

Carry on Up The Gulf

"Nations are real things, of whom you love one and feel for the rest indifference - or hatred. The glory of the nation you love is a desirable end - but generally to be obtained at your neighbour's expense. The politics of power are inevitable, and there is nothing new to learn about this war or the end it was fought for it would be stupid to believe that there is much room in the world, as it really is, for such affairs as the League of Nations, or any sense in the principle of self-determination except as an ingenious formula for rearranging the balance of power in one's own interests."

This is J.M. Keynes describing the attitude of Clemenceau at Versailles towards the world of 1919 and the states which would be formed after the peace conference. The French president would have felt completely at home in the politics of the gulf. Far from events there being explained by the madness of the mullahs or the brutality of the Iraqi regime, the behaviour of the great and not-so-great powers conforms exactly to the classic model of nation state conflict

Genesis of a Dispute

The treaty of Erzerum of 31st May 1847 defined the frontiers between the Ottoman and Persian empires. The second and third articles of the treaty gave the Sublime Porte sovereignty over the whole of the Shatt al-Arab waterway but recognised Persian sovereignty over the eastern bank and over the anchorage and town of what is now Khurramshahr. In 1914 a commission set up by the British, Russians, Turks and Persians began work by delimiting the frontier on the Shatt al-Arab as running along the low water mark on the Persian side, except in the vicinity of Khurramshahr where it followed the line of deepest flow.

On achieving independence, Iraq made it clear that reclaimed the whole rights of the Ottoman Empire over the Shatt al-Arab. Persia under Reza Shah found the position increasingly annoying, especially at Abadan Island, a port of shipment for Persian oil,

where ships had to berth and load in Iraqi waters. Eventually both countries took their case to the League of Nations. A treaty was signed in 1937 when Persia was given a frontier in the vicinity of Abadan consistent with the line of deepest flow for a distance of eight kilometres.

Relations after the Second World War between Iraq and Persia (now Iran) went from bad to worse. Muhammad Reza Shah was annoyed both by the attempts of the Iraqi government to stir up irredentist feeling in Khuzistan where many of the inhabitants were Arab and by the treatment of thousands of Iranians who live in Iraq. But the Shatt al-Arab remained the principle bone of contention. Although Abadan was no longer as important as it had been for the export of Iranian oil, Khurramshahr was still a major port of entry for goods destined for the interior of Iran. In 1965 Iran threatened to renounce the treaty of 1937 if Iraq continued its 'provocation'. In 1969 Iran did just that stating that the only frontier it would accept along the waterway was the median line.

Thousands of Iranian pilgrims were expelled from Iraq and the Iraqi government threatened to unleash the 'Front for the Liberation of Khuzistan'. The Iranians for their part began to arm Kurdish rebels in the north of Iraq. Behind the bluster, the Iraqis were worried. Conscious of their weakness in terms of military strength, population and wealth when compared with Iran, the Iraqis looked for allies. The Americans were heavily involved in Iran so the Iraqis naturally turned to the Soviet Union which wanted to extend its influence in the gulf. It turned out that the Russians could only provide limited help. The Iraqi government came under more and more pressure from Kurdish rebels and in 1975 it had to settle. In return for Iraq's concession of the median line of the Shatt al-Arab as the Iran-Iraq frontier, the Shah agreed to stop supplying arms to the Kurds. Although the OPEC summit meeting at Algiers in 1975 witnessed the touching scene of Muhammad Reza Shah embracing Saddam Hussain al-Takriti, the Iraqi vice-president, it was clear that the agreement was a defeat for the Iraqi government.

So here is a typical territorial dispute between two states bubbling merrily away.

Matters become even more exciting when the states in question turn out to be unstable. And during the 1970s Iraq and Iran were very unstable indeed.

There is no sense of historical continuity between Iraq's previous existence as three distinct vilayets (provinces) of the Ottoman Empire and its present status. The population of Iraq is made up of a number of separate communities distinguished by religious, racial and cultural differences. There are Sunni and Shii Arabs, Kurds and Yazidis. Turcomans, Jews and Christians. The lack of a general political community tends to make the rule of law difficult and political differences are often resolved by violence. Arab nationalism is inseparable from Islam and that normally means Sunni Islam. The nationalism advocated by the Iraqi elite therefore appeals to only one community and is sectarian and divisive. It is important to note that the army and police, especially in the officer corps, is recruited from the Sunni communities north of Baghdad.

No Persian Renaissance

Iranian politics in the 1970s was not noticeably more successful than Iraq's. In 1971 Muhammad Reza Shah celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy. It was the Shah's way of announcing the emergence of Persia/Iran as a great power. He believed that the Iranian civilisation was superior to that of his Muslim neighbours and that the West was irredeemably decadent. His father, Reza Khan, had been a near illiterate soldier who achieved power in a *coup d'etat* in 1920-21. He adopted the patronym of 'Pahlavi' the name of the Persian language before its 'corruption' by Arabic. The Shah followed the example of his father, showering endless dignities upon himself. but fate was determined that he should not bestride Western Asia like Cyrus the Great.

The reasons for the Shah's downfall seem fairly clear. The Iranian monarchy relied upon the support of the rural classes but as with many third world leaders, the Shah was keen to industrialise.

Unfortunately, the growing industrial proletariat did not share the enthusiasm of their rural brethren for the Peacock throne. The Shah attempted to relegate religion to the sidelines after the fashion of Attaturk thereby ensuring the enmity of the mullahs. These social tensions might have been contained if the Shah had not gone on a spending binge after the first oil shock. When the price of oil began to fall back, huge commitments could not be sustained, and rising inflation antagonised the middle class, precisely the group which might have sustained the Shah in his darkest hour. The Shah's boast that Iran was a modern state was, in any case, vastly exaggerated. Illiteracy was very high, religion very influential and the economy heavily dependent on one commodity. The combination of Islamic fundamentalism and radical political ideas of every statist stripe is well known in the Middle East and it proved too much for the Shah.

In the past, the fall of a dynasty in Iran has meant that the country would be rent by civil war and foreign invasion. The departure of the Shah proved to be no exception. The growing chaos in Iran gave the Iraqis the chance to revenge themselves for the 1975 humiliation. The Iraqi invasion was at first successful, but by weight of men the Iranians drove them back and a kind of stalemate was reached. This stalemate has given the superpowers time to define their respective positions in the gulf.

The US fear a spread of Iranian fundamentalism throughout the Middle East damaging their economic interests. Their main objective is the prevention of an Iranian victory and they are therefore willing to escort Kuwaiti tankers carrying oil for Iraq. The US argument about freedom of navigation is quite specious. If the Americans are worried about freedom of navigation then they should support Iran to the hilt. All Iranian oil exports must go through the gulf whilst Iraq's can be partly transported across land. The Iranians have the most to lose. therefore, when gulf shipping is attacked, and it is no surprise to learn that the Iraqis began the attacks on ships.

The Russians have no interest in the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, but they do have an interest in

embarrassing the USA. To the extent that the Iranians can damage the US they are to be supported. It is not true, as George Shultz seems to think, that the Americans and Russians can have a common policy in the gulf for long. The super powers are to be likened to two boxers who sometimes go into a clinch to recover energy. If one boxer seems to be gaining more from these clinches however, it is clearly in the interests of the other boxer to terminate the arrangement.

A Question of No Importance

What are the implications for libertarianism of the war over the Shatt al-Arab? Put it another way. What are the implications for libertarianism of the war in Afghanistan? It might be possible to make out some sort of libertarian case for the Russian intervention in Afghanistan. The Afghans are backward and barbarous and Afghan society would progress faster economically under the Russians. Equally it might be possible to make out some sort of libertarian case against the Russian intervention. The Russians are not wanted and they are responsible for thousands of deaths and millions of refugees. But the truth is that libertarianism does not have much to do with it. And so it is with the gulf. There are no significant libertarian issues at stake. The choice between Iran and Iraq is the choice between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and it is a choice which does not have to be made.

The only certainty is that the war makes the development of liberal ideas in the Middle East more difficult than ever - a daunting conclusion. If any liberal ideas had been available, the Iranian and Iraqi governments would have realised that the issue of who owned the Shatt al-Arab was not really all that important. Free Trade between nations means that the waterway would have been used for the economic benefit of the populations of both countries, though the respective political elites would have had much less fun.

Free Life