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Islamic Resistance to Western Hegemony in the Middle East

In this chapter, we explore the central theme of Western hegemony and the kinds of resistance it has provoked in the Middle East basically in terms of two dimensions. The first is to clearly identify the parameters of the struggle between Western hegemony and the forces opposing the West in the form of political Islam and Arab and other forms of nationalism. In the second dimension, which is dialectical, we show what specific characteristics of hegemony have triggered what forms of resistance. This dialectical struggle proceeds along both normative and objective tracks.

By hegemony we mean the dominant role that countries like Britain, other European states, and the United States either singly or in partnership with others have tended to exercise in the region of the Middle and Near East. This hegemonic or dominant role is exercised by certain countries because of the ascendant position they occupy in the world market and the community of nation states, often as we shall see, buttressed by military and technological superiority. Another meaning we have attached to the term hegemony is that the dominant country or countries of the West have not only penetrated the Islamic or Arab countries of the region in economic and political terms but also in very significant cultural areas. Thus, the overall Islamic resistance or defiance to Western dominance has been articulated not only in political or economic terms but also in major ways in cultural and religious terms. As Leonard Binder has noted, as compared to Latin America, which has largely been concerned about European or American economic exploitation, the focal point of Middle Eastern resistance to Western dominance has been primarily religious and cultural. "I think it correct to say that no other cultural region is as deeply anxious about the threat of cultural
penetration and westernization. And the central symbol of this anxiety is Islam, with which authenticity, identity, dignity, and even manhood are associated."

One can trace the history of British dominance of some of the principalities of the Middle East from the early and middle part of the nineteenth century. British penetration of India started as early as 1814 with Clive’s victories in Bengal. One also witnessed the British penetration of the United Arab Emirates (1820s), Bahrain (1861), and Kuwait (1899). These were followed by the extension of British control over Oman in 1891 and Qatar in 1916. Thus, between 1913 and 1922, the British were able to extract vital concessions from different rulers “who undertook not to award any oil concession except to a company appointed by the British government.”

One could see that in the 1920s, that is, soon after the First World War, in addition to the British, the Italians and French had replaced the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in the Islamic world of the Middle East, the dar al-Islam (zone of Islam) had virtually fallen under either direct colonial control or become a part of European protectorates. The only independent states left were Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan, and central Arabia.

Political Islam in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had come to rest on the central principles of the solidarity of the umma (community of believers), which was institutionalized in the form of the caliphate. The Ottoman Caliphate, abolished in 1924, in the eyes of millions of Muslims was the living and institutionalized form of the umma. However, when the Ottoman Empire started disintegrating in the nineteenth century, one could see that the overall resistance on the part of the Muslim community was extremely feeble and, where it was strong, it tended to be febrile and short lived at best. The Iranian Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897) emerged as the passionate champion of the unity of the umma against the European and particularly British threat. His attempts to construct a pan-Islamic movement were defeated again and again because of the different and conflicting interests pursued by the various rulers of Muslim states. He became a precursor of reformist and pan-Islamic movements which were to come later.

An even more revealing development was the way the Ottoman Empire was dismantled at the end of the First World War. There was no resistance against its dismantling in the Arab world. In fact, under the influence and leadership of T. E.
Lawrence, Arabs were responsible for dealing devastating blows at its power and prestige in regions like central Arabia and Syria. In India, which was ruled by the British, an intense and emotional movement was launched in support of the Turkish caliphate. This movement demonstrated the enormous hold that Islamic symbols had over the minds of Muslims in India. When the leader of the Khilafat movement, Muhammad Ali, was arrested, thousands of Muslims belonging to elite professional groups like lawyers, physicians, and the ulama courted arrest enthusiastically. Because the British had attacked Turkey, thereby endangering the very existence of the caliphate, Muslims, particularly in the provinces of the North-West Frontier and Sind, were led to believe that India had become a dar al-harb (zone of war) and as many as 18,000 of them migrated to Afghanistan in August 1920. On March 3, 1924, the ruler of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, by sending the Caliph, Abdul Majid, into exile and abolishing the caliphate dealt the final and deadly blow to the Khilafat movement in India.

One could also discern certain ironic ingredients in the way the kingdom of Saudi Arabia had evolved. The Saud family had relied heavily on the support of the Wahhabis and their organization, the Ikhwan, in establishing their ascendancy over the tribal structure in Saudi Arabia. In the final stages King Abd al-Aziz used British support and particularly the mechanized weaponry that he received from them in suppressing the Ikhwan and establishing the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Thus, it was ironic that in the very heartland of Islam the Saudi state first developed largely with the help of a religious movement and later the same state had to use British assistance to tame the Ikhwan into submissive partnership. The Saudi state followed the same traditions in seeking technical help from the British and the Americans for the establishment of the highly lucrative oil industry in the kingdom.

In the eyes of Muslims and Arabs there was a clear purpose behind the pattern of dominance that the Western powers were crafting in the Middle East. First of all, the Middle East constituted a vital strategic area because it provided a land mass and sea links through the Suez Canal for European powers to penetrate the Asian mainland or the subcontinent of India. Perhaps an even more important consideration in these calculations emerged with the discovery of almost inexhaustible resources of oil in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian peninsula. Those Muslims
and Arabs who subscribe to a conspiracy theory of international affairs would argue that the establishment of Israel in 1948 was deliberately designed by the West so that the state might serve as the outpost of Western hegemony.

One can discern several types of responses on the part of Muslims to what they term Western dominance and imperialism. There is the traditional Islamic response, which one comes across in the sermons given by Muslim preachers either in public meetings or in mosques. The line of argument is that Christians and Jews from the very inception of Islam, and particularly since the Crusades, have implacably opposed any manifestation of Muslim power. Certain verses of the Qur'an are cited. One of the usual citations runs as follows: "Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with thee unless thou follows their form of religion" (2: 120).

Khomeini was one of the most clear-headed and determined leaders who argued that the struggle between the West and political Islam was not just between Western imperialism and Islam as a religion. To him, Islam represented a whole way of life and civilization and he, as a spokesman for the Third World nations, opposed what he termed the oppressors and imperialists.

If you pay no attention to the politics of the imperialists, and consider Islam to be simply the few topics you are always studying and never go beyond them, then the imperialists will leave you alone. Pray as much as you like; it is your oil they are after—why should they worry about your prayers? They are after our minerals, and want to turn our country into a market for their goods. That is the reason the puppet governments they have installed prevent us from industrializing, and instead, establish only assembly plants and industry that is dependent on the outside world.

Western observers refer to Khomeini and the Islamic revolution in Iran or the Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria as manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism. We characterize them as movements led by certain leaders and ideologues who think that Western power can be opposed effectively not by emotional invocations to an Islamic umma but only by mobilization of political and economic power. This explains why we describe the Iranian Islamic revolution and other attempts like the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front as movements that represent a program or a
strategy of socio-political Islam. *Socio-political Islam* refers to both the global crisis and the Islamic crisis. It is significant that the introductory statement of the *Political Plan of the Islamic Salvation Front*, while referring to both the global and the internal crises that Algeria is facing, states:

When the governments that have ruled Algeria have demonstrated their inability to cope with the multidimensional crisis that is shaking the country to its very depths, the Algerian people have initiated a process of resurgence which is moving them in the direction of a democratic and pluralist polity anchored in an authentic Islamic societal foundation. The failures of different ideologies, Western and Eastern, have compelled us to turn to our religion in order to safeguard and protect our history and civilization and our human and natural resources.  

Socio-political Islam is not the only form of resistance that the West has encountered in the Middle East. As we emphasize in chapter 2, President Nasser spearheaded a movement that he characterized as Arab nationalism because he probably felt that a purely Islamic organization like the Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Society of Muslim Brothers) would not be able to mobilize adequate political power through internal and external means to oppose American, Western European, and Israeli domination of the Middle East. Therefore, he sought Soviet economic and military assistance and also constructed the Egyptian state on secular and socialist lines. Nasser's construction of barricades against the West was preceded by an outright suppression of the Ikhwan. As we argue in chapter 2, this response ended in failure because Nasser's economic organization did not bring economic prosperity or stability to Egypt, and his military organization turned out to be ineffective against a series of Israeli and Western attacks in 1956 and more disastrously in the war of 1967.

The Nature of Dominance versus the Nature of Resistance—1951-1973

This section analyzes in very broad terms three major events: the conflict between the Iranian government and the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, 1951-1954; the 1956 Arab-Israeli war; and the oil embargo of 1973. In this analysis of these
three episodes, a pattern emerges that indicates the nature of the conflict that took place between certain Western dominant powers and Middle Eastern states. These episodes reveal first the declining role of European powers and particularly the British, the growing importance of the United States as the dominant power, and finally, it is noted that the struggle against Western dominance was being waged largely by nationalist forces with perhaps political Islam very much in the background.

In the 1951-1954 Iranian conflict with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AICO), the Iranian complaint was that British interests monopolized the entire Iranian oil production. In 1950 the net profits of AIOC were over 33 million pounds sterling, which were double what the AIOC paid that year to the Iranian government. The attempts of the Iranian government to renegotiate the concession with the AIOC were turned down even though the United States intervened and suggested to the company officials that they should accept a 50:50 formula for profit sharing. The Americans also pointed out that this was the standard practice that the American companies followed with their host countries. The nationalists led by Muhammad Mussadeq, who became prime minister in May 1950, decided to nationalize the AIOC. The AIOC, being supported by the British government, would not budge from its position. Later, the Americans, becoming increasingly apprehensive of the growing strength and popularity of the communist Tudeh party, followed a plan engineered by the CIA to overthrow Prime Minister Mussadeq and restore the Shah to the throne. Robert O. Keohane, drawing on several sources, observes: “Aided by thugs whose services were secured with CIA funds, the Iranian army deposed Mossadegh and restored the Shah, who fled briefly to Italy during the disturbances, to his throne. As a result of this American-sponsored revolution, the old political institutions of Iran were either destroyed or reduced to only symbolic importance, as the Shah became an absolute monarch.”

American intervention in this dispute turned out to be successful because of U.S. links with the Iranian military and the way the government persuaded and pressured the American oil companies to accept the terms proposed under a carefully worked out consortium. The Department of Justice also came out with a ruling in 1954 that the participation of American oil firms in the consortium would not be interpreted as an illegal restraint of trade. Under the terms of the consortium worked out by the
State Department, American firms were accorded a 40 percent share of the Iranian operation with the AIOC retaining 40 percent. The shares of Shell and CPF, the French company, would be 14 percent and 6 percent, respectively. Commenting on the terms of the consortium, one observer remarked that "even after the compensation payable to Anglo-Iranian any stake in that venture was like getting a 'license to print money'." Referring to the enormous advantages that the American government and American firms had extracted from this episode, Keohane points out: "The remarkable part of the trick was that the American government, and American firms, profited immensely while appearing reluctant to become involved and only to be doing so to aid in reconciliation, economic development, and the provision of public order. Hegemonic leadership was never more rewarding than this!"

When we turn our attention to the emerging political situation in the Arab world, we find that most of the Arab states, despite public declarations that they were opposed to the presence of Israel as a Western bastion and intensely suspicious of its expansionist policies, did not have much capability to pursue an effective anti-Israeli strategy because of their internal divisions. One great exception was Nasser’s Egypt where he had nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. In doing this, he had demonstrated that he could overcome British opposition to his policies and thereby improved his image as a dominant leader of Arab nationalism. He had often defined Arab nationalism as an outcome of Arab solidarity. This solidarity could grow only out of Arab independence, which could assert itself if the Arab countries were to defeat Western designs to interfere in the internal politics of their countries. "Arab nationalism means Arab solidarity, that is Arab independent countries cooperating together."

Nasser’s success in emerging as a leader of Arab nationalism and unity aroused Israeli and Western fears. Another factor that reinforced Nasser’s leadership and that, in its turn, was a thorn in Western and Israeli sides, was his success in attracting Soviet support to his cause and strategy. In addition, Nasser felt sufficiently strong after nationalizing the Suez Canal to deny to Israeli ships passage through the Suez Canal and particularly the Straits of Tiran. However, the justification that Israel used for invading Egypt on October 30, 1956, was the growing number of raids on Israel being launched from Egyptian territory.
It was significant that within a short period of four days of the Israel invasion, Israel had occupied the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. European powers like the British and the French were so opposed to Nasser emerging as the dominant leader of the Arab world that they joined hands with Israel in mounting an invasion to seize the Suez Canal. The Soviet Union took a stand against this invasion and hinted that it would have to intervene. The United States not only opposed the Israeli, British, and French concerted action against Egypt, but supported the Canadian-inspired resolution of the United Nations which called for the removal of the invading forces from Egyptian soil and the placement of United Nations troops along the Egyptian-Israeli borders.

One could see in both the Iranian-British oil dispute of 1951-1954 and the 1956 Arab-Israeli war that European powers like Britain and France were being steadily eliminated from the Middle East, with the United States emerging as the most influential power. Even though Israeli forces had triumphed so speedily over Egyptian forces in 1956, Nasser's position as a hero and leader of the pan-Arab movement was considerably strengthened. He could claim that he had been successful in rolling back a powerful invasion launched by Israel, France, and Britain.

The third episode being examined here is related to the Arab-Israel war of 1973, leading to the oil embargo decision. This episode indicates that the dominant position the United States had acquired in the Middle East ever since the 1950s was being challenged by the Arab desire to use the oil weapon to pressure the United States into changing its policies toward Israel in such a way that the latter country would be effectively induced into returning Arab lands captured by Israel in the 1956 and 1967 wars.

On October 6, 1973, Anwar Sadat unleashed his surprise attack on Israel. As Israel started reeling from the initial attack and as there was growing evidence by October 10 that the Soviet Union was beginning a massive resupply of arms to Syria, American military aid was rushed to Israel. The American administration led by Nixon and Kissinger could not allow an American ally like Israel to be overwhelmed by Soviet arms. The surprise of Sadat's military invasion was perhaps more than matched by the unsheathing of the Arab oil weapon under the leadership of King Faisal. King Faisal had consistently complained of the twin threat that the Middle East faced from Zionism and Commu-
nism. But American calculations were that the Saudi ruling family led by Faisal was not likely to turn against the United States by using the oil embargo. Faisal had faced mounting threats to his kingdom from Nasser's Arab nationalism and particularly from his military intervention in Yemen. In 1969, when the monarchy in Libya and the military government in Sudan were overthrown by military cabals, a plot against the Saudi monarchy on the part of some air force officers was uncovered in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Faisal knew that Saudi prosperity and security could be guaranteed only by the continuing economic and strategic support that the United States gave to Saudi Arabia. The question arises as to why Faisal changed his mind in October 1973. A clue to Faisal's thinking rested not only on his concern for security and prosperity but also on the fact that he was at heart both an Islamicist and an Arab nationalist.

Faisal had formerly believed that the oil weapon against the United States would not work because the United States was a swing producer of oil in the sense that American sources like Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma could produce additional oil to make up for any deficit created by an Arab curtailment of oil supplies. It was apparent, however, that the United States could no longer fulfill the function of the producer of last resort and that any reduction of oil supplies brought about by Arab action could create havoc on the Western economy. Joseph Sisco, the American assistant secretary of state, emphasized in an interview on Israeli television in September 1973 that American interests could not be regarded as "synonymous with the state of Israel. . . . I'm in no position to be clairvoyant and predict it. . . . But there are obvious voices in the Arab world who are pressing for the linking of oil and politics."

In September 1973, the Agency for Resources and Energy in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry in Japan released a White Paper that disclosed: "The oil-supply management system, until now run by the international oil companies, has crumbled" and that the Japanese could discern that the oil supply would be controlled not so much by the companies but by the oil exporting countries. In other words, it had become clear to the Japanese as early as 1973 that some of the major producing states from whom they purchased their oil were nationalizing the production of oil even though the great multinational oil companies were still controlling the transport and selling of oil. This shows that Arab nationalism had infected even conser-
ervative states and that bureaucrats in these states were trying to assert state control over a major industry like oil.

It should also be noted that the bureaucrats were a part of the nationalist trend that could be seen in the 1970s and 1980s in the Arab world. Presumably this nationalist trend was also the outcome of the spread of education in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, where the proportion of children going to school was increasing rapidly. Arab national consciousness was also a product of several hundred thousand television sets and other forms of media creating the feeling in these countries that Arabs were united by bonds of common language and culture. It may be recalled that the initial impetus for Arab nationalism came from Nasser's leadership during the 1950s and 1960s.

An equally important factor that influenced a man like King Faisal was his considerable commitment to Islam. He held the view that the Saudis were not only protectors of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina but were also responsible for protecting "the third most holy spot in Islam—Al Aqsa, the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem." During our visits to Saudi Arabia in 1984-1985, one could see how some of the Egyptians occupying important positions in universities in Mecca, Jeddah, and Riyadh venerated Faisal, because he had provided refuge to them when they fled from Nasser's persecution of the Ikhwan in Egypt. Thus, Faisal's decision to impose the oil embargo in 1973 was also motivated considerably by the Islamic factor.

Faisal's oil minister, Zaki Yamani, refers to a meeting that took place on May 23, 1973, when Faisal addressed executives of the oil companies of ARAMCO, Texaco, Exxon, Mobil, and SoCal. According to the transcribed notes of this meeting, Faisal said: "Time is running out with respect to US interest in Middle East, as well as Saudi position in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia is in danger of being isolated among its Arab friends because of the failure of the US Government to give Saudi Arabia positive support, and that HM [His Majesty] is not going to let this happen. You will lose everything." When, a week later, some of the oil representatives informed American government departments like the State, Defense, and CIA about what Faisal had said in his meeting with the oil executives, they were told that Faisal should be able to cope with such pressures because he had faced much greater pressures from Nasser and that Faisal needed America. The ARAMCO conclusion was, "Some believe his Majesty is calling wolf when no wolf exists except in his imagination. Also,
there is little or nothing the U.S. government can do or will do on an urgent basis to affect the Arab/Israel issue."\footnote{14}

The book on Yamani reveals that in August 1973 the king had started asking Yamani to provide him with detailed and periodic reports on the production and expansion plans of ARAMCO and how adversely American consumers would be affected as a result of curtailed production of oil. Yamani thought that this was a new development as the king never bothered him with such details. The book on Yamani points out: "The Aramco official also reported that there were elements in Saudi Arabia which, 'for their own reasons', were trying to tell the United States that Saudi Arabia would not follow up on its threats. 'Reference here to Fahd's group.' There were also elements in the US which were misleading Nixon as to the seriousness of Saudi Arabia's intention. Yamani mentioned Kissinger. For that reason, the king has been giving interviews and making public statements designed to eliminate any doubt that might exist."\footnote{15}

Faisal and his minister, Yamani, thought that there was a possibility to influence the decision making in the White House in favor of the Arabs directly or indirectly by mobilizing public opinion in favor of the Arab cause through interviews with newspapers and television. The Saudis used all these methods. Three of the oil companies—Texaco, Chevron, and Mobil—came out publicly in support of a change in the American Middle East policy. Mobil, through a large advertisement in the New York Times, clearly suggested that since the United States depended on Saudi Arabian oil, it should do everything to bring about a settlement in the Middle East otherwise U.S.-Saudi relations would deteriorate and the Saudis would have to base their decisions on political considerations.

James Akins, who was the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia and was close to King Faisal, is quoted by Yamani. Akins's account reveals the way Faisal was wrestling with the problem as to at what point could the Saudis justifiably impose the oil embargo. Faisal is reported to have told Akins.

We cannot rationally absorb the income we have from this oil production. We're only doing this because you've asked us to. And we will not continue unless there is some progress in restoring Arab lands. He made that point over and over again. They were sorry to have had to impose the embargo but we were sending arms to Israel during the
war. We were flying planes from Germany straight into the occupied Sinai with military equipment. This was considered a hostile act against the Arabs. Then Congress voted for a massive increase of aid to Israel and that was the last straw. It made the embargo inevitable.16

The decision to impose the embargo was the third stage, preceded by two earlier decisions. The first was the decision of OPEC to raise the price of oil to $5.12 a barrel. This action was later followed by the reduction of oil production immediately by 10 percent and then by 5 percent on a monthly basis thereafter. On October 20 King Faisal announced the oil embargo and said: "In view of the increase of American military aid to Israel, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has decided to halt all oil exports to the United States of America." Thus, the Saudis could argue that they had explored and exhausted every possible means to impress upon the Americans that, because they were a major supplier of oil to the free world and thus a sustainer of its economy, their pleas for certain changes in Middle East policy should be heeded.

The conclusion that flows from the analysis leading up to the embargo is that the Saudis through their close association with the United States, both in terms of oil production and foreign policy, had learned how to play the game according to the rules of the American political process. In playing this game, they became aware of the norms of American political culture. Those who play this game automatically get captured by a pragmatic approach in which the luxury of ideological purity and simplicity is no longer a possibility. This probably explains why the Saudis, particularly with their enormous financial resources, have become more closely entangled in the American political process than any other Muslim or Arab power. How this process has led to the Saudi regime pursuing an accommodational strategy that excludes confrontational or radical methods is a theme of our chapter on Saudi Arabia.

The dominant imperial systems of Pax Britannica and Pax Americana that we have seen in the Middle East were created to enforce the rules of an international economic order the main purpose of which was to promote the interests of the respective dominant power. The problem with such regimes was that by their very nature they sowed the seeds of strife and instability. There was not only competition from rival powers but also resis-
tance from those who felt that their territories and resources were being used to ensure their subordination.

Keohane analyzes the foundations on which the structure of hegemonic stability was constructed: "The theory of hegemonic stability, as applied to the world political economy, defines hegemony as preponderance of material resources. Four sets of resources are especially important. Hegemonic powers must have control over raw materials, control over sources of capital, control over markets, and competitive advantages in the production of highly valued goods." As we have seen, in 1973 this regime of hegemonic stability that was functioning under U.S. domination was challenged by the Middle Eastern oil producing countries who organized their cartel known as OPEC. American dominance resulted in Middle Eastern countries using their oil resources to establish a counterdominant regime; namely, OPEC. There was not only an oil embargo but from the point of view of Western interests a skyrocketing of prices by almost 400 percent between October 1973, when the price of oil was raised from $5.12 a barrel, to $11.65 in December 1973. One could see how these prices had undergone steady increases from $1.80 in 1970 to $2.18 in 1971 to $2.90 in mid-1973 to $5.12 in October 1973 and to $11.65 in December 1973.

The United States reacted by proposing the establishment of an international energy agency in 1974. It should be noted that during the postwar period, largely under American leadership, certain international arrangements had been set up, such as a stable international monetary system to facilitate international trade and payments and also to ensure the free flow of oil from the Middle East to Europe and Japan "at prices well below the opportunity costs of substitutes, and even below the protected American price."

It looked as if the oil embargo was imposed by Saudi Arabia to save the Egyptian and Syrian military positions on the battlefront, because it was clear that the American decision to rush military supplies to Israel would actually end in the Arab armies retreating even further from their pre-October 1973 positions in Egypt and Syria. The embargo was lifted in March 1974 because Americans under Kissinger brought about a military disengagement on both fronts. The embargo created a severe economic discomfort for the West, but for the Arabs it did not change the military and political map of the Middle East. As Yamani pointed out, the Americans under Kissinger were not looking for an over-
all settlement but "simply wanted to water down the fire, to reduce the heat of the situation and keep these pending until some time in the future and there would be no settlement. That way Israel could continue its occupation of the territories taken in 1967 and annex them." Thus, one could argue that the Israelis had actually tightened their hold on the Arab lands taken in 1967. As will be argued in Chapter 2, even after the Israeli agreement to withdraw from the Sinai peninsula and accord some kind of autonomy for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza under the Camp David agreement of 1978, the political situation really did not undergo a sea change. In fact, as a result of the Camp David agreement, any Egyptian threat to Israel was neutralized and the Israelis could expect to so consolidate their position in Gaza and the West Bank that they could settle Russian Jewish immigrants on Arab lands. Thus, all such Arab attempts to change the American policy so that the Arab position vis-à-vis Israel would improve were exercises in futility. To borrow a phrase from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Iran's Islamic Revolution: Successes and Setbacks

As will be argued in Chapter 3, the Islamic revolution in Iran refuted a fairly well-accepted maxim of political theory which suggested that rapid urbanization and industrialization very often led to erosion of certain traditional loyalties built around religion or tribe. The Islamic revolution demonstrated that political power could be mobilized through religious solidarity on such a massive scale that it could overwhelm the political support that the Shah thought he enjoyed through economic growth and the enormous military power he commanded. But one could see in the early stages of the revolution that political power mobilized by the clerics for revolutionary purposes could not be translated into support for implementing social reforms like land reforms and nationalization of foreign trade. Land reforms were vetoed by the Council of Guardians, which had twelve members, half of them theologians appointed by Khomeini and the other half Muslim jurists nominated by the Supreme Judicial Council and approved by the parliament. Land reforms provoked opposition from the theologians in the Council of Guardians because they provided for the compulsory purchase and distribution of land owned and cultivated by private individuals. This confirms
the impression created by Maxime Rodinson's work that, even though Islamic doctrines could be invoked in favor of a "society without privilege," certain Islamic principles "have up to now most often served to justify societies based upon privilege." However, it should be pointed out that Iran's revolutionary leaders did extend the role of the public sector to include banking, insurance, and major industries as well as the bulk of foreign trade and urban property.

A disturbing factor in the Islamic revolution, particularly for some of the ruling circles in the Gulf states and Lebanon, lay in the fact that for centuries the Shi'ite community had suffered deprivation at the hands of the Sunni ruling classes in these areas. Thus, one of the indications of the way the Iranian revolution was being exported to the Gulf states and Lebanon was the rise of militancy on the part of the Shi'ite masses. The Iranian appeal assumed even more alarming proportions when it was couched in universal Islamic terms emphasizing the solidarity of the umma, which depended upon greater unity and common action between the exploited Sunni and Shi'i classes. The message that was beamed through the Iranian radio and media to the neighboring states spoke of the Muslim mustazafin (the oppressed) who ever since the days of the Prophet had been called upon to rally against monarchies and other forms of oppressive and decadent social and political systems. Joseph Kostiner gives a fairly detailed account of popular demonstrations in countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, and in the al-Ahsa region of Saudi Arabia. According to Kostiner, "subsequent Shi'i assertiveness consisted almost wholly of acts of sabotage and terrorism." He concedes that the "passage to terror" had been conditioned by the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent attempts of Gulf governments to extend aid to Iraq.

The Iraqi invasion of Iran was launched in September 1980. Throughout the war, Iraq waged a systematic propaganda war against Iran in which the Iranian revolution was condemned as anti-Arab, anti-Islamic, and anti-Sunni. Iraq's military and propaganda campaigns were financed by wealthy Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. A constant theme of this propaganda was that the Iranians, who were described as descendants of and similar to the ancient fire-worshippers of Persia, would have to be liberated and Islamicized along the same lines as the Arabs had done to their ancient forebears in the seventh century. The way the war was manipulated through the extension of military
aid channelled to Iran by Israeli agents but with U.S. backing created the impression that the United States wanted both sides to bleed each other through this war. Nixon has written: “Our interest demanded that neither side emerge as a clear-cut victor, and the Reagan administration acted correctly in playing both sides.”

Nixon's observation was correct except that American officials "in playing both sides" one against the other seemed to have eventually overlooked the fact that the Iraqi conduct of the war in using chemical weapons against Iran was morally reprehensible. George Shultz, the then Secretary of State, in his memoirs writes that in March 1984 there was a debate within the administration circles as to how the United States could overlook the monstrous moral culpability of Iraq in using lethal chemical weapons in the war. Presumably there were groups in the National Security Council who were in favor of developing diplomatic relations with Iraq in spite of its behavior. By November 1984 the negotiations that were going on between the United States and Iraq regarding the American willingness to resume diplomatic relations with Iraq after a seventeen-year hiatus had reached such a crucial and concluding stage that Secretary Shultz had started speaking from both sides of his mouth. According to his memoirs, on November 26, 1984 he told Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister, that the United States was "unalterably opposed to the use of chemical weapons and that we would be watching Iraq carefully." But on the same day the United States resumed diplomatic relations with Iraq. "There were no stars in my eyes or in Ronald Reagan's. I simply thought we were better off with diplomatic relations with Iraq . . . Iraq's ambitions and activities were not of a kind to breed confidence in Saddam Hussein. But the fact remained that a radical Iran now posed an immediate threat to the strategic Gulf area, and Iraq was the only military machine that could block the path of Khomeini's forces."

Thus it was quite clear that Americans were interested in the Iraqis turning back the Iranian forces and imposing a strategic and ideological defeat on the Iranians. For American and international consumption the American administration adopted a lofty and highminded approach in denying to both sides military weapons. But their calculations and strategic moves confirmed the American fear which Shultz expressed repeatedly in his memoirs: "If Iraq collapsed, that could not only intimidate but
inundate our friends in the Gulf and be a strategic disaster for the United States.”24 The American administration preferred an Iranian defeat in the war even if it came about as a result of the monstrous unleashing by Iraq of chemical weapons against the advancing Iranian forces.

The war terminated during July-August 1988 when Khomeini, as he put it, decided to drink the cup of poison in the face of the mounting massacre of Iranian forces and the Iraqi bombing of the Iranian civilian population. The Iranians and Iraqis agreed to a cease-fire on August 20, 1988. The Iranian strategic and ideological setback turned out to be a major turning point in the sense that Iranians realized that their pursuit of certain pure ideological policies had to be drastically altered to suit the emerging grim realities. Externally they had to make radical alterations in the strategy of exporting the Islamic revolution to Middle East countries. Internally, as will be seen in Chapter 4, Iran had to progressively substitute a pragmatic economic and social strategy for the traditional ideological policies that it had embarked upon during the Khomeini era. It was significant that only a year before the cease-fire Khomeini was exhorting the haj pilgrims in Mecca to be both devout and militant and think of the pilgrimage as a religious act and a political opportunity to denounce the common enemy of the Muslim umma; namely, the United States and its supporter, Saudi Arabia. In October 1988 Rafsanjani admitted that the umma was deeply divided both along political and religious lines and that the ideal of a united umma could be only a distant goal. Disunity existed between Sunnis and Shi’as. “One country’s leadership owes allegiance to the United States, for instance, another to the USSR, another one is nonaligned, another is pro-British.” Therefore, Rafsanjani ruefully concluded “that the Muslims need highmindedness (se’eh-sadr) and this highmindedness does not exist.”25

American Strategic Interests versus the Ideological and Political Objectives of Political Islam

It is common knowledge that 65 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves are located in the Persian Gulf. As Richard Nixon has pointed out: “Now its oil is the lifeblood of modern industry, the Persian Gulf region is the heart that pumps it, and the sea routes around the Gulf are the jugular through which that lifeblood passes.”26 In another book, Nixon argued that,
because the Persian Gulf is likely to continue as "the only source of significant exportable oil in the world for the next twenty-five years—we have no choice but to remain engaged in the area."27 The regimes, particularly those friendly to the United States, are not very strong politically and very often the United States has to prop them up, knowing full well that they are autocratic. Such regimes have been designated in a recent work as Friendly Tyrants. "The most important of all Friendly Tyrants for the United States is Mexico. . . . Washington would undoubtedly be prepared to do much more to keep a Friendly Power in power there than elsewhere if the alternative were viewed as being much worse from the perspective of U.S. interests. Certainly it would be more willing to keep an unfriendly tyrant from taking power there than anywhere else in the world."28 When one considers that the Persian Gulf supplies nearly 60 to 70 percent of Japan's oil needs, over 50 percent of Europe's, and above all, that the mounting debts of the United States are financed by the credit from Japan and Germany, one can see that perhaps the Gulf region and particularly Saudi Arabia is a close second, if not as vital, to the security of the United States as Mexico.

As against all this, the ideological and political objectives of socio-political Islam run counter to those of the United States. Socio-political Islam should be distinguished from the more popular term Islamic fundamentalism because the latter often means a rigid adherence to the original principles and rituals of Islam. In this sense, a conservative state like Saudi Arabia would claim to be an upholder of Islamic fundamentalism. Socio-political Islam defines its goals in terms of Islamic resurgence for the purpose of establishing an alternative social and political system that would challenge Western control over the Muslim lands and resources of the Middle East. Thus, the central purpose of socio-political Islam would be to mobilize the power of the masses to wrest political and economic control from the West. Therefore, socio-political Islam in this sense cannot play an accommodative or subordinate role to Western hegemony as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan do.

As we have indicated, American attempts to dominate Iran were motivated by American strategic interests in the area. Later, the American and Soviet role in the Iraq-Iran war were influenced by the same considerations. It has also been suggested that the American and Allied naval intervention in the Gulf area to protect Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian oil tankers was an attempt
to tilt the balance of forces against Iran (the center of political Islam) in the Iraq-Iran war. The American naval presence could have been one of the factors which influenced Iran's acceptance of U.N. cease-fire resolution 598 on July 18, 1988.

Until the fall of the Shah in 1979, the two pillars on which American hegemony in the Middle East rested were Iran and Saudi Arabia. It was obvious that since the United States lacked a major regional power to act as a surrogate, it had to develop under President Carter "initial agreements to allow prepositioning of U.S. equipment and supplies in regional states and created the Rapid Deployment Force, which later became the U.S. Central Command." Thus, Nixon is correct in pointing out that the United States had already laid the basic infrastructural foundations "needed to support a major U.S. intervention to defend Saudi Arabia and the southern Gulf. Without these facilities, Operation Desert Shield/Storm would have become a modern-day Gallipoli."29

In the eyes of Muslim and Arab countries, the United States, ever since the formation of the state of Israel has followed a consistent policy of excessive cordiality and favoritism toward Israel. They would argue that Arab oil has contributed heavily toward the enrichment and growth of the Western economy, but that oil has been used to help Israel in such a way that the legitimate interests of the Arab and Muslim states have not only been disregarded but adversely affected. As noted previously, when President Nixon was in the White House, Arab states under the leadership of King Faisal, by imposing an oil embargo in 1973, tried to influence the United States into pressuring Israel to return Arab lands. President Nixon paid no heed to Arab demands, and the embargo had to be lifted. Now it seems that President Nixon has realized how unjust the Israel position has been in these matters. President Nixon quotes Menachen Begin, former prime minister of Israel, who said in August 1982 that the lands that Israel occupied in June 1967 were taken through certain Israeli offensive actions and not because the Arabs lost them by launching an attack on Israel.30 According to Nixon: "The Arab-Israeli conflict poisons our relations with the Muslim world. . . . Israel's occupation of Arab lands undercuts our ability to cooperate with countries with modernist, pro-Western leaders. Israel's occupation of Arab lands—and particularly its increasingly harsh treatment of the Palestinians—polarizes and radicalizes the Muslim world. It undermines the moderates, such as President Mubarak
of Egypt." Similarly, Nixon charges Israel with having reneged on the solemn agreements that it signed with Egypt under the terms of the Camp David accord negotiated by President Carter in 1978. Israel was supposed to grant autonomy to Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, but in the words of Nixon, "Israel stonewalled the United States and Egypt." The United States, like any other superpower, follows a pragmatic course of action; that is, a policy that is also in tune with the domestic pressures it faces from time to time. At first American public opinion was inclined to support the pro-Israeli policies of both the Democratic and Republican administrations. Now it seems that American public opinion is becoming increasingly skeptical of the view that Israel should be supported on every issue in its conflict with the Arabs and particularly the Palestinians. This skepticism has also arisen because Americans feel that, in view of the economic problems they face as a result of the recession, they can no longer support a policy designed to provide economic aid to Israel year after year. This change of opinion has emerged over the question of loan guarantees that Israel has been demanding for providing housing on Arab lands to thousands of Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union. A nationwide poll of registered voters in March 1992 disclosed that 49 percent were opposed to loan guarantees being provided to Israel under any circumstances with 13 percent in favor of giving the loan guarantees outright and 32 percent supporting President Bush's position of imposing conditions on the deal.

All this suggests that it is up to a superpower like the United States to follow whatever interests its geo-political calculus dictates. After favoring a friendly democrat like Israel, it may decide that its interests demand that some balance should be restored between the favors it grants to friendly tyrants and those it provides to a friendly democrat. By expressing some concern for the rights of the Palestinians, its policy could be both politically expedient as well as morally defensible. In all such varying situations, what remains constant is the dominance of the United States.

The Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 revealed that it suited the strategic interests of the U.S.-led U.N. coalition to ensure that Israel stayed out of the conflict with Iraq because its participation would have weakened enormously the political position of the United States. It has often been argued that because of the per-