

Before the Gulf War—the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

Here is some background that is important to understanding American policy during the Iran-Iraq war.

- In 1953, the CIA overthrew the elected premier, Mossadeq, after he had begun to nationalize the British oil operations in Iran and made clear his left-leaning inclinations. (Cp. the US overthrow of the leftist Arbenz regime in Guatemala around the same time, at the instigation of the United Fruit Company.)
- In Mossadeq's place, the US installed the shah as supreme ruler
- After the CIA-led coup, American oil companies which had previously held no concessions in Iran obtained 40% of the oil business, and the shah pursued America-friendly right-leaning policies
- The shah's regime was extremely unpopular and was considered brutally oppressive. Torture was practiced on a routine basis by the secret police unit, SAVAK
- In 1979 the shah fled the country amid rioting and general chaos, and the Shiite religious leader Khomeini returned from exile to lead the country. Though parliamentary democracy continued, ultimate (though not sole) power was vested in a circle of clerics, led by Khomeini, who had shah-sympathizers executed and gradually banned most opposition parties
- Also in 1979, the shah, who suffered from cancer, was granted asylum by the US, with American officials citing medical and humanitarian reasons
- When this news broke in Iran, the American embassy was stormed and hostages were taken. The hostage crisis lasted until 1981, when all were released unharmed. (It is important to note that these hostages were not the same hostages as those involved in the Reagan-era Iran-Contra/arms-for-hostages scandal—see below.)

In 1980, then, intense anti-Americanism prevailed in Iran, largely due to (a) the overthrow of Mossadeq, (b) the support for the shah, (c) the sense of exploitation at the hands of American businesses in collaboration with US-appointed leaders, and (d) US support for Israel. In the US, deep hostility toward Iran was caused mainly by, (a) the hostage crisis, (b) the general anti-American policies of the Khomeini regime, (c) a fear of the spread of Khomeini-style radical-Islam, and (d) the anti-Israeli policies of Iran. (The usual cold-war worries, however, did not apply—Iran's new theocracy wasn't sympathetic to Soviet communism.)

Here are some important facets of the Iran-Iraq war.

- Though there had been minor territorial disputes between Iran and Iraq, the main cause of the war was probably Hussein's fear of the Iraqi Shiite majority revolting—the dreaded “exporting of the revolution.” Khomeini did in fact call on Shiites to revolt. The invasion, however, was militarily unprovoked and unilateral.
- Other ME nations supported Iraq heavily with money and weapons. They too feared the spread of Shiite/Islamic unrest. It is also important to remember that the Iranians aren't Arab, and so presented the triple-threat of (a) subversive revolutionary Islam, (b) Shiite hereodoxy, and (c) non-Arabism.
- After initial Iraqi gains, the war settled into a bloody stalemate, though there were times when Iran seemed to be close to a decisive victory. The war ended with the borders virtually unchanged. Casualties were in the hundreds of thousands.
- Officially, the US was neutral between the two parties.
- Many nations, including the US, Israel, and the Germans profited from selling weapons to one or both sides.
- Early in the war, Iraq began using chemical weapons, especially mustard gas. Iran attempted unsuccessfully to induce the US and the UN to apply pressure on Iraq to withdraw and to cease using chemical weapons.
- It was widely known in the United States that Iraq was gassing Iranians on an almost daily basis. By the end of the war, Iraq had gassed tens of thousands of Iranians.
- In 1983 Reagan's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Donald Rumsfeld, visited Hussein on a good-will visit. According to Rumsfeld, he “cautioned” Hussein about the use of chemical weapons. According to the Washington Post, the Department of State has clarified this claim, saying that the caution was issued to a lesser official and was mentioned “in passing.”
- Reagan issued a secret directive ordering American officials to do whatever was necessary to prevent the Iraqis from losing the war.
- Reagan officials approved giving the Iraqis information about Iranian troop-movements
- The US sold the Iraqis cluster bombs through a Chilean front, which were used on Iran
- US officials authorized American companies (like Dow Jones) to sell Iraq compounds that were known to be used to produce Anthrax
- The US gave the Iraqis several billion dollars in debt-forgiveness and credits
- Reagan had Iraq removed from the Department of State's list of terrorist states

- After the Gulf War, many of the weapons Iraq was to be stripped of turned out to have been manufactured by American companies, such as Union Carbide and Honeywell
- The Reagan administration never issued a public condemnation of either the invasion of Iran or of the use of mustard gas.
- At various points, members of Congress suggested sanctions or severing ties with Iraq, however none of these suggestions generated much enthusiasm, and the White House repeatedly urged Congressional leaders not to act

The events dubbed the Iran-contra scandal occurred during the Iran-Iraq war. Reagan officials sold weapons systems to the Iranians in exchange for their using their influence to have hostages taken in Lebanon released. The funds thus obtained were used to fund the Contras, who were right-leaning rebels fighting the elected leftist government in Nicaragua (the Sandinistas). This was questionable, inter alia, because Congress had passed laws forbidding such funding at various points. (The UN World Court later found the US guilty of state-sponsored terrorism in this connection and ordered a large indemnity paid, though the US refused to comply.)

Several of the major Reagan officials never were tried because Bush Sr. pardoned them “pre-emptively.” (Bush would have been called to testify under oath had these trials occurred.) It is also worth noting that a Reagan official, Abrams, who was convicted of perjury and pardoned by Bush Sr. was recently appointed to an important post on the NSC overseeing ME strategy by Bush Jr.