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BUREAU OF
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OGCR/GP/M

(U) THE IRAN-IRAQ BOUNDARY:
GEOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Summary

(U) Geographically, the Iran-Iraq frontier can be divided into three segments: Khuzestan/Lower Mesopotamia; the Central Plains and Foothills; and Kordestan/Kurdistan. The Khuzestan/Lower Mesopotamia segment has assumed the greatest importance owing to the Iraqi attack on the important petroleum centers of ⁴⁰ Khorramshah and Abadan. It is also the one segment where an Iraqi territorial claim--control over the Shatt al Arab estuary--has been clearly enunciated.

(U) The Central Plains and Foothills region, however, was the center of conflict in 1974 and again prior to the Iraqi invasion of September 1980. It is quite probable that both sides in the conflict will claim that the Algiers Agreement of 1975, which ostensibly delimited the 906-mile Iran-Iraq boundary, was abrogated by the initiation of military activity along this part of the frontier.

(C) Although the Iran-Iraq frontier has been the subject of dispute for years, the raison d'etre underlying the present conflict has more to do with determining the eventual leadership in the Persian (Arabian) Gulf region. The 1975 Algiers Agreement, respected by both parties until the fall of the Shah of Iran, was as concise a delimitation of the respective states as any international boundary agreement of recent years. Iran's gain, through the use of the thalweg (the main channel) of the Shatt al Arab estuary to determine state sovereignty, was and is in keeping with methodology commonly accepted in international law. Should Iran lose the right to navigate freely in the Shatt al Arab, it would be only a matter of time until conflict again occurred.

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(C) In the long run, Iraq could perhaps force Iran to relinquish some territory in the Central Plains and Foothills (which perhaps could serve as a bargaining element in a cease-fire); however, this would be an unlikely denouement to a dangerous conflict that pits Persian against Arab and Shia against Sunni in a region where religious and ethnic hatreds are centuries old.

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(U) For practical as well as historical purposes, the existing frontier between Iran and Iraq can be divided into three segments (see Map A, over):

- Khuzestan/Lower Mesopotamia;
- the Central Plains and Foothills;
- Kordestan/Kurdistan.

(U) Current US interest is focused on the Iraqi incursion into Iranian Khuzestan, commonly known as "the cradle of the Iranian oil industry." Somewhat less known is that while Khuzestan comprises only 9 percent of Iran's land mass, it possesses 37 percent of that country's surface water flow. This factor has led Iran to choose the region as a center of agricultural production. Thus Khuzestan's importance to Iran is twofold.

(U) In 1974, however, the military activity along the Iran-Iraq frontier--which led to a UN Security Council investigation and thereby to the Algiers boundary agreement of 1975--centered in the Central Plains and Foothills region. Again, in 1980 the military disturbances prior to the Iraqi invasion in September took place, for the most part, in the central region.

(U) Control of the Shatt al Arab, located in the Khuzestan/Lower Mesopotamia region, is now the single most important aspect of the dispute, but the justification for the abrogation of the Algiers Agreement will be based on activities that took place in the central, not the southern, boundary region.

(U) Khuzestan/Lower Mesopotamia

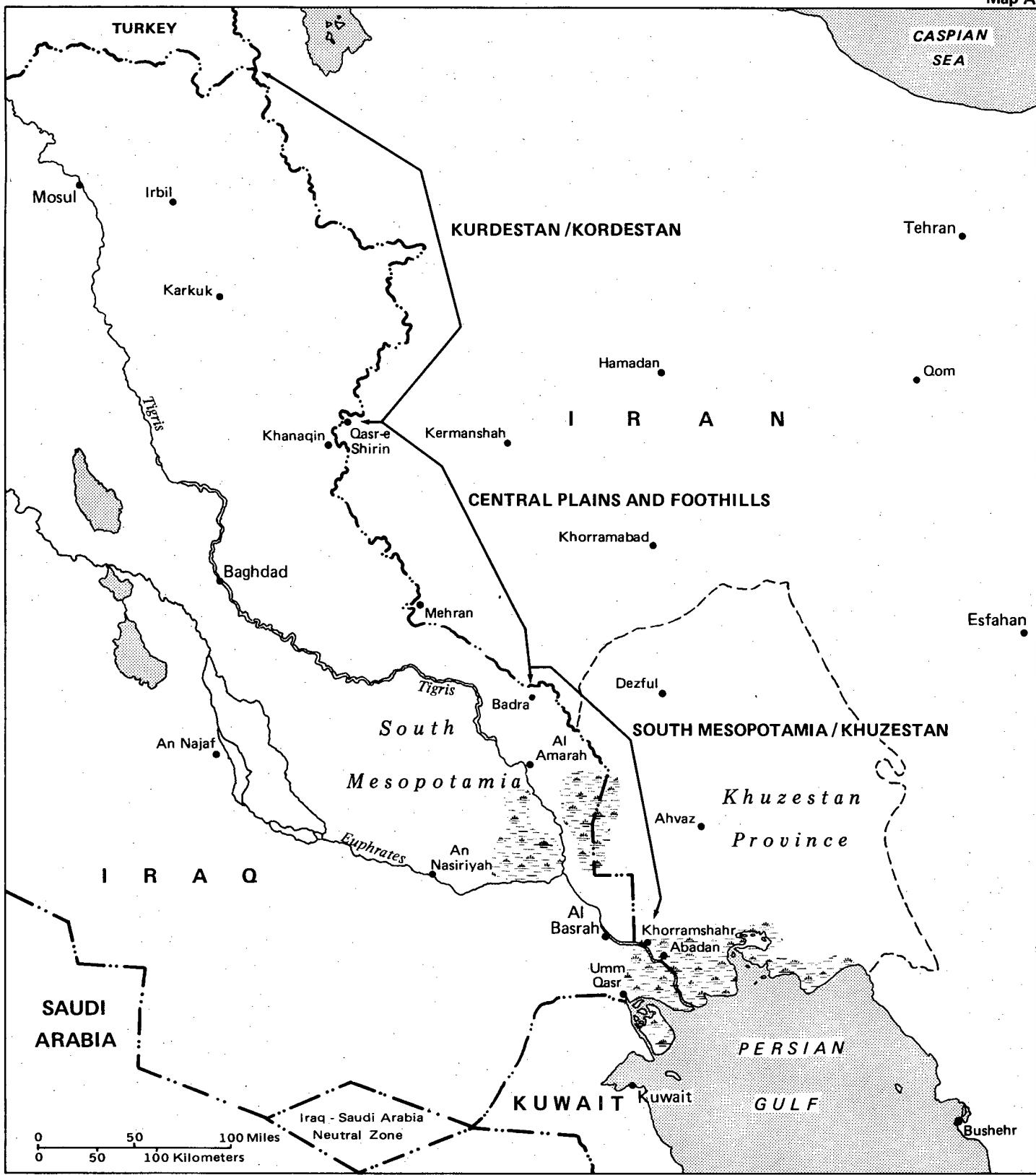
Geopolitically, the outstanding feature in the long history of Iraq-Iran boundary disputes has been the Shatt al Arab estuary. Formed by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates, it drains Iraq's Lower Mesopotamia region. The Shatt al Arab also forms, in its last 55 miles, the Iraqi boundary with the Iranian province of Khuzestan. Khuzestan is often referred to by Arabs and geographers alike as "Arabistan." The term itself, however, is not of recent creation. This generic

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Map A



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description has been used for years to describe a region predominantly Arabic in population--not a territorial claim.

The Treaty of Zuhab (1639), which remained the basis of frontier relations between Turkey and Persia (Iran) until the 19th century, recognized Khuzestan as a Persian Zone and the Shatt al Arab as the southern boundary between the two states. In 1888, Persia's Karun River was opened to navigation via the Shatt al Arab, and goods entering or leaving could be carried to and from Ahwaz. Navigation above Ahwaz to Shushtar was reserved for Persians.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, sovereignty over the lower reach of the Shatt al Arab became a constant pre-occupation:

- The Treaty of Erzerum (1847) settled some issues. The Ottoman Government recognized Persian sovereignty over Mihammarah (Khorramshahr), Khizr (Abadan), and land south to the Persian Gulf on the left bank of the Shatt al Arab. Iranian vessels could use the estuary; however, the estuary itself was considered Ottoman territory.
- The Constantinople Protocol (1913) stated again that the Shatt was under Turkish sovereignty, with the exception of certain islands named.
- The Iran-Iraq Boundary Treaty (1937) acknowledged Iraqi sovereignty over the lower estuary subject to limitations which did not in fact influence to any appreciable extent Iraq's control of shipping on the waterway.

In 1958, it appeared that a new agreement would settle the longstanding dispute. Whereas previous agreements had fixed the river boundary by applying different criteria to different parts of the river, this one used the main channel, or thalweg,^{1/} to define the joint boundary--in keeping with modern boundary delimitation methodology. The agreement was never concluded, however, for in the same year the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown.

1/ "When a river forms a boundary between two states it is usual to say that the true line of demarcation is the thalweg, a German word meaning literally the 'downway' that is the course taken by boats going downstream, which is that of the strongest current, the slack current being left for the convenience of ascending boats...." Westlake, International Law (2nd Edition), 1910.

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in treaties??*

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There followed vague Iraqi claims to Iranian territory located to the east of the Shatt al Arab. The Iraqi Government also began to interfere with the free passage of Iranian-bound vessels on the Shatt al Arab. In 1961, Iraqi refusal to provide pilots for Iranian-bound vessels brought trade with Abadan, Iran's major oil refinery center, to a standstill. Iran then courted war by using its own pilots, "Until such time when the frontier disputes between the two countries were settled."

Again in 1969 there was trouble on the estuary when Iraq demanded that all ships bound for Iran's Shatt al Arab ports fly the Iraqi flag on entering the waterway. Consequently, Iran declared null and void the Iran-Iraq Boundary Treaty of 1937 and began to take military action to protect its interests. Iranian vessels were thereafter accompanied by Iranian naval escorts on the Shatt al Arab.

Relations between the two states were further strained by Iran's seizure of the Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb in 1971, and by the continuing problem of the Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq which was supported by Iran.

The joint boundary in the Shatt al Arab was thought to have been settled definitively with the signing of the Algiers Agreement of 1975 which encompassed the 906-mile frontier. The agreement itself caught the Western world by surprise; although it had appeared that Iran and Iraq were nearing some rapprochement, the agreement exceeded the most sanguine expectations. The parties agreed to the permanent demarcation of their land frontier and decided, "To limit their river frontiers according to the thalweg line."

The 1975 agreement, which led to a repartition of sovereignty along the waterway, was shattered by Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has abrogated the agreement and has:

"Demanded full control over the strategic Shatt al Arab waterway dividing the two countries which the Algiers Agreement had divided between them."

For the moment, Hussein's claim can be seen as a return to form or as an act of retribution. Iraqi war aims may demand the forced assimilation of Khuzestan Arabs or the reworking of the Iran-Iraq boundary beyond the Shatt al Arab itself. But once again, as in 1958, the Iraqi Government is being very vague as to its territorial claims.

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For Iran's part, a USSR All-Union Radio commentator stated in an October 3 broadcast that "Iranian circles" would demand the following conditions for a cease-fire: (1) the resignation of Hussein; (2) the surrender of Iraqi forces in Iranian territory; and (3) the cession of the Iraqi city of Basra, an important Iraqi center of petroleum-related activities. This request would be as unpalatable to Iraq as any loss of territory would be to Iran.

*Middle
Belt*

The Iraqi region north of the Shatt al Arab and east of the Tigris River has long been home to Arabs who have been called "people of the reeds." Little was known of either the people or the region until Western anthropologists began to take an interest in them in the 1950s. The region was malarial, life expectancy was short, and the problem of boundary demarcation in this segment was (and apparently remains) relatively unimportant.

(U) The Central Plains and Foothills

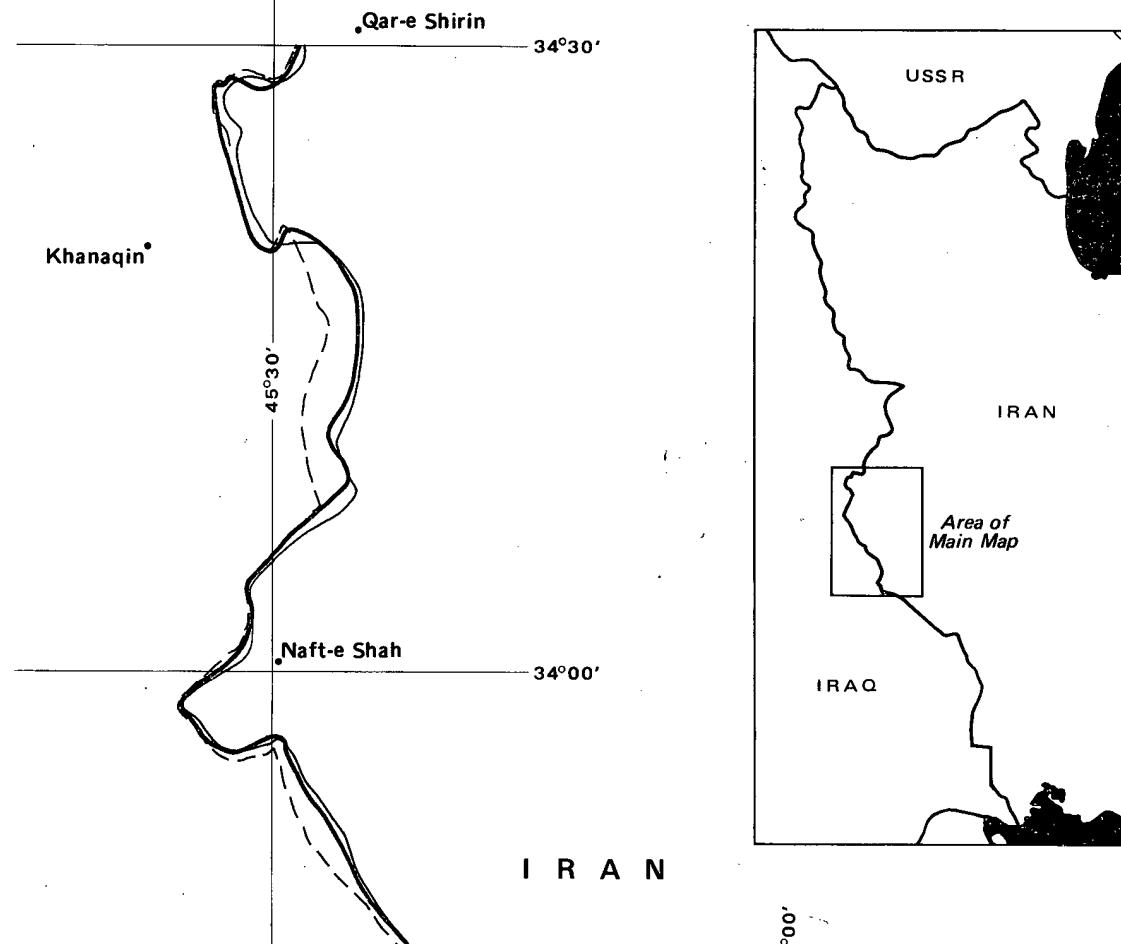
A 130-mile portion of this segment (bounded by Khanagin and Qasr e Shirin to the north and Badra and Mehran to the south) often has been the scene of border conflict. Action there in 1972-74 led to UN Security Council intervention. In March 1974 a UN representative, during a mission on the frontier, found, "To his delight ... each government had been using maps with different land border tracings without being aware of the fact." Although it would seem that the various treaties (of 1639, 1746, 1823, 1847, 1913, and 1937) had provided for a recognized boundary in the region, either joint border demarcation had not taken place or boundary markers had been destroyed—~~or ignored!~~

The 1975 Algiers Agreement ostensibly rectified this situation. In 1976 there were indications that police posts in the central sector were being pulled back from the frontier in preparation for exchanges of territory. Map B, following, depicts the Iraq and Iran claims of 1974 and the boundary created by the 1975 agreement.

In August 1980, Qasr e Shirin, located in the extreme north of the central segment, was the focus of small attacks and counterattacks by Iraqi and Iranian forces. This prelude to the full-scale invasion of Iran may eventually serve as the pretext for the Iraqi invasion. (On September 26, 1980, Iraqi news sources claimed that Iraq had captured Qasr e Shirin while pursuing Iranian troops as far as 32 kilometers inside Iran's boundary. Iraq has also announced the capture of Mehran to the south.) Recent news reports would suggest

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**NAMES AND BOUNDARY REPRESENTATION
ARE NOT NECESSARILY AUTHORITATIVE**



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**1975 Iran/Iraq boundary as depicted
on 1978 DMA maps**

Pre-1975 boundary claims*

Boundary as claimed by Iran

Boundary as claimed by Iraq

**Source: Map No. 2760, April 1974, published by the United Nations.*

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that Iraq intends to claim that the Algiers Agreement was broken by Iran when it initiated a series of attacks along this frontier. However, if Iraq presses a border rectification in the central region, it does so on the flimsiest of grounds. The Algiers Agreement delimited the boundary in this region to the satisfaction of both parties--as hundreds of large-scale maps will attest--and, overall, to Iraq's benefit.

*Where are?
large maps
my country
less than 100*

(U) The Kurdish Mountain Region

This region's boundaries seem to have been adequately delineated in the Turco-Persian Boundary Agreement of 1913 and by the Boundary Delimitation Commission of 1914. Although the boundary divides Iraqi and Iranian Kurds--who have long been the subject of Iraqi "pacification" drives--the frontier has not in recent years been the subject of boundary disputes. Some slight Iraqi military penetration seems to have occurred along this boundary. Further penetration would be hampered by the rugged terrain; secondly, it would arouse the Kurds.

*N. They have
re-creased site
in northern Iraq*

For the moment, the Kurds appear to be sitting it out as their traditional enemies slug it out. Of the three regions, this seems the least important as events continue to unfold.

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(C) Conclusion

The Iraq-Iran conflict is not a "boundary" war per se. The abrogation of the Algiers Agreement on the grounds that one or the other of the signatories refuses to comply with a treaty is only a pretext to continue the fighting. The settling of old scores, or the need for a prestigious settlement, may in time lead to a remaking of the boundary. The roots of the conflict, however, lie in the antithetical political aspirations of two leaders. The end result of this conflict may have little to do with territorial gain, but it should have a great deal of impact on the future leadership of the Muslim world of the Middle East.

It should also be noted that no official position on the Algiers Agreement can be found in either Department of State material or USUN press releases. This is not surprising: it is unusual for US officials to comment on the merit of boundary agreements unless the US, for good geographical or geopolitical reasons, has a direct interest. Finally, the use of the thalweg in delimiting a boundary is a common method which has found near-universal acceptance. The question of the Ussuri River boundary between the USSR and China remains the only major dispute where the thalweg method for determining a frontier remains in dispute.

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(U) ANNEX

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