Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, University of Exeter
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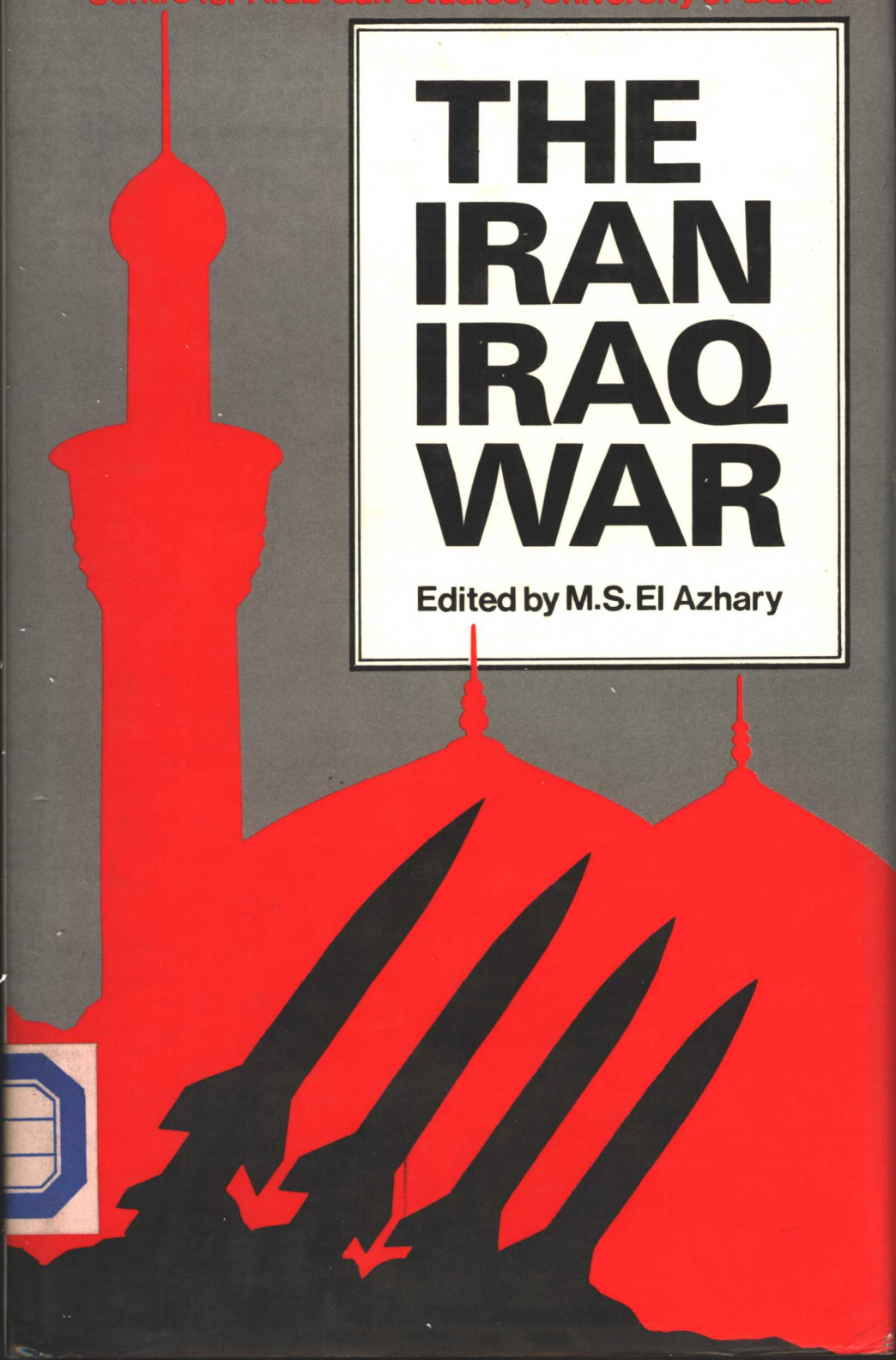
THE IRAN IRAQ WAR

Edited by M.S. El Azhary



THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

An Historical, Economic and Political Analysis

Edited by M.S. El Azhary

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PREFACE

Most of the articles in this book were originally presented as papers to to a symposium entitled 'Shatt al-Arab' which was convened at the University of Exeter in July 1982. The symposium was held under the joint auspices of the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, University of Exeter, and the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, University of Basra. I would like to thank the staff of both Centres for their hard work in organizing the symposium.

Thanks are also due to all those who participated in the symposium, whose comments have enabled several of the speakers to refine the arguments presented in the symposium version of their papers. Several Iranian specialists were invited but disappointingly only two accepted the invitation and participated, adding to the lively discussions that characterized the symposium proceedings.

I am grateful to the technicians and cartographers of the Geography Department, University of Exeter, for the preparation of the maps.

To Mrs Sheila Westcott, who typed the manuscript with expertise and patience, I extend my appreciation.

M. S. El Azhary

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1 INTRODUCTION

M. S. El Azhary

The Iran-Iraq war which broke out in September 1980 and which continues unabated in 1983 has brought death and suffering to hundreds of thousands of people on both sides, and it has devastated the economies of both countries. It has also increased international tension by precipitating new alliances and a rearrangement of forces in the already turbulent Middle East. And although the war, so far, has been limited to the two countries, it still has the potential danger of spreading the fighting at any moment to the rest of the oil-rich Gulf region, with incalculable results both for the states in the area and the world at large.

The focus of this book is on the historical, economic and political dimensions of the war between Iraq and Iran. It examines many aspects of what has proved to be a very complex conflict, including its long history, its present economic and political setting, the different responses to the war by outside parties and its regional and worldwide implications. But before embarking on an analysis of the intricacies of the conflict that are offered in the following articles, an overview of the main developments in the war during the past three years is in order.

In early 1979, after the Shi'a Islamic revolution seized power in Iran, the new regime began exporting its brand of revolution to Iraq through a propaganda campaign aimed mainly at the Shi'a community, which comprises more than half the Iraqi population, inciting it to revolt against the Sunni-dominated Baathist regime. Iranian leaders attacked the ideology of the Baath party as anti-Islamic, and Ayatollah Khomeini repeatedly called for the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein, whom he called an enemy of Islam and Muslims. These and other calls by the Iranian leadership were accompanied by a terror campaign of bombing incidents and assassination attempts on Iraqi officials which were carried out by members of a right-wing Iranian guerrilla group.

The result was an atmosphere of fear and tension in Baghdad. The Iraqi government took the Iranian actions seriously and responded in a way that showed it was willing to go to war to put

an end to them. First, Iraq countered with a propaganda campaign of its own. It denounced the 'Persian magicians led by Khomeini' and called for the overthrow of his regime. Radio Baghdad openly indulged in the racial stereotype that the Persians were dangerous and devious people and it appealed to the Arab world's dislike of *al-'ajam* — the non-Arab Muslims of the East.

Secondly, Baghdad armed and trained guerrillas who waged a sabotage campaign against Iranian oil installations. The Iraqi government also took reprisals by expelling tens of thousands of persons of Persian descent from southern Iraq. Thirdly, Iraq opened up its old territorial disputes with Iran which seemed to have been settled in the deal Iraq made with the Shah in 1975. Iraq called for a revision of the agreement on the demarcation of the border along the Shatt al-Arab; for a return to Arab ownership of the three islands in the Strait of Hormuz which the Shah seized in 1971; and, most dangerously of all, for the granting of autonomy to the minorities inside Iran. The granting of this last demand would have led to the fragmentation of the present Iranian empire, and this in turn might have led to a secessionist movement among the Arab community in the oil-rich province of Khuzistan in southern Iran.

In the meantime, sporadic skirmishes along the frontier became serious and more frequent. Throughout 1980 both sides were reporting tank, artillery and aircraft bombardment of their positions. But with Iran in the throes of revolutionary chaos, its armed forces appeared inferior to those of Iraq in material, morale, organization and discipline. So the Iraqi leadership was greatly tempted to grab the oilfields in southern Iran — which they tried to do when full-scale fighting erupted in September of the same year. They hoped that a quick victory on the battlefield, coupled with increasing their support to the anti-Khomeini forces inside Iran, would weaken further the regime in Tehran and thus force the Iranian government to accept Iraqi demands.

With this bold move Iraq was claiming the mantle of the dominant power in the Gulf region, the same role played by Iran under the Shah in the 1970s. But after a few weeks of fighting, the Iraqi armed forces had captured only a few hundred square miles of Iranian territory, which was not a sufficiently clear victory to bring about such grandiose results. The war soon developed into a stalemate, with the Iraqis prevented from advancing further or consolidating their hold on the occupied areas. This situation

continued for months on end with no significant military action by either side.

To be sure, there was considerable damage done in these first few weeks of the war to the major towns in southern Iran, and to the oil installations of both sides. Iraq's oil exports from Khor al-Amaya and Mina al-Bakr at the head of the Gulf ceased because the loading terminals were badly damaged and the Syrians had closed one of the pipelines to the Mediterranean, thus limiting Iraq to the use of only one pipeline via Turkey. The Iranians, on the other hand, were able to restore their oil exports from Kharg island and the other terminals further down the Gulf. It is important to note, however, that after this initial damage to the oil installations of both countries, the two sides abided by an unwritten understanding that neither side would inflict further damage on the other's oil installations. Under these circumstances Iran has been able to pay for its own war effort, while Iraq has had to depend on Arab financial aid that has diminished in recent months.

In the spring of 1982 the Iranian armed forces regrouped and were able to dislodge and push back the Iraqis across the border. Now it was the turn of the Iranian leadership to try to implement a grandiose scheme of its own with the overall aim of regaining the dominant regional role Iran once had. In the following July Khomeini unleashed his army along the Shatt al-Arab in a huge invasion of Iraq. His objective was not just the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, but the creation of an Iraqi Islamic republic modelled on that of Iran. Khomeini now was insisting that reparations for the damage from the war must come from Iraq. But the Iranian invasion failed, with the Iraqi armed forces performing better in defence of their homeland. Since then they have also succeeded in repulsing several other major Iranian offensives.

Soon the war reverted to a stalemate; it did not trigger a Shi'a rebellion in southern Iraq, just as the earlier invasion of Khuzistan had failed to produce a liberation movement there. In fact, the war seems to have had the opposite effect: it has had the unintended result of increasing national pride and support for both regimes among their respective populations. Death and destruction, however, have been extensive, with the number of dead and casualties estimated in the hundreds of thousands. In economic terms, the devastation is incalculable on both sides: losses are estimated in tens of billions of dollars from the loss of oil revenues and the destruction of oil and other installations.

At the regional level, the war has not so far spilled into neighbouring states, nor has it obstructed access to oil from the Gulf; both parties have adhered to their declared desire of keeping the Strait of Hormuz open to shipping. Moreover, the United States has dispatched the AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) reconnaissance planes to Saudi Arabia to deter Iran from widening the war. In this respect, Iraq has been viewed as the less dangerous of the two combatants, considering its improved relations in recent years with Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf States, Jordan and Egypt, all of which have sided with Iraq in the war and given it financial as well as logistical support. Iraq has also improved its relations with the West generally, and increased her arms purchases from France.

Furthermore, Iraq has split from the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front, whose members — Syria, Libya, South Yemen (PDRY) and Algeria — have sided with Iran in the war; thus a new divisive factor has been introduced into inter-Arab politics. Consequently, this division in Arab ranks has produced the negative effect of shifting Arab concerns away from the Arab-Israeli conflict; it also encouraged the Reagan administration to neglect this problem and feel no urgency to reactivate the search for peace until disaster struck in Lebanon in the summer of 1982. From Lebanese and Palestinian perspectives, it was this distraction and neglect that gave Israel a free hand on such an unprecedented scale, bringing calamitous results for both peoples.

The two superpowers have found it advantageous to stay neutral towards the war between Iraq and Iran. Although their stakes in the conflict remain high, both lack leverage to influence the course of the conflict. Yet both have expressed concern, because it is in their interest to avoid the danger of the fragmentation or dismemberment of either side.

The articles in this book cover four broad aspects of the Shatt al-Arab dispute, each of which contributes to an overall understanding of the present conflict. First, in a historical survey of the long antagonism between the two sides and the strategic importance of the Shatt al-Arab for them both, Peter Hünseler (Chapter 2: The Historical Antecedents of the Shatt al-Arab Dispute) shows that for centuries both countries have made claims and counterclaims on each other's territory, supporting their respective positions by ethnic, political or religious arguments. Mustafa al-Najjar and Najdat Fathi Safwat (Chapter 3: Arab Sovereignty

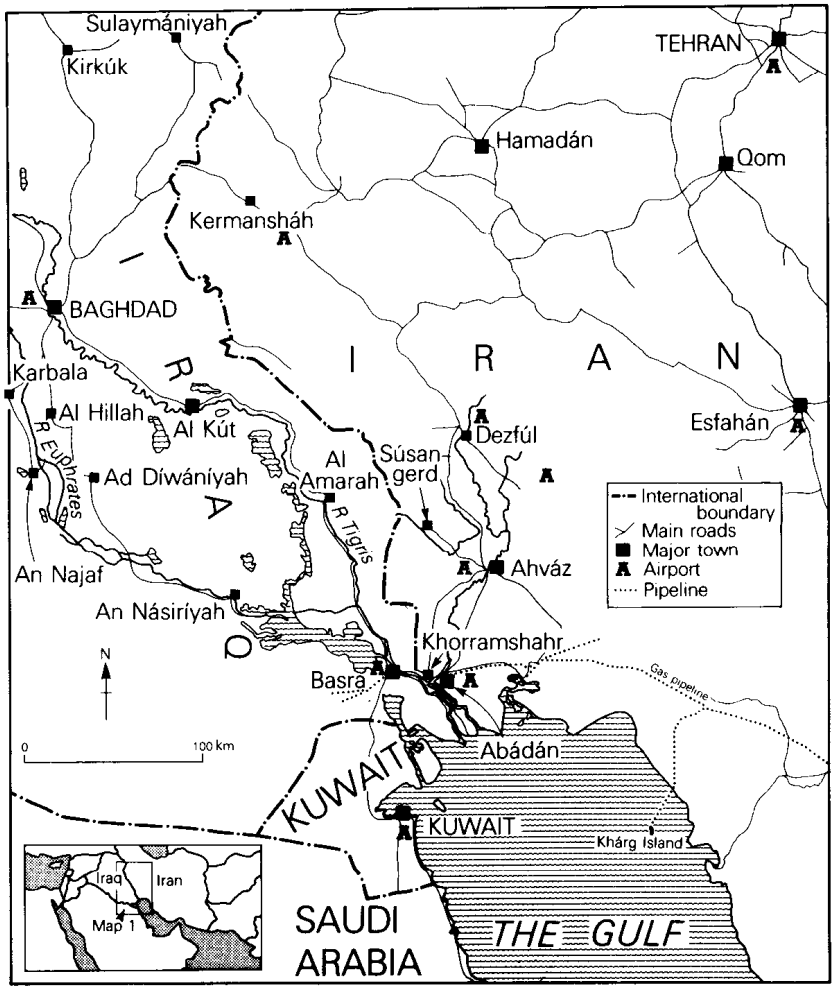
over the Shatt al-Arab during the Ka'bide Period) chronicle the history of the Arab dynasty of the Bani Ka'b, who in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established their domain east of the Shatt al-Arab in Arabistan and imposed Arab sovereignty over the Shatt.

Second, the economic and political setting of the present conflict is examined in three articles. David Long (Chapter 4: Oil and the Iran-Iraq War) shows how the shift to alternative sources of energy, in progress since the 1973–4 oil price rise, combined with market forces to moderate the impact of the war on the worldwide demand for oil. Long assesses the devastating impact of the war on the Iraqi and Iranian oil sectors. John Townsend (Chapter 5: Economic and Political Implications of the War: the Economic Consequences for the Participants) looks at the effects of the war on the major economic activities of both countries, particularly foreign trade, economic development programmes and manpower. Basil al-Bustany (Chapter 6: Development Strategy in Iraq and the War Effort: the Dynamics of Challenge) focuses mainly on the impact of the war on the five-year plan of 1981–5; he goes into greater detail about how the development programmes are being implemented so far. Although al-Bustany's assessment is written from a different perspective than that of Townsend, the two are not necessarily incompatible.

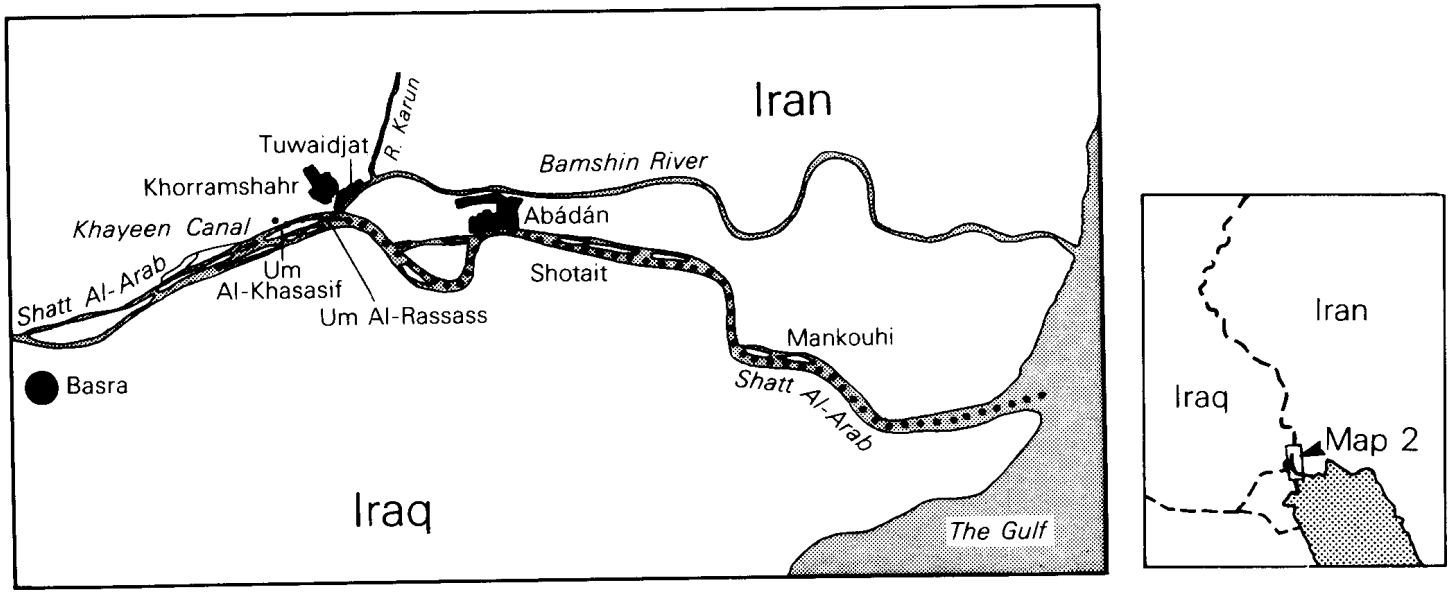
Third, in the international field, the external attitudes to the Iran-Iraq war and its regional and worldwide implications are examined in three articles. G. H. Jansen (Chapter 7: The Attitudes of the Arab Governments towards the Gulf War) explains the varied reasons behind the lack of support for Iraq from most Arab states. M. S. El Azhary (Chapter 8: The Attitudes of the Superpowers towards the Gulf War) analyses the positions taken by both superpowers towards the conflict in the context of their bilateral relations with both Iraq and Iran. From a different perspective, and with a wider scope than in the two previous articles, John Duke Anthony (Chapter 9: Regional and Worldwide Implications of the Gulf War) evaluates the concerns of the outside world at the regional and global levels.

Fourth, the prospects for a peaceful settlement of the Gulf war are assessed in the final article by Glen Balfour-Paul (Chapter 10: The Prospects for Peace) in the light of his analysis of the real issues in dispute between the two combatants. This also sheds some light on the failure of all the attempts at mediation made so far in this conflict.

Map 1.1: International Boundary Line Between Iraq and Iran



Map 1.2: The Shatt al-Arab Frontier, Algiers Agreement (6 March 1975)



2 THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE SHATT AL-ARAB DISPUTE

Peter Hünseler

The Shatt al-Arab Dispute in the Overall Context of Persian-Arab Antagonism

Unlike the course taken by other peoples who came under subjection in the Arab conquests of the seventh century, Persia succeeded in maintaining its national character against the invaders. When, in AD 636, the Persian Sassanids were defeated at the Battle of Qadisiya near Hira by the Arab armies of General Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas and the empire itself came to an end with the Battle of Nihawand in 642, its population, conscious of the state's territorial integrity and cultural continuity, converted to Islam. The conquering Arabs and the peoples they subjected considered Arabism and Islam a unity; the Persian culture, however, 'though overlaid by Islam, could not be suppressed'.[1]

A key principle which has permeated Persian history since the Arab conquests, and strongly influenced its current social and political life, is that of a juxtaposition of Persia and Islam. This principle has arisen out of the Zoroastrian view of a state which tends towards a secularly-legitimized kingship, the survival of the Persian language (albeit soon written in Arabic script) and the proud awareness of a distinct Persian history. Within only two centuries, the Sunni-Arab caliphate of the Abbasids had come to find Persian literature attractive. Real power was seized, time and again, by the Persian dynasties in the Abbasid caliphate. Between 954 and 1055 — for over a century — the Buyid dynasty managed to control political events in Iraq and western Persia and to restrict the Abbasid caliphs to a purely religious role. 'Thus the history of the Buyids in Iraq can bee understood as a struggle between Arabism and Persianism'.[2]

The adoption of Shi'ism as the state religion in Persia by the Safavids early in the sixteenth century constituted the zenith of Persia's delimitation from its Arab neighbours, while remaining within the context of Islam. For the first time in the history of

Islam, Shi'ism thereby established itself in a state, thus fragmenting, in a way previously unknown, the unity of the Islamic world. The Safavid kings viewed themselves primarily as secular rulers and left religious leadership to the theologians. The Shi'a clergy subsequently became unwilling to relinquish the powerful position they had acquired under the Safavids. Especially under the early Qajar rulers, land and money had been lavished upon them, gaining for their leaders economic independence from the monarchy and a steady growth of influence in Persian politics. No comparable development had taken place in the neighbouring Sunni Arab states.

A new dimension had therefore been added to the original contradiction between Arab and Persian nationalism: the Sunni-Shi'a antagonism. In that context, adherence to divergent branches of Islam proved less significant than the differing degree of influence exerted by religion on the formation and appreciation of politics and state power. That condition still prevails today, particularly in those states in which an *Arab* population is divided into Sunnis and Shi'a.

The leaders of the Shi'a clergy in the Arab states (Iraq, Bahrain) could not attain an exclusive social position comparable to that in Persia, where the Shi'a acquired a national religious importance. Hence these Shi'a clerics found themselves exposed to a dual conflict of loyalty: on the one hand, they preached Shi'ism in a state not homogenously Shi'a and were thus drawn into the historic antagonism between Sunni and Shi'a; on the other, as *Arab* Shi'a they were suspected by their Arab rulers of succumbing to non-Arab (in other words, Persian) influence. Only too often they were perceived by their Arab compatriots as representing foreign, non-Arab interests. The Arab Shi'a's perennial dissociation from their political leaders evidently originates here, apart from their mistrust of any secular rule, a mistrust grounded in Shi'a chiliasm.

Persian-Arab antagonism and the struggle for influence and predominance in the Middle East naturally manifested itself chiefly where Sunni and Shi'a population groups, as well as Arabs and Persians, clashed in their settlement areas. While Persians and the Arabs of the Arabian peninsula were separated geographically by the Persian-Arab Gulf, antagonism appeared clearly along the land boundaries. The determination of a common border thus became a conflict lasting several centuries, in the course of which each side repeatedly claimed vast territories of the other state. These claims

were corroborated historically, ethnically, geopolitically or by way of religious arguments. The economic and strategic significance of the Shatt al-Arab for both sides gave the border definition in this area an importance well beyond that of all other controversies.

The war that broke out in September 1980 between Iran and Iraq is a further element in the lengthy struggle by both sides for delimitation, influence, and predominance in the region. Contrary to earlier conflicts, however, in which both sides were forced into a compromise by major European powers according to their own interests in the region, Iran and Iraq went to war in 1980 with the uncompromising goal of achieving only their own respective claims. They employed all the strategies which have marked the long history of the conflict: intervention in each other's internal affairs, mutual territorial claims (Iran to the Shatt al-Arab and Bahrain; Iraq to the Shatt and Arabistan/Khuzistan), and different idelogical orientations.

The Shatt al-Arab Dispute between Persia and the Ottoman Empire

The Peace Treaty of 1639

After the conquest of Baghdad in 1638 by the Turkish Sultan Murad IV, the first border settlement with Persia was arrived at as early as the following year. Since both in the north (Kurds, Armenians) and in the south (Arabs) the boundary cut through traditional settlement areas of tribes which 'regarded as their natural masters'[3] neither the Turks nor the Persians, the course of the border was not laid down exactly or in any detail, but conformed, for the most part, to tribal loyalties and toponyms. This accommodated the wishes of both sides to make further territorial gains by closely linking the tribes to either Esfahan or Istanbul. Although frequent boundary disputes flared up thereafter, in the Kurdish-Armenian boundary district, they could be settled on the basis of the 1639 agreement. For the boundary course in the Shatt al-Arab region, however, this agreement proved insufficient. From the Persian point of view, the Shatt al-Arab constituted a natural border; the Turkish perspective, however, was that the Arab tribes on both sides of the Shatt al-Arab constituted an ethnic and historical unit, from which they concluded that Arabistan, including the Shatt al-Arab, belonged to the Ottoman Empire.