



IMPACT OF IRAN-IRAQ WAR ON IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The long duration of the Iran-Iraq war was due to various political and historical causes. It was not a war for territorial expansion but a war of ideologies and regional supremacy. It resulted into an international uproar due to the effect the war had on oil resources. Use of chemical weapons by Iraq was also an issue of international discontent. The war ended with a UNSC Resolution. The war had repercussions on Iran-Saudi Arabia relations. The present paper aims at analysing impact of Iran-Iraq war on Saudi Arabia and Iran relations. Saudi Arabia-Iran relations got strained due to Saudi-Arabia's support to Iraq in the war.

KEYWORDS : *various political and historical causes , war of ideologies and regional supremacy.*

1. Iran-Iraq War and Rivalry between Iran-Saudi Arabia

The Iran-Iraq war is the longest war of the twentieth century that had been fought for eight years. This war began just after the Iranian Revolution, in September 1980 and lasted until August 1988. While this war was fought between Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia along with the member states of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) supported Iraq in this war against Iran.¹ Since the advent of the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia was threatened by the Iranian challenges and the idea of the Revolution. Saudi Arabia viewed the Revolution as a threat for it. The Saudi Kingdom looked for an opportunity counter Iranian influence. The Iran-Iraq war gave an opportunity to Saudi Arabia to decrease Iranian power by extending its help to Iraq. Saudi Arabia, thus, took decision to support Iraq against Iran. Saudi Arabia supported Iraq economically, morally, and providing its air-space for Iraqi fighter planes. The Saudi support to Iraq became one of the major factors that led to hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia at the extreme.

2. Causes of Iran-Iraq war

The territorial conflict, Kurdish issue, the Iranian Revolution, and Saddam Hussain's expansionist behaviour led to war between Iran and Iraq for eight years. The territorial conflict has historical aspect between Iran and Iraq. The conflict began in 1921 when Iran got sovereignty over Shatt al-Arab River and Iraq was allowed only navigation in this river. This river was divided by Britain in 1921. Iraq was not satisfied with this division. Later on, Iraqi government had to sign the Frontier treaty with Iran over the Shatt al-Arab river in 1937 under pressure. This treaty became the main issue of contention between Iran and Iraq. This border conflict was further contributed by Kurdis problems that led to Algiers agreement between Iran and Iraq. During the rule of Shah, Iraq was becoming the Influential power in the region. Iraq's enhancing role

¹ Adami, A and NajmiehPouresmaeili (2013), "Saudi Arabia and Iran: the Islamic Awakening Case", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 3 (4): 154.

was seen as a contender in the region by Iran. By supporting separatists' movement of the Iraqi 'Kurdis'² people Shah sought to weaken Iraqi influence and power. Movement of separatists was a threat for Iraq because it could destabilise the central authority led by Saddam Hussein. They had been fighting for their rights and autonomous status for a long time. The support of Shah provoked the Kurdis people against Saddam Hussein.

Both these issues together had been the persistent irritants between Iran-Iraq relations till early 1970s. Under these circumstances Iran and Iraq signed the Algiers agreement on March 6, 1975.³ Through this treaty, Iran and Iraq wanted to resolve the territorial disputes between them. However, this treaty could not satisfy Iraq because Iraq wanted full sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab River for its multidimensional purposes, specifically security purpose. Therefore, Iraq was looking for an opportunity to get the full sovereignty over this river. When the Iranian Revolution broke out both the States came to direct confrontation against each other. Being an autocratic, the Iranian Revolution came with a challenge for Saddam Hussein. He verbally attacked the Iranian Revolution because he was concerned about the Idea of political Islam; anti-monarchy and quasi democratic in which religion and politics could be compatible. Saddam Hussein began to conspire against the Supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. In response to this conspiracy, the Iranian media began to call Iraqi people for the toppling of a despotic ruler, Saddam Hussein. Khomeini also strongly criticised Saddam Hussein. Historical reasons also led to Iran-Iraq war. During the demonstration of Iranian people against the Shah of Iran, Khomeini was thrown out from Iraq and Saddam Hussein gave special treatment to Shah in 1978.⁴ Therefore, situation was ripe for a direct confrontation between Iran and Iraq in 1980. When Khomeini came to power in Iran, he saw Iraq as an enemy because of earlier behaviour of Saddam Hussein with him.

3. The beginning of Eight years Iran-Iraq War

After the Iranian Revolution Iranian military power was decreased. A large number of Iranian soldiers were forced to leave their job. Many of them were executed by the new Iranian government and many experienced army officers fled Iran or were exiled. The Iranian political situation was also not stable because of the chaos created in the wake of the Revolution. Iraq thought to exploit Iranian domestic turmoil and increase its territory by invading Iran.⁵ Moreover, the other Gulf States were also against the Khomeini's revolution. On the other side, Iraqi situation was in better condition in comparison to Iran. International support was with Iraq and Iraqi military power under Saddam Hussein became stronger in course of time. Most of the circumstances were in favour of Iraq. By judging all these situations Saddam Hussein, on September 17, 1980 abrogated the Algiers treaty by declaring, in a famous speech at Iraqi national assembly, Iraqi sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab river.⁶ The war began in September 1980 when Iraq attacked Iranian territory.⁷ The Iraqi air force started striking Iranian air force base to damage its military power. Many Iranian cities were captured by Iraqi forces in a few weeks. The Primary target was the Iranian Oil rich areas-Khorramshahr, Abadan, Ahvaz, Dezful, and Masjed. These were the areas that Saddam Hussein wanted to capture so that he could hamper Iranian oil industries and undoubtedly, weaken Iranian economy. Iraqi troops advanced to the Iranian territory and captured some strategic point of Iran. After defeating Iranian

² Kurds are basically Iranian origin people who live in four countries-Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. They have been denied many fundamental rights for a long time. They are demanding for a separate State, Kurdistan, for a long period. Kurds are ethnically minority people who speak Kurdish language. Their demand for a separate State has created problems for those States where they live in. However, Iraqi Kurds got some autonomy in 1990s.

³ Gardner (1988), *The Iran-Iraq War: a Bibliography*, London: Mansell, p. viii.

⁴ Menashri, D (1990), *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution*. New York: Holmes & Meier, p. 101-102.

⁵ Teitelbaum, Joshua (2010), "Saudi Arabia and the New Strategic Landscape", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 14 (3): 43.

⁶ Simons (1998), *Saudi Arabia: The Sphere of a Client Feudalism*, London: Macmillan, p. 157.

⁷ Wilson, Ben and Dodds, Joana (2009), "The Iran-Iraq War: Unattainable Objectives", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 13 (2): 76.

troops on many fronts, on September 28, 1980 Saddam Hussein publically stated that his aim of attack Iran completed now he wanted to peace treaty with Iran.⁸ However, Iraqi victory could not be achieved because Iraqi troops faced stiff resistance from Iranian troops. In addition, Iran was not in a mood to see Iraq as victorious.

Ayatollah Khomeini viewed this war through a different perspective and manipulated it by declaring it against the despotic Saddam Hussein who is against the Islamic Republic. Khomeini saw an opportunity to overthrow Saddam Hussein from within by the support of Iraqi Shiite people since they were suppressed by Saddam Hussein. Moreover, Shiites had been tortured and killed by Iraqi government after the collapse of monarchy in 1958 in Iraq. Because of torture and killing of Shiites a large number Shiite clergy fled to Iran.⁹ Therefore, Khomeini saw the war as an opportunity to mobilise Iraqi Shia and get support from it. He claimed that this war is for the protection of marginalised people of Iraq against the despotic ruler Saddam Hussein who suppressed them. Khomeini tried to spread this propaganda amongst the people. Indeed, it was an instrument to get support and mobilise the people against Saddam Hussein. In sum, both Iran and Iraq used different tools to legitimise their war against each other. While Iraq was fighting in the name of the representative of Arab, Iran was fighting in the name of Islam by declaring Saddam Hussein against Islam. By the mid of June 1982, Iran threw out Iraqi forces and now the Iranian leaders were thinking about the invasion Iraq. Ayatollah Khomeini finally decided that Iran would continue its war until the final victory over Iraq. He said that 'ending the War victoriously is the key to solving all difficulties' and 'War, War until the victory' became the popular slogan among the Iranian people.¹⁰ For Iran and Iraq this war was not a matter of territorial extension, but it was the contest of ideologies and competition for power and regional leadership.¹¹

Gradually, this war was becoming more devastating for both the states in terms of economy, infrastructure, casualties, and turning from a regional war to an International issue. The use of chemical weapons by Iraq against Iran became very controversial issue before the international community. Due to the exhaustion of resources in the war, both States were struggling with the economic problem in the late of 1980s. International community was also eager to end the war between them because this could become the issue of threat for the world in terms of economy and peace. Both Iran and Iraq having huge oil resources affected international economy. During this war, many petroleum industries were destroyed and oil production level went down. After the broad discussions at the United Nations, the members passed 'Resolution 598'¹² to stop war between Iran and Iraq. Both the States declared ceasefire by signing this resolution and it came to an end on August 6, 1988.¹³ However, this war ended without any outcome. Both the countries unilaterally claimed their victories. Nevertheless, it affected Iran-Saudi Arabia relations to greater extent.

4. Saudi Arabia's Support to Iraq in War: Impact on Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations

While war began between Iran and Iraq, the Iran-Saudi Arabia relations were also deteriorating. During the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq with all its capacity. The Iranian Revolution that posed threat to the Saudi Kingdom was the main factor which led to support Iraq in this war. Prior to the beginning of Iran-Iraq war in 1980, Saudi Arabia and Iraq signed a secret deal that was security deal between them in

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Fuller, G E and Francke R R (1999), *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 72.

¹⁰ Takeyh, Ray (2010), "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment", *Middle East Journal*, 64 (3): 373-74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

¹² This resolution was passed by United National Security Council (UNSC) in July 1987 to stop war between Iran and Iraq and withdraw a permanent boarder line. Under the provision of this resolution, Secretary-General sent a team of observer in Iran and Iraq regarding war and after the end of war the UN peacekeepers were also despatched. However, both the States signed this resolution after one year in August, 1988 because of mutual mistrust.

¹³ Dodds, Joana and Wilson Ben (2009), "The Iran-Iraq War: Unattainable Objectives", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 13 (2): 89.

February 1979.¹⁴ Under this secret deal, Iraq had to provide security protection to Saudi Arabia in case of war situation with other state. This deal was made strong by exchanging of the high level diplomatic officials.¹⁵ This secret deal had many implications and one of the most important implications was Saudi-Iraq alliance against Iran. When war began between Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia provided Financial and logistical support to Iraq. Thus, Saudi Arabia became the main financier of the War. During the eight years of the war, Saudi Arabia with Kuwait gave approximately 50 billion dollars to Iraq.¹⁶

Behind this support Saudi Arabia had its own interests against Iran. Saudi Arabia was afraid of the Iranian Revolution. The Iranian policies towards the Monarchies of the region became very aggressive in the wake of the revolution. Khomeini began to call them anti-Islamic and should be toppled and called for the establishment of the Islamic State in those states. And the last objective of Saudi Arabia was to the weakening of Iran and Iraq. Under the Saddam Hussein Iraq was becoming powerful in the region. Therefore, The Saudi Kingdom thought that the war between Iran and Iraq would probably lead to the weakening of both the States-Iran and Iraq and that would be good for Saudi Arabia's security concern. In sum, Saudi Arabia wanted to check the Iranian regional influence by weakening its power and Iran-Iraq war came with an opportunity for Saudi Arabia. In this way, Saudi Arabia's intention was to end the competition for regional supremacy as well as the leadership of the Islamic world.

Saudi Arabia tried to weaken Iran in many ways. On one side, it was giving financial support to Iraq and providing base for army against Iran. On the other side, Saudi Arabia with Kuwait began more oil production to flood the oil market in the world. The logic behind it was to hamper the Iranian economy by lowering the oil price in the world market. Being an oil resource dependent State, Iran began to face many economic crises because of the decrease in the oil price. Indeed, this was the conspiracy against Iran and Khomeini stated that the 'price of war is no less important to us than the price of oil'.¹⁷ In response to these actions and use of oil as a weapon to damage the Iranian economy, Iran intended to take a strong action against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Even Iran threatened Saudi Arabia that it would bombard Saudi Arabia's port. This warning posed threat to Saudi Arabia that the war could reach its territory. The Iran-Saudi relations began to deteriorate and it reached its extreme when Saudi Arabia shot down an Iranian aircraft in 1984. Saudi Arabia claimed that the craft was in its territory, while Iran said that the craft was in international airspace, and it was not violating Saudi Arabia's Space. This incident was followed by the Mecca demonstration during Hajj by the Iranian pilgrims in 1987. This incident led to the nadir of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations.

5. CONCLUSION

Iran-Iraq war lasted for eight years. The rivalry between Iran and Iraq had various causes which were in gist ideological. The war affected the international community due to the oil trade on which the international community is dependent on. Even though, at the end of the war, both States declared themselves as victorious but it was evident that both States had serious loss of resources in the war affecting their respective economies. It affected the Saudi Arabia-Iran relations which had its effect beyond the war. The secret agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, to support Iraq during war was the cause of discontent of Iran. The Saudi Arabia and Iran inter-State relations could not be mended well even today due to Saudi Arabia's support to Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war.

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¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Simons (1998), *Saudi Arabia: The Sphere of a Client Feudalism*, London: Macmillan, p. 257-58.

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