



CHAPTER 18

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE REVIVAL OF ISLAM

The Iranian revolution of 1979 was profoundly significant not only for Iran but also for the Middle East as a whole, for Islamic states throughout the world, and for outside powers dealing with the Middle East. Within Iran, the revolution has been called “a cataclysmic event” that transformed the country’s political, social, economic, and legal structure.¹ It overthrew the shah and led to the establishment of a republic, it replaced secular laws with Islamic codes of law, and it ousted the shah’s hand-picked political and military leaders and set up a new elite.

The success of the revolution provided encouragement to those Muslims who were disenchanted with Western models of development and longed for a restoration of Islamic institutions through which they hoped a prosperous and positive future could be built. But the rulers of Middle Eastern states did not share in the popular euphoria the revolution generated. The emergence in Iran of a militant Islamic Republic caused tremors among conservative monarchs and secular dictators alike, and Iran became isolated in the Middle East. And finally, the revolution destroyed the foundations on which US policy in the Persian Gulf had been built. The shah was the United States’ strongest ally in the oil-rich Gulf; he received billions of dollars’ worth of US arms in order to enable his country to protect US

interests and to discourage Soviet adventurism. With the onset of the revolution, Iran’s military arsenal came into the hands of a regime that renounced its ties with the United States, condemned Israel, and pledged to eradicate US influence in the region. During the decade after 1979, the United States’ attempts to recover its position were awkward and bumbling, tending to worsen rather than improve its relationship with the new forces emerging from the revolution.

THE STAGES OF REVOLUTION IN IRAN

Stirrings of Opposition

In 1975, Muhammad Reza Shah’s regime took steps to further consolidate its control over the lives of the Iranian people by abandoning the existing two-party system and introducing a single political organization, the Resurgence Party. Through the Resurgence Party and its affiliated organizations, the regime attempted to gain control of groups that had managed to retain a certain degree of autonomy from the government, especially the bazaar merchants and the ulama. The government tried to force the party apparatus into the bazaars and attacked the religious establishment by reducing the role of Islam in daily life and glorifying the monarchy at the expense of Islamic norms of identity. For example, in a provocative move that challenged the role of Islam, the shah replaced the Islamic calendar with a royal calendar that dated from the reign of Cyrus the Great. Such measures antagonized both the bazaar merchants and the religious establishment and activated the traditional alliance between them. Yet the government’s totalitarian control of society appeared to be so all-embracing as to provide a secure foundation for the perpetuation of the monarchy.

However, cracks in the structure of royal absolutism were evident even in the period of its greatest strength. Economic management was one of the regime’s failings. Following the dramatic rise in oil prices in 1973 and 1974, the government indulged in wasteful spending that generated runaway inflation and showed the extent to which the benefits of the oil wealth were unevenly distributed. On the one hand, privileged factions within Iranian society—developers, certain business people, and the intermediaries who arranged contracts with foreign firms—

to survive, it had to provide Iranians with social and economic benefits. For this to occur, the leadership would have to overcome the disagreements on economic policy that so divided its members.

The Islamization of Iranian Society

Because of the demands of the war, the government postponed decisions on how Islamic laws and standards were to be introduced and applied. From the first days of Khomeini's rule, though, certain objectives were established. Primary among them was the achievement of the Islamic principles of social justice and the equitable distribution of wealth. In the economic sphere, the attempt to achieve these goals resulted in an expansion of the role of the state at the expense of private enterprise. The government nationalized banks and insurance companies as well as large industrial complexes. But there were sharp disagreements between supporters of capitalism and advocates of state control of the economy. As a result of these divergent views, the regime had not formulated a coherent economic policy by the time of Khomeini's death in 1989.

In the countryside, the early months of revolutionary turmoil witnessed the spontaneous seizure of land by the peasants and the confiscation of large landholdings by local revolutionary courts. The government endeavored to gain control of the situation by proclaiming a sweeping land reform law that provided for the confiscation of middle and large holdings and their distribution to landless peasants. The response to this law revealed the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence and the difficulties that would be faced in attempting to implement it. Although the intent of the land reform law was to further social justice, certain members of the religious establishment—some ulama were large landowners—spoke out against it on the grounds that Islamic jurisprudence also defended the right of private property. The Council of Guardians vetoed the legislation, and the Iranian countryside remained chaotic for most of the 1980s. Rulings that protected the vested interests of the ulama and evidence of a marked improvement in the well-being of some *mujtahids* and *ayatollahs* aroused public suspicions that rep-

resentatives of the religious establishment were gaining undue benefits from their exercise of political power. These suspicions were encapsulated in a popular song that has a low-ranking member of the ulama saying, "My poor old mule died last week; so to replace him I bought a Mercedes Benz."⁷

In other spheres of governmental responsibility, the process of Islamization took place more rapidly. There was, for example, a dramatic reorientation of the qualifications for the judiciary. In a reversal of legislation passed under Reza Shah in the 1930s that stipulated that only judges who had Western law degrees would be allowed to hear cases, the Islamic Republic of the 1980s decreed that judgeships would be awarded only to individuals with competence in Islamic law. Secular judges who lacked such competence were to be transferred, retired, or dismissed. In 1982, Khomeini insisted that Iran's courts discard all secular legal codes and base their decisions solely on Islamic regulations. This ruling necessitated an extensive review and augmentation of Islamic law, which was not specific in all areas of legal transactions and processes.

Additional Islamization occurred in the realm of gender relations. In effect, the new regime dismantled many of the rights women had acquired under the two Pahlavi shahs. A dress code requiring all women, including female civil servants, to wear the loose-fitting garments and head scarf known as *hijab* was introduced in 1980. The university women who donned *hijab* clothing during the revolutionary days of 1978 as an assertion of cultural identity and revolutionary solidarity surely did not anticipate that they would later be subject to laws that required them to wear those same garments or face arrest and a year in jail.

By 1981, the family protection laws promulgated by Muhammad Reza Shah were altered, and women lost the right to initiate divorce, to retain child custody, to attend school if they were married, and to study such subjects as law, medicine, and engineering. Khomeini and his supporters opposed female emancipation on the grounds that it would disrupt family life. In this view, women could not fulfill their primary roles as mothers and wives if they participated in public affairs. The notable exception to this series of restrictions was enfranchisement—women retained the right to vote and used it with increasing effect in the years to come.

The regime further sought to purify society by implementing measures that ranged from banning music and dancing in public places to cracking down on drug dealers to razing Tehran's red-light district.

In its foreign relations, Iran was isolated in the Middle East and the international community throughout the 1980s. Statements by Khomeini and other high-ranking religious leaders claiming that the goal of the Iranian revolution was to establish a universal Islamic order alarmed the leaders of the Arab states, who feared for the security of their own regimes. Iran's support of radical Shi'a groups in Lebanon who seized US and European hostages illustrated its intent to export its revolution. Thus, with the exception of Syria and Libya, the Arab states sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq conflict.

One of the goals of the revolution was to end Iran's dependence on the United States and to assert an independent foreign policy that was, in Khomeini's words, "neither East nor West." The Iranian leadership was also distrustful of Soviet motives in the Middle East and had no intention of substituting Moscow's embrace for that of Washington. For its part, the United States was at a loss over how to deal with revolutionary Iran. The Reagan administration of the 1980s sought to contain the spread of Islamic fervor and anti-US sentiment associated with the Khomeini regime. But the administration also recognized the economic and geopolitical significance of Iran and searched for avenues through which normal relations could be established with Tehran. This search led to the bizarre and inept episode subsequently known as Irangate or Contragate.

During 1985 and 1986, the United States, which was leading the campaign to impose an international arms embargo on Iran, secretly sold thousands of anti-tank missiles and tons of military spare parts to Tehran, mainly by using Israel as an intermediary. The purpose of the operation was to improve relations with Iran and to persuade the Khomeini regime to pressure pro-Iranian groups to release the US hostages they held in Lebanon. The operation failed miserably; three hostages were released but additional ones were taken, and Iran received a windfall of weaponry and spare parts. Moreover, the revelation that a small group of officials in the White House and the National Security Agency had arranged the

secret arms sales without the knowledge or approval of the State Department caused a domestic scandal in the United States that tarnished the Reagan presidency. And finally, Washington's willingness to deal secretly with the Khomeini regime while publicly denouncing that same regime prompted the United States' Arab allies in the Gulf to question the sincerity of US diplomacy. The Irangate affair represented another example of the difficulty the US government had in coping with the complexities of change created by the Iranian revolution.

With the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the regime was forced to consider whether foreign firms should be allowed to participate in rebuilding the country or whether to continue on the path of total self-reliance. Although relations with the United States remained strained, Tehran did restore diplomatic relations with the major states of Western Europe and toned down its calls for the establishment of an Islamic order in the Middle East.

The revolutionary impulse within Iran had moderated by the late 1980s, and a certain accommodation was achieved between the requirements of piety in the workplace and the need for managerial competence. Iranian politics developed a pattern of "authoritarian populism" centered on Khomeini's personal charisma and his constitutional powers as supreme Islamic jurist.⁸ Khomeini commanded a large base of mass support by addressing Iran's political, social, and economic issues in terms of Islamic ideology, an ideology the population understood and endorsed. But the use of Islamic doctrine did not imply the desire for a simple return to the past. To portray the revolution, as many US commentators did, as backward looking and disembodied from the realities of everyday Iranian life is to miss its significance. The goals of the leaders—and certainly of the masses who supported them—were to improve the quality of life in the present. Social justice and cultural integrity went hand in hand. Hopes for a better economic future motivated the mass revolutionary uprising against the shah's oppressive government and the privileged elite who benefited from it. Khomeini did not use his enormous constitutional powers as supreme Islamic jurist to establish a direct personal dictatorship; rather, he acted as a guide, offering decisions on major questions and avoiding involvement in routine administrative matters. He ruled

by balancing various government factions against one another, making sure no single group gained dominance. This may have been one reason the Islamic Republic Party was abruptly dissolved in 1987; it had served its purpose of establishing clerical authority and was abolished before it became a rival center of power. At times, Khomeini refused to make decisions on vital issues, a practice that kept his lieutenants guessing as to his wishes and paralyzed the operations of the government.



PHOTO 18.1. Representatives of three disparate and ultimately conflicting visions of the Iranian revolution. On the left is the young secular reformer, the Paris-educated first president of the Islamic Republic, Abol Hasan Bani-Sadr. In the center is the 1950s-era constitutional liberal Mehdi Bazargan, first prime minister of the republic. On the right is Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the uncompromising spokesman of the religious establishment. (Courtesy of Nikki R. Keddie)

Although political life in the Islamic Republic was markedly different from what it had been under the shah, freedom of expression and choice were nonetheless constrained. The requirement that the Council of Guardians had to approve candidates for the Majlis ensured that no opponents of the regime would be elected to the national assembly. Nevertheless, the candidates did offer voters a choice, and debate within the Majlis was spirited even though the discussion of certain topics was prohibited. In addition, the very existence of relatively free elections represented a marked change from the shah's regime. The Islamic revolution ushered in a period of mass politics in which popular opinion, expressed at the polls, played a role it had previously been denied.

During its first decade, the Islamic Republic did not employ a centralized security agency. However, correct political and social behavior was enforced by the Revolutionary Guards and bands of young men who roughed up, arrested, and occasionally executed individuals who were suspected of opposing the regime or were identified as engaging in practices contrary to Islamic norms. The menacing shadow of SAVAK had been removed, but it was replaced with the equally menacing possibility of arbitrary punishment meted out by organizations operating outside the authority of the state but with the state's tacit approval.

In June 1989, Khomeini's death triggered great outpourings of popular grief. The question of succession had been settled in advance, and there was a smooth transition of power to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as ruling Islamic jurist. By this time, members of the religious establishment held all of the leading positions in government; Khomeini's goal of consolidating the political authority of the ulama had been achieved. A deep divide still separated the proponents of religious and secular institutions, but the regime of the *ayatollahs* was widely accepted, if not always well liked. It remained to be seen how effectively that regime would function in the absence of the charismatic individual who had been responsible for its creation.

THE REVIVAL OF ISLAM

An Overview

Although the Islamic revolution in Iran was by no means the first manifestation of Islamic-oriented political activity in the 1970s, the impact it made called attention to the existence of Islamic movements in other countries. There can be no precise date for the emergence of a phenomenon such as the Islamic resurgence, but most observers have identified the resounding Arab defeat in the June War with Israel as the point at which disillusionment with borrowed ideologies and cultures became pronounced. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamic states of the Middle East—and beyond—experienced an outgrowth of popular demands to restore Islam to a central role in political and social life. Although the resurgence of Islam occurred in virtually every Islamic country, the forces that gave rise to it were specific to individual states. The movement should therefore be seen as a phenomenon that had its origins in the context of local conditions even though it acquired certain transnational features.

The first challenge facing the historian of this subject is deciding what to call it. Some Western scholars and journalists use the term *fundamentalism*—often, though not always, in a pejorative manner. But in the strictest historical sense, fundamentalism refers to a specific movement of American evangelical Protestantism in the early 1920s and is unsuitable as a defining label for Islamic groups. This book will employ the terms *Islamism*, *political Islam*, and *Islamists* to describe the contemporary current of Islamic activism and those who participated in it.

Some Western writers have characterized Islamists as fanatics or backward-looking reactionaries. That is an inaccurate portrayal of the movement and of the majority of the people who are sympathetic to it. The driving force behind the Islamic resurgence was not a rejection of change; rather, it was a rejection of the Middle East's dependence on Western and other alien models of development. The Islamic resurgence was also motivated by a rejection of the assumptions on which Western development theories were based. These theories equated modernization with secularization and suggested that societies would become modern only as they freed themselves from their traditional religious faiths. The Western

experience in which church and state became separated and society became generally secular was posited as the only viable path to true modernity. But to many Muslims who reflected on the course of their modern history, this path had not only been forced on them; it had failed them.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, a dominant theme of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Middle Eastern history was the attempt by certain rulers to adopt Western technology, ideology, culture, and institutions. From the military uniforms of Sultan Selim III's new army to the weapons of Muhammad Ali's Egyptian forces, from Isma'il's opera house and school system to the Ottoman constitution, and from Atatürk's relentless secularization policies to Muhammad Reza Shah's program of economic development, the inspiration was Western, not Islamic. These and other rulers' objective was to imitate the West because Western products, techniques, or political institutions appeared to be superior.

Yet the end result of the nineteenth-century reforms was the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the occupation of Arab-Islamic lands by Britain and France. The two European powers sought to generate a European model of political development by imposing Western-style parliamentary systems on Egypt and the Arab mandates. The systems failed, largely because they had not evolved out of the social and political fabric of the states on which they were imposed and because of their cynical manipulation by the imperial powers, and they were swept aside following World War II. In the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser and his imitators throughout the Arab world endeavored to create social equality and economic development through the adoption of socialist doctrines; Nasser was careful to label them Arab socialism in an attempt to disguise their foreign origins. He and his admirers also emphasized Pan-Arab nationalism as the ideology that would lead the Arabs to unity, dignity, and victory over Israel. But Arab unity was never realized, and Arab socialism tended to produce bloated bureaucracies and inefficient economies. The Nasser-era ideologies were already losing their power when they were dealt a devastating blow by the humiliating defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the June War of 1967. Many Muslim Arabs regarded the defeat as more

than a military disaster; they saw it as God's punishment of Muslims for straying from the divine path set forth in the Quran and the *shari'ah*.

In addition to adopting foreign institutions, the Muslim states of the Middle East were inundated with foreign products, and their inhabitants were urged to practice Western patterns of consumption that often seemed to contradict Islamic mores, to say nothing about common sense. The duty-free shops in the airports of even the most conservative Gulf states did a thriving business in packaged alcoholic beverages, and the presence of a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label scotch in the sitting room became, for some, a symbol of middle-class success. A sociologist's portrait of an Egyptian peasant relaxing with his family after a grueling day's work in the fields shows the jarring intrusion of foreign values into the Middle East during the 1970s: The peasant is watching Egyptian television on the set his son has purchased with money earned by working abroad. The program on the screen is *Dallas*. During commercial breaks, he "is told in English that he should be drinking Schweppes or in dubbed Arabic that he should use deodorant, and that all his problems are caused by having too many children—a total package of imported ideas."⁹ This sort of situation caused some Muslims to reflect on the dangers—and the folly—of relying on external cultural values.

As a result of the failure of imported, secular models to bring economic progress, political freedoms, or social justice, many Middle Eastern Muslims began to question their leaders' reliance on foreign practices and to reexamine their own personal values. By departing from an integral Islamic order, an order in which political, social, and economic activities were conducted according to the *shari'ah*, their leaders had, many Muslims believed, contributed to the weakness of Islamic society as a whole. Muslims who held this view asserted that Islam contained the necessary ingredients for modern development. To be healthy, political and economic life should be derived from the moral values rooted in Islam, not from Western consumerism and materialism. Muslims undertook a renewed effort to find Islamic solutions to the problems that confronted them in their daily lives and troubled their societies as a whole.

However, it should be pointed out that for the vast majority of Muslims, the rural peasantry and the urban poor, Islam had remained a constant feature of their existence. They had not participated in the debates over socialism and capitalism, nationalism and Ba'thism. As illiterate or semiliterate members of society, the Muslim masses had little reason to question the role of Islam in their lives. They continued to be strongly influenced by the rudiments of Islamic instruction they received in childhood, by the oral transmission of stories and legends about the heroic age of Islam, and by the general Islamic value system that shaped their outlook.

What was new about the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s and 1980s was the participation of members of literate urban society in a general movement to assert Islamic cultural authenticity. Among ordinary men and women, the Islamic resurgence was manifested by increased attendance at mosque services and by the adoption of Islamic dress codes, including the growing of beards by men and the wearing of *hijab* clothing by women. One educated Egyptian woman explained to a foreign visitor that wearing proper Islamic dress helped her overcome the frustrations of daily living: "We have problems with housing, with budgets, with the schools, with transportation, with electricity, butagas and water, and the telephone doesn't work. When we put on *ziyy shari* [lawful dress], we feel that at least here is one problem we can solve for our families and society for ourselves. At least we've done something."¹⁰ Other examples of the Islamic resurgence included an enormous increase in the publication of religious materials, a growth in the popularity of televised sermons, and a willingness to deposit funds in so-called Islamic banks that did not pay interest.

A significant component of the Islamic resurgence was a demand for the return of the *shari'ah*. The Western legal codes that had been adopted piecemeal by the Ottoman Empire and Egypt during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drastically reduced the scope of *shari'ah* jurisdiction in civil law. In 1949, an Egyptian jurist, Abd al-Raziq al-Sanhuri, framed a new Egyptian civil code drawing on examples from existing Egyptian legislation, from other contemporary codes, and from the *shari'ah*. Although al-Sanhuri attempted to select rules of foreign origin

on the basis of their conformity to the *shari'ah*, the completed code was more French than Islamic. Al-Sanhuri also drew up civil codes for Iraq and Kuwait. The legal reforms of the post-World War II era made inroads into the last vestiges of *shari'ah*.

Family law, or the law of personal status, was an even more sensitive issue because it touched the population directly and was regarded as the very heart of the *shari'ah*. Yet even in this sphere of activity, rulers in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt introduced legislation that altered the *shari'ah* provisions dealing with the status of women. Such legislation contributed to the popular opinion that leaders who chose to ignore the *shari'ah* and to impose statutes of Western origin were undermining the proper order of state and society. Thus, the very essence of Islamic society, rule by divine law, was eliminated. During the period of malaise that set in after 1967, militants and ordinary citizens alike expressed a desire for the reestablishment of the *shari'ah*.

In the 1970s, Islam was increasingly used as a political tool. As the populations of Islamic states came to demand greater adherence to *shari'ah*-inspired policies on the part of their rulers, political leaders sought to rally mass support through the manipulation of Islamic symbols. Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, was able to rally the Iranian people against the shah by using Islamic symbols and slogans. In the Iranian protest movement, as in others, the instruments of modern communications assisted the spread of a religiously based message; the cassette recordings of the speeches of Khomeini and Shari'ati played an important role in expanding the audience of the two men. Rulers also used Islamic symbols to bolster their legitimacy. With the exception of Atatürk, no modern Muslim ruler has openly disavowed Islam. On the contrary, political leaders have sought to associate themselves with Islamic activities and have been quick to portray their domestic opponents as imperfect Muslims. The late shah of Iran tried to calm the growing opposition to his rule by proclaiming his attachment to Islam and his closeness to God. As the war clouds gathered over the Persian Gulf in early 1991, Saddam Husayn of Iraq attempted to rally international Islamic opinion to his side by presenting the US-led UN coalition as an anti-Islamic campaign and calling on

Muslims to wage a *jihad* throughout the world. Thus, Islamic symbols could become powerful mobilizing agents for opposition movements and incumbent regimes alike.

CONCLUSION

The revolution that swept aside the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah in the final months of 1978 has been described as “one of the greatest populist explosions in human history.”¹¹ During the Muharram demonstrations of December, millions of Iranians joined in protest marches against the shah. Denouncing the secular, authoritarian, and corrupt monarchy of the Pahlavis and its US sponsors, the demonstrators demanded the return of Ayatollah Khomeini and the creation of an Islamic government, a combination they believed would bring about social justice, economic equality, political freedom, and sovereign independence. The Shi’a religious network, though battered by five decades of Pahlavi secularism and oppression, had remained intact and was available to direct the popular protest and to ensure it was expressed through an Islamic idiom. Two intertwining sentiments were at work in the revolution: a desire for social, political, and economic change, and a belief that only the renewal of an Islamic order could effect such change.

The desire for the reconstitution of Islamic cultural traditions cut across classes and generations, yet there was a decided difference of opinion on the degree to which historical Islamic institutions should be implemented. Moderate liberal reformers favored the restoration of Islamic cultural values in combination with secular governing institutions, but the religious establishment and the popular support the ulama obtained for revolutionary change overwhelmed them.

Although Iran provides a unique example of a Muslim religious establishment’s use of Islam to bring about revolutionary political and social transformation, it was not the only case of Islamic protest against existing regimes. In all Islamic states, from Indonesia to Morocco, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed popular demands for the restoration of the *shari’ah* and the renewal of the Islamic heritage. The failure of the independent regimes of the post-World War II era to

solve pressing social and economic problems through the imitation of foreign models of development created a growing sense of popular disillusionment with external ideologies. The general public, through such gestures as wearing Islamic dress, expressed their desire for the restoration of an Islamic social order, an order in which religion governed human relations and rulers were expected to govern in accordance with the principles of divine law. The belief in the need to restore an Islamic social order went beyond a popular desire to assert the authenticity of Islamic cultural traditions; it was also a belief that the essence of Islam was a divinely ordained system. In copying Western institutions, Muslims had abandoned the pattern of existence that God had commanded them to follow. Only by restoring, in a modern context, the divinely ordained social order would Muslim states experience prosperity and harmony.

These sentiments, or variations of them, continued to have popular appeal in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

NOTES

1. Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York, 1986), p. 4.
2. Mangol Bayat, “Islam in Pahlavi and Post-Pahlavi Iran: A Cultural Revolution?” in John L. Esposito, ed., *Islam and Development: Religion and Sociopolitical Change* (Syracuse, 1980), p. 100.
3. Bakhash, *Reign of the Ayatollahs*, p. 38.
4. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, 1982), p. 516.
5. Cited by Rouhollah K. Ramazani in the introduction to the publication of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in *Middle East Journal*, vol. 34 (Spring 1980), p. 182. Subsequent references to the Iranian constitution are to this edition.
6. Bakhash, *Reign of the Ayatollahs*, pp. 225–226.
7. Cited in Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism* (New Haven, 1985), p. 207.

THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR, 1975–1990

The First Phase, 1975–1976

Following the 1967 June War, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict intruded on Lebanese political life. This development, in combination with demographic and political changes taking place inside Lebanon itself, upset the country's fragile sectarian balance and plunged it into fifteen years of vicious and destructive civil war. The civil war was not an exclusively Lebanese affair; it was precipitated by the Palestinian presence in the country and soon attracted external intervention by Syria and Israel, thus bringing to an end the attempts of Lebanon's political bosses to insulate their country from the wider regional conflict.

After the events of Black September in 1970, the Palestinian commando organizations moved their base of operations to Lebanon, where they joined 300,000 Palestinian refugees who were already present in the country. The majority of them lived in camps in southern Lebanon, and it was in and around the camps that the bulk of the guerrilla groups settled. The commandos' freedom to undertake military operations against Israel was based on a 1969 agreement in which the Lebanese government turned over the supervision of the refugee camps to the PLO in exchange for the PLO's pledge to obtain the government's consent for any armed incursions it might make.

This latter restriction went largely unheeded, and from 1970 onward, the cycle of Palestinian raids into Israel and Israeli retaliation in force repeated itself countless times. The Israeli bombing attacks affected not only the Palestinians but also the mainly Shi'a villagers of southern Lebanon, thousands of whom abandoned their homes and migrated to the squatter suburbs of Beirut, embittered against a government unable to protect them from either Palestinians or Israelis. The relative ease with which Israeli forces were able to execute commando raids of their own, exemplified by a strike against Beirut International Airport in 1968 and the assassination of three Palestinian leaders in Beirut in 1973, caused an outcry from Arab nationalists and radical reformers against the government. They accused the authorities of failing to deploy the Lebanese army against Israel and of using it

instead to frustrate the activities of the Palestinian commandos. This accusation illuminated the crux of the issue deeply dividing the people of Lebanon: Were the Palestinian commandos to be allowed unrestricted freedom to conduct raids against Israel with the inevitable Israeli armed response, or should the Lebanese state attempt to retain control of the commandos' activities?

Support for the Palestinians came primarily from Muslims alienated by the existing system, which benefited the political bosses and their associates but failed to provide basic social services to broad sections of the population. By the early 1970s, a poverty belt of at least 500,000 inhabitants, most of them rural migrants, surrounded Beirut's suburbs. Some had been driven from their villages by the Israeli raids in the south; others were forced to leave the countryside because the government did not fund the irrigation and transportation services that were needed for commercial agriculture. The failings of the central government were particularly evident during the presidency of Sulayman Frangieh (1970–1976), who abandoned the reformist programs of President Shihab and reverted to nepotism and corruption.

The sectarian arrangements that continued to favor the country's Christians compounded Muslims' social and economic grievances. Long before the crisis of the 1970s, Lebanon's political leaders recognized that Muslims outnumbered Christians—the Shi'a Muslim community was the largest single religious grouping in the country. Largely ignored in the distribution of confessional powers during the mandate years, the Shi'as in the 1970s asserted their sectarian majority and demanded their fair share of the political and economic pie. The Christians were not inclined to give it to them, insisting that the interwar agreements that set a parliamentary ratio of six Christian deputies for every five Muslim deputies remain in effect. The underprivileged and underrepresented Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, reacted to the Christian leaders' intransigence by identifying with the Palestinians, a community that was also opposed to the status quo.

With the alteration of its demographic balance and the new pressures placed upon it to assume a role in the regional Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanon of the 1970s was no longer the Lebanon of the 1932 census or the 1943 National Pact.

The political leader who most clearly recognized these changes was Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community. As indicated in Chapter 16, Jumblatt was not just an established *za'im*; he was also a political and social reformer able to attract a following beyond the confines of the Druze community. In 1969, Jumblatt forged a loose coalition of discontented Muslims into a front known as the Lebanese National Movement. Committed to administrative reform, the abolition of the confessional basis of politics, and freedom of action for the Palestinian commandos, the Lebanese National Movement became a major factor in the civil war.

Standing in direct opposition to Jumblatt's National Movement and to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon were the Maronite political leaders. The Maronites prospered under the existing confessional political system and were prepared to use armed force to resist changes. The most uncompromising Maronite leaders were Pierre Gemayel, head of the paramilitary Phalange, and former president Camille Chamoun, who had his own private militia, the Tigers. When it became evident to these politicians that the government and the army were incapable of taking decisive action against the Palestinians, they resolved to do so themselves.

In preparation for their confrontation with the Palestinians, the Christian militias embarked on a large-scale program of arms procurement. The PLO and the leftist organizations did the same, and by spring 1975, all factions within Lebanon were armed to the teeth. The spark that ignited this explosive situation came in April, when the Phalange attacked a busload of Palestinians and killed twenty-seven of the passengers. This set off a round of fighting between the PLO and the Maronite militias that lasted until the end of June, when the main PLO forces accepted a cease-fire and withdrew from the fighting for the remainder of the year.

However, the PLO's disengagement did not resolve the differences between the Lebanese themselves, and in August 1975, fighting broke out between Muslim and Christian militias. The Muslim groups in general supported Jumblatt's Lebanese National Movement; the Christian forces were spearheaded by the Maronite Phalange. From their fortified positions in Beirut's high-rise office tow-

ers and luxury hotels, the opposing sides engaged in artillery duels that transformed the core of the cosmopolitan city into a war zone and reduced it to blackened ruins. In December, the conflict took an even more ominous turn as the Phalange and its allies began expelling Muslims who resided within those areas of Beirut controlled by the Maronite forces. This action intensified the sectarian divisions within the city and made the possibility of a return to confessional cooperation still more remote.

The PLO, whose presence in Lebanon was one of the main causes of the civil war, had managed to avoid becoming entangled in the fighting after its brief confrontation with the Maronites. But in January 1976, the Phalange and its Maronite allies formed a coalition known as the Lebanese Front and laid siege to the large Palestinian refugee camp of Tal al-Za'tar located in the suburbs of Beirut. Because the PLO's base of support came from Palestinian refugees, the siege of Tal al-Za'tar drew the organization back into the conflict. At the same time, the Lebanese army began to disintegrate into its confessional components, as officers and troops defected in order to join militia organizations that reflected their religious affiliations. Without an army and without an effective central government, Lebanon plunged deeper and deeper into the chaos of civil war.

The war was expanded and then brought temporarily to an end by Syrian intervention. In May 1976, President al-Asad of Syria sent his army into Lebanon to rescue the Christian militias from the battering they were taking at the hands of the PLO and Jumblatt's forces. Al-Asad's choice of allies was perplexing because it created a situation in which Syrian troops and Maronite militiamen fought side by side against the PLO and the forces of the National Movement. Whatever al-Asad's motives may have been for supporting the Maronite faction, Syria's invasion of Lebanon escalated the fighting and expanded the level of destruction.

On October 18, 1976, Syria and the PLO accepted a cease-fire drawn up by Arab heads of state, and the worst of the fighting came to a halt. The terms of the agreement provided for an Arab deterrent force to be stationed in Lebanon to maintain law and order. In reality, the force was composed almost exclusively of Syrian troops whose presence enabled al-Asad to continue his efforts to shape the

Lebanese situation to suit the needs of Damascus. The cease-fire agreement allowed the PLO to retain the same status it had enjoyed before the war. Once it came into effect, Palestinian commando units returned to their old bases in southern Lebanon and prepared to resume their activities against Israel.

Although the civil war eroded the power of the central Lebanese state, it did not move Lebanese politicians to abandon the confessional system or to amend the formula by which political representation was allocated. It was as though the destruction of Beirut, the deaths of 30,000 to 40,000 people, and the invasion of Syrian forces had failed to resolve any of Lebanon's prewar problems. In the years from 1976 to 1982, the country disintegrated into a collection of sectarian enclaves, each defended by its own militia organization. Warfare between militia factions became a way of life, and the name Lebanon, which had once stood as a symbol for sectarian harmony, became synonymous with mindless violence. Attempts by President Elias Sarkis (1976–1982) to rebuild the army and to effect reconciliation foundered on private militias' unwillingness to disband and on the suspicions and distrust of a people who had experienced the brutalities of civil war. Those brutalities frequently resurfaced, notably with the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt in 1977. His followers assumed the assassin was a Maronite and took vengeance on members of that community. And so it went, moments of hope and plans for reconstruction dashed by the explosion of car bombs and the ring of snipers' bullets.

The 1982 Israeli Invasion of Lebanon

When Israeli troops crossed the border into Lebanon in June 1982, they launched what would become Israel's longest and most controversial war. In the course of the three-month operation, the Israeli Defense Forces not only engaged units of the PLO; they also placed an Arab capital city—Beirut—under siege and contributed to the deaths of hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians. Menachem Begin's government planned and conducted the invasion intended to facilitate his goal of annexing the occupied West Bank.

For Begin, the PLO provided the connection between the West Bank and Lebanon. He believed that if Israel could drive the PLO's armed factions from Lebanon, then the Palestinians in the West Bank would be isolated and more susceptible to Israeli annexation. The situation in Lebanon invited Israel's attention because of the continuing weakness of the Lebanese government, whose authority scarcely extended beyond the capital. As it had done before the civil war, the PLO took advantage of this weakness to assume a degree of administrative autonomy in a belt that stretched from the organization's headquarters in West Beirut south to the Israeli border. This was that belt the Israeli government wished to destroy. Its first concerted effort to do so occurred in 1978, when 25,000 Israeli troops invaded Lebanon as far north as the Litani River. The operation failed to dislodge the PLO from its strongholds, although it did cause large-scale demographic disruptions in southern Lebanon as thousands of villagers, mainly Shi'as, fled their homelands for the area of Beirut. Pressure from the United States and the UN eventually compelled Israel to withdraw its troops. At the same time, the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) were installed in southern Lebanon in an attempt to provide a buffer between Israel and the PLO. The 1978 invasion brought home two lessons for Begin's government: First, military action that confined itself to southern Lebanon alone could not eliminate the presence of Palestinian guerrillas in Lebanon; second, the influence of the Palestinians in Lebanese affairs could not be eradicated without resolving the broader issue of Lebanon's political instability.

With these lessons in mind, Begin and Minister of Defense Sharon devised a plan they hoped would solve Lebanon's lingering crisis in a way that would work to Israel's advantage. The plan had three main objectives: the destruction of the PLO as a fighting force; the withdrawal of the Syrian occupying troops, whose presence in Lebanon brought them uncomfortably close to Israel; and the forging of a mutually advantageous alliance with the dominant Maronite faction. This faction was led by Bashir Gemayel, who became the instrument through which Israel sought to reconstruct the Lebanese state.

Bashir was the younger son of Pierre Gemayel, the founder and titular leader of the Phalange. In the period of instability following the first phase of the civil war, Bashir became commander of the Lebanese Forces, a military organization made up of several different Christian militias. Determined to perpetuate the Phalangist version of Maronite domination in Lebanon, Bashir engaged in a ruthless and successful campaign to destroy the autonomy of the other militias and bring them under his direct command. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, he had extensive contacts with Israeli officials, with whom he shared a dislike for the Palestinian and Syrian presence in Lebanon. By spring 1982, the groundwork for cooperation between Gemayel and the Israeli government had been laid.

Israel launched a huge invasion, known as "Peace for Galilee," on June 6, 1982; its publicly stated purpose was the destruction of the PLO bases in southern Lebanon. However, the real objectives of the Israeli government were far more ambitious. Peace for Galilee was designed not only to clear the PLO bases from southern Lebanon but also to destroy the PLO infrastructure in West Beirut and to ensure the election of Bashir Gemayel as president of Lebanon. In the view of the Israeli cabinet, such an outcome would establish a stable and cooperative government in Beirut and leave Israel with a free hand in the occupied territories.

The deliberate misleading of Israeli and world opinion concerning the planned scope of the military operations was one of the reasons for the strong reaction against the invasion. Another was the terrible toll it took in civilian lives. Within days of launching the invasion, Israeli forces pushed beyond their stated objectives and reached the outskirts of Beirut. At that point, Defense Minister Sharon ordered Lebanon's capital city placed under siege. Throughout summer 1982, West Beirut, the area of PLO concentration, was subjected to intense air, sea, and land bombardments that caused heavy casualties among the predominantly civilian population. The PLO remained defiant in the face of the Israeli siege, and the Israeli government was reluctant to order its forces to take West Beirut in house-to-house fighting because of the high casualty rate that would result.

Finally, international efforts at mediation, mounting domestic criticism within Israel, and deteriorating conditions in West Beirut combined to produce an agree-

ment for the withdrawal of the PLO forces. The agreement, signed on August 18, called for France and the United States to head a multinational force to supervise the evacuation of the PLO fighters; it also provided guarantees for the safety of the Palestinian civilians who would be left behind. By September 1, the evacuation was completed and the US forces were withdrawn.

When in late August Bashir Gemayel was chosen as Lebanon's president, it appeared the Israeli government had achieved all of its objectives. Two weeks after his election, however, Gemayel was assassinated, and the Sharon-Begin scheme began to unravel. In the wake of the assassination, Israel violated the evacuation agreement by sending its army into West Beirut. Instead of protecting the civilians as it claimed it was doing, the Israeli military allowed units of the Phalange to enter the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila and to massacre over 1,000 men, women, and children who had been left unprotected by the PLO evacuation.

The atrocities at Sabra and Shatila produced an international outcry against the entire Lebanese operation and a wave of revulsion within Israel. Members of the Israeli Defense Forces spoke out against the invasion, and large segments of the Israeli population continued to question the reasons for engaging in a conflict that took so many lives at a time when the survival of the state was not threatened. In response to the criticism, the government created a board of inquiry, the Kahan Commission, to investigate the events at Sabra and Shatila. The commission found that Israeli officials, both civilian and military, were indirectly responsible for the massacres. Defense Minister Sharon's role was singled out, and he was forced to resign his portfolio. The Lebanon war destroyed Begin's political career. Disillusioned by the failure of his plans and troubled by the high casualty rates among the Israeli soldiers who had died in futile pursuit of his goals, Begin resigned the prime ministership in 1983 and withdrew completely from public life up to his death in 1992.

The effect of the Lebanon war on the PLO was profound. Deprived of the autonomous Lebanese base that had sustained it on Israel's northern border for over a decade, the organization moved its headquarters to Tunis, some 2,000

miles (3,200 kilometers) away from the territories it sought to liberate. Although Arafat and his associates retained control of the PLO, the organization was less cohesive and more vulnerable to pressures from the Arab states than it had previously been.

In 1983, the Israelis undertook a protracted evacuation that lasted until 1985 and even then was incomplete. Israel continued to occupy a security zone in the south, a zone that made up roughly 10 percent of Lebanese territory. As long as Israeli forces remained in Lebanon (and they did not finally withdraw until 2000), they were subject to attacks by local armed groups claiming the right to liberate their country from occupation.

In the aftermath of the partial Israeli withdrawal, the new Lebanese president, Amin Gemayel, brother of the murdered Bashir, was faced with armed opposition from Druze and Shi'a militias. Feeling abandoned by the United States and Israel, he turned in desperation to the Syrians to save his government, who were only too willing to help and began deploying its troops in support of Gemayel. Nothing more vividly demonstrated the failure of Israel's plans to manipulate the situation in Lebanon than this latest twist: In 1985, Syria's position in the country was more firmly entrenched than it had been at any time since the outbreak of the civil war a decade earlier. And in that same year, armed Palestinian guerrillas reestablished themselves in southern Lebanon.



CHAPTER 20

THE ARABIAN PENINSULA IN THE PETROLEUM ERA

In the immediate post–World War II years, the states of the Arabian Peninsula were marginal to the main political and diplomatic issues that preoccupied the Middle East. Impoverished, sparsely populated, and ruled by traditional monarchs with few resources, they were of little international concern except to Britain, which had secured treaty relations with them in order to protect the route to India, and to a few Western companies that had begun exploring for oil in the 1930s. Within three decades, however, these desert states had achieved the highest per capita incomes in the world and become crucial participants in the global economy.

Oil was the resource that transformed the Arabian Peninsula from an isolated preserve of Britain to a world arena. The oil wealth was used, on the one hand, to generate enormous material and social changes in the producing states and, on the other hand, to prevent changes in the political order. The oil states presented seemingly contradictory patterns of modernization and conservatism, of rapid development coupled with political restrictions and the preservation of monarchical rule. Envied and often reviled by their more radical Arab neighbors, they were

also courted by the rulers of these same states for their ability to provide copious financial assistance. For the most prosperous oil-producing states, financial aid was a tool of diplomacy designed to silence potential critics and keep restless neighbors from acts of aggression. Despite their vast wealth, the oil-producing states were unable to translate their economic power into military strength. Lacking population reserves and industrial technology, they depended on external patrons to protect their independence. The external power most willing and able to offer military assistance was the United States; but the United States also provided military and economic aid to Israel. How could the Arab oil producers balance their dependence on US military protection with their responsibilities as Arab states? Even within the Arab and Islamic worlds, their position was precarious. How could they, as conservative monarchies, be sympathetic toward the social revolutions in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq or toward the Islamic revolution that swept non-Arab Iran? Yet how could they ignore these neighbors, with their large armies and their rhetoric of social egalitarianism? These were but a few of the dilemmas confronting the Arabian Peninsula states as they transitioned from isolated poverty to international financial prominence.

THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

Patterns of Rule and Foreign Policy to 1973

Unlike the Pahlavi dynasty of Iran or the Hashimite monarchies of Iraq and Jordan, the al-Sa'ud family had deep roots in the history of the country over which it ruled. The Sa'udis joined their tribal military forces with the puritanical Islamic ideology of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century to form a confederation that seized control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina from the Ottoman authorities. Although defeated by Muhammad Ali of Egypt, the family retained a regional power base and reemerged in the twentieth century under the dynamic leadership of Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa'ud, who created the kingdom that bore his family name (see [Chapters 7](#) and [12](#)).

King Ibn Sa'ud introduced significant changes into his subjects' lives, among them the establishment of a central government in place of regional tribal confederations. Yet even as he forged a state, Ibn Sa'ud adhered to a patriarchal style of rule. He made all policy decisions, and the institutions of government reflected his dominance. At the time of his death in 1953, the kingdom had no constitution, no codes of governmental procedure, no political parties, and no institutionalized forms of consultation. Islam was the ideology through which Ibn Sa'ud legitimized his family's right to rule. The Quran was the constitution; the *shari'ah*, the law.

The kingdom's founder was succeeded by his son Sa'ud, the least competent of the sons who have ruled since his death. King Sa'ud's reign (1953–1964) coincided with the emergence of Egyptian president Nasser's appeal to secular Pan-Arabism and socialism, doctrines that posed a challenge to the Islamic and monarchical foundations on which Sa'udi rule rested. In addition, domestic changes created by the expanding petroleum industry and the wealth it generated further threatened the conservative social and political order that sustained the royal family. Ill equipped to deal with these challenges, King Sa'ud opted for hostility toward Nasser during the peak of the Egyptian president's popularity, a policy that isolated the kingdom in the Arab world and made its royal family a target of Nasser's attacks on "feudal reactionaries." Moreover, King Sa'ud made no distinction between the state treasury and the royal purse, squandering millions of dollars on personal indulgences. His financial irresponsibility drove the state to the brink of bankruptcy, his lack of leadership in foreign policy exposed the kingdom to attack from the radical Arab states, and his behavior became an embarrassment to the royal family. In 1964, a coalition of family members deposed him in favor of Crown Prince Faysal.

Faysal's reign (1964–1975) transformed Saudi Arabia's administration, armed forces, educational system, and regional stature. Faysal made the fateful decision in 1973 to participate in the Arab oil embargo, a decision that had the unanticipated results of turning the desert kingdom into a global financial power and making it an object of intense international scrutiny. In some ways, Faysal's mod-

ernization program reflected the policies of the nineteenth-century Ottoman and Egyptian reformers. The king sought to broaden the government's role so that he could effectively manage the country's economic development and administer the far-reaching social welfare programs he wished to establish.

To train individuals to staff the new positions in the bureaucracy, Faysal expanded education. The state constructed new university campuses, both religious and secular, and sent thousands of young Saudis abroad to study, mainly at US universities. Faysal then made sure graduates from the local and foreign universities staffed the new ministries and service agencies. Although the new Western-educated elite achieved wider managerial responsibilities, it was the king and selected members of the royal family, operating in secrecy, who determined state policy. Members of the new administrative elite chafed at their exclusion from decision making, yet they were co-opted into accepting the traditional political order by being awarded high offices in the bureaucracy that brought them wealth and prestige. As long as the Saudi royal system rewarded them for their advanced educational training, they were prepared to support that system and to accept the political constraints it embodied.

Yemen as an Issue in Saudi Foreign and Domestic Policy

The most persistent and most immediately threatening foreign policy issue facing the Saudi regime from the early 1960s to the late 1970s was related to developments in the neighboring country of Yemen (see [Map 20.1](#)). In September 1962, factions within the Yemeni armed forces carried out a coup against the monarch, Imam Muhammad al-Badr. Inspired and supported by Nasser, the coup leaders abolished the monarchy and proclaimed the existence of the Yemen Arab Republic. However, the rebels had failed to capture Imam Muhammad, and he surfaced in the northern region of the country. When he began rallying tribes in support of his return to the throne, civil war erupted. Neither the republicans nor the royalists could achieve victory, and each party turned to outside powers for aid, thereby transforming a civil war in Arabia's southern tip into a regional conflict.



MAP 20.1. Arabia and the Persian Gulf in the mid-1970s.

As discussed in Chapter 15, the republican regime of Abdallah al-Sallal received military assistance from Nasser, whereas the Saudi government aided the royalists in the north. Egyptian intervention was direct and substantial; by 1966, Egyptian forces in Yemen numbered nearly 70,000, and on several occasions, the Egyptian air force bombed Saudi border towns. King Faysal refused to commit Saudi troops to the conflict for fear they would be defeated, and Saudi aid was therefore confined to providing subsidies and weapons to the royalist forces. Although Nasser's agreement to withdraw his troops following the June War

ended the immediate Egyptian threat to the Saudi regime, developments in south Arabia continued to compromise the security of the Saudi monarchy.

In 1967, Britain withdrew from the Aden Protectorate and was replaced by a Marxist National Liberation Front that established the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen and sought to overthrow all the traditional monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula. The Saudi regime thus faced two hostile Yemens, both with radical governments, both supported by the Soviet Union, and both committed to the establishment of republican forms of rule. King Faysal responded to this danger by mending fences with the northern Yemen Arab Republic and scheming to foment discord between it and the People's Republic of the south. Faysal's policy created a complex set of circumstances in which the northern republic accepted Saudi economic assistance and sometimes engaged in armed clashes with the People's Republic yet at other times pursued the goal of unifying the two Yemens. Although the north and south signed a unity agreement in 1979, their turbulent domestic politics prevented its implementation. Throughout the 1980s, the two Yemens viewed one another and Saudi Arabia with suspicion.

The radicalization of the Yemens and the outbreak of popular liberation movements elsewhere in the peninsula prompted King Faysal to increase the size and efficiency of Saudi Arabia's armed forces. The confrontation in Yemen revealed that the Saudi military was not a credible deterrent against Egyptian and Yemeni aggression and that it might not even be capable of putting down a determined internal uprising. The government therefore embarked on a vigorous expansion of the kingdom's military capability. The defense budget rose to over \$2 billion in 1970 and grew steadily thereafter. During the 1970s, the Saudis allocated between 35 and 40 percent of their total annual revenues to defense and security expenditures. This percentage remained constant even as Saudi revenues soared, so that in the fiscal year 1975–1976, the kingdom allocated nearly \$36 billion for defense and security. The government endeavored to acquire the most sophisticated military technology that could be purchased, giving special priority to the air force, regardless of whether the Saudi forces had the capability to operate and maintain it. This military spending spree most benefited the United States, which con-

cluded several lucrative weapons system contracts with the Saudis in the 1970s and 1980s.

The royal family was aware that young military officers had led the coups that overthrew the kings of Egypt and Iraq. The regime therefore closely supervised the armed forces and appointed senior officers from among the Saudi family. Despite the vast sums devoted to the military, the kingdom was unable to build an armed force that could compare with that of Iraq or Iran, its two most powerful potential regional antagonists. In any crisis that depended on military might alone, the Saudi state was bound to be ineffective. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Saudis' speedy request for direct US military assistance demonstrated this vulnerability.

The Oil Embargo of 1973 and Its Consequences

A review of the arrangements between the Saudis and foreign oil companies before 1973 sheds light on the extent to which the oil embargo and the oil price increases of 1973 changed the world economy and catapulted Saudi Arabia into global financial prominence. Ibn Sa'ud granted the kingdom's first oil concession in 1933 to the Standard Oil Company of California (later reorganized as the Arabian American Oil Company, ARAMCO). The company acquired the right to extract and transport petroleum found within its concession in exchange for the construction of a refinery and the payment of royalties amounting to four gold shillings per ton of crude oil. The terms of the concession were immensely favorable to ARAMCO. Oil was discovered in the eastern province of Dahrán in 1938, but major commercial production did not take place until after World War II. During the 1950s, the concession agreements were modified so that Saudi Arabia and most other Middle Eastern oil producers received 50 percent of the profits from the foreign companies. However, the oil-producing countries had little say in determining prices or production levels. ARAMCO emerged as a giant multinational corporation that controlled not only the exploration and extraction of Saudi oil but also its refining, marketing, and pricing.

In an attempt to gain greater control over pricing policies, representatives from five of the major producing countries—Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela—founded the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. The organization later expanded to include thirteen nations. A parallel group, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), composed solely of Arab oil exporters, was created in 1968. The impulse behind the formation of the two organizations was a desire on the part of the member states to assert control of their most valuable natural resource. For the Middle Eastern states in particular, the issue was independence. OPEC was founded in the Nasser era, and one of Nasserism's principal goals was to break out of the constraints of postwar neocolonialism that found the Western powers still manipulating the Arab world's diplomatic and economic affairs. OPEC's immediate objective was to utilize its member states' collective-bargaining power to pressure the Western oil companies to increase oil prices. But as long as the world supply of oil was plentiful, OPEC had limited success in changing the oil companies' policies and attitudes.

Abundant, low-cost oil was the energy source that fueled the postwar recovery of Europe and Japan and assured the economic vigor of the United States. With the rise of gasoline-fueled automobiles and diesel-powered trains and the mounting use of oil to supply energy for industry, coal economies were transformed to depend on oil. This transformation was grounded in the assumption that oil would always be readily available and moderately priced. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the assumption was borne out as the industrial states enjoyed rapid economic growth made possible by an ever-increasing supply of cheap oil. However, the industrial world's avid consumption of oil made it more dependent on Middle Eastern petroleum producers. As world demand for oil rose, the Middle East came to supply an ever-greater percentage of the demand. This was especially true for Japan and Western Europe, areas that either had no oil of their own or had oil that was extremely costly to extract (as in the case of the North Sea reserves). As a result of this reliance on low-cost petroleum, Saudi Arabia supplied 21.6 percent of Europe's oil requirements in 1972 and 13 percent of the

world's total production of crude oil in 1973. Even the United States, a major producer and the world's largest petroleum consumer, became dependent on imported oil. Saudi Arabia's share of US oil imports in 1973 was 8.1 percent.¹

In these circumstances of growing US, European, and Japanese dependence on Middle Eastern petroleum, the industry gradually restructured. Led by demands from the shah of Iran, prices began to edge upward in the late 1960s, and some of the producing countries attained partial control over pricing and production levels. Despite these changes, the world was unprepared for the Arab producers' decision to deploy their oil weapon as an instrument of diplomacy. In the midst of the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973, the United States carried out an extensive airlift of military supplies to Israel, and US president Richard Nixon requested that Congress approve a \$2.2 billion appropriation for military assistance to Israel. Saudi Arabia responded by joining OAPEC in embargoing all oil shipments to the United States and the Netherlands (the latter targeted primarily because of Rotterdam's importance as a port of entry and distribution center for oil destined for Europe). In addition, the Saudis and other Arab oil producers announced that they would cut back on oil production and reduce the amounts available to the consuming countries. These announcements sparked panic and confusion in the industrial states. A scramble to purchase non-Arab oil followed, and prices began to rise. In November 1973, the political leverage of the oil weapon became apparent as the European Economic Community and Japan issued statements affirming Palestinian rights and urging Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967. In the following months, previously underpriced petroleum began to find its true market value. OPEC set the price at \$11.65 per barrel effective January 1, 1974; a year earlier the price had been \$2.74. The price increases had a dramatic impact on Saudi revenues. In the year before the price hikes, the kingdom earned \$6.4 billion in oil revenues; in the fiscal year 1974–1975, Saudi revenues skyrocketed by 330 percent to \$27.7 billion. During 1981, when oil prices peaked at \$34 per barrel, Saudi Arabia's oil revenues were an astounding \$102 billion. The kingdom was awash in funds.



CHAPTER 21

THE CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The Regimes of Hafiz al-Asad and Saddam Husayn

The Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in the June War prompted a period of soul-searching throughout the Arab world and led, in the cases of Syria and Iraq, to the overthrow of the existing regimes. Prior to 1967, these two states had acquired well-deserved reputations for political instability, but in the post-1967 order, they developed remarkably durable regimes. In Syria, Hafiz al-Asad seized power in 1970 and retained the presidency until his death in 2000; in Iraq, Saddam Husayn emerged as the political strongman in 1968, was officially proclaimed president in 1979, and retained power even after his country's defeat in the Gulf War of 1991 and despite its struggles under an economic embargo that remained in effect up to the US invasion of 2003. Each of these men distrusted the other, and in the 1970s, their two countries became locked in a smoldering rivalry for regional dominance. Yet despite their foreign policy clashes, their regimes had much in common.

In al-Asad and Husayn, both states had rulers whose persons and regimes represented the rise of a new elite of rural origins at the expense of the established

urban politicians and merchants. Both regimes were authoritarian, basing their power on the military and the Ba'th Party. In both, the sole ruler held absolute power and became the object of a personality cult. Both regimes adopted socialist economic policies and stood for egalitarian reform. However, in the area of national wealth, they contrasted sharply. Although Syria became a net exporter of oil during the al-Asad era, its petroleum revenues paled in comparison with Iraq's. In 1979, Iraq's oil production was second only to Saudi Arabia's among all the oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf.

Hafiz al-Asad, Saddam Husayn, and their comrades in both countries expressed common sentiments of resentment toward the United States for its failure to understand the Arab predicament and for its unwavering support of Israel. Both regimes heaped enormous sums on military equipment in the 1970s and 1980s to buttress their claims to regional superiority and to confront their principal regional enemies—Israel in the case of Syria, Iran in the case of Iraq. Their expanded military capabilities might have augmented their diplomatic leverage, but it also prompted Iraq to embark on ill-conceived military ventures.

To focus on the careers of al-Asad and Husayn is not to suggest that it is individual leaders alone who shape the social and political dynamics of a state; however, these two rulers achieved great dominance in their countries' decision-making councils, and they retained that dominance over an impressively long period. Knowledge of the forces that shaped them and their policies is thus crucial to understanding the history of the region.

SYRIA IN THE AL-ASAD ERA

Hafiz al-Asad: The Rise to Power

Al-Asad was born in 1930 in the impoverished and isolated Alawite region of northwestern Syria. The Alawites were a Shi'a sect whose beliefs and rituals diverged so much from mainstream Islam that members of the Sunni establishment occasionally referred to them as infidels. Composing about 10 percent of the

Syrian population, the Alawites possessed long-standing traditions of autonomy and alienation from the rest of Syrian society. Al-Asad was determined to break out of the isolation and poverty that characterized his community. He managed to gain admittance to the secondary school in Latakia, the first member of his family to advance past a primary education, and he consistently finished at the top of his class. Like other young men of his generation, al-Asad was attracted by the Ba'th Party's doctrine of national revival and social reform. At age sixteen, he joined the party and became an active student politician and Ba'thist organizer.

Upon graduation from secondary school, he faced a problem common to many young Syrians of rural origins: He had talent and ambition, but his family was too poor to finance a university education. In al-Asad's case, as for a number of his Alawite comrades, the military academy, with its free tuition, offered an opportunity to acquire postsecondary training and a state job as an officer in the armed forces. Al-Asad enrolled in the academy in 1951 and was assigned to the fledgling air force division. By all accounts, he was a top student and was selected for advanced fighter pilot training in the Soviet Union. By the late 1950s, he had made the breakthrough from Alawite peasant to skilled pilot and commissioned junior officer. But in the highly politicized Syrian armed forces of the era, the officer corps engaged in affairs of state as well as military duties. Thus al-Asad combined his role as officer and pilot with organizational activities on behalf of the Ba'th Party.

For men of al-Asad's political outlook, the period of the United Arab Republic (1958–1961) was difficult (see [Chapter 15](#)). He admired Nasser and supported the notion of Arab unity. However, he was dismayed over Egypt's domination of the union and was especially upset at Nasser's insistence that the Syrian Ba'th Party be dissolved. His perspective did not improve when he was assigned to a meaningless post in Cairo, presumably because the Egyptian authorities regarded him as a potential troublemaker. During al-Asad's time there, he became involved with like-minded young Syrian officers in a clandestine organization plotting a Ba'th Party revival in their homeland. Their opportunity came during the political chaos that followed Syria's secession from the UAR in 1961.

In 1963, al-Asad and his fellow officers carried out a coup d'état that brought the Ba'th back into power. It also brought to power a tightly knit group of young Alawite officers who worked to consolidate their control over Syrian political life. In addition to al-Asad, who, at age thirty-three, became the commander of the air force, the ruling coterie was composed of Muhammad Umran and Salih Jadid, both from peasant backgrounds similar to al-Asad's. Although the head of state, Amin al-Hafiz, was a Sunni Muslim, the three young Alawites controlled the levers of power. Their domestic policies were designed to consolidate Ba'thist rule and to remake Syrian society along more equitable lines.

The social reforms undertaken by the new Ba'th regime continued the political and economic campaign against the urban notables. In 1965, the regime nationalized 100 companies and began to expropriate and redistribute land from the large privately owned estates. The following year all members of the old influential families were purged from government service. The new military regime was restructuring the Syrian political elite by forging an alliance between individuals of rural origins and the lower middle-class urbanites—schoolteachers, civil servants, and university students—who formed the Ba'th's backbone.

Al-Asad's faction of young officers led a violent internal coup that ousted Amin al-Hafiz in 1966 and rid the regime of many of the Ba'th's original supporters, including its cofounders, Aflaq and al-Bitar, both of whom fled their homeland, never to return. Although the regime that emerged out of the coup was ostensibly governed by civilians, it was in reality controlled by the military officers who had engineered the putsch. Al-Asad, now minister of defense as well as commander of the air force, became the dominant figure within the armed forces; his fellow Alawite Jadid controlled the Ba'th Party. The June War, in which Israel destroyed the Syrian air force and captured Syrian territory, discredited the regime and especially its minister of defense. However, al-Asad was convinced that Syria's defeat was caused primarily by his associates' mistakes, and he resolved to gain control over all aspects of Syrian decision making. In November 1970, al-Asad achieved his goal by ordering the arrest of Jadid and other members of the government. Early in the following year, al-Asad was elected to a seven-year term

as president. The ambitious Alawite of peasant origins had risen to the pinnacle of Syrian power—what would he do with that power?

Instruments of Rule

Most scholarly studies of al-Asad portray him as cautious, calculating, and pragmatic. His pragmatism was evident in the moderate way he applied Ba'thist principles and in the attempts he made to broaden his base of popular support. Although al-Asad's government pursued the socialist policies enshrined in Ba'thist doctrine, it was more tolerant of private enterprise than were the radical military regimes of the 1960s.

In another pragmatic gesture designed to gain support for his regime, al-Asad set up institutions of political participation that were more open and more broadly based than any Syria had known in over a decade. In 1973, the government introduced a new constitution that provided for an elected assembly known as the People's Council. Yet the constitution granted the president such sweeping powers that the assembly was little more than a symbol of democratic government. Most controversially, the constitution omitted the usual clause requiring the president of the republic to be a Muslim. To the battered Sunni majority within Syria, this omission suggested that the regime of the Alawite ruler was both secular and sectarian, and they organized protest demonstrations in the major cities. Al-Asad quickly backed down from this confrontation and arranged for the insertion of a clause calling for a Muslim president. He also arranged for a prominent member of the Shi'a ulama to issue a decree affirming that the Alawites were Muslims. The protest and al-Asad's response showed the persistence of sectarian tensions in Syrian political life.

Al-Asad was calculating as well as pragmatic, and primary among his calculations was a determination to retain the power he had labored to acquire. Al-Asad had used the military and the Ba'th Party as the vehicles for his ascent to the presidency, and once in power, he established them as the foundations of his regime. He himself took the office of secretary general of the Ba'th, thus combining the

two roles of head of state and head of the party. With its elaborate hierarchy, its network of affiliated popular organizations, and its branches in the armed forces, the Ba'th developed into an instrument of political control and indoctrination. The other pillars of the regime, the military and the internal security forces, enforced the state's authority and, when necessary, stamped out opposition.

Al-Asad attempted to ensure loyalty to his regime by appointing relatives and trusted associates to key positions in the ruling hierarchy. In this regard, al-Asad's personal triumph in attaining the presidency was also a victory for the Alawite community. Alawite officers rose to the most prominent commands in the military and security agencies, thus gaining a stake in the regime's preservation. In addition, members of al-Asad's family were placed in charge of special forces outside the regular military structure. The most notable of these was an elite praetorian guard, known as the Defense Companies, commanded by the president's younger brother Rif'at. The regime took on a distinctly Alawite coloring that made it suspect in the eyes of the Sunni majority.

The Sunni Muslims who managed to gain appointments in the new power structure tended to hail from modest social backgrounds rather than from the old urban notability. Thus, in addition to its Alawite coloring, the regime had a decidedly rural composition and represented the rise of the countryside at the expense of the former elite class of urban-based notable families. The new elite of al-Asad's state also differed from the reformers who had built the Ba'th Party in the 1940s and 1950s. Aflaq and al-Bitar, the party founders, were of Damascene origin and developed their ideas while studying European literature and philosophy in Paris. To some extent, they represented a continuation of the nineteenth-century practice of seeking advanced education in the West. But the officials of al-Asad's regime came from rural hamlets and small towns; their educations took place in rudimentary village secondary schools and the national military academy. They were not inspired by the abstract ideas of European philosophers and, in most cases, not influenced by any sustained experiences in Western Europe.¹ Like the Free Officers of Egypt, they were pragmatic officers and administrators who

focused on the needs of their country in its Middle Eastern context and on the retention of their own power.

Domestic Policy: Economy and Society

When al-Asad seized power in 1970, Syria's economy was predominantly agrarian based, and the country's leading cash export was cotton. During the first decade of al-Asad's rule, the economy shifted to one dominated by the service, industrial, and commercial sectors, and oil replaced cotton as the main source of foreign exchange.

The Ba'thist regimes of the 1960s had reoriented Syria's existing private enterprise economy to an economy based on state control. This shift was achieved through the nationalization of major business firms, banks, industrial plants, and transportation companies. In addition, the large landed estates were expropriated and a hesitant program of land redistribution was begun. President al-Asad retained the principle of public-sector domination of the economy, but he was less doctrinaire than his predecessors. He made gestures of reconciliation to the Sunni urban business people and merchants by liberalizing the economy and relaxing certain restrictions on private-sector activity.

The combination of public-sector dominance and private-sector participation was successful for a time, and Syria experienced an economic boom in the 1970s. Financial aid from the Arab oil-producing states, foreign loans from other countries, and increased revenues from Syria's own modest petroleum industry allowed the government to embark on major development projects and to expand state services. However, Syria's economic prosperity was tied to the Middle Eastern political situation, and when al-Asad's foreign policies alienated the oil-rich states, the country's economy plummeted and the government introduced urgent austerity measures.

At least 10,000 of its inhabitants had been killed by their own government's armed forces. The events at Hama sent a collective chill of fear through Syrian society. Hafiz al-Asad warned other potential dissidents that his regime would use all the force at its disposal to remain in power.

The next serious challenge to al-Asad's authority came from within his own ruling group. For several months in 1983 and 1984, the president was recuperating from a heart attack and rarely appeared in public. During this period, his brother Rif'at, commander of the elite Defense Companies, made a bold bid for power. He placed his Defense Companies in strategic positions in and around Damascus; generals loyal to the president moved their forces to the capital city to oppose Rif'at. Syria again teetered on the verge of conflict between factions within the armed forces. However, al-Asad's adroit handling of the crisis prevented violence, and he reasserted his authority. The regime edged Rif'at out of power and out of Syria.

Al-Asad again stood supreme, but his triumph over the Hama rebels and over his own brother in Damascus showed that his authority rested not on popular consent or civilian institutions but on the loyalty of the armed forces. In the aftermath of these two crises, the regime became more repressive and remote, and al-Asad became "more an object of orchestrated adulation" than had been the case previously.² The development of a personality cult around the president suggested a certain insecurity on the part of al-Asad and his advisers, a feeling that the regime's unpopular policies could be explained away by raising the image of the president to the level of one whose wisdom was beyond the comprehension of the average citizen. Thus were the trappings of dictatorship consolidated.

IRAQ IN THE ERA OF SADDAM HUSAYN AND THE BA'TH

The Rise of Saddam Husayn

The coup that overthrew the monarchy in 1958 launched Iraq into a period of political and social instability (see [Chapter 16](#)). When another coup d'état

occurred in 1968—the third such event of the decade—it appeared to be just another in the series of political convulsions that regularly plagued Iraq. However, the 1968 coup brought to power a determined group of individuals who established a stable regime that would endure for thirty-five years. The figure who molded the regime's character and set its policies was Saddam Husayn.

Like al-Asad of Syria, Husayn was a man of humble rural origins who used the Ba'th Party as a stepping stone to the presidency of his country. Husayn differed from al-Asad in that he came from the Sunni Arab community, which, though a minority, has dominated the central administration of the region from Ottoman times to the present. Husayn was born in 1937 to a family of landless peasants in Takrit, a middle-level administrative town on the Tigris. His father died before he was born, and he was raised in the home of an uncle who had participated in the Rashid Ali uprising against the British in 1941 and was imprisoned when the revolt was crushed. Reportedly Husayn was deeply affected by his uncle's lingering hostility toward the British and the British-backed monarchy.

At age eighteen, Husayn moved to Baghdad to begin high school. His involvement in political activity interrupted his studies. He joined the rising tide of protest against the monarchy and, in 1957, became a member of the Ba'th Party. In 1959, he participated in a daring and unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Iraqi president, Abd al-Karim Qasim. Husayn escaped arrest and fled the country, eventually settling in Cairo, where, at age twenty-four, he completed high school.

When the Ba'th seized control in Baghdad in 1963, Husayn returned to Iraq but was imprisoned when the Ba'th regime was overthrown after only a few months in power. He spent two years in jail and then escaped and resumed his activities on the party's behalf. The Ba'th was in the midst of an extensive reorganization directed by Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr (1914–1982), a former military officer and prime minister who also hailed from Takrit and was related to Saddam Husayn. In 1966, al-Bakr arranged for the appointment of his young relative as the deputy secretary general of the Ba'th.

From 1964 to 1968, Husayn's experiences as political prisoner, party organizer, and conspiratorial plotter shaped his attitude toward political conduct. Because

the Ba'ath was a banned opposition party, Husayn's duties had to be carried out underground. As a result, he developed a secretive decision-making style and a tendency to be suspicious and distrustful of those around him. He also developed a reputation as a man not to be crossed.

In July 1968, the Ba'ath and its allies overthrew the regime of Arif and established a new government in which Hasan al-Bakr held the offices of president and prime minister. Al-Bakr also chaired the newly formed Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), an inner circle of close associates that served as the main decision-making body within the state. His fellow Takriti Saddam Husayn became vice chairman of the RCC in 1969. The new regime consolidated its control in the usual manner by purging the officer corps and the higher ranks of civil servants and appointing Ba'ath loyalists to the vacated positions. From the outset, the regime was ruthless in its treatment of those whose loyalties were suspect. Hundreds received lengthy prison terms, and others were hanged in public executions intended to remind Iraqis of the fate that awaited any who dared oppose the regime. By the end of 1970, the number of "official" executions stood at eighty-six.

As the regime ferreted out its enemies, it sought to identify its friends. Just as al-Asad in Syria had depended on his fellow Alawites for support, so al-Bakr and Husayn turned to their associates and kinsmen from Takrit. In the regime's early years, Takritis were appointed to key positions in all the organizations that propped up the government. Thus, at one point in 1973, Takritis held four of the nine memberships on the RCC; all the principal posts in the party, army, and government; and the commands of the air force, the Baghdad garrison, and the tank regiment of the Republican Guard. Their role was so critical that one historian has remarked that "the Takritis rule through the Ba'ath party, rather than the Ba'ath party through the Takritis."³ The national prominence of individuals from the same modest-sized town, several of them related by blood or marriage ties, gave the politics of the regime a personal rather than an institutional or ideological tone.

The Takriti who cast an increasingly large shadow over the workings of the regime was Saddam Husayn. His power derived from his authority within the civilian ranks of the Ba'th Party, his control of a new Ba'th militia, and his position as head of a complex network of security agencies that provided him with information he used to determine who rose and who fell. By the early 1970s, Husayn had emerged as the real force behind the regime. However, al-Bakr continued to play an important role. As a former officer, he had contacts within the armed forces, and he used his presidential powers to expand Ba'thist influence among the officer corps. By all accounts, the senior al-Bakr and the young Husayn worked together effectively, and their regime carried out impressive economic and social reforms.

Their political objective during the 1970s was to establish a one-party state, and they successfully extended the Ba'th into all aspects of Iraqi society. Labor unions, student federations, and women's groups all came under party control. The officer corps was also brought within the party's orbit, and party membership determined promotion. An important transformation occurred in 1977 when all members of the Ba'thist ruling council became members of the RCC; this development virtually removed the distinctions between party and state.

In 1976, al-Bakr appointed Husayn, who had no military background, to the rank of general in the army. Husayn's insertion into the military hierarchy reduced the importance of al-Bakr, and in 1979, he resigned. Husayn immediately succeeded him as president, secretary general of the Ba'th Party, chairman of the RCC, and commander in chief of the armed forces. To ensure his retention of state power, Husayn ordered another round of purges and executions of Ba'thist officials and military officers whose loyalties he deemed suspect. Throughout the ensuing years, Husayn concentrated ever-greater powers into his hands until his regime became a one-man dictatorship.

Domestic Policy: Ethnic and Religious Tensions with the Kurds and Shi'a

The Iraqi state as created by Britain contained an enormously diverse population (see [Chapter 11](#)). The majority of the inhabitants of Iraq were Shi'a Arabs who lived mainly in the southern part of the country. The Shi'a were economically and politically disadvantaged by the system put in place by Britain and perpetuated by the independent regimes since 1932. In addition, a large minority of Kurds inhabited the oil-rich north. The post-1968 Ba'thist regime, for all its aggressive centralization of political authority, had difficulty controlling Shi'a expressions of discontent and Kurdish demands for independence.

The contentious issue of the status of the Kurds within Iraqi society troubled the Ba'thist regime of Husayn and al-Bakr as much as, if not more than, it had the preceding governments. At its most basic, the Kurdish question was a dispute between a people who sought autonomy and a government that wished to assert centralized control—between a culturally and linguistically distinct minority who claimed their own nationality and a ruling elite committed to the primacy of Arab nationalism.

When the Ba'th seized power in 1968, the Kurdish region was once again in a state of rebellion. Although in 1970 Saddam Husayn personally negotiated an agreement that recognized Kurdish autonomy, the agreement was not implemented, and by 1974, the on-again, off-again conflict between Baghdad and the Kurds had escalated into full-scale warfare. The government forces were able to use their advantage in firepower to make initial gains, but they could not penetrate the mountain strongholds, and the conflict reached a stalemate. In this instance, the Iraqi government's position was made more difficult by the attitude of its neighbor, Iran.

The shah of Iran—a conservative monarch, US ally, and ruler with ambitions to extend his country's influence in the Persian Gulf region—was alarmed at the emergence in Baghdad of a Ba'thist regime that mouthed revolutionary slogans, procured its weapons from the Soviet Union, and had its own designs on controlling the northern Gulf. Iran was only too willing to weaken the Baghdad government by providing aid to the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq. During the 1974–1975 fighting, the shah sent weapons and contingents of Iranian Kurds to assist the

rebels; he also offered Iraqi Kurds sanctuary in Iran. Then, in what seemed like a sudden about-face for both states, in 1975, Iraq and Iran concluded a treaty known as the Algiers Agreement. Iraq conceded a long-standing Iranian demand to redefine the boundary along the Shatt al-Arab waterway; Iran in turn pledged to close its borders to Iraqi Kurds and to cease assisting the rebellion in Iraq.

The agreement was a disaster for the Kurds of Iraq. Denied the opportunity to disperse their forces across the Iranian border—or the Turkish border, which had been closed to them earlier—they were decimated by the Iraqi air force and compelled to seek a cease-fire in summer 1975. Once the Ba’thist regime was assured of military victory, it implemented a reconstruction plan that granted the Kurds a limited degree of cultural and political autonomy as well as providing them with considerable funds for local development projects. But there was another—and brutal—side to Baghdad’s Kurdish policy. To reduce the chances of a future rebellion, the government uprooted as many as 250,000 Kurds and relocated them in the central and southern regions of the country. The authorities also forced large numbers of Arabs to move to Kurdish territory so as to dilute the Kurdish majority in certain mixed provinces. This was a policy of pacification, not of peace, and the Kurdish people recognized it as such. Despite the obstacles facing them, they managed to resurrect their resistance movement by the late 1970s. That movement was given a new impetus by the war with Iran and then burst again into the open in 1991 in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War (see [Chapter 22](#)).

The interactions of the Shi’a community with the central government differed from those of the Kurds. Because the Shi’a had become diversified, they were not a monolithic community with a common attitude toward the government. After World War II, thousands of Shi’a migrated from the rural south to Baghdad, where they became integrated into national life as members of the labor force and the civil service. Whatever grievances this segment of the Shi’a community may have had against the regime, they were based more on economic and political considerations than on religious ones.

Among the rural Shi’a of the south, however, religious identity continued to be important, and the ulama’s influence remained strong. The leading ulama and

their followers opposed the Ba'th regime on three grounds: its secularism, its refusal to appoint Shi'a to the higher echelons of the government or the party, and its attempts to dominate all organizations within society, including religious institutions. Shi'a protest was expressed through the formation of a secret, ulama-led organization known as *al-Da'wa* (Islamic Call), which advocated the overthrow of the regime and the establishment of an Islamic government. Large-scale Shi'a anti-government demonstrations broke out in 1977 and again in 1979 during the pilgrimage rites in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. Alarmed by the protest's scope, the regime arrested large numbers of individuals suspected of belonging to al-Da'wa and executed a prominent member of the ulama who was one of the organization's leaders. These acts of repression in 1979 occurred just at the time Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran and issued his appeal for Islamic revolution. The Baghdad regime's uncertainty over the loyalty of its Shi'a population in the face of the ayatollah's appeal was one of the factors that led it to invade Iran in 1980. As shown by the Kurdish rebellion and the Shi'ite protest movement, Iraq's national unity remained fragile, even after fifty years of statehood.

THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR, 1980–1988

In 1979, the shah of Iran was deposed in a popular revolution inspired by the rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini. The regime that emerged out of the revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran, called for the spread of Islamic revolution in every region of the Middle East. With the advent of the Islamic Republic and its militant Shi'a vision of Islam, the tensions between Iran and Iraq, papered over in the 1975 Algiers Agreement, were once again brought into the open.

The issues that divided the two countries ranged from the long-standing cultural rivalry between Arab and Persian civilizations to immediate disputes over frontiers and navigation rights, to conflicting interpretations of the role of nationalism and religion in public life. One of the most sensitive questions for Iraq was the northern border. The Kurds had taken advantage of the turmoil surrounding

the Iranian revolution to resume their armed insurrection against the regime of Saddam Husayn. The new Iranian government refused to close its borders to Kurds seeking refuge from the Iraqi army, thus violating the terms of the 1975 agreement.

But to the Iraqi regime, the most disconcerting challenge posed by Khomeini was his direct appeal to Iraq's Shi'a to overthrow Husayn. This was not only a political threat to the regime's existence but also an ideological threat that pitted the universalist principles of Islam against the Ba'th's secular nationalism. A year before assuming power, Khomeini had specifically identified Saddam Husayn and his "infidel Ba'th party" as enemies of Islam. In 1980, following Husayn's suppression of Shi'a disturbances and the execution of a leading Shi'a clergyman, Khomeini asserted that "the people and army of Iraq must turn their backs on the Ba'th regime and overthrow it." In the same speech, Khomeini charged the Iraqi regime with "attacking Islam and the Quran."⁵

It appeared to Husayn that the Iranian government was endeavoring to destabilize his regime by aiding the Kurdish rebellion, encouraging a Shi'a uprising, and denouncing the legitimacy of Ba'thist rule. He resolved to topple Khomeini's government before it could fully consolidate its power. In this decision Husayn had the support of the oil-rich monarchs of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf states, for whom Khomeini's brand of populist, revolutionary Islam was anathema; he also had the support of the United States.

In an appearance on Iraqi television on September 17, 1980, Husayn announced the abrogation of the Algiers Agreement. To emphasize his point, he ceremoniously ripped up the official copy of the document. Five days later, Iraqi forces invaded Iran in what was intended to be a brief military operation against a foe in disarray. Instead, Husayn launched the longest conventional war of the twentieth century, a horrible conflict that cost hundreds of billions of dollars and took hundreds of thousands of lives.

In the first month of fighting, Iraq occupied 10,000 square miles (26,000 square kilometers) of Iranian territory along a front running 375 miles (600 kilometers) north to south (see [Map 21.1](#)). However, Iraqi casualties ran higher than

anticipated, and the Iranian resistance was much stiffer than expected. Husayn had miscalculated the effect the invasion would have on the Iranian population. Rather than turning against the Khomeini regime, they rallied to it, displaying a degree of patriotism and loyalty that allowed the government to weather the initial setbacks and regroup for a counteroffensive. Moreover, the military arsenal the shah had accumulated was in some respects superior to Iraq's, and the Iranian armed forces were not nearly as decimated by the turmoil of the revolution as Husayn had been led to believe. Between November 1981 and May 1982, Iran mounted a series of counterattacks that drove the Iraqi forces back across the border and placed Iraq on the defensive. For the next six years, the war was fought mainly on Iraqi soil, and there were moments when it appeared that either the port city of Basra or the capital, Baghdad, would fall to Iran. But for most of the period from 1982 to 1988, the conflict settled into a dreary war of attrition punctuated by episodic Iranian offensives spearheaded by waves of human attackers that resulted in appalling casualties.

Although the US government and media directed nearly hysterical criticism toward Saddam Husayn and his regime during the 1990–1991 crisis, we should recall how crucial US assistance to Iraq was during the earlier war. For the United States in the 1980s, the demon of the Middle East was Ayatollah Khomeini, not Saddam Husayn, and Washington was willing to ignore the brutality of Husayn's regime so as to prevent the spread of the kind of Islamic radicalism and anti-US sentiment Khomeini represented. What was at stake for the United States in this war, as in that of 1991, was not human rights but oil reserves. The pro-Western Arab Gulf states controlled over half the world's known supply of oil. If Iraq were defeated, then it seemed likely that the Gulf states would either fall to Iran or, at the very least, come within Iran's orbit. This was a frightening prospect for the US government, and it therefore lent its support to Iraq. The United States' military

and diplomatic intervention on behalf of Husayn's government played a vital role in persuading Iran's leaders to seek an end to the war.

In spring 1988, the Iranians launched a final offensive that succeeded in capturing the Kurdish town of Halabja in northern Iraq. The Iraqi air force responded by bombing the town with poison gas, killing at least 5,000 of its civilian inhabitants. This was not the first instance of Iraq's use of chemical weapons in the conflict, but the regime's decision to deploy them against its own population was a sign of the ruthlessness with which it was prepared to conduct the war. Iraq's possession of chemical weapons and the possibility that it might launch missiles armed with poison gas at Iranian population centers was another factor in persuading the Khomeini regime to accept a truce.

On August 20, 1988, a UN-sponsored cease-fire took effect, and the long war ended. Neither side had achieved its objectives. Instead of toppling the Iranian government, Saddam Husayn's invasion had strengthened it. And Ayatollah Khomeini's assertion that Iran would never agree to a truce as long as Husayn retained power had to be reversed. As for the border dispute, it remained unresolved until 1990, when Husayn offered to restore the Algiers Agreement he had publicly torn up a decade earlier. Nothing, it seemed, had changed. The costs of achieving so little were staggering. Iran's war dead were estimated at 262,000; Iraq's at 105,000. The war devastated Iraq's economy: The port facilities at Basra were destroyed, the ambitious civilian development projects had been abandoned, and austerity measures had been adopted. Moreover, Iraq emerged from the conflict with a paralyzing foreign debt, estimated at \$80 billion, over half of which was owed to the Arab Gulf states. The requirements of servicing the debt limited the funds Iraq could devote to much-needed reconstruction.

Although the Kurds remained defiant, the war solidified sentiments of Iraqi national identity among the bulk of the population. Because of the regime's concern over the loyalty of the Shi'as, it blended measures of conciliation toward the community with continued policies of repression. Greater numbers of Shi'as were appointed to high-ranking posts within the Ba'th Party and the armed forces, and President Husayn sought to project an image of himself as a concerned Muslim by

visiting the Shi'a holy sites and assuring the population that the Ba'th upheld Islamic principles. The vast majority of Iraq's Shi'as chose to side with their Arab identity over their religious affiliation and remained loyal to the government during the war. It was evident that they had no desire to come under Iranian domination.

Iraq's armed forces grew in wartime from 190,000 to more than 1 million, and the country became a major regional military power. It developed a burgeoning armaments industry capable of producing everything from light arms and ammunition to Scud missiles and chemical weapons. With materials and equipment acquired primarily from European firms, Iraqi scientists were working intently on the development of nuclear capability. As the armed forces evolved into the state's key institution, Iraqi society became militarized. The government glorified military virtues, and Husayn's daily television appearances wearing an officer's uniform emphasized his close ties to the armed forces. His control of the military strengthened his grip on total power. However, despite the participation of all sectors of Iraqi society in the war effort, Husayn's power base remained narrow, and he continued to appoint mainly members of his extended family and trusted long-term associates to sensitive positions in the armed forces, the security services, and the RCC. The war also intensified the personality cult that was built up around Husayn. So numerous were the posters and statues of the president that some Iraqis joked that the true population of their country was 28 million—14 million people and 14 million statues of Saddam Husayn.



PHOTO 21.1. A monumental portrait of Iraq's President Saddam Husayn. It was unveiled during ceremonies in 1990 to celebrate his fifty-third birthday.

Assessments of Iraq's economic position in 1988 concluded that the country's prospects for recovery were far from hopeless. If expenditures on the military were reduced and the substantial revenue from oil exports channeled into reconstruction, then Iraq stood a good chance of being able to meet its debts and attain modest economic growth. But the regime gave rearmament priority over reconstruction; during the two-year period from 1988 to 1989, Iraq spent \$10 billion on military equipment. It was partly because of these vast military expenditures that Husayn was moved to achieve Iraq's economic recovery by annexing Kuwait in 1990. This adventure proved even more ruinous to Iraq than the ill-conceived war with Iran.

CONCLUSION

The writings of its cofounder, Michel Aflaq, defined the Ba'th Party in romantic and stirring language. It was to be an instrument for social justice and a vanguard organization with the eternal mission of bringing about Arab unity. The Ba'th's platform offered the appealing vision of an Arab renaissance, and the party attracted young Arabs of the postindependence era eager for a cause and for the restoration of Arab dignity. However, Aflaq's intentions for the party were thwarted as it divided into regional groupings and quarreling factions. This reality was most evident in Syria and Iraq, where the Ba'th came under the control of ambitious men who used its apparatus and ideology to serve their own ends. For al-Asad and Husayn, the Ba'th became an instrument of control and indoctrination that assured the survival of their regimes. Both leaders justified their rule in the name of Ba'thist principles, but instead of using the party's ideology to prepare the foundations of Arab unity, they used it to criticize one another and to buttress their individual claims to regional supremacy. In the hands of al-Asad and Husayn, the Ba'th lost its Pan-Arab mission and developed rival Syrian and Iraqi branches, each of which sought to undermine the other. One of the victims of their rivalry was Aflaq himself. Expelled from Syria by a Ba'th regime that no longer needed him but feared his appeal, he was welcomed by Husayn, who trumpeted his presence in Baghdad as proof that the Iraqi Ba'th had remained true to the principles of the party's founder.

Both regimes practiced a combination of political repression and social reform. The extent of the reforms should not be underestimated. As was the case in Iran under the last shah, though, the emergence of a more literate and more prosperous population was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in opportunities for political organization or free intellectual expression. Syria and Iraq were ruled by authoritarian dictators backed by the power of the Ba'th Party, the armed forces, and networks of internal security agencies. These were the institutions Hafiz al-Asad and Saddam Husayn had manipulated as they rose from impover-

ished peasants to national presidents, and they continued to rely on them for the perpetuation of their rule.

NOTES

1. This comparison originates with Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 98.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 339.
3. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, 1982), p. 1088.
4. Cited in Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, 3rd ed. (London, 2001), p. 180.
5. The quotations in this paragraph are cited in Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (London, 1990), pp. 34–35.