7 The War and the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism
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One of the underlying themes of the eight-year Gulf War was the issue of fundamentalist Islam as a political alternative in the Middle East. The fiery new brand of Islam that grew up around the Iranian revolution played a crucial role in the war's origins, in its evolution and in the conditions that contributed to its finale.

ORIGINS

For Iraq, the perceived threat of Muslim zealotry was a primary catalyst in President Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Iran. Indeed, the spectre of a powerful Shi'ite theocracy inspiring Muslim constituencies elsewhere in the region, notably Iraq's Shi'ite majority, was arguably a more critical factor than was Baghdad's share of the Shatt-al Arab waterway. Repeated calls by Iran's mullahs for Iraqi Shi'a to rise up against the Ba'thist regime provoked both anger and alarm in Baghdad at a time that militant Islam was gaining momentum throughout the Middle East, notable during such events as the 1979 seizure of Saudi Arabia's Grand Mosque in Mecca by Sunni extremists, the Shi'ite uprisings in Saudia's eastern Hasa province in 1979 and 1980, and the challenge of Afghanistan's Mujahedeen after the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion. Baghdad was anxious to defuse the potential of a fundamentalist threat at home.

For Iran's theocrats, the conflict from the beginning was defined in part along religious lines. Just six days before Iran agreed to accept United Nations Resolution 598, Tehran Radio broadcast a communique from the Armed Forces General Command. 'This war is not about territory,' it said. 'It is a continuous confrontation between the righteous and the wicked which today has turned into a bloody conflict between two systems of values and countervalues. And what is at stake here is the all around defence of Islam and the Moslems.' For the ruling mullahs, it really was a jihad, or holy war, elevated to a cosmic plain of good versus evil in which, even during the six years when Tehran gradually regained its own territory and ate away at Iraqi land, Iran was still always perceived at home as being on the defensive, fighting to protect the pure and total Islamic vision against injustice.

Although Tehran always referred to the conflict as 'the imposed war', it in
event fit in with Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini’s broader vision in many ways. Six months after the revolution and more than a year before the war began, the imam declared, ‘The governments of the world should know that Islam cannot be defeated. Islam will be victorious in all the countries of the world, and Islam and the teachings of the Koran will prevail all over the world.’ He also specified, ‘We have in reality, then, no choice but to destroy those systems of government that are corrupt in themselves and also entail the corruption of others, and to overthrow all treacherous, corrupt, oppressive and criminal regimes. This is the duty that all Muslims must fulfill, in every one of the Muslim countries, in order to achieve the triumphant political revolution of Islam.’ Saddam Hussein’s secular, socialist and Sunni-ruled Iraq perfectly fit these criteria.

EVOLUTION

As Iran built up its own war machine after the conflict started, it also began to train and aid Muslim fanatics from other countries, most notably Lebanon. Because of the war, the Revolutionary Guards were converted from a paramilitary prop for the mullahs into a conventional military unit to supplement the regular armed forces, which had been weakened by a series of purges, executions and early retirements after the Shah’s ouster. In keeping with Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic world without national boundaries, the Pasdaran trainers also provided rudimentary instruction in camps scattered throughout Iran for hundreds of youths from Arab states as well as Afghanistan. Among the recruits were Hamza akl Hamieh, a Lebanese Shi’ite who hijacked six planes between 1979 and 1982 and who later became a military commander of a Lebanese Shi’ite militia, and the suicide bomber who drove into the American marine compound in Beirut in 1983 and killed 241 US military personnel. Others suspected by Arab and Western intelligence of receiving Iranian training and backing were members of a group who attempted a coup d’état in Bahrain in 1981 and the seventeen Iraqis and Lebanese who were convicted and imprisoned in Kuwait for the 1983 bombings of the US and French embassies and four other strategic installations. (The imprisonment of the Kuwaiti seventeen, in turn, became the motivation for Lebanon’s Islamic Jihad to kidnap American hostages, showing how the emergence of new extremist movements also often created a new cycle of political activism and violence in the region.)

The campaign to export the revolution was, in the initial stages, often haphazard and clumsy. This was particularly evident after the arrest of 73 Shi’a from several Gulf Arab states for the 1981 plot in Bahrain, one of the few cases in which Iran’s role was traceable; although no Iranians were arrested, Bahraini intelligence claimed the plotters had used the Iranian Embassy’s diplomatic pouch to bring in equipment. In March 1982, how-