

FACTSHEET

Chronic Conflict: A Case Study of Iraq

Part 1: The Iran-Iraq War

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The Iran-Iraq War was a conventional armed conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ba'athist Iraqi Republic. It began with Iraq's invasion of Iran on 22 September 1980 and ended with a ceasefire commencing 20 August 1988. Both regimes had expansionist ambitions that played important roles in the war: the Hussein regime in Iraq sought to replace Egypt as the pre-eminent Arab state, while the new Iranian regime intended to export its revolutionary shi'a Islamic ideology. Geopolitical factors, however, served to lay important foundations for the war long before either Saddam Hussein or Ayatollah Khomeini came to power.¹

A history of border disputes

Iran and Iraq have long contested control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway (or "Arvand Roud" in Persian), which forms part of the boundary between them. Competition for control of the waterway can be traced back as far as the seventeenth century, when the Ottoman Empire and Persia vied for power in the region. In 1937, Iran and Iraq agreed a treaty that gave them equal access to the



Shatt Al Arab and Khuzestan
(Source: BBC)

waterway. However, in 1969 Iran reneged on the agreement and refused to pay shipping duties to Iraq. A period of tension followed, during which each country attempted to undermine the other's sovereignty, for example, by fomenting unrest amongst their respective Kurdish populations. In 1975, the two countries signed the Algiers Agreement, whereby Iraq conceded control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway in return for Iran ending its support for the Iraqi Kurdish

insurgency. The Algiers Agreement was embarrassing for the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, which saw not only the waterway but also Khuzestan province in south-west Iran as its rightful territory. Khuzestan is oil-rich and the majority of the population speak Arabic. Hence, when Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, he sought to take control of these areas, seeking to elevate Iraq to the status of 'regional hegemon'.

Ideological conflict

Relations between Iraq and post-revolutionary Iran were not always acrimonious; the Shah of Iran had been no friend of the Ba'athists in Iraq, who were glad to see him go. However, the Shah 'was not so much interested in toppling the Baath regime as he was in preventing Iraq from competing militarily with Iran'². By comparison, the new Iranian regime under Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly called for shi'a revolution and the overthrow of the regime in Iraq. Saddam Hussein quickly recognised this as an existential threat to his rule. However, he perceived Iran to be weak domestically in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, and thus saw an opportunity to strike.

The longest conventional war of the 20th Century

Throughout the course of the war both sides took and conceded territory. The Siege of Abadan (November 1980-September 1981) was an important early action in the war. Abadan Island was the site of one of Iran's major oil refineries and Iraq tried to take control of it but met with strong resistance. The Hussein regime had predicted that the Iranian people would be in disarray in the wake of the 1979 revolution and had relied on this when planning the invasion. However, whilst there was some domestic disorder, Iran proved resilient and was able to gradually reverse Iraq's territorial gains. Iran launched a counter-invasion of Iraq in July 1982, code-named Operation Ramadan, during which they incurred heavy losses for relatively small gains. In contrast to large-scale missions such as these, the war was also characterized by long periods of battlefield stalemate. This caused the war to evolve in terms of both strategy and scope.

New tactics

In 1984 Saddam Hussein launched the so-called 'tanker war'. This involved intensifying the targeting of merchant ships carrying Iranian crude oil from the Gulf region. It was hoped that this would force Iran to take extreme measures such as closing the strategically significant

¹ See E Karsh, 'Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War' (1990), *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 44 (2), pp. 256-268.

² *Ibid*, p. 268.

Strait of Hormuz—an action that constituted a “red line” for Western intervention in the conflict. Iran did not react as Iraq had intended and was careful to avoid provoking external involvement. Instead, Iran responded by using the same strategy against ships chartered to carry Iraqi oil. However, attacks against Kuwaiti tankers led Kuwait to request protection from both the US and the USSR, which they provided.

International alignment: Iraq’s life-support, Iran’s isolation

International protection and assistance gave Iraq the upper hand as it was able to continue attacking Iranian oil tankers while the super powers offered protection for the shipment of Iraqi oil. Iran, on the other hand, was internationally isolated. Despite Iraq having invaded Iran, the latter was portrayed as the aggressor throughout the war and is often remembered as such. As well as receiving protection from the US and USSR, Arab states (excluding Syria) funnelled enormous financial assistance to Iraq, fearful of the revolutionary ideology emanating from Iran. The war was ended when both parties agreed to UN Security Council Resolution 598, which called for an immediate ceasefire and return to the pre-war boundaries. Although the resolution was accepted in July 1988, it did not enter into force until the following month and, in the meantime, Iraq staged a last-ditch attempt to take control of Khuzestan province, which ultimately failed.

Aftermath and implications of the conflict

The war has been dubbed a ‘costly exercise in futility’³ and certainly the costs in human and economic terms were enormous. Moreover, the war paved the way for further violence and instability. Acts of retribution towards Kurdish populations in Iraq, notably the Al-Anfal campaign, followed the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq. Shi’a communities were also oppressed, straining sectarian cohesion. Furthermore, within two years of the ceasefire, Iraq would once more resort to military invasion of another neighbour, tiny Kuwait to its south, precipitating further instability in the region.

³ E Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, (2002) Oxford: Osprey Publishing, p.84.

Key Dates

- 23 September 1980: Iraqi forces invade Iran
- 6 October 1980: Khorramshahr (capital of Khuzestan province) surrounded
- 24 October 1980: Khorramshahr comes under Iraqi control
- November 1980-September 1981: Siege of Abadan
- 5-11 January 1981: Major Iranian counter-attack fails
- March 1982: Iranian offensive, Operation Undeniable Victory, drives Iraqi forces out of Khuzestan Province
- April 1982: Syria closes pipeline for Iraqi oil
- July 1982: Iranian invasion of Iraq
- February 1984: ‘Tanker War’ begins and first ‘War of the Cities’
- February 1986: UN resolution on a ceasefire
- 6 April 1987: Kuwait seeks protection of oil tankers by both US and USSR
- March 1988: Halabja massacre
- July 1988: Ayatollah Khomeini accepts ceasefire



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