



Conflict Factsheet

Iraq-Iran: from Water Dispute to War

Type of conflict
Main

Intensity
4

Conflict Locality
Western Asia

Time
1944– 1988

Countries
Iraq, Iran

Resources
Water



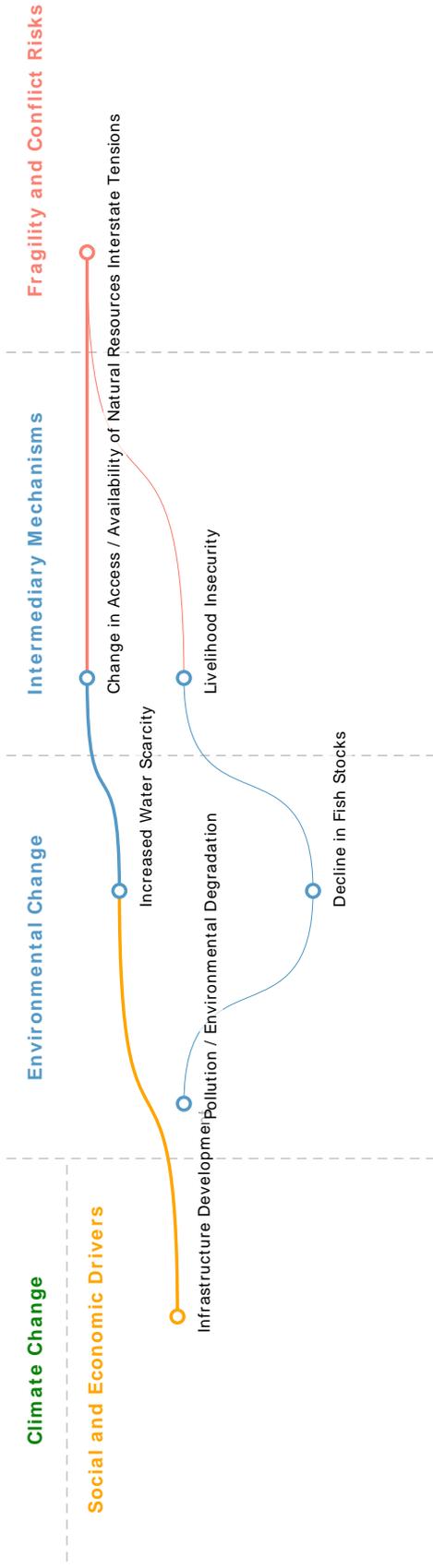
Transboundary
water
management

Conflict Summary

The Shatt al-Arab River forms the boundaries between Iran and Iraq before flowing into the Persian Gulf. Due to its strategic importance for both Iraq and Iran, for centuries both countries have defended their sovereignty rights over the river. The Shatt al-Arab dispute was an important cause which led to the outbreak of the 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Water





Conflict History

The delimitation of the Shatt al-Arab River has been a point of contention between the co-riparians for centuries. Tensions due to incompatible sovereignty claims over the river escalated in the 1960s and led to a full-scale war between Iran and Iraq from 1980 to 1988. Recently, after centuries of dispute, bilateral strains have been normalised and the co-riparians have concluded an agreement on both the delimitation and the joint management of the Shatt al-Arab River.

Strategic importance of the Shatt al-Arab River for both Iran and Iraq

The Shatt al-Arab River is formed by the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers in Iraq. The river constitutes the border between Iraq and Iran on the last 50 miles of the river and continues to flow down to the Persian Gulf ([Francona, 2001](#)). Being the only access point of Iraq to the Persian Gulf, the Shatt al-Arab River has a strategic importance for the country's transportation and exports. Moreover, given the dry and humid climate in this part of the Middle East, the water from the river is crucial for agriculture ([ICE, 1998](#)). Although Iran has other accesses to the Gulf, a high quantity of crude oil produced in Iran is transported through the Shatt al-Arab River.

In addition to that, this river also symbolises a cultural line between Persians and Arabs ([Ibid.](#)). This boundary illustrates the many fault lines between Iran and Iraq: Shi'a vs. Sunni Government; heir of Persian Empire vs. heir of Ottoman Empire; Fundamentalist/Secular Government ([Ibid.](#)). The delimitation of the Shatt al-Arab River's borders has been a point of contention between Ottomans and Persians for centuries and both empires have sought to control it ([Francona, 2001](#)). After the Second World War, and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the dispute shifted to an Iraq-Iran conflict ([Ibid.](#)).

In conclusion, the differing cultural heritage between Iran and Iraq has been a factor that has made the issue of sovereignty between Persians, on the one side, and Arabs, on the other side, even more salient. Indeed, this was particularly the case for Iraq who have perceived the Shatt al-Arab to be "totally Iraqi and total Arab" ([Pipes, 1983](#)). The second part of this case study assesses the cooperation efforts attempted by third parties in order to settle the Shatt al-Arab dispute.

Resolution Efforts

Successive bilateral agreements on the delimitation of the river

After the First World War (WWI), Iraq and Iran once again concluded agreements over the delimitation of the river: in 1937, with the support of the League of Nations; and – after the 1937 agreement failed – in 1975, on the initiative of the Algerian President Houari Boumediene ([Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1978](#); [Karsch, 2002](#)). However, these agreements were doomed to failure, as Iraq never altered its stance according to which the country should have full sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab River. Even though these agreements managed to appease bilateral relations momentarily, they never eradicated tensions present in the region.



Incompatibility of perceived sovereignty rights impede agreements

Due to the fact that Iraq never recognised Iran's sovereignty over one half of the river, since the 1960s, both countries have engaged in a race for power to defend their perceived rights. In the 1960s, Iran started scaling up its military capacities in order to defend its sovereignty rights over half of the river (ICE, 1998). In 1969, when Iraqi leaders claimed sovereignty over the entire river, Iran, whose military capacity was in 1969 greater than Iraq's, unilaterally withdrew from the treaty and claimed its sovereignty over half over the river (Karsch, 2002). In order to put pressure on Iraq, Iran provided support to the Kurds who were seeking autonomy in the Northern part of the country (ICE, 1998). By using this strategy of linking the water dispute to the Kurdish issue, Iran succeeded in bringing back Iraq to the negotiation table and to get the latter to recognise Iran's sovereignty claims (Pipes, 1983).

Even though a new agreement was reached between the co-riparians in 1975 with the Algiers Agreement, the fact that the treaty recognized the co-sovereignty of Iran was seen as "humiliating" for Iraq (Ibid.). As a result of that, in 1979, when Iran's military was scaled down, Iraq announced its withdrawal from the 1975 treaty (Ibid.).

The role of the Shatt al-Arab dispute in the 1980-1988 war

Due to the incapacity to delimit the river in a way that would be acceptable for both co-riparians, the dispute over the river was a major cause for the break out of the hostilities of the 1980-1988 war, which opposed Iraq and Iran (ICE, 1998). However, the Shatt al-Arab dispute was not the only issue, which was at the roots of the war. In fact, Iraq wanted to take control of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan at the border with Iran (Onwar, 2015). The territorial dispute over three Persian Gulf islands seized by Iran in 1971 and Iran's diversion of the Shatt al-Arab's tributaries upstream contributed to increase tensions (Pipes, 1983). Moreover, Hussein also feared that Iran's new Islamic revolutionary government could foster rebellion amongst Iraq's Shiite majority (Onwar, 2015).

Consequences of the 1980-1988 war

During the war, as both parties were determined to defeat each other, one million people were killed and one million refugees were reported (Global Security, 2011). Moreover, the considerable impacts of the conflict on the environment also contributed to destroy the livelihood of the population. The strategy of both sides to target each other's oil infrastructure led to major oil spills in the Gulf, impacting the Gulf population, for which fishing was the main source of livelihood (TED, 1999). In addition to that, the destruction of 17-18 million date palms in Southern Iraq – strategy to reduce potential for attacking forces – contributed to increased soil salinity and had detrimental impacts on agriculture (UNEP, 2003).

Cease-fire despite the unsettled Shatt al-Arab dispute

After eight years of conflict, characterised by heavy human, environmental as well as economic consequences, both parties accepted the ceasefire brokered by the UN (UCDP, 2015). Nevertheless, even though Iraq and Iran put an end to the violent hostilities, both parties publicly indicated immediately after the cease-fire that they had not changed their position regarding the status of the Shatt al-Arab (Wallace, 1988).



The cease-fire did not therefore succeed in settling the Shatt al-Arab. However, in fall 1990, shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait, Iraq and Iran restored diplomatic relations (Onwar, 2015). This move initiated by Hussein must be understood in the wider context that, following Kuwait's invasion, Iraq had lost support from the West – who tacitly supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. On the other hand, by multiplying diplomatic initiatives, in 1989 Iran had succeeded in restoring normal diplomatic relations with France, Italy and Germany and prospects of improvement of relations with US were boding well (Tarock, 1998). Fearing that such rapprochement could lead to an alliance against itself, Iraq withdrew its troops from occupied Iranian territory – which Iraq occupied despite the ceasefire – and agreed on a division of sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab with Iran. Iraq also agreed on an exchange of prisoners-of-war (ibid.). The Algiers Agreement was however not reinstated.

Tensions over the Shatt al-Arab continued

Although bilateral diplomatic relations improved after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the following governments kept the strong position that Iraq would never reinstate the 1975 Agreement (Hunter, 2014). Tensions also remained over the Shatt al-Arab River due to Iran's water-development projects upstream of the river, which were a major source for Iraq's agriculture downstream (Waterinventory, 2013). In 2004, Iraq's ministry of water resources voiced opposition to Iran's diversion plans (ibid.).

New development on a mutually acceptable delimitation of the Shatt al-Arab

In recent years – and particularly since the beginning of the war in Syria –, relations between Iraq and Iran have majorly improved (Duman, 2013). This has been reflected on the Shatt-al Arab issue. In 2014, Iraq and Iran's Prime Minister met to discuss the how to delimit the river in a mutually acceptable way and to put an end to the status quo (Dinar Advice, 2014). Water-protection aspects took also a major space in the talks (ibid.). This perspective of cooperation is very timely, as reports point out the increasing deterioration of water quality and its hazardous threats for health and agriculture (Myers, 2010). Fifteen years after the Iran-Iraq war, both parties are finally taking steps to cooperate on cleaning-up the hazardous reminders of the war, which keeps polluting their waters dangerously and threaten the resilience of the ecosystem. To conclude, after attempts to resolve the Shatt al-Arab disputes since 1939, and a culmination of the conflict with the 1980-1988 war, the first real steps towards cooperation have been made in 2014. Today both countries have restored bilateral diplomatic relations and reached agreements on a mutually satisfying delimitation of the river. They are also jointly working towards the protection of the river. However, these agreements should make sure they do not restrict themselves to the area of the Shatt al-Arab and that they also address the impacts of Iran's dams on the downstream part of the river. In fact, reports have pointed out the severe impacts on water-quality and water-quantity that Iran dams on the upstream part of the River have for the population downstream (EJOLT, 2013; AMAR, 2007). Failure to do this could revive tensions between both parties.



Intensities & Influences



INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Diplomatic Crisis
Interstate War (COW)



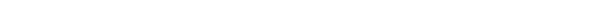
Violent Conflict
Yes



Salience with nation
National



Mass displacement
More than 100.000 or more than 10% of the country's population are displaced within the country.



Cross Border Mass Displacement
No



Resolution Success

Reduction in Violence

Violence has ceded completely.

Reduction in geographical scope

The geographical scope of the conflict has decreased.

Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.

Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been mostly addressed.

Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

Conflict resolution strategies have been clearly responsible for the decrease in conflict intensity.

Resources and Materials

References with URL

[Amar. \(2007\) Geography of the Marshes "chapter 3 Marsh Draining Operations.](#)
[Bureau of Intelligence and Research. \(1978\). International Boundary Study Iran-Iraq Boundary.](#)
[Dinar Advice. \(2014\). Iraq-Iran Talks on Borders, Shatt al-Arab.](#)
[EJOLT. \(2013\). Declaration of the Ekopotamya Network \(Turkey, Iran, Iraq\).](#)
[Francona. \(2001\) Iran-Iraq: Role of the Shatt Al-'Arab.](#)
[Global security. \(2011\). Iran-Iraq War \(1980-1988\).](#)
[ICE. \(1998\). TED Conflict Studies Iran-Iraq War and Waterway Claims.](#)
[Hunter, S.T. \(2014\). What Iran Wants in Iraq and Why.](#)



[Myers, S.T. \(12.06.2010\). Vital River Is Withering, and Iraq Has No Answer.](#)

[Onwar. \(2015\). Iran-Iraq War 1980-1990.](#)

[Pipes,D. \(1983\) A Border Adrift: Origins of the Iraq-Iran War: Old Conflict, New Weapons.](#)

[TED. \(1999\). TED Case Studies. Marsh Arabs.](#)

[UNEP. \(2003\). Desk Study on the Environment in Iraq.](#)

[Wallace. \(1988\). Iran, Iraq Still Fail to Bridge Waterway Dispute. Los Angeles Times.](#)

[Waterinventory. \(2013\). Chapter 5 Shatt al Arab, Karkheh and Karun Rivers in Inventory Of Shared Water Resources In Western Asia.](#)

[Uppsala Conflict Data Program \(Date of retrieval 09/04/2015\). Iran.](#)

[Duman, B \(30.04.2013\). Where Are Iran-Iraq Relations Heading? Al-Monitor.](#)

References without URL

Tarock, A. (1998). The superpowers' involvement in the Iran-Iraq War. Commack, N.Y: Nova Science Publishers.

Karsh, E. (2002). The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988. Oxford: Osprey Pub.

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/iraq-iran-water-dispute-war>