

Maritime Security and Geopolitics: Operation Earnest Will and the Projection of U.S. Power in the Persian Gulf

Amanda Neves Leal Marini¹

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the naval dimension of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) within the geopolitical context, exploring the intersections between maritime security, energy security, and the strategies of global powers. The central hypothesis suggests that Operation Earnest Will (1987–1988) marked a turning point in consolidating U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf, anticipating the strategies later applied during the Gulf War (1990). Through a qualitative approach based on a literature review and document analysis, it concludes that the operation not only ensured the continued flow of oil but also reinforced U.S. power projection in the region. The study highlights how historical, religious, and geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East were instrumentalized by global interests, reaffirming the Persian Gulf's strategic role in energy stability and the dynamics of international power.

Keywords: United States; Iran-Iraq War; Persian Gulf; Operation Earnest Will.

¹ PhD candidate and Master's degree holder in Military Sciences from the Graduate Program in Military Sciences (PPGCM) at the Meira Mattos Institute, affiliated with the Army Command and General Staff School (ECEME).

INTRODUCTION

The United States emerged from World War II in 1945 with a significantly altered status. The country had established itself not only as a political power but also as an economic and military one, reflecting a trajectory that had begun at the end of World War I. In this new context, driven by the desire to secure new energy sources closely tied to development, the United States implemented successive foreign policy doctrines, with a special focus on the Middle East — a region rich in hydrocarbons — aiming to achieve its strategic objectives. The term “doctrine” refers to a broad and structured discourse, such as the annual State of the Union Address (SOTU) delivered by the U.S. president. These speeches outline the strategic vision for national security, establishing continuities or changes in the country’s foreign policy (MICHAELS, 2011, p. 470).

Halliday (2005, pp. 124–125) notes that these presidential doctrines have, at various times, sought to protect Washington’s specific interests in the Middle East — broadly speaking, control over oil and natural gas fields and reserves. However, such resources are not evenly distributed across the region; they are predominantly located along the waters of the Persian Gulf. Among the doctrines mentioned, key examples include the Truman Doctrine (1947), which was also applied in defense of Western interests in Turkey and Iran; the Eisenhower Doctrine (1957), which sought to reassure Arab allies after the Suez Crisis; the Kennedy Doctrine (1961), which promoted social reforms in Iran and Egypt to prevent revolutions. Furthermore, the Nixon Doctrine (1969) introduced the Twin Pillars Strategy², delegating the task of maintaining security in the Persian Gulf to Iran and Saudi Arabia, thus ensuring Western access to oil. Finally, the Carter Doctrine (1980) was formulated to protect American interests in the Gulf in response to growing threats in the region and increasing instability regarding access to energy resources. These presidential doctrines articulate broad principles of national security, identifying

2 The Two-Pillar Doctrine was one of the main U.S. foreign policy strategies in the Middle East during the Cold War, aiming to stabilize the region by supporting two key allies: Iran and Saudi Arabia. This approach sought to contain the expansion of Soviet influence by ensuring that both countries acted as counterweights to movements with socialist or communist orientations. U.S. military support to Iran, which lasted until 1979 and included the sale of advanced weaponry, was a crucial part of this doctrine, reflecting the country’s strategic importance to American interests in the Middle East (ALVANDI, 2012).

perceived threats and outlining strategies to address them. However, these guidelines often reflect narrow conceptions of security, creating conditions that may generate crises by ignoring contingencies outside their immediate interests (BADIE, 2011, p. 213).

The relevance of the Persian Gulf was intrinsically linked to the region's central role in the global oil market. Since the Truman Doctrine, the United States had determined that the Gulf must not fall under the influence of hostile powers. In this context, the 1979 Iranian Revolution drastically altered this model and regional scenario (YERGIN, 2011, p. 168). As Coggiola (2008, p. 143) points out, the Islamic Revolution in Iran decisively disrupted the political balance in the Middle East and projected itself as a powerful factor in global political crisis. It remains the only Islamic revolution of the 20th century to have overthrown a secular regime and established a theocratic one, lasting to this day for more than 45 years. Moreover, it is considered one of the greatest revolutions in history, comparable to the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions (DEMANT, 2022, p. 231). This event represented one of the most serious challenges to the United States' dominance in the region. The rise of a Shiite theocratic regime openly opposed to Western influence not only reconfigured the regional balance of power — breaking the Twin Pillars Strategy — but also created an environment of uncertainty that reverberated in U.S. security and defense policies. Thus, with the anti-imperialist and anti-American tone of the manifestations emerging from Tehran, Washington was compelled to contend with the loss of one of its key geostrategic allies. The situation demanded a reevaluation of its regional posture, highlighting the fragility of its alliances (COGGIOLA, 2008; POLLACK, 2004; PADOVAN, 2010).

From the perspective of international relations and U.S. global policy, the West had lost one of its most important pawns in the Middle East. With 2,600 kilometers of border with the USSR, Iran was an ideal base for advanced American electronic monitoring of Soviet military and space activities. More than that, Iran was a vital source of oil for Europe, Japan, and the United States. Additionally, it willingly undertook the mission of policing the strategic Persian Gulf

(COGGIOLA, 2008, pp. 80–81).

With its long border with the Soviet Union, Iran was strategically important both for monitoring Soviet military and space activities and for supplying oil to Western economies. The situation worsened with increasing regional tensions following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, prompting the U.S. to intensify its concerns over the security of the region's oil fields. In short, from the First Oil Shock (1973/74) to the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the United States increasingly prioritized access to regional oil. The Soviet invasion was interpreted by the Pentagon as a serious threat to the free flow of oil from the region, especially since the USSR was only 300 miles from the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which about two-thirds of the world's oil supply passed (SKIDMORE, 1994, p. 723).

In this context, local uncertainties and instabilities prevailed until, between 1987 and 1988, the Iran-Iraq War expanded into the waters of the Persian Gulf, as Tehran began attacking oil tankers — particularly those of Kuwait — in an attempt to block Iraqi exports. In response, the U.S. intervened by escorting merchant vessels, neutralizing naval mines, gathering intelligence, and conducting offensive actions against Iranian targets, in what became known as Operation Earnest Will. This action was based on the Carter Doctrine, which emerged from concerns over regional energy resources and advocated for the protection of oil routes in the Gulf — vital to the U.S. economy. The operation reaffirmed the U.S. military presence in the region following the loss of Iran as an ally and was marked by the strengthening of the Fifth Fleet and the expansion of military infrastructure.

Given this, the present article investigates how Operation Earnest Will can be interpreted as a preparatory stage for the outbreak of the 1990 Gulf War, particularly in terms of consolidating U.S. predominance in the Persian Gulf. The object of study focuses on U.S. foreign policy toward the region, emphasizing the strategic decisions and actions adopted throughout the 1980s that paved the way for a more forceful military intervention in the following decade.

The central objective of this research is to analyze the historical and political character of Operation Earnest Will, highlighting its implications for regional balance and its role in articulating and consolidating American influence in the Middle East. The underlying hypothesis is that

by protecting oil routes and ensuring free navigation amidst the threats posed by the Iran-Iraq War, the United States strengthened its strategic presence in the region. This operation became a decisive variable in the military and geopolitical developments that culminated in the Gulf War, underscoring the interconnectedness of the two armed conflicts.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach, combining a case study with the historical method. Primary sources — such as the 1980 State of the Union address, National Security Directives 26 and 45, and UN Security Council Resolutions 540 (1983), 582 (1986), and 598 (1987) — were analyzed alongside secondary sources identified through the State of the Art method. The case study, as defined by Gerring (2007), allows for an in-depth analysis of a historically and geographically bounded phenomenon, while George and Bennett (2005) emphasize its value in understanding specific aspects of complex historical episodes.

Therefore, this research is justified not only by its interdisciplinary nature — bringing together knowledge from International Relations, Military History, and Geopolitics — but also by offering an in-depth and original analysis of an episode often overlooked in studies of the Gulf conflicts. By emphasizing the naval dimension and the mechanisms of American power projection in the decade preceding the Gulf War, the article contributes to understanding the long-term strategies adopted by Washington in consolidating its regional hegemony.

II DEVELOPMENT

Historical Background

The Iranian Revolution also posed a dilemma for the newly established Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein, who saw Iran as a threat to be contained. Over the centuries, both Arab and Persian cultures have established contacts, exchanges, conflicts, and divergences. Thus, territorial disputes have been a constant feature in the history of this ancient region, particularly between these peoples (CATHERWOOD, 2006, p.30). However, religious and ethnic tension emerged as a significant element in understanding contemporary conflicts, especially during the republican period in Iraq, and due to the intensification of the Shatt al-Arab demarcation issue. In 1969, Shah Reza Pahlavi attempted to impose a

change in the border, proposing that it be defined by the river's thalweg³ instead of following the left bank of the waterway. Consequently, disputes over the demarcation of this channel became a persistent source of instability in diplomatic relations between the two countries (BRITO, 2014, p.81).

In this context, in 1975, the Algiers Accords were signed—a treaty between Iran and Iraq intended to resolve territorial disputes between the two countries. The agreement aimed to end the conflicts related to borders along the Shatt al-Arab waterway—where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers converge and one of the most important channels in the Middle East—and in the surrounding areas, especially in the Basra region, in southern Iraq (GALBRAITH, 2007). However, on September 17, 1980, Saddam Hussein unilaterally revoked and annulled the treaty, citing sovereignty and defense concerns and the need to fight for territorial claims. The issue of access to navigable channels and the sea, made possible by the Shatt al-Arab, is of paramount importance to Iraq, which had its coastal access practically restricted due to the artificial design of its borders by Britain and the artificial independence of Kuwait in 1961. Furthermore, the region is rich in natural resources, hosting significant oil fields, especially near Basra, which stands out as one of the country's main oil production centers. Therefore, the Shatt al-Arab waterway is crucial not only for the transportation of oil and petrochemical products—connecting Iraq to the Persian Gulf—but also for fishing, which plays a vital role in the local economy (TARIQ, 2003). Thus, territorial, border, and energy issues emerge as some of the most significant variables for the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). The struggle for strategic areas and natural resources intensified tensions between the two countries, decisively contributing to the conflict.

Another relevant aspect of this conflict is the religious and ideological dimension, particularly Saddam Hussein's animosity toward Ayatollah Khomeini⁴. Khomeini lived in exile for 14 years in Najaf⁵, Iraq,

3 The thalweg of a river is the line that connects the lowest points along the riverbed—that is, the deepest part of the river channel. This line is important for determining the water flow path and the river's dynamics, as well as influencing erosion and sediment deposition.

4 Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) was a Shiite cleric and Iranian politician. According to Demant (2022, p.229), he was the main ideologue and theorist of the Iranian Revolution, as well as its chief strategist and revolutionary leader.

5 Although located within Iraqi territory, Najaf is one of the holy cities of Shiism, and its emergence as a theological center dates back only to the past few centuries (DEMANT, 2022, p.243).

and was expelled in 1978 by Saddam—then serving as vice president—at the request of Shah Reza Pahlavi. Thus, in addition to disputes over navigable routes and territorial issues, the seeds of war were sown even at a personal level, given the hostility between the leaders of the two countries (BRITO, 2014, p.84). Moreover, in April 1980, Saddam Hussein's government brutally executed Iraqi Shiite Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, leader of the al-Da'wa movement (Islamic Dawa Party)—which attracted many former members of the Iraqi Communist Party and sympathizers of the communist movement in general—along with his sister, Amina al-Sadr. Both were accused of being responsible for an alleged attack on Christian politician and minister Tariq Aziz⁶. This action generated deep indignation and shock among the oppressed Iraqi Shiite population, resulting in a strong reaction from the Shiite clergy (GALBRAITH, 2007, p.84; DEMANT, 2022, p.244; FERRO, 2008, p.134).

On the other hand, Ayatollah Khomeini saw the war as an opportunity not only to defend the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran—whose ideology included exporting the revolution—but also to expand and promote an Islamic Revolution among Iraqi Shiites. Khomeini aimed to overthrow Saddam and the Baath Party regime, which had committed violent acts against the Shiite population, such as the January 1970 massacre that amounted to a true ethnic cleansing in southern Iraq, involving the deportation of Iraqi Shiite survivors of Persian descent and the killing of cleric al-Sadr (FERRO, 2008; DEMANT, 2022; WOODS et al, 2009).

Both sides sought to destabilize each other through subversive campaigns and mutual destabilization efforts. Iraq, for instance, supported the separatist aspirations of Iranian Arabs in the neighboring province of Khuzestan. Conversely, Iran encouraged the Kurdish rebel movements in northern Iraq, despite facing similar challenges with the Kurdish community within its own territory. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein prioritized the maintenance of his power and the security of his regime—in other words, he was concerned with regime self-preservation and the protection of his mandate at the expense of popular demands. Although the majority of Iraq's population was Shiite, the government was predominantly composed of Sunni-oriented individuals, despite the

6 In Arabic, تاريق عزيز, when translated and transliterated into Portuguese, can be written as either Tarek Aziz or Tariq Aziz.

Baath Party's secularist origins⁷. In addition, with the establishment of a Shiite theocracy in Iran and the possibility of the movement's expansion, Saddam recognized the urgency of containing it, as his own administration felt threatened (FERRO, 2008; DEMANT, 2022).

In other words, based on the variables presented, there was significant fear that the Islamic Revolution would spread to Iraq and destabilize the Arab world. This fear led Saddam—convinced he was “a new Nasser”—to initiate a war against Iran, rekindling the ancient antagonism with the Persians. Within this dynamic, another factor in Saddam Hussein's political calculus was his desire for an Arab victory over the Persians, driven not only by historical hostilities but also by his pursuit of legitimacy and his ambition to consolidate his position as the leader of pan-Arabism, of which he considered himself a champion. He saw himself as the “savior of the Arab world” against Shiite revolutionary expansionism, and through this conflict, he intensified existing sectarian rivalries in terms of both narrative and rhetoric (FERRO, 2008; WOODS et al, 2009). Thus, the Iraqi government, fearing that the spread of the Islamic Revolution in Iran could lead to its overthrow and return the country to a spiral of constant power changes, declared war on its neighbor (WOODS et al, 2009; GALBRAITH, 2007; FERRO, 2008).

In the midst of this complex context, as previously noted, from the U.S. perspective, the Carter Doctrine was formalized, presented by President Jimmy Carter in his annual “State of the Union” address on January 23, 1980, with significant contributions from his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. In that speech, Carter expressed concerns about the Iranian Revolution, mentioned the hostage-taking of American diplomats in Iran, and highlighted Soviet aggression in Afghanistan.

The 1980s have begun in a period of turbulence, conflict, and change. This is a time of challenge to our interests and our values, and it is a time that tests our wisdom and our skills. At this moment, in Iran, 50 Americans are still held captive, innocent victims of terrorism and anarchy. At this

7 According to Tarek Aziz, when referring to Iraq and the Baath Party, it is better to use the word secular instead of laic, as the latter carries a militant, anti-religious notion that in no way reflects the case of Iraq, where each person is free to choose their own religion (DENAUD, 2003, pp. 32–33).

moment, massive Soviet troops are attempting to subjugate the fiercely independent and deeply religious people of Afghanistan. These two acts—one of international terrorism and one of military aggression—present a serious challenge to the United States of America and indeed to all the nations of the world. We will meet these threats to peace together. [...] The region now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: it contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world's oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil. [...] An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." (STATE OF THE UNION, 1980, p.1).

In a critical context marked by the Iranian Revolution, increasing local instability and volatility, and the loss of one of its main allies, the Carter Doctrine—often called the “Monroe Doctrine of the Persian Gulf”—was formulated as a response to these dual challenges, while also making the U.S. presence in the region more explicit (BADIE, 2011, p. 211). The prevailing fear was that with the expansion and consolidation of the Iranian Revolution, access to oil and the region's strategic reserves would be compromised, hindering U.S. interests. Additionally, it is worth noting that diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iraq had been severed and were only reestablished in 1984 (TARIQ, 2003). Still within the Cold War context, the U.S. had lost Iran, its former ally, and faced growing proximity with the Soviet Union, which had just invaded Afghanistan, with direct

implications for the stability of the Persian Gulf (AHARI, 1989).

Thus, the Carter Doctrine legitimized the possibility of direct U.S. military intervention in the face of Soviet threats or other actors that might jeopardize control over oil in the region, emphasizing the vital importance of this resource to U.S. interests, aligned with the regional tension scenario. Furthermore, it publicly and clearly exposed the strategic, economic, and military interests of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf, underlining its dependence on local oil. Within this context, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980 posed a new dilemma for the United States. This situation demanded a reassessment of U.S. security and defense strategies in the region, highlighting the complexity of the evolving geopolitical landscape (FUSER, 2006, 2013).

The Iran-Iraq War

Amid growing tensions and the aforementioned variables, on September 22, 1980, Iraq launched a surprise attack on Iranian territory at eight points along the border, including military installations and air bases in the country's interior. The conflict, initially perceived by both sides as a short war, dragged on for eight years, significantly impacting oil production at a time when the world had just emerged from a decade marked by difficulties due to the Oil Shock and the elevation of this commodity as a political weapon (POLLACK, 2004).

This war also took on the form of a regional "cold war": Iran, until then a U.S. stronghold, possessed weapons and Armed Forces equipped through its former partnership with Washington, which had been severed by the Revolution. Conversely, Iraq's military was outfitted with Soviet weaponry, but in the context of the new regional realignment, it also received support and increased presence from the United States, with whom diplomatic relations were reestablished in 1984⁸ (TARIQ, 2003; PADOVAN, 2010).

Nevertheless, what stood out was the Western support for Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which skillfully leveraged the prevailing conditions. According to a report from the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. War College, Khomeini's revolutionary movement was an anathema to both

8 Diplomatic relations between Iraq and the United States had been suspended in 1967 as a result of the consequences and outcomes of the Arab-Israeli war that took place in the same year.

Baghdad and Washington, as both sought to eliminate the Ayatollah. Accordingly, the U.S. began supporting Iraq, which became a bulwark against the Iranian Revolution in the region, actively collaborating to achieve this shared goal (PADOVAN, 2010, p.48). Although Washington viewed Saddam Hussein as a radical leader, they believed he could help establish balance in the region and contain the spread of the Iranian Revolution, despite his proximity and sympathies with Moscow (BANDEIRA, 2015, p.220).

Throughout the 1980s, Iraq consolidated itself as a major U.S. trading partner, with arms trade playing a central role in this relationship. During this period, Iraq's military expenditures totaled US\$180 billion, of which US\$80 billion was spent on arms imports, including US\$10 billion exclusively for weapons of mass destruction programs (PADOVAN, 2010, p. 46–47). However, while the U.S. favored Baghdad, it also provided a degree of support to Tehran. The logic behind this maneuver was to prevent a revolutionary Iran from growing too strong, while also stopping Iraq from emerging as an overly dominant regional power. This supports the notion that Washington has no permanent friends, only interests—a dynamic that would become even more apparent in its later anti-Saddam rhetoric. In summary, this strategy, known as the “dual containment” policy, was attractive to the United States, which did not want either Middle Eastern state to become hegemonic or exert control over local oil. The position of the U.S. and other Western powers was therefore ambiguous, encapsulated by Henry Kissinger's quote: “It's a pity they can't both lose” (PADOVAN, 2010, p. 48).

Regarding the conflict itself, Saddam Hussein believed that by launching a surprise attack on Iranian territory, the newly established ayatollah regime—formed after the Islamic Revolution—would quickly collapse. His goal was a swift victory with the capture of four strategic Iranian cities: Khorramshahr, Abadan, Ahvaz, and Dezful. However, this prediction proved inaccurate, as the war, far from being short and easy, dragged on for years. To bolster his regime and secure internal support, Saddam's Baath Party created an ideological militia. This paramilitary force, already under development before the conflict, played a key role in sustaining the Iraqi regime during the early years of the war (BRITO, 2014; GALBRAITH, 2007).

Saddam estimated the conflict would last no more than eight weeks. His confidence was based on the perception that Iran, freshly out of

the Islamic Revolution and engulfed in domestic instability, was weakened and disorganized. The Iraqi attack did indeed come as a surprise, catching the Iranians unprepared. However, Iran's response was swift, marked by fierce resistance, proving that despite internal difficulties, the country would not yield easily (WOODS et al., 2009).

Iraq's military planning was extremely flawed. There was no clear strategy or effective coordination between operational goals and the tactics employed. Both Iraq and Iran had little understanding of the nature of the conflict they were waging, placing more emphasis on loyalty, bravery, and courage than on military organization, training, and discipline. The focus was more on soldier morale than on developing an organized and effective armed force. Both sides demonstrated a short-sighted view, underestimating the complexity of the conflict and the challenges involved. This lack of preparedness led to a series of miscalculations on the Iraqi side, exacerbated by Saddam's direct interference in military operations, which highlighted his limited understanding of military affairs (WOODS et al., 2009).

Iran, under Ayatollah Khomeini, responded to the invasion by mobilizing the population, especially through the creation of the so-called "Army of Twenty Million," composed of youth with minimal military training but driven by ideological motivations tied to the revolutionary ideals that guided the country in those weeks (BRITO, 2014, p.87). Notably, the Badr Corps was formed—also known as the Badr Brigade—composed largely of Iraqi Shia who had fled to Iran after being persecuted by Saddam Hussein's regime. With Iranian support, including weapons, training, and logistical aid, their goal was to destabilize Saddam's government (POLLACK, 2004, p. 247). The Badr Corps fought alongside Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War and later participated in the 1991 Shia uprising in southern Iraq. However, Saddam Hussein brutally suppressed these revolts.

Despite Iran's initial disadvantage, this improvised force managed to halt Iraq's advance, and the initially mobile and fast-paced conflict soon devolved into trench warfare, leading both countries to total exhaustion of resources (COGGIOLA, 2008, p.106). Khomeini saw the war not only as an opportunity to defend and consolidate the Islamic Republic but also to spread the Shia revolution into Iraq and defeat his political enemies. This passionate interpretation of the conflict reinforced Iran's desire to prolong the war, resisting Saddam's repeated attempts over the years to bring the

confrontation to an end (LITTLE, 2008).

Meanwhile, like Iran's, Iraq's military campaign remained poorly planned and executed, lacking strategic leadership and support from a strong military structure. In response to growing Iranian pressure, Iraq began a mass mobilization in 1982 and created the Republican Guard to strengthen its forces. By 1984, chemical and biological weapons became a major part of Iraq's strategy, with little international condemnation (WOODS et al., 2009).

In multiple offensives, Iraq employed lethal gases like sarin and mustard gas, which attack the nervous system and cause horrific injuries. These weapons were used not only against Iranian forces but also against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, who had rebelled during the conflict. From November 1983 onward, the use of these chemical agents intensified, but the international community largely remained silent, taking no effective action to condemn or stop such atrocities. Even with UN Security Council Resolution 582 condemning the use of chemical and biological weapons, in practice, nothing was done. This underscores the brutal nature of the conflict and the complexity of political alliances at the time, as global powers avoided direct intervention due to their own geopolitical interests in the region, as well as the ambiguous role played by the United States (WOODS et al., 2009).

Beyond the impacts on the oil industry, which had already been severely affected by the Second Oil Crisis—resulting from the combination of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War—the conflict brought direct consequences for Iraq's oil exports. In the early days of the war, Iran shut down Iraqi export routes through the Persian Gulf by damaging the offshore loading facility in Faw, a vital point for oil transport. By the end of the conflict, in 1987, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) managed to occupy the Faw Peninsula, from where Iraq had exported oil before the war. Facing this strategic loss, Iraq turned to Kuwait as an alternative route, highlighting both the historical tensions between the two states and Iraq's vulnerability due to its limited access to the sea—an outcome of its territorial design. As a result, Iran began attacking Kuwaiti vessels in an attempt to block Iraq's access to the sea (BRITO, 2014; GALBRAITH, 2007; RAZOUX, 2015).

Naval Aspects of the Conflict

In the final years of the conflict, 1987 and 1988, the war extended into the Persian Gulf waters with the so-called “Tanker War,” also known as Operation Earnest Will. Iran, in an effort to block Iraq’s oil exports, attacked vessels and ports, including those in Kuwait, which had been used by Baghdad’s government. In response, the United States intervened by refueling tankers and providing escorts to protect commercial traffic. From a naval perspective, the operation involved escorting merchant ships with U.S. naval forces—including destroyers and aircraft carriers—to protect American and allied-flagged vessels from Iranian attacks. It also included neutralizing sea mines and conducting patrols to ensure the safety of navigation routes. Thus, Washington aimed to protect its economic and energy interests, while ensuring freedom of navigation in the region, since Gulf oil was critical for the global economy (RAZOUX, 2015; TUCKER, 2010).

In other words, the strategy adopted in the operation was clear: the U.S. Navy began escorting commercial vessels, especially oil tankers, protecting them from missile attacks, mines, or hostile boats. By securing maritime traffic, the United States not only ensured the continuity of oil trade but also reaffirmed its presence and authority in the Persian Gulf, maintaining strategic control over essential sea routes. The use of armed commercial vessels under American escort was a tactical innovation, allowing the U.S. to effectively safeguard global economic interests without resorting to direct military intervention.

This U.S. naval action in the Gulf, a response to Iranian attacks on tankers, aimed to protect merchant ships through the implementation of naval escorts and combat actions, ensure freedom of navigation in the region, and safeguard oil transportation routes. Therefore, this was the application of the Carter Doctrine, which declared that threats to regional oil access would prompt a U.S. response, underscoring the importance of this commodity to Washington—especially following the critical period of the Oil Shocks. Furthermore, this strategic stance helped solidify the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, particularly after the loss of Iran as an ally, influencing the area’s geopolitical dynamics. In addition, the United States conducted strikes on Iranian targets such as oil platforms and vessels to deter hostile actions. The operation also involved intelligence gathering and joint exercises with regional allies (RAZOUX, 2015; HALLIDAY, 2005).

The main concern was defending oil sources, as seen in the 1980

Carter Doctrine, which was applied for the first time. However, by 1986, a full military setup was already in place, including the construction of air bases and the development of the 5th Fleet, which increased U.S. intervention capabilities in the region. According to Little (2008, p.252): “During the end of 1987 and early 1988, the Pentagon doubled the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf from six to thirteen warships and authorized nearly 100 escort missions under the auspices of Earnest Will.”

The relationship between Maritime Security and Geopolitics takes on a significant strategic dimension at this point, reflecting how security concerns over energy maritime trade intertwine with international power dynamics and geopolitical interests. As seen, the operation’s main objective was to protect navigation routes in the Persian Gulf—a vital region for oil transport, one of the most strategic resources for the global economy—and to ensure that the interests of the U.S. and its allies in the region were not compromised. Moreover, the Persian Gulf, with its critical access to the Strait of Hormuz, is one of the world’s most important oil transport routes, making its security a top priority for global powers such as the United States (TUCKER, 2010).

In summary, the need to guarantee the continued flow of oil and protect regional allies was urgent for the U.S., which was committed to maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf. At the same time, the operation reflected the American geopolitical doctrine of securing maritime trade routes and defending global energy interests, positioning itself as a preventive measure to counter the growing Iranian influence in the region. Ultimately, Operation Earnest Will exemplifies the convergence between Maritime Security and Geopolitics, where protecting trade routes is not merely a security issue, but also a matter of power, influence, and control over essential resources. Simultaneously, it reflected a shift in U.S. foreign policy, which, faced with a scenario of regional uncertainty and challenges, adopted a more assertive stance in defending its economic and geopolitical interests (RAZOUX, 2015; TUCKER, 2010).

Furthermore, the core of the Carter Doctrine—which established that Persian Gulf oil was a vital interest of the United States to be defended against external threats, even with military force—remained clearly present in both National Security Directive No. 26, issued by President Bush in October 1989, and in National Security Directive No. 45, released in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Thus, it can be concluded that there was a revival of the Carter Doctrine to legitimize both the invasions

and U.S. actions in the region. Within this analysis, Bandeira (2015, p.222) argues that: CENTCOM J-2 (United States Central Command), responsible for all military activities in the region stretching from Egypt to Kenya to Pakistan, predicted in 1989 that Iraq, following the war against Iran and the decline of the Soviet Union, would likely constitute the next threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, especially due to the development of its military capabilities. In short, revisiting and reinforcing the points mentioned earlier, Little (2008, p.253) states that: "In January 1989, a State Department transition team suggested that 'the lessons of the [Iran] war may have transformed Iraq from a radical state challenging the system into a more responsible, status quo state, working within the system and promoting regional stability.' These ideas were translated into policy terms, echoing Carter's text, nine months later, when Bush signed National Security Directive 26 (NSD-26), titled 'U.S. Policy Toward the Persian Gulf,' on October 2. Almost unnoticed at the time, NSD-26 instructed U.S. policymakers to create economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior and increase American influence in the country."

Another point is that UNSC Resolutions 540 (1983), 582 (1986), and 598 (1987) addressed the Iran-Iraq War, highlighting concerns over the conflict's escalation, the severe human losses, and the material destruction it caused. Across all three resolutions, the UN attempted to mediate the conflict and urged all involved parties to refrain from actions that could worsen the situation. However, none of the resolutions effectively ended the war. Although they expressed concern and condemnation, the measures proposed in Resolutions 540 and 582 were not sufficient to halt the fighting. Resolution 598, despite calling for a ceasefire, came at a time when both sides were already exhausted from years of combat and devastation. At that point, both countries were weakened, and the ceasefire became a viable option more due to widespread attrition than international pressure. This conflict devastated both nations' economies, crushed any hopes of regional expansion, and left a lasting mark on the Middle East's balance of power, ultimately ending in a ceasefire in 1988 without significant territorial gains for either side. In summary, the Iran-Iraq War officially ended in August 1988 with the acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 598, which called for a ceasefire.

Gulf War (1990–91)

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) marked a turning point in the strategic dynamics of the Middle East, resulting in a military and political stalemate with no significant territorial gains for either side. Although both Tehran and Baghdad claimed victory, the outcome of the conflict was, in practice, a tactical, operational, and strategic draw. For Saddam Hussein, the impact was particularly devastating: Iraq, which at the beginning of the 1980s was among the most prosperous nations in the region, emerged from the war deeply in debt, with a damaged infrastructure and no short-term economic prospects (PADOVAN, 2010).

In this context, Saddam began pressuring neighboring Arab countries—especially the Gulf States—for financial support. His main justification was that Iraq had played the role of a “buffer” against the revolutionary threat of Shia Iran and therefore deserved compensation for preserving regional stability. With debts amounting to approximately US\$100 billion, the Iraqi regime expected not only debt forgiveness but also coordinated actions to raise the price of a barrel of oil to US\$25—a crucial measure for its economic recovery (LEFFLER, 2023; LITTLE, 2008).

However, this strategy failed. The leaders of the oil monarchies feared that an economic revival of Iraq would result in an even more assertive foreign policy, with expansionist ambitions that could threaten the region’s fragile geopolitical order. Moreover, Iraq’s narrative of being the “protector of the Arab world” no longer resonated as strongly: the Iranian Revolution, although still influential, was largely contained within its borders and no longer posed an immediate risk (LITTLE, 2008).

Faced with political isolation and internal economic collapse, Saddam began to see Kuwait not just as an obstacle but as a solution to Iraq’s problems. Kuwait had vast oil reserves, and its surplus production drove prices down, further worsening Iraq’s crisis. Additionally, there were allegations that Kuwait was illegally exploiting oil reserves along the border with Iraq—a narrative that the regime began to use as justification for a potential military action (TRIPP, 2007; BRITO, 2014; PADOVAN, 2010).

The decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990 was built on economic interests, historical rivalries, and a shortsighted reading of the international context. By annexing Kuwait, Saddam intended to consolidate Iraq as a regional and energy power, increasing its influence within OPEC and strengthening its geopolitical position in the Persian Gulf. This was not merely a case of territorial expansionism: it was a deliberate attempt to alter the regional balance of power and reestablish Iraq as a central player

in Arab politics (BRITO, 2014).

However, Saddam's calculation proved mistaken. The occupation of Kuwait was interpreted by Washington as a direct threat to Saudi Arabia's security and to Western access to Gulf oil reserves. The possibility that Iraq might move into Saudi territory prompted the mobilization of an international coalition led by the United States, aimed at containing Iraqi expansion and restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty (PADOVAN, 2010).

Starting in 1989, with General Norman Schwarzkopf's appointment as CENTCOM commander, the U.S. perception of Iraq began to shift. The revision of OPLAN 1002-90—originally drafted to counter a potential Soviet invasion of Iran—was redirected to focus on the threat posed by Iraq. Now seen as an emerging regional military power, Iraq became an increasing concern for U.S. strategic interests, especially due to its control over vital oil resources. Saddam Hussein's growing military capabilities, combined with an assertive foreign policy, made Iraq a destabilizing force for regional security (TUCKER, 2010).

National Security Directive No. 26 (NSD-26), signed in 1989 by President George H. W. Bush, marked a significant shift in U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf. Unlike the Carter Doctrine, which prioritized external threats, NSD-26 began to identify regional powers such as Iraq and Iran as the greatest risks to U.S. national security. Although the U.S. still sought to influence Saddam Hussein's regime through economic and political incentives, the Iraqi government's increasingly unpredictable behavior fueled fears of potential aggression and expansion of influence in the region.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the U.S. response was immediate, reflecting the continued application of the Gulf defense policy established by the Carter Doctrine. The invasion was seen not only as a violation of the sovereignty of an independent state, but also as a direct threat to regional stability and to the oil flow that was critical to the United States and its allies. The reaction to the invasion was guided by a set of principles deeply rooted in U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War and reinforced by the Carter Doctrine, which had first been applied during Operation Earnest Will (PADOVAN, 2010).

Throughout the operation, the United States demonstrated not only the strength of its military capabilities but also the importance of coordinating a multilateral foreign policy—one that sought to involve allies and legitimize action on the international stage, as it led the

International Coalition under the auspices of the UN Security Council. Ultimately, Operation Earnest Will and the Gulf War were both embedded in the same geopolitical logic outlined by the Carter Doctrine. Both actions reveal Washington's willingness to intervene in the Middle East to ensure the security of oil routes and protect its regional allies, reflecting a continuity of threat containment strategies—both external and internal—that had been developed over decades.

III FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Operation Earnest Will, conducted during the final years of the Iran-Iraq War (1987–1988), can be interpreted as a fundamental stage in the construction of the United States' strategic predominance in the Persian Gulf and as a preparation for the geopolitical developments that culminated in the 1990 Gulf War. From a historical and analytical perspective, the operation proved to be a milestone in U.S. security policy, reflecting the interdependence between military dominance, control over energy routes, and the consolidation of a regional order favorable to Washington's interests.

By ensuring the protection of maritime routes and the continued flow of oil, the United States not only addressed the immediate challenges imposed by the Iran-Iraq conflict but also reinforced its strategic position in one of the world's most sensitive regions in terms of global power balance. Through the coordination of naval, diplomatic, and regional alliance capabilities, Washington demonstrated its ability to operate as a hegemonic arbiter in a scenario marked by interstate rivalries and the centrality of oil in the global economy. This practical experience contributed to the strengthening of doctrines and strategies that would prove decisive during U.S. operations in the 1990 Gulf War.

In summary, the context presented throughout this work highlights the centrality of oil in the strategic development of the United States, underscoring its role as both a powerful political tool and a source of volatility and instability. Dependence on this commodity significantly propelled U.S. actions in the region, directly shaping its projection of power and influence. Within this framework, energy security and control over oil flows became fundamental elements of U.S. foreign policy, with profound impacts on the naval and maritime dimension of the Persian Gulf, reinforcing the need for presence and control over essential maritime

routes to ensure global stability.

Therefore, based on the analysis undertaken, it can be concluded that Operation Earnest Will constituted not only a tactical response to Iranian attacks during the final years of the Iran-Iraq War but also a strategic maneuver that anticipated and paved the way for U.S. engagement in the 1990 Gulf War. By securing oil routes and reaffirming the Carter Doctrine, the United States consolidated its military presence in the Persian Gulf and deepened its geopolitical influence in the region, transforming the regional balance of power. Through a combination of case study methodology and historical analysis, supported by a qualitative approach, it was possible to observe that Operation Earnest Will represented a significant variable in the developments that led to the 1990 conflict, highlighting the interconnection between the two episodes. Thus, this investigation contributes to a broader understanding of the mechanisms behind U.S. power projection, particularly regarding the protection of energy interests and the consolidation of naval predominance in the Middle East, offering insights for further reflections in the fields of Geopolitics, Military History, and especially Naval History.

REFERENCES

AHRARI, M. E. **The Gulf and International Security the 1980s and Beyond**. Nova York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989.

AL SARHAN, A. S. United States Foreign Policy and the Middle East. **Open Journal of Political Science**, Atlanta, v. 7, n. 4, out./ 2017, p. 454-472. ISSN 2164-0505.

ALVANDI, Roham. Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: the origins of Iranian primacy in the Persian Gulf. **Diplomatic History**, Oxford, v. 36, n. 2, p. 337-372, abr./ 2012. ISSN 1467-7709.

BADIE, Dina. "Doctrinal Cycles and the Dual-Crisis of 1979". **International Studies Perspectives**, Oxford, p. 212-230, 2011.

BANDEIRA, Luiz Alberto Moniz. **A Segunda Guerra Fria: geopolítica e dimensão estratégica dos Estados Unidos: das rebeliões na Eurásia à África do Norte e ao Oriente Médio**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2015.

BRITO, Bernardo de Azevedo. **Iraque: dos primórdios à procura de um destino**. Trindade: Editora UFSC, 2014.

CARTER, Jimmy. State of the union address 1980. **Jimmy Carter presidential library & museum**, Washington, 23 jan. 1980. Disponível em: <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>. Acesso em: 28 jan. 2025.

CATHERWOOD, Christopher. **A loucura de Churchill: os interesses britânicos e a criação do Iraque moderno**. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2006.

COGGIOLA, Osvaldo. **A Revolução Iraniana**. São Paulo: Unesp, 2008.

DEMANT, Peter. **O mundo muçulmano**. São Paulo: Editora Contexto, 2015.

ESTADOS UNIDOS DA AMÉRICA. Presidente (1989–1993: George Herbert Walker Bush). **National Security Directive 26: U.S. Policy Toward the Persian Gulf**. College Station, TX: George Bush Presidential Library, 1989. Disponível em: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd26.pdf>. Acesso em: 28 jan. 2025.

ESTADOS UNIDOS DA AMÉRICA. Presidente (1989–1993: George Herbert Walker Bush). **National Security Directive 45: U.S. Policy in Response to the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait**. Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1990. Disponível em: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd45.pdf>. Acesso em: 28 jan. 2025.

FERRO, Marc. **O choque do Islã: século XVII-XXI**. Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exército Editora, 2008.

FUSER, Igor. **Energia e Relações Internacionais**. São Paulo: Saraiva, 2013.

FUSER, Igor. O petróleo e a política dos EUA no Golfo Pérsico: a atualidade da Doutrina Carter. **Lutas Sociais**, São Paulo, n. 17/18, p. 23-37, 2007. ISSN: 2526-3706.

GALBRAITH, Peter W. **The end of Iraq: How american incompetence created a war without end**. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007.

HALLIDAY, F. **The Middle East in international relations: power, politics and ideology**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

LITTLE, Douglas. **American Orientalism: the United States and the Middle East since 1945**. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

MICHAELS, Jeffrey H. Dysfunctional doctrines? Eisenhower, Carter and U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. **Political Science Quarterly**, Oxford, v. 126, n. 3, p. 465-492, 2011. ISSN: 1538-165X.

ORGANIZAÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS (ONU). Security

Council. **Resolution 540 (1983)**: adopted by the Security Council at its 2505th meeting, on 31 October 1983. New York: United Nations, 1983. Disponível em: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/61392>. Acesso em: 11 out. 2024.

ORGANIZAÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS (ONU). Security Council. **Resolution 582 (1986)**: adopted by the Security Council at its 2666th meeting, on 24 February 1986. New

York: United Nations, 1986. Disponível em: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/116401>. Acesso em: 11 out. 2024.

ORGANIZAÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS (ONU). Security Council. **Resolution 598 (1987)**: adopted by the Security Council at its 2750th meeting, on 20 July 1987. New York: United Nations, 1987. Disponível em: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/137345>. Acesso em: 11 out. 2024.

PADOVAN, Gisela Maria Figueiredo. **Diplomacia e uso da força: os painéis do Iraque**. Brasília: Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão, 2010.

POLLACK, Kenneth M. **The Persian puzzle: the conflict between Iran and America**. Toronto: Random House Trade Paperback Edition, 2004.

RAZOUX, Pierre. **The Iran-Iraq war**. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015.

SKIDMORE, David. Carter and the Failure of Foreign Policy Reform. **Political Science Quarterly**, Oxford, vol. 108, n. 4, p. 699-729, dez./1993. ISSN: 1538-165X.

TARIQ, Ali. **Bush na Babilônia: a recolonização do Iraque**. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2003.

TUCKER, Spencer C. **The encyclopedia of Middle East wars: The United States in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq conflicts [5 volumes]**. ABC-CLIO, 2010.

WOODS, Kevin M. *et al.* **Saddam's war: An Iraqi military perspective of the Iran-Iraq war**. Washington DC: Government Printing

Office, 2009.