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Iran and Iraq: An Overview

Commander Bennice L. Liner, US Navy

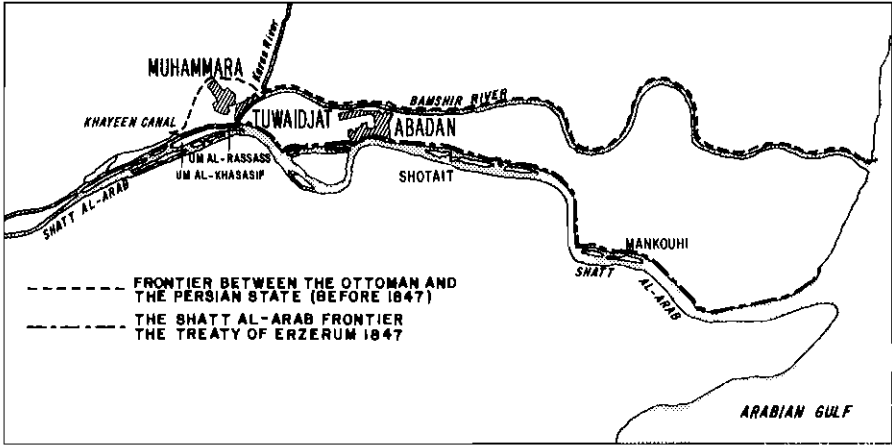
Iran and Iraq, two of the major producers of crude and refined oil in the Persian Gulf have been at war for over three years now. Why, with oil so important to the industrial nations, has there not been a greater effort made to end this seemingly unnecessary drain on the area's economy? Before being able to deal with this question, one must examine the causes for the war—its geographic, political and ideological aspects.

The present war started in September 1980, but the dispute over the Shatt-al-Arab (the Shore of the Arabs) waterway goes back several centuries. The rivalry between the two countries dates back to the seventh century when the area now known as Iraq was under oppressive Persian rule.¹ This period ended when the Persians were defeated at the battle of Qadisiya by tribesmen from Arabia in A.D. 637. Although various treaties have tried to settle the dispute over this vital waterway, none has successfully satisfied both parties. The border between what we now know as Iran and Iraq was set by the Peace of Amasya in 1555 and has been slightly modified by various treaties through the years, ending with the 1975 Algiers agreement.

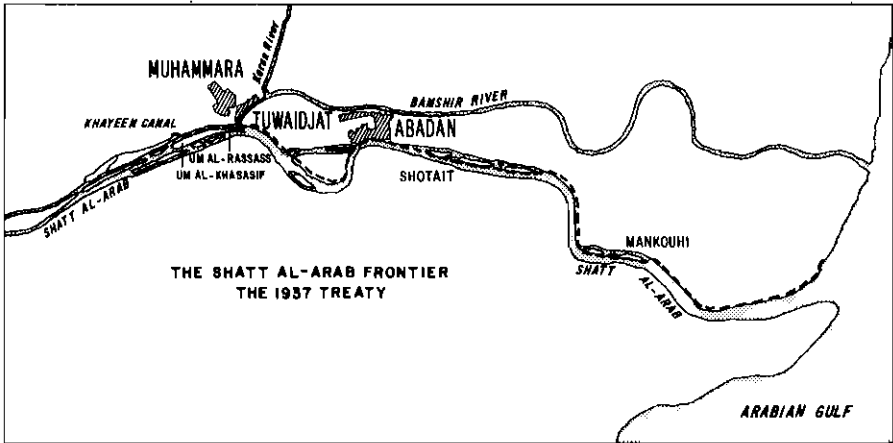
Maps 1 through 3 show the slight movement of the border over the years. All of these treaties have been affected somewhat by outside influence. In the nineteenth century, for example, Russian and British imperialistic policies were the main influences in this region—they in effect controlled Persian affairs. These powers influenced treaties for their own interests and thus gave Iran and Iraq grounds to reject the treaties based on that influence. In the 1975 Algiers agreement, Iraq did accede to moving the boundary to mid-channel in exchange for an Iranian agreement to suspend aid to the rebellious Kurds in northern Iraq.

The Algiers agreement failed with the invasion of Iran by Iraq forces on 22 September 1980, a step designed to solve the border dispute in favor of the Iraqis. However, citing the battle of Qadisiya and calling upon his people to fight the Persians, President Saddam Hussein indicated a far deeper reason for the war than a mere border dispute²—there existed major political and

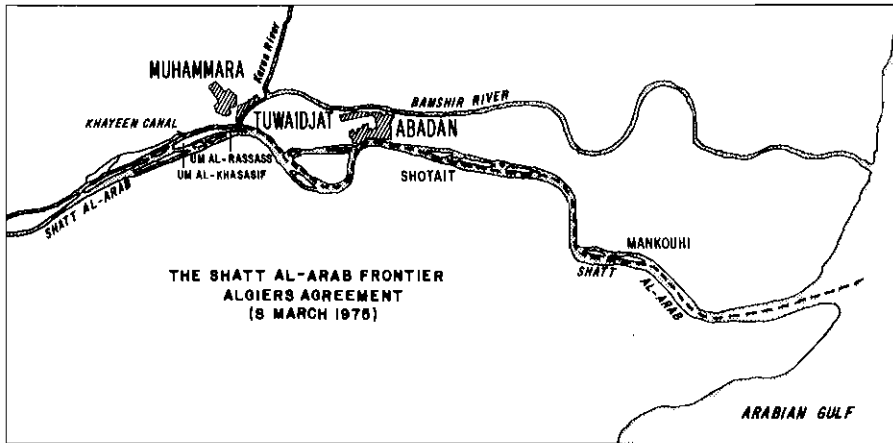
Commander Liner, a recent graduate of the Naval War College, is currently on the staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.



MAP 1



MAP 2



MAP 3

ideological differences. In examining this conflict, one can achieve a better understanding by looking at the strategic location of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, Ayatollah Khomeini's belief in Islamic Internationalism, Iraq's Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party's desire for Arab nationalism, and the irredentism in both countries.

The strategic location of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway is evident (map 4). Iraq sees it as a vital connection between their port of Basra and the Gulf. Iran also considers it vital for the same reason—transportation from the port facility of Mnhammara to the Gulf. Neither will be satisfied with less than guaranteed access and freedom of transit to this strategic line of communication. After the Algiers agreement either side could threaten restrictive actions, and the chances for conflict became greater.



Map 4 displays the location of the Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq as well as the Arabs in Iran. Both of these groups have been players in the friction between Iran and Iraq.

The Ayatollah Khomeini's (Shiah muslim) belief in and the desire for a united Islamic movement has been the source for friction within the area. By advocating an active Islamic ideology, and by declaring his open hostility to secular nationalism (including Arab nationalism), he put himself on a collision course with Iraq.³ On the other hand, Iraq's Sunni Muslim Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party motto is "One Arab nation with an eternal mission."

This ideology is based on the belief that Arabs have always been a single nation, and the desire to return to past glory. Thus, Iraq saw the Ayatollah's rhetoric as an attempt to instigate Shiah unrest within Iraq, and was certainly a factor in the "border" war.

The Kurds have been a source of friction between the two countries for many years. The Kurds are of the Sunni Muslim faith and form sizable minorities in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Although never really having a state of Kurdistan, they have always resisted subjugation by foreign powers. Their location and irredentist ideas have made them participants in the politics of the area. The Iranians were supplying arms to the rebellious Kurds in northern Iraq until the 1975 Algiers agreement. During the current war both sides have been trying to use the Kurds to their advantage, with little success.

Another area of friction was in the Khuzistan (Arabistan) area of southwestern Iran where Iraq desired to influence the Arabs located there. With their Pan-Arabic ideals, the Iraqi government looked at the area and its people (Arabs) as in need of being liberated. Quite naturally the Iranians saw this as interference in their internal affairs.

Iraqi rulers, primarily Sunni in faith and socialist Baathist in politics, possess a population of which 65 percent belong to the Shiah faith, the same as the Ayatollah Khomeini. Shortly after the Iranian revolution, the Ayatollah began seeking to export the revolution by stirring up dissidence among the Shiahs elsewhere.⁴ When one combines Kurdish unrest, Shiah-Sunni religious ideology differences, and a border dispute, there is the climate for a major conflict; and the border dispute conveniently becomes the major pretext for war.

With these factors considered, it is easy to see that this is far from a simple border war and will require a much more complex settlement before bringing about the end to the fighting. With tribe against tribe and religion against religion, all interested parties will continue to find it very frustrating to formulate and pursue an effective Middle East policy.⁵

In the first few days of the war, the United States publicly announced its policy toward the war: neutrality, containment, cessation of hostilities, continued access to Arabian Peninsula oil, and avoidance of a superpower confrontation.⁶ This policy was developed in light of the Iranian hostage crisis and acknowledged the fact that the United States had little, if any, influence in either country. The United States also had no serious capability for intervening militarily and, therefore, had limited ability to shape the direction of events.⁷

Although the United States has had few diplomatic avenues available with the two countries, the path of the war has not had any major adverse effects. Iran and Iraq (neither friendly toward the United States) are two of the most powerful countries in the region. Both are politically and militarily ambitious, seeking leadership roles in the Gulf. With both tied up in this war,

Saudi Arabia has had the opportunity to strengthen its role in the political, military and security affairs of the Persian Gulf. The war has had other effects—one being that it again has demonstrated that Arab unity is somewhat of a myth. An example was the collapse of the coalition of Arab States opposed to Camp David.

Israeli security interests have been enhanced by the war by having Iraq out of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Iraq can no longer confront or threaten Israel militarily to the west when it is engaged to the east. Israel will not encourage an end to this war and has reportedly been supplying Iran with arms and spare parts for its US-made weapons.⁸

The Soviets have not been overly adventurous in the area. Since neither country is aligned with the United States and both are becoming weaker as the war drags on, the Soviets see a weakened threat to their southern flank. Although not overtly involved, the Soviets would most certainly move in and take advantage if the opportunity should arise.⁹

Now that the world is experiencing an oil glut, the loss of Iran and Iraq oil has had little effect on the industrial nations. Basically, the only losers are the countries of Iran and Iraq. Both sides are calling upon their people for "total victory," yet neither is capable of delivering the critical knockout punch. As Richard Hartshorne said, we tend to look at centrifugal vice centripetal forces in evaluating our adversaries. This seems to be the case here, each side believes the other will collapse under the pressure of the war. In any event, a negotiated settlement would be more like an armed truce than a prelude to peace.¹⁰ The question now is: What course should the United States take to further its own interests?

Three main issues need to be considered in any attempt to end the fighting: first, the military aspect of a cease-fire and troop withdrawal/disposition; secondly, the administration of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway; and, finally, the assurance of noninterference in the internal affairs of the other nation.¹¹ Granted, it would be no small task to accomplish a cease-fire and get the two sides to the negotiating table; but, if US diplomats could pull this off (either unilaterally, in cooperation with the United Nations, or in conjunction with other states in the area) they would certainly gain prestige throughout the world as a peacemaker.

If a cease-fire could be arranged, it must be realized that the deep differences between the two countries will cause tension to continue for years. The goal here must be to prevent further outbreaks of hostilities and prevent its spread if war returns. A balance of military power is necessary to ensure stability. It must be remembered that it was the perceived collapse of this balance that led Iraq to contemplate war in the first place.

At the present, the United States has only limited ability to influence events in either country, and no real vital interest except to keep the oil flowing from the area in general. However, potential for a spread of the

war exists. For example, if the Iraqi pilots flying Super Etendards (on loan from France) with Exocet missiles inflict heavy damage on oil terminals or sink a major tanker, the Iranians may respond by trying to close the Strait of Hormuz.¹² This of course could lead to US involvement and even superpower confrontation. Therefore, the United States must continue to work toward peace and develop normal relations with the countries involved.

Notes

1. "It all Goes Back to A.D. 637," *The Economist*, 27 September 1980, p. 41.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Tareq Ismel, *Iran and Iraq, Roots of Conflict* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 34.
4. "It All Goes Back to A.D. 637," p. 41.
5. T.D. Bridge, "Iran Versus Iraq: Oil Not Guns," *The Army Quarterly and Defense Journal*, October 1982, p. 405.
6. Stephen R. Grummon, *The Iran-Iraq War* (New York: Praeger, 1982), p. 61.
7. Caspar W. Weinberger, *Annual Report to the Congress* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1982), p. III-106.
8. Grummon, p. 52.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
12. "Gulf War: Into the Dire Strait." *The Economist*, 30 July 1983, p. 35.



Eleventh Military History Symposium To Be Held At USAF Academy

The Department of History at the US Air Force Academy will host its Eleventh Military History Symposium on 10-12 October 1984. The subject of the eleventh symposium is "Military Planning in the Twentieth Century." Session topics include:

- Military Planning, Before and During World War II,
- Technology and USAF Planning; Military Planning and the Cold War, and
- Planning and Limited Conflict, 1945-1976.

The Twenty-seventh Harmon Memorial Lecture, the symposium keynote address, will be presented by Harold C. Deutsch of the US Army War College. Dr. Deutsch will speak on "German Strategic Military Planning."

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