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"No Sense in Military Terms:" Reconsidering the Surprising Use ofForce in a Gray Zone Conflict[1]

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American policymakers misjudged the potential for escalation with Iran in the late 1980s during the Tanker War in the Persian Gulf: the maritime theatre of the larger Iran-Iraq War. Shortly before the US Navy began escorting reflagged Kuwaiti tankers under *Operation Earnest Will* in 1987, US Under Secretary of State Michael Armacost explained to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "it would be foolhardy for Iran to attack American-flag vessels. They will have American masters; they will carry no contraband; they pose no danger to Iran; they will be defended if attacked."[3] Other American officials repeated similar risk assessments. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's 1987 report to the US Congress on the situation in the Persian Gulf stated that "it is considered unlikely that Iran would seek a direct confrontation with the United States by directly or overtly attacking a US-flag merchant ship."[4] Before the end of the

[1] Frank Carlucci, quoted in Janice Gross Stein, "The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place: The United States in the Gulf," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter, 1988-1989), p. 154, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538739.

[2] The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, or the Naval Postgraduate School.

[3] "Iran-Iraq War and Navigation in the Gulf," International Legal Materials 26, 5 (1987): p, 1430, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20693160.

[4] Caspar W. Weinberger, *A Report to the Congress on Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1987), p. 17, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA193900.pdf.

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year, however, the US Navy found itself engaged in a low-intensity war with Iran. After attacking two Iranian observation platforms in reprisal for Iranian actions in October 1987, US President Ronald Reagan said, "We're not going to have a war with Iran. They're not that stupid."[5] Yet the most intense fighting between American and Iranian naval forces was still months away, and American policymakers remained surprised that Iran continued to endanger gulf shipping under the threat of superior American firepower. After the American frigate, *Samuel B. Roberts* struck an Iranian mine on 14 April 1988, Frank Carlucci, Weinberger's successor as the Secretary of Defense, remarked, "I have only to assume that it's some kind of fanatical reaction or slavish obedience to a contingency plan. But it certainly makes no sense in military terms."[6] In response to the *Roberts* incident, the US Navy initiated a stinging single-day air and sea battle on 18 April and destroyed a significant portion of Iranian naval combat power. By the end of July, Iran accepted a ceasefire with Iraq under UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 598, ending the Iran-Iraq War and the hostilities in the Gulf.

As an example of armed coercion, *Earnest Will* seems successful. The United States achieved its policy objectives in a little over twelve months, and fears about an open-ended American commitment and deeper involvement in the Iran-Iraq War were not realized. But strategists and policymakers have given little thought to why the United States and Iran came to blows when American officials considered it unlikely and – for Iran – irrational. This question takes on new meaning when considering the Tanker War as an example of the maritime gray zone, which is defined by the US Secretary of the Navy's most recent strategic guidance as "the contested arena between routine statecraft and conflict."[7] The United States was a neutral power yet destroyed a large portion of Iran's naval forces during significant combat actions. Iran – although fighting a war against Iraq – was not openly at war with anyone else. Both were operating within a conceptual framework short of war while trying to coerce other states. Understanding how such a conflict escalated into something more serious is important when considering contemporary challengers such as Russia, China, and – again – Iran: states are known to employ gray zone methods in pursuit of security goals.

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[5] Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), p. 205.
[6] Carlucci, quoted in Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," p. 154.
[7] Carlos Del Toro, "One Navy-Marine Corps Team: Strategic Guidance from the Secretary of the Navy," (Department of the Navy, 2021), p. 1, https://media.defense.gov/2021/Oct/07/2002870427/-1/-1/0/SECNAV%20STRATEGIC%20GUIDANCE_100721.PDF.

So why did *Earnest Will* escalate? Carlucci's fanaticism and slavish obedience are insufficient explanations. Instead, confrontation occurred in response to the strategic circumstances of the Iran-Iraq War, which was seven years old by the start of the American operation. In other words, Armacost was wrong: from the Iranian perspective, ships bound for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were threats to Iran given the strategic circumstances in 1987 and 1988 and presented Iran with a way to exert pressure when few other options remained. Moreover, Iranian actions occurred within an established pattern of behaviour that was relatively restrained. Although escalation occurred, there was nothing unusual about Iranian measures in the Persian Gulf by the time the United States became involved. Meanwhile, the United States found itself in a situation that demanded action to maintain regional influence. Together, the positions of Iran and the United States made at least limited armed conflict likely. Following an analysis of the strategic context of the Iran-Iraq War and the political situation preceding American intervention, this article discusses American and Iranian perspectives during the Tanker War to argue that *Earnest Will* escalated because of the unique strategic conditions surrounding the intervention. In addition, the article examines the established pattern of violence to argue that Iran reacted rationally in the circumstances.

The Strategic Context of the Iran-Iraq War

When Iraq invaded Iran on 22 September 1980, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was expecting a short war against an adversary weakened by internal revolutionary turmoil, but Iran did not cooperate. The war developed into a prolonged revolutionary and religious struggle in Iran and ebbed back and forth through a series of offensives and counteroffensives until its end in 1988. The potential for defeat carried a significant risk for Hussein – whose domestic political legitimacy was at stake – and for the other gulf states that feared Iranian revolutionary expansion. In May 1982, a Central Intelligence Agency assessment stated that "Iraq is losing its war with Iran – in fact, its main concern now is to prevent an Iranian invasion. There seems little the Iraqis can do, alone or in combination with other Arabs to salvage much from the military situation."[8] Anticipating the challenge for American policy with remarkable accuracy, the report predicted that

[8] "Possible Outcomes and Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," (official memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency, 1982), p. 1, Gale Primary Sources, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349555310/USDD?u=navalps&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=ef8dd944&pg=1.

"the US would be pressed by Arab conservatives to do 'something' to help Iraq, and this could be exploited by the US to try to organize a regional consensus on security. Iran, of course, would interpret any such US move as additional evidence of Washington's hostility. The Arab moderates, in turn, would become more hostile if the US did nothing."[9]

As Iraqi hopes for a quick victory faded, the strategic situation that would come to define the war began to take shape. By the end of 1982, Iran had driven the Iraqi army back across the border and held some Iraqi territory. Iranian offensives in 1983 then made gains near Basra in southern Iraq, but the weaknesses of both sides produced a strategic stalemate. Iran employed superior numbers of highly motivated but poorly equipped soldiers, while Iraq fielded smaller numbers supported by superior combined arms firepower and the Iraqi air force. Searching for ways to break the deadlock, Iraq began employing chemical weapons and increased air raids on Iranian cities and economic targets including oil export terminals and tankers transporting Iranian oil.[10] Although Iran had attacked Iraqi oil terminals at the outset of the war, Iraq was still able to export oil through overland pipelines and through Saudi and Kuwaiti ports. Iran was completely reliant on the Gulf for oil exports, which it needed to fund the war effort. Beginning in 1984, Iran countered by attacking ships bound for other Gulf states, arguing that they were supplying material and financial loans to Iraq.[11] Iraq attacked a total of 43 ships from 1981-1983 without reciprocation by Iran. Then, in 1984, Iraq struck 53, and Iran responded with 18.[12]

Although ships and oil terminals had been targets since 1980 in relatively small numbers, Iraq's 1983 shift in tactics and Iran's decision to join the maritime economic battle in 1984 marked the beginning of the first true phase of the Tanker War. Iraq was

[9] "Possible Outcomes and Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 2.
[10] Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-87: Strategic Implications and Policy Option,* (London: Jane's Publishing Company Limited, 1987), 65-6; Chaim Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, ed. Efraim Karsh (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 261.
[11] Chaim Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications,* ed. Efraim Karsh (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 262; Clyde R. Mark, *The Persian Gulf, 1987: A Chronology of Events,* CRS Report No. 88-129 F (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1988), v, https://congressional-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/congressional/docview/t21.d22.crs-1988-fnd-0060?accountid=12702.
[12] Ronald O' Rourke, *Persian Gulf: U.S. Military Operations*, CRS Report No. IB87145 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1988), p. 2, https://congressional-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/congressional/docview/t21.d22.crs-1988-fnd-0011?accountid=12702.

trying to change the strategic balance and avoid losing the war. By exerting economic pressure on Iran and increasing the danger to all shipping in the Gulf, Iraq hoped to provoke an Iranian response that would prompt Western states to intervene and force Iran to a negotiated settlement.[13] In a meeting with French Foreign Minister Clause Cheysson in January 1984, US Secretary of State George Shultz raised the possibility that Iran could close the Strait of Hormuz, which was supported by vague threats previously issued by Iranian mullahs.[14] Cheysson dismissed the idea, arguing that it was beyond Iran's current capabilities to completely close the strait and pointing out that Iran – dependent on oil exports for revenue – was carefully managing the economic situation. Cheysson also argued that Iraq, despite possessing the more capable air force, did not have the capacity to cause so much damage that Gulf traffic would be seriously curtailed.[15] Still, the idea that the widening Tanker War could interfere with the flow of oil through one means or another was on the minds of American officials, which is what Hussein wanted. True to Cheysson's assessment, Iraq was unable to cause enough damage to change the strategic balance. The number of ships attacked by both sides declined in 1985, although the total was still nearly four dozen.[16]

1986 saw a sharp increase in attacks and the beginning of the Tanker War's second phase. Iraq again initiated the escalation and attacked more ships than Iran as they had throughout the war: 66 ships to Iran's tally of 45.[17] Iraq also expanded the war by extending attacks to the Sirri and Larak islands.[18] The difference this time was the strategic motivation. Iran – holding Iraq's Fao Peninsula – was potentially winning the war and was thought to be planning an attack to capture Basra.[19] During this time, Kuwait emerged as a key catalyst for eventual American intervention. As a small state with strong neighbours, Kuwait tried to strike a balance between the superpowers and also between the war's belligerents. The latter was difficult. Iraq's Fao Peninsula along the Shatt al-Arab waterway was the only territory standing between Kuwait and revolutionary Iran, giving it a reason to want to avoid an Iraqi defeat and possible

[13] Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), p. 50.
[14] Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War*, p. 50.
[15] "Secretary's 17 January Meeting with Frenchm," (official message, Department of State, 1984).
[16] Elizabeth Gamlen, "US Responses to the 'Tanker War' and the Implications of its Intervention," in *After the War: Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf*, ed. Charles Davies (West Sussex, UK: Carden Publications Limited, 1990), 321; O' Rourke, *Persian Gulf: U.S. Military Operations*, p. 2.
[17] O' Rourke, *Persian Gulf: U.S. Military Operations*, p. 2.
[18] Gamlen, "US Responses," p. 322.
[19] Gamlen, "US Responses," pp. 321-2.

destabilization of the region. Kuwait also needed to avoid giving Iran a pretext for attack, which meant not overtly supporting Iraq. US Ambassador to Kuwait Anthony Quainton recalled in an interview that Iraq requested the use of Kuwaiti islands to range Iranian positions with artillery, but Kuwait refused: "The Iraqis, I think, pressed very hard to get authorization from the Kuwaitis. But almost everything in Kuwait's foreign policy tried to keep both sides in play. They never wanted to take a stance so provocatively pro-Iraqi that it would lead to Iranian intervention."[20] Still, despite their neutrality, both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were essential to Iraq's war effort. Michael Freedman cites $35 billion in loans and the use of Saudi and Kuwaiti ports to export Iraqi oil and import supplies as reasons for Iranian ire, with Kuwait "the most important supporter, with 13 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and great wealth."[21]

Under renewed economic pressure, Iran retaliated by focusing on Kuwait-bound shipping beginning in August 1986.[22] Later that year, Iran took additional measures ahead of a planned Islamic foreign ministers conference in Kuwait by shelling Kuwait's Failaka Island and sabotaging Kuwaiti oil facilities.[23] Now a prime target of Iran but still trying to avoid clear alignment with any one power, Kuwait approached the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council to seek proposals for the protection of its tankers. Although Kuwait rejected an initial American offer because the United States refused the idea of a combined operation with the Soviet Union, the deteriorating situation in the Gulf proved irresistible.[24] Iran test-fired a Silkworm anti-ship missile in February 1987 and later placed missile batteries along the Strait of Hormuz. On 2 March, Kuwait formally requested that the United States reflag six tankers. The United States extended the offer to eleven to cover an additional five tankers that Kuwait was discussing with the Soviet Union. The US Navy began escorting the first reflagged convoy into the gulf on 22 July 1987, marking the start of *Earnest Will*.

Maintaining American Regional Influence

[20] Anthony Quainton, Interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, p. 122, https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Quainton,%20Anthony.toc.pdf.
[21] Freedman, *Choice of Enemies,* p. 196.
[22] Mark, *The Persian Gulf*, p.vi.
[23] Cordesman, "*The Iran Ira00q War*," pp. 134-5.
[24] Cordesman, "*The Iran Iraq War*," p. 134.

In the early years of the war, the United States had little reason to intervene. In a 1984 US House of Representatives hearing on the situation in the gulf, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy defined American policy as ensuring oil supplies to Western states, preventing the Soviet Union from gaining influence in the region, and ensuring the security of the gulf partners to guard against Soviet and Iranian encroachment.[25] "Our objective is to bring the Gulf War to a negotiated end, in which neither belligerent is dominant, and in which the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both are preserved," he said, adding that "we have made it known that we would not intervene unless asked to do so and that we are not seeking such an invitation."[26] With the supply of oil to Western allies the first stated priority, there was no reason for concern at the time. A June 1984 intelligence assessment advised that "the escalating attacks on Persian Gulf shipping over the last two months have had little impact on exports from the region or market perceptions of oil availability," adding that shipowners would continue to risk the transit as long as insurance was available, and the market would remain in check as long as there was confidence in surplus production capacity and access to strategic reserves.[27] Intelligence analysts added that "the reactions of West European governments have also been tempered by their belief that current oil stocks in combination with increased purchases of oil from producers such as Nigeria and Libya would meet their needs for up to 6 months."[28]

Kuwait's overture to the Soviet Union, in addition to the other four permanent members of the Security Council, prompted a change in American policy. As previously discussed, the United States offered to reflag an additional five Kuwaiti tankers offered to the Soviet Union, bringing the American total to eleven. In April, Kuwait announced that it would also lease three tankers from the Soviet Union, which entered the gulf in May accompanied by a Soviet frigate and two minesweepers.[29] Between Murphy's

[25] United States House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Developments in the Persian Gulf, June 1984: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States House of Representatives*, 98th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1984), p. 4.
[26] United States House of Representatives, *Developments in the Persian Gulf*, pp. 4-6.
[27] "Persian Gulf War: Oil Market Response," (official memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency, 1984), pp. 2, 6, Gale Primary Sources, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349274904/USDD?u=navalps&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=9514598b&pg=1.
[28] "Persian Gulf War: Oil Market Response," p. 6.
[29] Mark, *The Persian Gulf*, p. 3.

hearing in 1984 and Weinberger's report to the US Congress in June 1987, American priorities were reordered. Weinberger listed the prevention of Soviet influence first, followed by Gulf state security and the supply of oil.[30] Weinberger's report criticized the Soviet presence as unwarranted since the Soviet Union was a "net exporter of oil."[31] Interestingly, the report mentions land-based missiles, terrorism, and sabotage as potential threats to American naval forces, but it does not mention mines, which Iran was already known to use and had already damaged one of the Soviet tankers leased to Kuwait.

With the fear of losing the gulf to the Soviet Union driving the intervention forward, the United States was heading into a scenario in which it would be politically impossible to back down. Already in 1984, before there was serious talk of intervention, officials recognized the danger of losing face with the Arab states. Under the heading "Low Probability/High-Risk Options," a US Department of State memorandum considered the possibility of an Iranian decision to mine the Strait of Hormuz or intercept ships by sea and air: "Iran's military actions will likely be designed to demonstrate US inability to protect its interests and defend the Gulf states. . . . Iran might seek to wage a prolonged, low-level campaign to interrupt Gulf shipping based largely on its perception that the US lacks the political will to support a sustained commitment of US forces in the Gulf."[32] American officials were clearly concerned about credibility with the Gulf states, both before and especially after the Iran-Contra affair became public in 1986. Referencing Iraq's inability to eject Iranian forces from the Fao Peninsula in January 1987 ahead of the foreign minister conference in Kuwait, a memorandum to Frank Carlucci – then US national security advisor before becoming the Secretary of Defense – theorized that Iraq's difficulties "will add to the . . . nervousness of our friends" and provide "them more of a reason publicly to hold us responsible for the Iranian successes – something the Iraqis will play up when the current fighting ends. . . . At the same time, Gulf state fears of Iranian gains will probably lead again soon to requests for help from us."[33] In a speech

[30] Weinberger, *Report to the Congress*, p. 2.
[31] Weinberger, *Report to the Congress*, p. i.
[32] "Iran-Iraq War: US Responses to Escalation Scenarios and Threats to Persian Gulf States," (official memorandum, Department of State, 1984), p. 7, Gale Primary Sources, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349676774/USDD?u=navalps&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=d63519f4&pg=1.
[33] Dennis Ross, "Response on Waite and Status of Iran-Iraq War," (official memorandum, National Security Council, 1987), https://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/response-on-waite-status-iran-iraq-war/docview/1679046461/se-p. 2.

on 15 June 1987, Reagan said that the United States would "abdicate our role as a naval power" if it declined the reflagging request and again referenced the threat of Soviet expansion into the gulf.[34] The rhetoric left few options open for avoiding confrontation if Iran tried to test American resolve.

UNSCR 598 did not help matters. Passed two days before the first re-flagged American convoy entered the gulf, UNSCR 598 called for an immediate ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and the withdrawal of all forces to respective sides of the recognized border. At this point in the war, however, Iran was the only belligerent occupying foreign territory, meaning that Iran was the only belligerent that stood to lose anything – its main bargaining chip – by accepting the resolution.[35] That was the point. After the Iran-Contra scandal, Iraq demanded the resumption of an American arms embargo against Iran and a Security Council resolution to end the war. According to US Ambassador to Iraq David Newton, American officials "were really pretty ashamed. So we jumped on that. Out of that came Resolution 598, which Iraq of course immediately accepted. The Iranians didn't want to accept it. . . . It's the only time to that point that the security council had called for an end of hostilities without having prior agreement of the two parties."[36] Although the United States could cite Iranian intransigence in not accepting UNSCR 598 in addition to all previous Iraqi ceasefire offers, it seems that there was never any expectation of acceptance. It also means that American officials recognized that Iran was in a delicate strategic position with limited options. Embattled regimes with limited options often lash out with the means still available to them as Iraq had done by initiating the Tanker War's first phase.

Three events during *Earnest Will*, which will be revisited in the next section, are key markers in the escalation between American and Iranian naval forces and indicate that there was confusion on both sides about where the line between tolerance and reprisal was drawn. First, American forces observed the Iranian amphibious landing ship *Al Fajr* – sometimes recorded as *Iran Ajr* – laying mines in an anchorage near Bahrain on the night of 21 September 1987. In the first major American action, American helicopters disabled the ship, and a boarding party seized it the next morning. Although Iran had

[34] Mark, *The Persian Gulf*,p 7.
[35] Janice Gross Stein, "The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place: The United States in the Gulf," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter, 1988-1989), p. 162, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538739.
[36] David G. Newton, Interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, p. 72, https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Newton,%20David%20G.toc.pdf.

employed mines several times before, the mines recovered from *Al Fajr* provided public proof and politically embarrassed Iran. In his memoir, US Secretary of State George Shultz indicates that Iranian President Khomeini and other Iranian leaders were surprised that the United States confronted *Al Fajr*.[37] Iranian surprise potentially indicates an assumption that minelaying – which other states had already attributed to Iran before the American intervention – was not an activity expected to provoke such a response.

Second, Iranian Silkworm missiles fired from the Fao Peninsula struck two tankers approximately 10 miles outside of the Kuwaiti port of Mina al-Ahmadi on 15 and 16 October 1987. The first ship was US-owned and Liberian-flagged. The second – the tanker *Sea Isle City* – was Kuwaiti-owned and US-flagged. Freedman points out that the protection of ships in Kuwait's territorial waters, regardless of what flag they were flying, fell to Kuwait under American policy at the time.[38] The United States conducted reprisals on 19 October anyway, attacking two former oil platforms used as Iranian observation posts. Defending the action, Weinberger writes, "This time I felt we had no choice but to respond, and the President fully agreed. I felt that it was important for us to deny the Iranian forces some measure of capability, and to impress upon them that we were not going to yield the Gulf to them."[39] The reprisal for *Sea Isle City* is less surprising when considered against a television interview from two weeks earlier in which Weinberger said that operations "will be required until the Iranians change their behaviour."[40] Changing a belligerent's behaviour is a difficult objective for a neutral power to achieve, especially when the messaging is mixed: another Silkworm fired on 22 September struck the oil terminal that the two tankers had been waiting to access, but this time the American response was a trade embargo announced a week later and tied to both the Iranian attacks and refusal to accept UNSCR 598.

Finally, after the frigate *Samuel B. Roberts* struck an Iranian mine, the United States responded with *Operation Praying Mantis* on 18 April 1988: a sea and air assault targeting two Iranian oil platforms and the frigate *Sabalan.* By the end of the day, several Iranian surface craft had been destroyed, including the missile boat *Joshan* and the frigate *Sahand*,

[37] George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 934.
[38] Freedman, *Choice of Enemies,* p. 204.
[39] Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), p. 419.
[40] Mark, *The Persian Gulf*, p. 16.

and *Sabalan* was crippled. The official statement provided by the White House briefing room said, "These actions were taken in response to Iran's recent resumption of mine-laying in international waters and its mine attack on the *USS Samuel B. Roberts*."[41] An assessment of Iranian intent seems to have played into the decision as well: according to Weinberger, the task force commander "concluded for two reasons that the mines had been newly laid. The *Roberts* had covered the same water going north with a convoy, without incident; and pictures of the unexploded mines were free of marine growth and other indications of age."[42] In addition, *Sabalan* was targeted not because it was implicated in the minelaying, but because "its skipper had been singularly aggressive in attacking unarmed merchant ships."[43] Again, changing Iranian behaviour appears as a motive.

Iran's Desperate Circumstances and a Well-Established Pattern

Although the Gulf states had reason to fear Iranian gains against Iraq in the latter stages of the war, Iran's position was delicate and susceptible to pressure. Whereas Hussein was largely successful in preventing Iraqi citizens from feeling the effects of the prolonged war, revolutionary Iran called upon the people to support a nationalist and religious cause.[44] According to Efraim Karsh, however, this "overshadowed the internal situation in Iran and portrayed Iranian society as much more cohesive and unified than it actually was. In fact, during most of the war, Iran was considerably affected by internal divisions on different levels, which culminated at times in eruptions of violence that forced the government to divert part of its energies."[45] Iraq's economic warfare and the long-range terror campaign of the periodic *war of the cities* also took a significant toll. By 1986, with the Kharg Island oil terminals under effective Iraqi air attacks, Iran's oil revenues fell to $6.6 billion from $19 billion at the start of the war, Iran suffered from high unemployment, and there were reports of internal power struggles within the regime.[46] One hundred and sixty surface-to-surface missiles struck Iranian cities in early 1988; 1.5

[41] Marlin Fitzwater, "Statement by Assistant to the President for Press Relations Fitzwater on the United States Military Strike in the Persian Gulf" (press statement, The White House, 1988).
[42] Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace,* p. 425.
[43] Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*,p. 425.
[44] Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War*, pp. 67, 71-2.
[45] Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War*, p.73.
[46] Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War*, pp. 74-5; Cordesman; *Iran-Iraq War,* p. 112.

million refugees left Tehran alone; and worsening economic conditions, fear of potentially chemical-armed Iraqi missiles, and the lack of peace prospects eroded public faith in the war effort.[47]

Militarily, Iran could claim some success in holding off the better-equipped Iraqi army and in mounting offensives around Basra, but Iran could not sustain the fight indefinitely. The rate of desertion increased in 1986, and Iranian pilots were defecting to Iraq.[48] With tens of thousands of casualties on the Fao Peninsula in 1987, Iran began to recall veterans to fill front-line positions, and some recruitment efforts involved involuntary impressment.[49] Iranian air defences could not prevent the Iraqi air force from flying over Iranian cities, and the Iranian air force – struggling under the arms embargo championed by the United States – was short of spare parts and could only support between four to eleven daily sorties.[50] The Gulf states and the United States aligned against it in preventing the replenishment of spare parts and weapons, protecting Iraq's supply lines in escorted convoys, and calling for acceptance of UNSCR 598 – which Iran argued made the United States a participant in the conflict – Iran had become isolated politically, militarily, and economically. "No country can afford to become isolated while at the same time maintaining a strong military posture," writes Chai m Herzog; "The nations of the world are interdependent, and a major element in any middle and small nation's military capability must of necessity be based on its international economic and political standing."[51]

Under such conditions, Iran had little choice but to try to counter Iraqi and international pressure through asymmetric economic warfare in the Gulf. Despite the precarious position, however, Iranian forces operated within a pattern of established behaviour: arguably a pattern of restraint that was designed to apply pressure to Iraq's allies while not provoking an overwhelming response. As previously discussed, Iraq attacked tankers from 1981-1983 without Iranian reciprocation. Iran had already shut off direct gulf access to Iraqi oil in the opening days of the war by destroying Iraq's oil terminals off the end of the Fao Peninsula. When Iraq opened the true Tanker War in 1984, Iran's only real option to gain strategic leverage was to attack Iraq indirectly

[47] Herzog, "Military-Strategic Overview," p. 263.
[48] Cordesman, *Iran-Iraq War,* p.112.
[49] Cordesman, *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 131.
[50] Cordesman, *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 131-2.
[51] Herzog, "Military-Strategic Overview," p. 267.

through Saudi and Kuwaiti tankers, and that response came ten weeks after Iraq initiated the escalation.[52]

In addition, the mines that provoked American action in the *Al Fajr* and *Roberts* cases were already established as a feature of the conflict by January 1987 when Iran attempted to mine Kuwaiti coastal waters, and it was not a coincidence that the first Soviet ships leased to Kuwait entered the gulf in early May with two minesweepers as escorts. One of those tankers – *Marshall Chuikov* – struck a mine on 17 May without noticeable reaction from Kuwait or the Soviet Union. It was one of four tankers to hit mines near Kuwait in May and June.[53] Little more than one month later, the US-flagged tanker *Bridgeton* struck a mine during the first convoy under US Navy protection, this time with no noticeable reaction from the United States. As the United States scrambled to assemble and deploy mine countermeasure forces to the gulf, the United Kingdom and Italy both denied American requests for support. It was not until mines were identified outside the gulf in an anchorage ahead of the transit through the Strait of Hormuz – where two additional ships were hit – that the United Kingdom and France decided to send minesweepers.

Although the United States had evidence that the mines encountered by *Roberts* in 1988 had been recently sown, nothing indicates that Iran was deliberately trying to target an American warship. The World War I vintage mines used by Iran were indiscriminate, and it is reasonable that Iran would place them in an area known to be travelled by the tankers that it needed to interdict in order to exert pressure on the Gulf states. Moreover, after *Bridgeton* struck a mine in 1987, its American escorts took the station behind the tanker for protection even though the path ahead had been swept by Saudi minesweepers. There was no reasonable way of knowing that the mines dropped in April 1988 would provoke a response like *Praying Mantis*.

The *Sea Isle City* incident is another example of established behaviour provoking an unexpected reaction. Before the two tankers were hit by Silkworm missiles in October 1987, Iran fired three Silkworms from the Fao Peninsula toward Kuwait on two and four September. Two missiles detonated in the sea. One made it to the beach. None caused any damage. In response, Kuwait took the symbolic political measure of expelling five Iranian diplomats. The use of missiles as a measure of intimidation was established.

[52] Gamlen, "US Responses," p. 319.
[53] Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 413.

Moreover, the initial launches did not come out of the blue: they were a response to Iraq's announcement on 28 August that it would resume attacking Iran-bound shipping because Iran had not accepted UNSCR 598. It was already assumed, of course, that Iran could not agree to UNSCR 598. From the Iranian perspective, the missiles that later struck *Sea Isle City* and another tanker were fired at legitimate targets supporting Iraq's war effort. In addition, they were in Kuwait's territorial waters and not under American protection at the time. Weinberger's report to the US Congress in June 1987 used such circumstances to downplay the threat, stating that no vessels of any flag had been attacked while in "close proximity of a US combatant."[54] Nothing had changed as far as the Iranians were concerned.

Conclusions

Given the strategic perspectives of the United States and Iran, confrontation in the Persian Gulf was likely once the United States initiated *Operation Earnest Will*. Fear of Soviet influence and a need to demonstrate resolve to the Gulf states led the United States into a position in which it was impossible not to respond to Iranian provocation. From the Iranian perspective of being isolated and running out of time, there were few options remaining for ending the war in an advantageous position. A limited campaign against the ships feeding the Iraqi war effort was the most promising. The *Roberts* was damaged by an indiscriminate weapon that was an established feature of the Tanker War and previously used against commercial traffic with little notice. It is unlikely that Iran intentionally targeted *Roberts* or expected that the American response would be so severe. Similarly, Iran had little reason to think that Silkworm attacks on tankers supporting Iraq's war effort in Kuwait's territorial waters would provoke reprisal from a neutral power.

Operation Earnest Will is a useful case study for navies with renewed interest in gray zone conflict or any coercive action short of war. It demonstrates key concepts of escalation and restraint and the potential challenges of using coercive naval power in a complex political environment. It also demonstrates the limits of that power. It is important to understand that the Tanker War did not end because of American coercive intervention. American objectives were achieved because Iran agreed to accept a ceasefire

[54] Weinberger, *Report to the Congress*, p. 15.

under UNSCR 598 after eight years in a vicious war of attrition and after Iranian defence officials convinced the regime that they could not achieve better conditions for negotiation.[55] The US Navy certainly contributed to the outcome by destroying a significant portion of Iranian naval combat power in 1988. More important than *Praying Mantis*, however, was the coincidental Iraqi offensive that recaptured the Fao Peninsula and deprived Iran of its bargaining power. It is impossible to know what would have happened if the United States had not intervened or if Iraq had failed to retake Fao, but strategists and policymakers should note that both Iraq and Iran turned to the Persian Gulf as an avenue to achieve strategic objectives: Iraq tried to tempt intervention by outside states, and Iran tried to gain strategic leverage after being checked in every other way. By intervening on terms that were clearly favourable to Iraq, the United States – a neutral power – increased the likelihood of violence because it failed to consider that measured violence was the only option remaining for Iran.

The threat posed by modern strategic competitors using less-than-conventional methods to alter the strategic environment is now widely recognized as a pressing challenge for the United States and its allies, but such gray zone conflict is not a recent phenomenon, and other historical case studies will surely offer additional lessons. *Earnest Will* alone demonstrates the importance of understanding the adversary's rationale and the ways in which they could pursue strategic objectives despite any barriers introduced by external intervention. In addition, presence – even with the threat of force – may not deter or coerce, and the military and political considerations of other – often neutral – states will exert influence on American policy. Currently, the Persian Gulf remains a dangerous maritime environment susceptible to gray zone methods. Attacks on oil facilities and tankers by drones, limpet mines, and hijackers in recent years are simmering reminders of the 1980s. Meanwhile, China and Russia continue to use gray zone methods in pursuit of their own long-term objectives. Although such efforts might be designed to remain under the traditional threshold of armed conflict, *Earnest Will* indicates that it is possible to underestimate the gray zone environment and end up in an armed confrontation despite predictions to the contrary.

[55] Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 61.

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