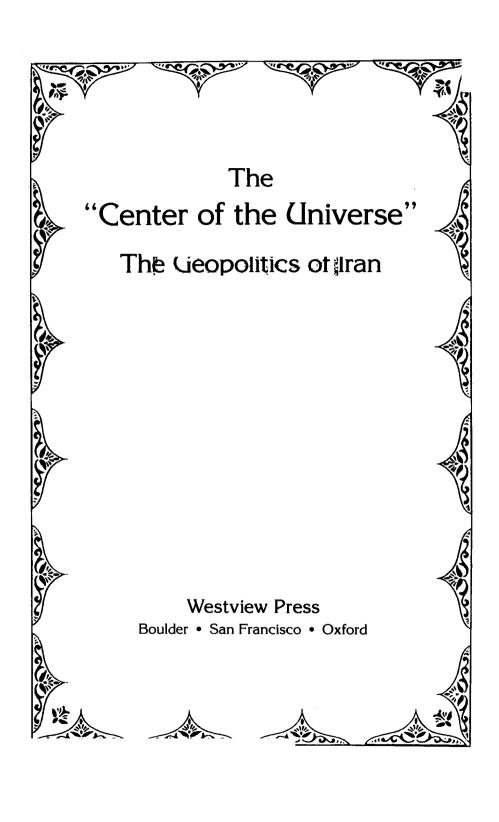
GRAHAM E. FULLER

THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

The Geopolitics of Iran



Westview Press
A RAND Corporation Research Study



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Preface

I wish to thank The RAND Corporation for generously providing research funds that enabled me to complete this study. I had written only part of the work at the time that I retired from government service in late 1987. I am also grateful to many colleagues at RAND who provided useful criticism of the manuscript: Frank Fukuyama, Nikola Schahgaldian, Paul Henze, and Zalmay Khalilzad. I also owe a considerable debt to many personal friends outside of RAND who generously agreed to review all or parts of the manuscript, especially Sohrab Sobhani, and others whom I cannot acknowledge here. Obviously the failings of the book are my own.

This book is more about the future than the past. It examines the character of Iran's relationships with each of its neighbors in order to identify issues, patterns, and constants within those relationships that are determined both by geopolitics and by the legacy of history. It does not purport to be a history of those relations in any way, except perhaps to familiarize the reader with a rough outline of the way those relations developed. Nor is the book a detailed chronicle of the bilateral relations involved. In the end, I am interested in seeing how aspects of these historical relations may likely reemerge in the future, often under quite different political circumstances and regional dynamics. In short, what is the character of this country we call Iran in its historical experience, and how is that past likely to affect its future?

Because I am interested in future implications of the past conflict patterns in Iran's pursuit of its foreign policy interests, I have not sought to develop new interpretations of established historical events. This study uses secondary sources to provide the basic data of past events. What is new and original in the book is the effort to identify some of these historical continuities and discontinuities and the historical/geopolitical determinants that will probably recur, perhaps in a new guise and under

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very different regional circumstances. The book sets out to be a guide to potential issues of conflict and geopolitical options that will confront any future Iranian leader as well as other regional leaders and other countries operating in the region. The book also explores a number of potential scenarios for these future conflicts to impart a sense of the range of problems and options involved.

As I note in the body of the book, I am interested in how countries tend to view other countries—almost invariably involving subjective or biased vision. In order to emphasize this point, I have therefore chosen a number of introductory quotations to many chapters, most of which present one or another stereotype—often outrageous—of the country or people involved. These quotations, generally pejorative, are meant to suggest the kinds of stereotypes that figure in the bilateral relations of the countries involved; I am in no way endorsing them as objective or accurate statements about any state or people.

In the end, it is the attitudes of one country toward another that have considerable impact on the "objective" formulation of their foreign policies. They represent the hidden psychological elements of foreign relations that are often ignored in more traditional political science studies. Yet it is these sets of attitudes that are often hardest for foreigners to understand or appreciate because they are not usually part of the public pronouncements of diplomats or the stuff of scholarship. They are nonetheless real for all of that, as outsiders who have resided for long periods in the region know well.

I developed an interest in the cultural and psychological aspects of national behavior during nearly twenty years of life abroad as a Foreign Service officer—mostly in the Middle East—learning languages, reading literature, and attempting to make sense of political patterns of behavior and styles of operation that differ from those in American political culture. These attitudes are more viscerally expressed and often better understood from the literature, fiction, and even films of a country than they are in scholarly studies of politics. My practical concern for the problem came during many years of responsibility for long-range National Estimates at the National Intelligence Council at the CIA—strategic studies aimed at predicting the future course of key world events—where an inordinate amount of time in the 1980s was devoted to revolutionary Iran and its intentions.

This book is intended for those with an interest in the geopolitics of Iran and the Persian Gulf, in Iran's role in broader Middle East politics, and for those who must work with Iran and the region on a practical basis. Although the historical events referred to here are well known to scholars of Iran, I would hope that scholars of the field might also be interested in speculation on the future evolution of politics in the

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region. Whatever the failings of this book may be, I know of no other book on Iran that attempts to spin out the implications of past events into the future. If my speculations on possible future directions are not congenial to some, I would hope to at least spark some alternative analysis in response from them. But *some* detailed speculation on the range of future political options is imperative for those who work with the area. Indeed, speculation about the nature of future events forces us to examine the past in a different analytical light, seeking to determine where we might expect continuity, and where change.

Lastly, I hope the book will lead to a better understanding of the very unusual country and richly endowed people of Iran—a country and culture for which I have considerable admiration. I seek not to be critical, but to explain. Although the political culture of Iran is complex, it is certainly not "crazy" or "irrational" as was often averred during periods of American confrontation; the basis of Iranian reality must be grasped by all who deal with it. It is unfortunate that Iran and the United States have probably expressed greater visceral anger at each other during the last decade than toward any other countries. If the political culture of Iran can be better understood through this work, I will be gratified.

On a more practical note, I have used the terms "Persia" and "Iran" more or less interchangeably, mostly with the same meaning, although I have tried to employ Persia more in reference to pre-Pahlavi times or as a cultural term. Although Iran was selected by Reza Shah in the 1920s as the new name for the country, it is at least as old a concept as Persia. The term "Persia" more precisely refers to the province of Fars, the cultural heartland of the country. I have also tended to use the term "Russia" in preference to "the Soviet Union" in referring to the future geopolitical relationships between the USSR and the Middle East. As the national republics of the USSR emerge more distinctly, it is Russia's relationship with Middle Eastern states that is the central geopolitical fact of the future rather than the defunct concept of the Soviet Union.

The August 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq once again highlights the importance of the Gulf region: Although Iran is not a direct party to the Iraq-Kuwait confrontation, it will figure prominently in the future containment of Iraq and remains strategically the most important country in the Gulf over the long run.

Graham E. Fuller Thousand Oaks, California

In this original and provocative book, Graham E. Fuller examines Iran and the character of its relations with each of its regional neighbors in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Soviet Union, and around the Indian Ocean. Fuller's geopolitical analysis takes into account the impact of historical events, regional demography, the nature of past conflicts, and the psychological attitudes and political rationale of neighboring nations. Reviewing Iran's geopolitical environment over the course of history, he identifies aspects of Iran's foreign relations that are likely to persist and influence future policies—regardless of the particular regime in power.

The book opens with a controversial discussion of those characteristics of Iranian society that the author argues have persistently affected Iran's view of the surrounding world (such as ethnocentricity, an exaggerated perception of enemies' power and malice, and a tendency to seek the "hidden agenda" behind apparently straightforward events). The subsequent chapters individually analyze Iranian relations in bilateral perspective but collectively work to convey a clear overall picture of regional dynamics and recurring trends in this volatile part of the world. The book includes an analysis of the broad implications of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

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Graham E. Fuller served for twenty years in the Foreign Service in Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong. He then became the national intelligence officer for Near East and South Asia at the Central Intelligence Agency, responsible for long-range national estimates. In 1986, Mr. Fuller was named vice-chairman of the National Intelligence Council, with overall responsibility for all national estimates.

In early 1988, Mr. Fuller joined The RAND Corporation, where he is a senior political scientist with primary responsibilities for Middle East affairs and Soviet-Third World affairs. He published a pioneering article in 1988 on the nature of the "New Soviet Foreign Policy Under Gorbachev" and a major study for RAND, "The West Bank of Israel: Point of No Return?" Besides writing this book, he has completed a study on Islam in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan for RAND and is currently doing research on nationalities issues in the Soviet Union. In addition to his publications of scholarly articles and books. Mr. Fuller is known for his regular contributions to the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times op-ed sections and has appeared on ABC's "Nightline" and "ABC Evening News" and on PBS's "McNeil-Lehrer NewsHour." He is also the author of the popular book How to Learn a Foreign Language.

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Introduction

The Sovereign, The Pivot of the Universe, The Sultan, His Auspicious Majesty, His Royal Majesty, The King of Kings, the Royal Possessor of Kingdoms, His Majesty the Shadow of Allah, The Khakan.

-The historical titles of the shah of Iran¹

This book is most of all about the future. It seeks to examine Iran's past for clues of future behavior, for threads of interests, continuities of conflict, and certain geopolitical constants that are likely to strongly affect Iran's foreign policy behavior in the decades ahead.

The title of this book, "The Center of the Universe," is a term taken from one of the many historical titles of the shah of Iran, a partial list of which are reproduced above. Expressing neither reticence nor modesty, the shah's title of "Center of the Universe" seems appropriate for an examination of Iran's geopolitical world. Not surprisingly, Iran's view of the world is intensely Îrano-centric-with a degree of intensity not always readily grasped by outsiders. To fail to enter into the internal logic of this Irano-centric view is to miss an important facet of Iran's operational behavior. Indeed, this book seeks to examine the concept of Iran as the center of its own universe, its view of itself and of the states that move in the same constellation. During the 1980s Iran indeed dominated international attention in the Persian Gulf as first the Iranian Revolution and then the Iran-Iraq War worked their influences upon the world's political and economic interests. And yet, in the first year of the 1990s in the eyes of much of the world Saddam Husayn of Iraq remarkably supplanted the image of Ayatollah Khomeini as the malevolent force of the Gulf with his seizure of Kuwait. For the moment, too, Iran is hors de combat, sidetracked, caught up in the reconstruction of postwar devastation, the aftermath of a severe earthquake in 1989, and the continuing struggles for power unleashed by Khomeini's death. Yet Iran will remain central to the longer range calculus of Gulf politics; this book argues that its long-term importance in the Gulf exceeds that of Iraq, despite current Western preoccupation with Baghdad's military threat. This book dedicates much attention to the Iraq-Iran relationship and its likely dynamic in the future of Gulf politics.

The book is about a great deal more than simply the Iranian world view, however. It is concerned with establishing many of those historical and geopolitical factors, including the inclinations and goals of its neighbors, that have marked Iran's dealings with each of its neighbors over time. The book also seeks to identify shifts in characteristic relations with neighbors, the reasons for such shifts, and the likelihood of either shift or continuity in Iran's foreign policy relations in the future.

Geopolitics is something of an old-fashioned art that classically focuses upon geography as one of the key determinants of state behavior. Traditionally, the location of a state, its neighbors, axes of communication, and physical resources are taken as immutable factors, the basic materials that bound a state's actions. The thrust of this book, however, goes considerably beyond classical geopolitics. If geography determines many key factors in a country's political behavior and delimits its options, so too does its past, its history. Iran's history itself is in part a product of classical geopolitical factors: Neighbors, axes of communication, and invasion routes directly affect the political/military/economic/ethnic experience. And the experience of history works powerfully to mold that elusive characteristic we variously call national culture, political culture, or national character.

In short, this book is written in the belief that nations have unique personalities or cultures, developed over a period of time by the unique melding of many factors that produce a distinctive culture and operating style. The character of the nation has direct impact on the kind of domestic—and foreign—policy that it will conduct. None of the factors identified as part of a nation's personality or character will enable anyone to predict specifically what it will do—any more than the knowledge of aspects of an individual person's personality can tell you specifically what that person will do under varying circumstances. It depends in part upon the circumstances that that personality is called to operate within. But we can all recognize the essential necessity of possessing maximum familiarization with the operating styles and personal characteristics of individuals with whom we are going to deal; indeed, we often brief others on how to approach individuals unknown to them. The same goes for nations.

More broadly, this book sets out to do several things:

- To examine some aspects of the style and political culture of the people of Iran as conditioned by historical events, geography, and culture. I seek not only to identify key formative events, but to examine the *perception* of those events in Iran and the region—often as important as the "historical facts" themselves. Myth, image, tradition, and prejudice are powerful determinants in any nation's history—especially when there is a lot of history involved, as is the case with Iran.
- To examine the nature of Iran's historical interactions with each of its neighbors in order to identify the salient issues that have emerged between them, and how they view each other—however far back in time one needs to go to identify root causes and attitudes. Greater emphasis is of course laid on events of this century because their legacy is more immediate.
- To examine how issues between Iran and its neighbors have been dealt with—resolved or not resolved—historically. What were the circumstances under which issues have been put to "permanent" rest in the past? What issues are still dormant? Political surprise usually occurs when a course of events turns a corner; factors long inoperative and ignored suddenly reemerge to become important once again. Can we identify any of those *latent factors*, icebergs in the political sea, in Iran's dealings with its neighbors?
- To identify those factors either in Iran or in neighboring countries capable of transforming political behavior under new circumstances. Under what circumstances might old issues recur as points of contention between Iran and each neighbor?
- To explore the *future prospects* for Iran's relations with each of its neighbors and Iran's behavior in the region. Because unforeseen events—especially coups, wars, and the actions of great powers—often have a decisive impact on regional events, what can we say about possible or conceivable future events in the region—based on historical precedent—that might unleash new or unforeseen conflict? If certain types of major events take place, how might they change the geopolitical calculus?

I recognize that this is a tall order. The number of possible factors are theoretically infinite, making any kind of firm predictions about future interactions almost impossible. However, an examination of the historical record should offer some clues about the possible range of events that might happen in the future.

This book does not presume to spin any single firm scenario about regional events around Iran. The art of forecasting, after all, really consists

of identifying alternative courses of events and isolating those factors that help determine which alternative emerges as most likely. This book does seek to identify those key geographical, historical, and cultural issues that might delimit the nature of future interactions. In short, it inquires into the pathology of the region and the kinds of things we need to look out for—even if they never take place. But thoughtful forecasts of events that never quite occur does not imply that such forecasts are "wrong." They simply serve to describe the operating environment, the hidden shoals, the barely visible icebergs that we very much need to be aware of, even if we do not hit them. Indeed, knowledge of the distinct possibility of certain kinds of events will enable us to either prepare for them or better avoid them.

Any book that deals with the future, with possible scenarios for major geopolitical changes and new interstate relations, must inevitably raise scenarios that will be disturbing to some of the states, regimes, or groups in power. In raising these scenarios, my intention in no way is to cast disrespect upon existing ruling institutions in any state. By suggesting the possible shape of future change in the region, I neither intend to advocate such change, nor to wish it to occur, but simply to flag it for the concern of all who live in or deal with the region. Any geopolitical study of the area must be honest in its appraisal of possible—even violent—change if it is to be worth the paper it is printed upon.

* * *

As noted above, this book concerns the kinds of attitudes and prejudices that abound in the region and that play hidden counterpoint to public events. My goal is to seek a better understanding of Iran in particular. In seeking to identify salient features of its political culture and operating style, I realize that such cultural observations often say almost as much about the observer as they do about the observed. Indeed, part of the United States' problem in dealing with Iran has been its own inability to grasp the culture and operating style of that country—even under the shah, but especially under the ayatollahs. That I feel a need for a book like this suggests that Americans are often victims of their own political culture and operating styles—styles that are unique in the world. Americans' own prejudices, attitudes, and unusual political history leave them exceptionally ill equipped to intuitively grasp the operating styles of most other states, especially states that are more constrained by ancient historical legacies, memories of the past, and long-term vulnerability to the pressures and ravages of outside states, to war and conquest. Because the United States is so big and its smallest actions possess such clout, Americans feel they can afford to overlook the necessity for sensitivity to the operating styles of others—a luxury no