of those relationships to American national security virtually ensures that while the United States is wrapping up the most recent oil war, its military and political strategists are already preparing for the next one.

²³ Roger J. Stern, "United States Cost of Military Force Projection in the Persian Gulf, 1976–2007," *Energy Policy*, 38 (June 2010), 2816–25.