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Persian Gulf Navies: A Power Vacuum

An Intelligence Memorandum

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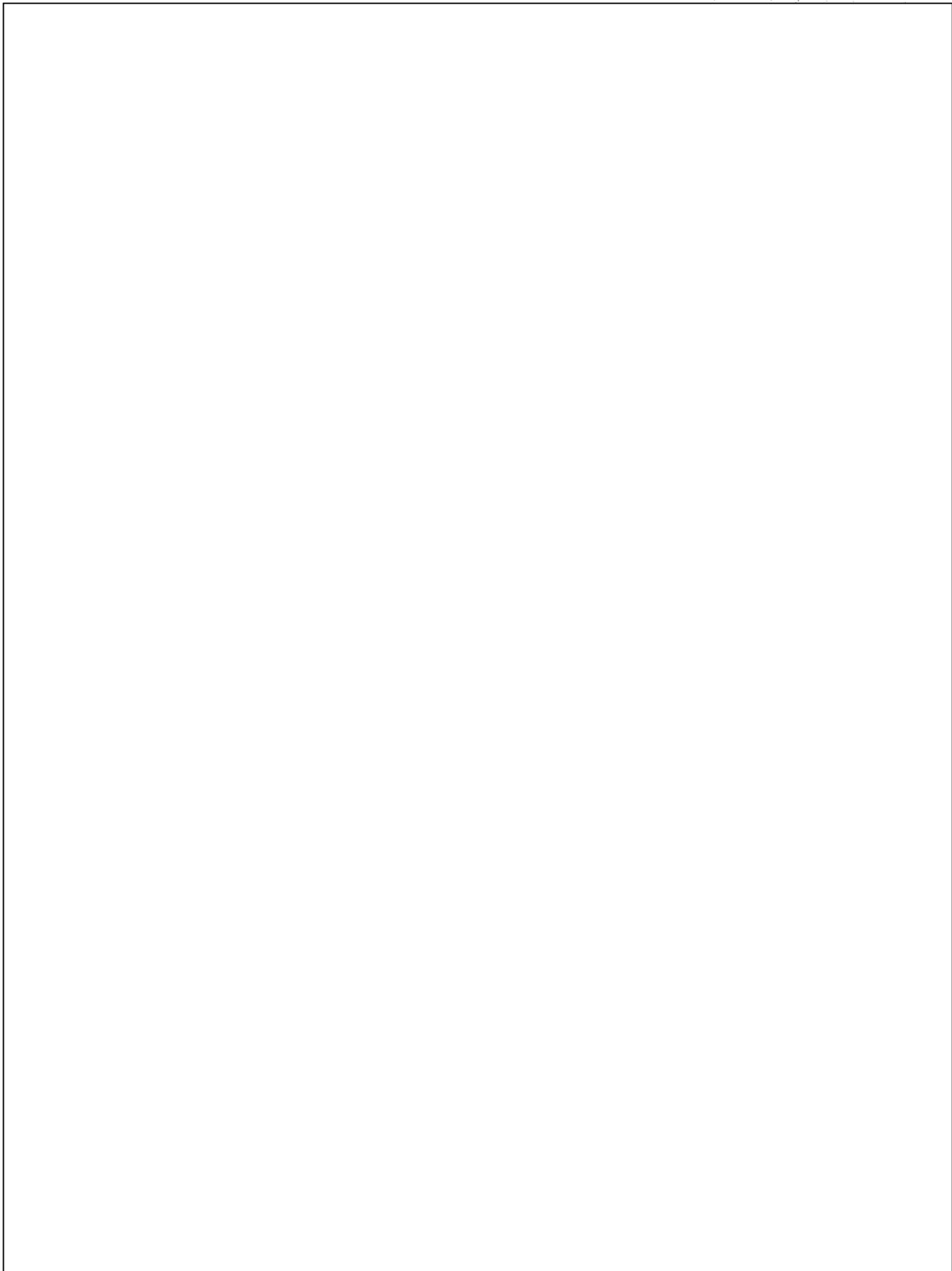
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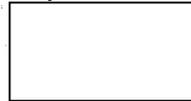
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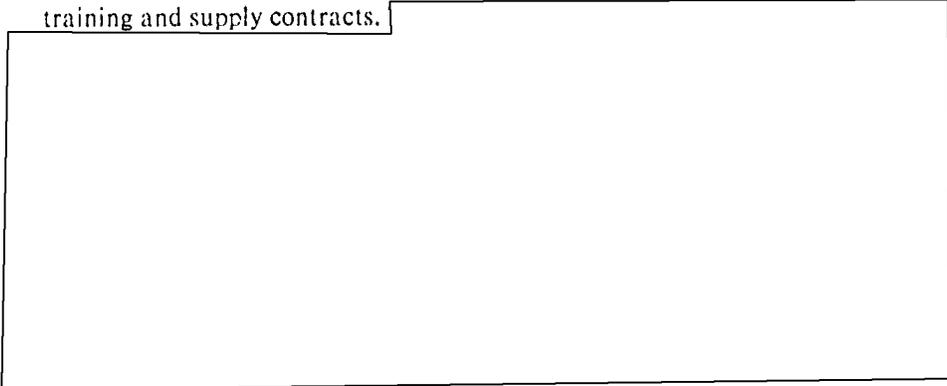


Persian Gulf Navies:
A Power Vacuum (U)

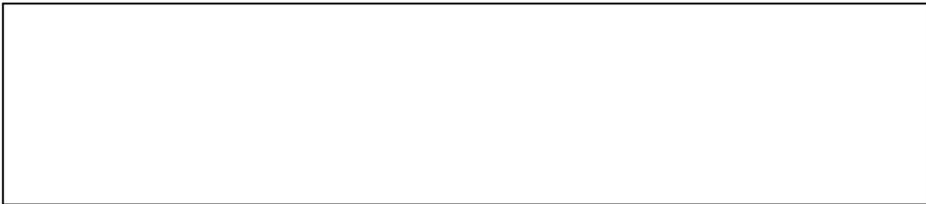
Summary

The revolution in February 1979 crippled the Iranian Navy, both as a regional naval power and as a coastal defense force. Prospects are dim that the navies of other Gulf states—alone or in concert—can ensure the security of the Gulf and the free flow of its oil. Iraq, Oman, and Saudi Arabia are the only states with navies of any size, and their mutual distrust suggests that they are more likely to compete than to cooperate in their efforts to fill the current void. 

The causes of the downfall of the Iranian Navy are many: the loss of maintenance skills, a shortage of critical spare parts, the demoralizing influence of Revolutionary Councils upon military discipline, a weakening of leadership, the departure of foreign advisers, and the interruption of foreign training and supply contracts. 

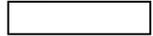
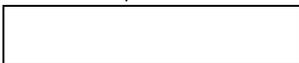
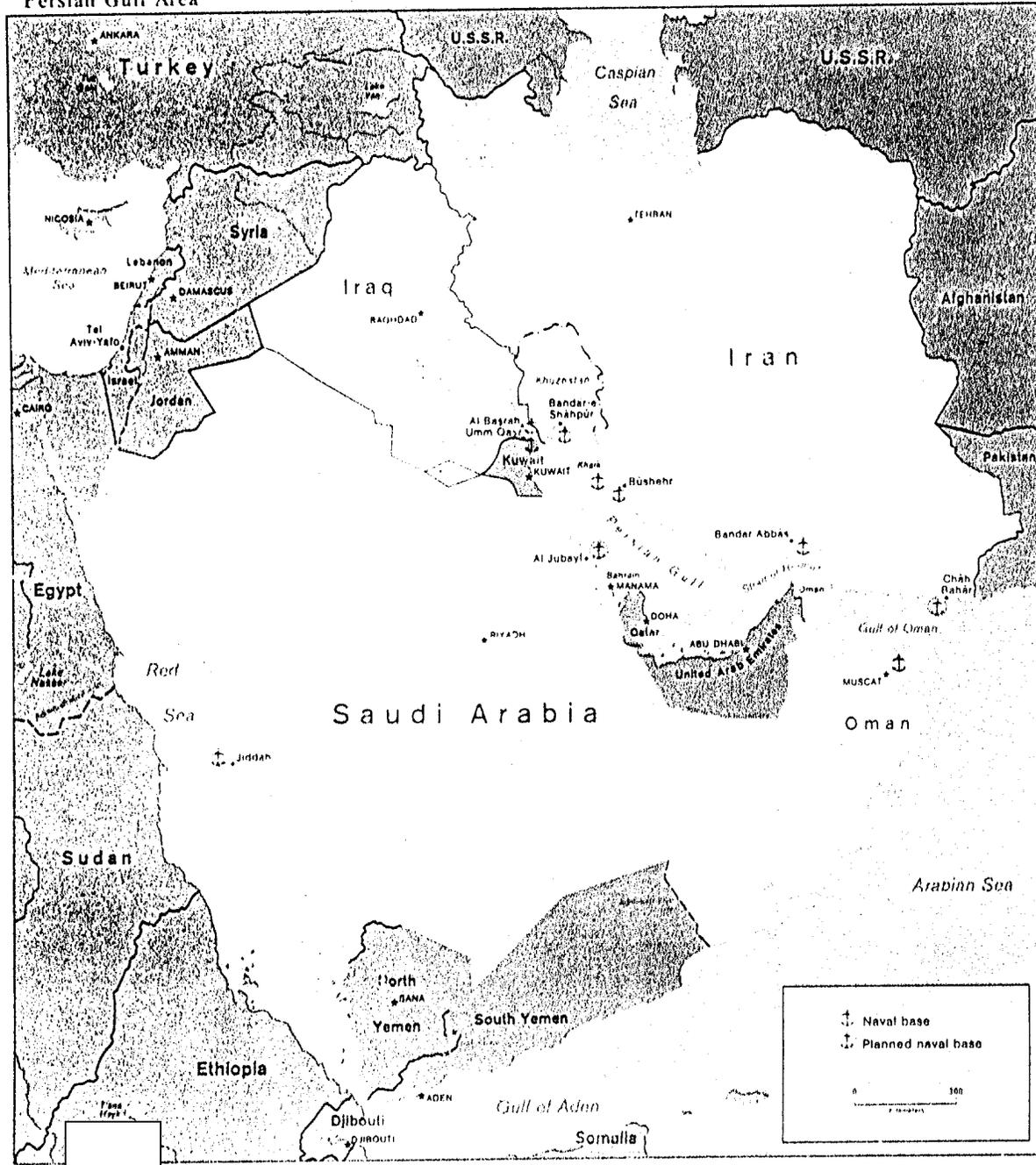


While US and allied economic sanctions remain in force, Iranian naval capabilities will continue to deteriorate. Because almost all of the Navy's equipment was obtained from the West, those sanctions make the Navy's supply and spare parts problems almost insoluble. In addition, the eroding skills of Iranian seamen will deteriorate further without renewed foreign assistance. The current government has neither the funds nor the commitment to arrest the Navy's decline. Even if it had both, the decline probably could not be reversed before the mid-1980s. 





Persian Gulf Area





**Persian Gulf Navies:
A Power Vacuum (U)**

**The Devastation of
the Iranian Navy**

The Navy Before the Revolution

Under the Shah, the Imperial Iranian Navy had both a coastal defense and a regional "blue water" mission. Its strategy was designed to protect the oil routes from the head of the Persian Gulf to the deep-water sea routes of the Indian Ocean. Suspicious of Iraq and its Soviet connection, the Shah was determined to maintain a fast, hard-hitting fleet inside the Persian Gulf to protect vulnerable oilfields and facilities from Iraqi strikes. Plans for the construction of the military base at Chah Bahar indicated Iran's concern with future control of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman (see map).



The Shah's grandiose plans for all the armed forces were financially dependent on Iranian oil. He realized that the oil boom of the 1970s would not last forever and was determined to bring the Iranian Navy quickly up to par with those of industrialized nations through purchases of the most modern arms available.



A close relationship with the West was a natural outgrowth of this effort. The economies of the United States and its allies depended on Persian Gulf oil, and the Shah's military ambitions coincided with the Western need for a strong and reliable ally in the region. (U)

Assuming Britain's vacated role as the dominant military power in the area, Iran assembled a navy larger than the combined naval forces of all the other countries bordering the Gulf. It grew to some 28,000 personnel and was organized into three flotillas at four bases on the Persian Gulf. Its 117 ships included 20 major combatants—3 destroyers, 4 frigates, 4 destroyer escorts, and 9 patrol boats—all but the escorts armed with guided missiles. It also had five minesweepers and 14 air-cushion vehicles—more hovercraft than any other navy except that of the Soviet Union.



The ability of the Navy to absorb and maintain the new ships and weapon systems was severely limited by a persistent shortage of mechanics and technicians. In addition, it had neither the facilities nor the administrators to handle large deliveries of new hardware. While the Shah was modernizing the military, he was also proceeding with economic development, social welfare, and other civilian modernization programs, and these simultaneous efforts competed for Iran's small trained work force. A disproportionate number of enlisted personnel were uneducated, two-year conscripts for whom extensive training was considered impractical. To work with



sophisticated equipment, the Shah hired many foreign technicians and sent large numbers of Iranian students to training schools in the United States and Europe. Thus, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Iranian capability to assimilate its new acquisitions became increasingly tied to the US capacity to provide technical assistance and training. [redacted]

In the late 1970s, while this arrangement was working smoothly, Iran's Navy was an impressive force, certainly the most powerful in the Persian Gulf. The officer cadre was especially well trained and loyal to the Shah, and discipline was reflected in a generally high state of operational readiness. New, highly advanced arms were pouring into the country, and although much of the online equipment was old and obsolete, it was fairly well maintained, with the help of foreign nationals, and fleet exercises and training proceeded regularly. [redacted]

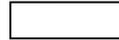
Revolution and Erosion

The revolution had a devastating effect on the Navy's combat readiness. Central command and control collapsed with the successive appointment and dismissal of four commanders in chief. Nearly all flag officers were arrested, retired, or forced into hiding when the Revolutionary Councils took over. With the departure of foreign technicians, most overhaul, repair, and maintenance activities were abandoned. Exercises, training, and even patrols were curtailed or suspended, and the Navy was virtually dormant for most of 1979. While some ships could still put to sea, they could not conduct maneuvers, fire guns, or remain at sea longer than a few days without mechanical breakdowns. Fire control systems, calibration devices, radars, and other equipment that depends on sophisticated electronic components rapidly deteriorated. [redacted]

The impact on naval personnel was equally ruinous. [redacted]

[redacted] Morale in the officer corps plummeted under the constant fear of dismissal, and the lower ranks lost confidence in the decisions of their superiors as they realized the sweeping authority of the Revolutionary Councils and the extent of their interference in the military chain of command. [redacted]

These turbulent changes lowered the professional and technical qualifications of the higher echelons of command. Junior officers, petty officers, and even civilian shipyard workers were elected or promoted to the positions of former high-ranking officers. These men were deficient in both trade and managerial skills. Although most had had some technical training, they had never performed or supervised ship repairs requiring advanced skills, and there were no longer any foreign technical experts upon whom to call for assistance. [redacted]

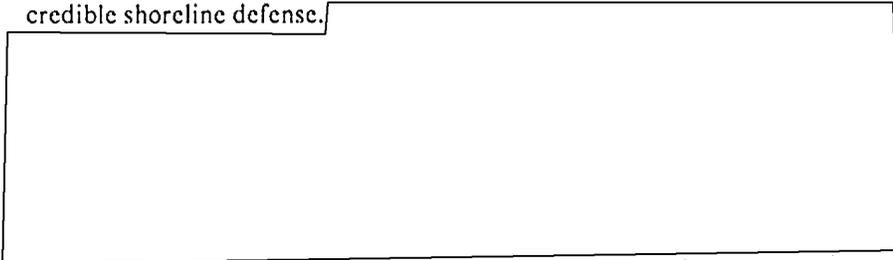


Current Posture

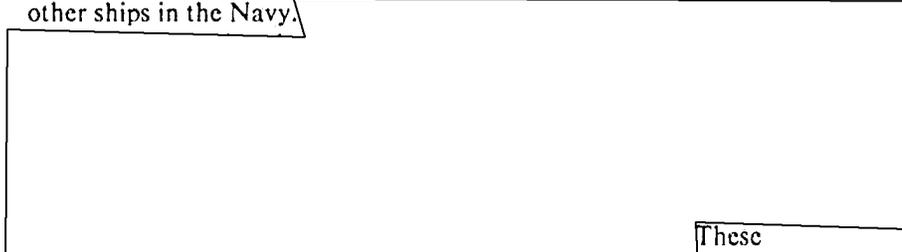
The Navy has emerged from the chaos of the revolution with a changed mission. Mainly because of policy decisions by government authorities, but also because its capabilities have diminished, the Navy has relinquished its former mission of protecting sea lanes in the Gulf of Oman and northwest Arabian Sea and is now little more than a coastal defense force. It also has a battered self-image that will be a long time healing. Despite the Navy's recent efforts to improve its maintenance capabilities, the ships still break down so often that they cannot be counted on even for coastal patrols.



Major Combatants. Iran's 20 major naval combatants (see table 1) have had such extensive and repeated mechanical difficulties since the revolution that some of them have rarely been noted at sea. The backbone of the Navy—the three guided-missile destroyers and four guided-missile frigates—spend most of their time in port and could not now muster even a credible shoreline defense.



The missile attack boats—the Iranian patrol units most frequently deployed in the Persian Gulf—have maintained a higher level of readiness than most other ships in the Navy.



These

French-built boats are the main fighting force of the Iranian Navy and even in their present state are a lethal force.





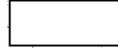
Table 1

The Ships of the Persian Gulf Navies

Type	Number	Major Armament	Range (km)
Iran: Major Combatants			
Destroyer (ex-British)	1	SSM Standard SAM Seacat	13
Destroyer (ex-US)	2	SSM Standard	13
Frigate	4	SSM Seakiller SAM Seacat	12 to 20
Corvette	4	Two 76-mm guns	
Missile attack boat	9	SSM Harpoon	55
Iran: Other			
Fast patrol boats	15		
Motor gunboats	7	One 40-mm gun	
Other patrol craft	15		
Minesweeper	5		
Hovercraft	14		
Amphibious landing craft	3		
Auxiliary craft	21		
Iraq			
OSA I patrol boats	4	SSM Styx	40 km
OSA II patrol boats	8	SSM Styx	40 km
Patrol craft	25	3.7-inch guns or smaller	
Minesweepers	5		
Amphibious craft	4		
Auxiliary craft	21		
Oman			
Missile patrol boats	2	SSM Exocet	42
Patrol craft	10	40-mm or smaller guns	
Amphibious craft	4		
Auxiliary craft	5		
Saudi Arabia			
Patrol craft	4	40-mm guns	
Mine warfare ships	4		
Amphibious craft	6		
Auxiliary craft	4		

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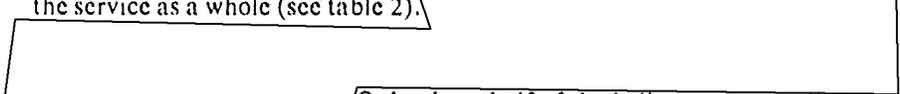


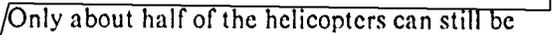


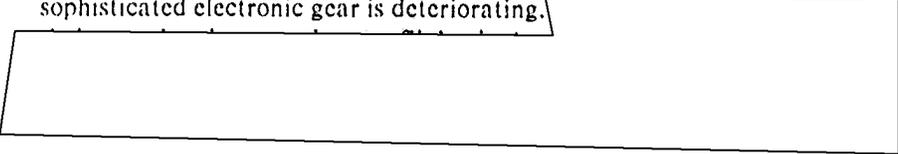
Other Equipment. The operational effectiveness of the approximately 15 US-built 65-foot fast patrol boats has dropped as frequent mechanical breakdowns have reduced their availability. By comparison, the seven motor gunboats—older and simpler than some of the Navy's more recent acquisitions—are less prone to breakdown but are obsolescent. Armed only with 40-mm, 20-mm, and 50-caliber guns, these boats offer little deterrent to potential enemies. Nevertheless, the Navy relies heavily on its patrol boats and gunboats for patrol duties. 

Iran's five minesweepers are virtually limited to patrol functions. Their equipment is old and breaks down repeatedly, the crews are not exercised, and the ships spend most of their time in port. The Navy has never had a mine-laying capability and its ability to sweep mines is poor. 

The Shah's ambitious hovercraft fleet has been greatly affected by the disruption of maintenance and lack of spare parts. 

The Navy's helicopter fleet has suffered from the same problems affecting the service as a whole (see table 2). 

 Only about half of the helicopters can still be operated, and on them some of the weapons and electronic systems no longer function. 

The Navy's air arm also includes a number of P-3F Orion long-range patrol aircraft, but most are flying only 15 to 20 hours per month, and their sophisticated electronic gear is deteriorating. 

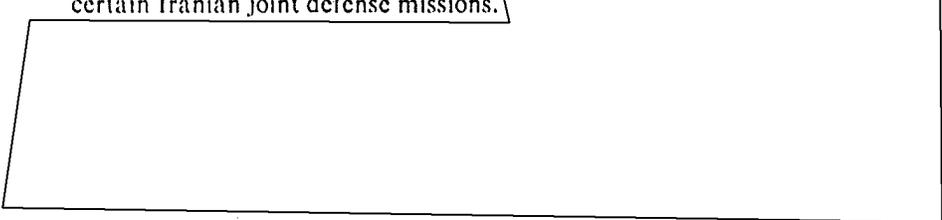
Friction between the Air Force and the Navy has hampered the execution of certain Iranian joint defense missions. 





Table 2

Status of Iran's Principal Naval Helicopters

Type	Origin	Function
18 SH-3D	Italian	Primarily antisubmarine warfare
18 AB-212	Italian	General purpose
6 RH-53	US	Minesweeping
14 H-3	German	General purpose
50 HU-1	US	General purpose

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The Navy's support ships have apparently performed somewhat more reliably than the other craft in the fleet—mainly because reduced operations have lessened the demands on them. The auxiliary forces include landing craft, barges, supply and repair ships, tankers, a water boat, tugboats, and two ex-Italian liners used as barracks ships.

Deterioration Continues. The Navy's overall level of preparedness will continue to decline. With national priority no longer given automatically to the armed forces, and oil production sharply down, neither the commitment nor the funds exist to arrest the Navy's deterioration, much less to reverse it.

Further deterioration is inevitable, despite an official recognition of the problem and some nominal efforts to correct it. Given the fragmented nature of Iran's Government and the aimless drift of its leaderless bureaucracy, the current situation will continue for some time. The US embargo, backed by allied support, is having a telling effect. This supply cutoff, on top of the nation's inherent weaknesses and its continuing domestic chaos, has doomed the Iranian Navy to decline. Even if the embargo were to end soon, the decline probably could not be reversed before the mid-1980s.



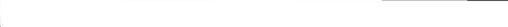


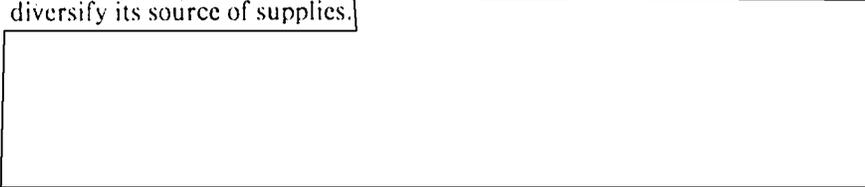
The Other Gulf Navies

The decline of Iran's once-respected naval forces has left a power vacuum that the other regional states have so far been unable to fill. Iraq, Oman, and Saudi Arabia have been exploring options for expanding their own naval roles in the Gulf area and have taken specific steps to improve their capabilities. 

Iraq

Iraq, already the strongest air and ground power of the Persian Gulf states, has the best potential for becoming the major Gulf naval power as well. Currently, however, its Navy is small, poorly trained, and largely devoted to coastal defense. The fleet's principal combatants are 12 Soviet-built Osa missile patrol boats. Iraq plans a major expansion that will allow the Navy to carry out regular patrols and project a viable combat capability throughout the Gulf by the mid-to-late 1980s. It has already acquired a frigate training ship from Yugoslavia for naval cadets. Even if the expansion were completed, however, Iraq would be hard pressed to maintain such a fleet at a high state of operational readiness. 

Although most of its major military equipment has come from the Soviet Union, Baghdad has been turning to the West since the mid-1970s to diversify its source of supplies. 

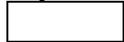


Iraq believes that it can play a major role--if not the dominant one--in the Gulf. This would allow it to protect the shipment of its oil, counter the influence of its old nemesis Iran, and expand its own power and influence among the smaller Gulf states. To achieve these goals, however, Iraq will have to hire or train skilled personnel. 

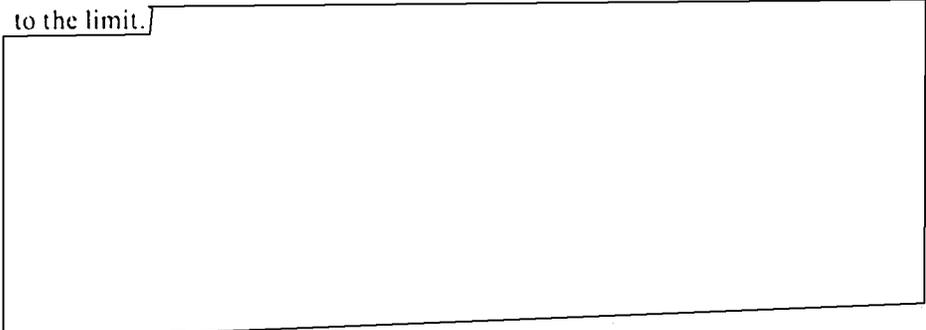
Oman

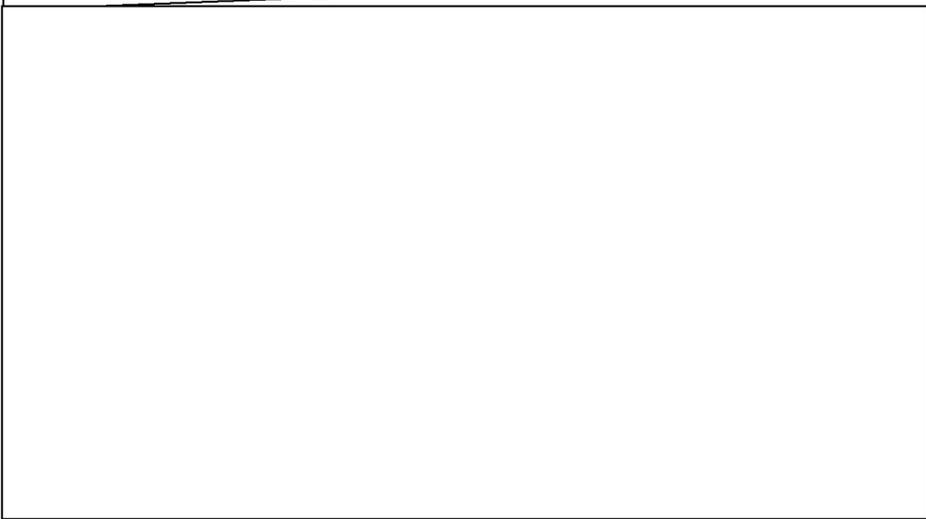
Oman's strategic location on the Strait of Hormuz places a heavy burden on the tiny but efficient Omani Navy. Trained and led largely by British officers, this Navy plays a vital role in guaranteeing the smooth flow of shipping through the Strait. Oman's two Brooke missile patrol boats, along





with three small gunboats, conduct regular patrols in the area of the Strait as well as in the Gulf of Oman. In addition to overseeing the safety of the shipping channels, Omani ships must guard Oman's territorial waters and monitor the local activities of nonregional navies—currently those of the United States and the USSR. 

Oman faces a dilemma. Sultan Qabus has committed the country to protecting the shipping lanes into the Gulf—even though all of its own port facilities are outside the Gulf—but its meager resources are being stretched to the limit. 



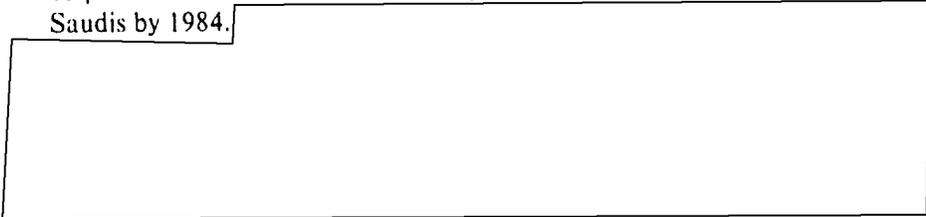
Saudi Arabia

Unlike Oman, Saudi Arabia has the financial means to expand its scant naval forces significantly. It could not absorb large amounts of modern, technically complex equipment, however. The Saudi Navy currently has four small patrol boats which have only limited capacity for shore patrols, and it must compete with the other armed services for the tiny pool of trainable manpower in the country. There are few trained officers or experienced NCOs around whom the Saudis can build an efficient force.





Nevertheless, the Saudis have developed an ambitious plan to expand the Navy to two flotillas—one in the Red Sea and one in the Persian Gulf—and to at least quadruple its force of patrol boats by 1984. The Navy plans to build three new facilities—a headquarters in Riyadh, a base in Jiddah on the Red Sea, and a base at Jubail on the Gulf. US firms are currently building 13 patrol boats to be armed with Harpoon missiles and delivered to the Saudis by 1984.



Prospects for the Persian Gulf

With Iran in disarray, Iraq, Oman, and Saudi Arabia all recognize the vulnerability of the Persian Gulf and its vital energy resources, but none of these navies, acting alone, will be capable of guaranteeing the security of the Gulf before the latter part of the decade, if then. Iraq will probably greatly increase its inventory of ships and weapons, but its shallow organizational base, inexperience, and technical weaknesses together will limit the effectiveness of the new force. Oman's Navy—better trained, organized, and led than any other in the Gulf—cannot be greatly expanded unless Oman finds a dependable financial backer. Saudi Arabia has the wealth to buy new equipment—much is already in the pipeline—but will have great difficulty absorbing the equipment or expanding its naval role in the Gulf. 

Only through closer coordination of naval planning could the Gulf states find an early regional solution to their joint security needs, but the prospects for such cooperation are dim. Their longstanding mutual distrust probably will doom any such efforts in the near future. 

Consequently, the regional navies will probably compete for influence instead of moving toward their common strategic goal—reduced dependence on outside powers for the security of the Gulf and the free flow of its oil. The Gulf states' failure to cooperate would convince the nonregional powers that they must maintain their own strategic naval presence in the area. 



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