

"IRAN"

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IRAN: NEW ARAB ALIGNMENTS

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The war with Iraq has encouraged Tehran to seek new allies among the radical Arab states. Since Ayatollah Rafsanjani's visit to Algeria, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon last month, Iran has moved rapidly to align itself with the radicals' Steadfastness Front. If Tehran's new alliances endure, Iran may play a larger role in regional politics in the months ahead.

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Iran played little part in Middle Eastern politics from the fall of the Shah to the start of the war with Iraq because of its preoccupations with internal problems and the hostage crisis. Tehran did attempt to subvert its neighbors by aiding dissident Shia movements in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Persian Gulf states, but this aid was limited primarily to propaganda.

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The Syrian Alliance

Tehran's diplomatic isolation in the early days of the war encouraged it to seek new allies among the radical Arabs led by Syria--a traditional enemy of Iraq. Ties between Syria and Iran were cordial before the war, but they had not developed significantly. Despite much talk of cooperation, President Assad never made a long planned visit to Tehran.

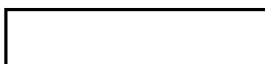
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Both Damascus and Tehran had given some aid to dissident Iraqi Kurdish and Shia groups. Since the start of the war this aid has been stepped up. Syrian radio has announced the formation of a unified Iraqi liberation movement also backed by Tehran, and both states have given financial and arms support to Iraqi dissidents.

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Shortly after the start of the war Syria began supplying Iran with small arms and ammunition. Syria has also served as a transshipment point for supplies

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NSA review(s) completed.

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from East European countries to Iran, [redacted]

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[redacted] Tehran and Damascus consulted on the Syrian military buildup along the Jordanian border. Tehran almost certainly encouraged Assad to keep troops along the border for the duration of the war in hopes of intimidating Amman into reducing its support for the Iraqi war effort. Jordan is a key supply route for Iraqi war materiel--in late November Tehran reduced relations with Jordan to the charge level to protest King Hussein's outspoken support for Iraq.

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[redacted]

Tehran backed Syria's boycott of the Amman Arab summit conference. Prime Minister Rajai recently called the Syrian boycott "a victory for ourselves," and President Bani-Sadr urged the Jordanian people to topple the "puppet regime" in Amman. The Iranians have strongly protested the summit's communique, which supported Iraq.

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[redacted]

Libya and the Missing Imam

Tehran's relations with Libya have improved even more dramatically. Although Libyan leader Qadhafi has long expressed support for Iran's Islamic revolution, relations between the two states were troubled by widespread allegations that Qadhafi was responsible for the mysterious disappearance in 1978 of Lebanese Shia Muslim leader Imam Musa Sadr, a longtime friend of Ayatollah Khomeini and President Bani-Sadr. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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The South Yemeni Connection

Iran has also sought to improve ties with Marxist South Yemen. Iranian Ambassador to Kuwait, Ali Shams Ardakani, visited Aden in mid-November. Ardakani is the first senior Iranian official to travel to South Yemen since the Shah broke relations in the early 1970s because of Aden's support for the Dhofar rebellion in Oman. Iran may also soon start to send oil to Aden's refinery. []

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Ardakani's trip reflected Iran's concern about the close ties between Iraq and the conservative monarchies in the Arabian peninsula led by Saudi Arabia. Tehran may hope that the appearance of improved relations with Communist Aden will serve to remind the monarchs of Tehran's ability to make trouble by working with dissident groups in the area. Since the start of the war, Tehran radio has continued to provide propaganda support to dissident Shia groups in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Gulf states. []

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The Palestinians' Dilemma

Iran's only close ally in the region before the war was the Palestine Liberation Organization, which has long supported the Khomeini revolution. PLO head Yasir Arafat made two widely publicized trips to Tehran after the fall of the Shah to demonstrate the closeness of the relationship. []

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The war with Iraq, however, has complicated Iranian-PLO ties because the PLO has sought to preserve its ties with Arab Baghdad. Arafat initially hoped to mediate the differences between the two sides and traveled to both capitals in the early days of the war, but his mission failed and led to strains with both sides. []

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Tehran continues to support the PLO in its struggle against Israel, however, and relations may again become more cordial since the PLO's decision to join the Syrian boycott of the Amman summit. The PLO retains an embassy in Tehran (the onetime home of the Israeli mission) and has wide popular support among the Iranian masses. []

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Outlook

It is too early to tell how enduring Iran's new alliances with the radical Arabs will be. If ties continue or expand, Iran may begin to play a larger role in regional affairs. Ties with the radical Arabs will tend to increase the conservative Arabs' fear of Iranian subversion and might push them closer to both Iraq and the United States for protection. A cementing of the Tehran-Damascus-Tripoli alignment could serve to push the Amman-Baghdad-Riyadh alliance closer together. [redacted]

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Improved ties with Tehran will also serve to increase the radicals' clout in Arab-Israeli issues. Although Tehran cannot aid Syria's military position against Israel, Iran can help Damascus press the Saudis and other moderate Arab states to continue boycotting Israel and US peace efforts in the region. [redacted]

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Closer ties with the radical Arabs could lead to an improvement in Iranian-Soviet relations. Syria, South Yemen, and Libya are Moscow's closest allies in the area, and Tehran is already gaining increased access to Soviet military equipment by dealing with these states. The radical Arabs will probably seek to persuade the Iranians of the benefits of closer ties with Moscow. [redacted]

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A dramatic improvement in Soviet-Iranian ties is unlikely given Tehran's deeply held suspicions about Moscow's regional intentions, but some practical improvements in relations are possible. Such a move would in turn lead to increased concern among the Saudis and others about Tehran's activities in the region. [redacted]

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