

Iran iraq war and implications on gulf war politics essay



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Iran and Iraq share a long history of conflicts. Iran and Iraq were at odds over border especially in the area of the Shatt El Arab, a river channel which was Iraq's only exit to the sea through Persian Gulf. Eventually two sides forged an agreement establishing a boundary which gave Iraq full control over Shatt El Arab. Despite border agreement crisis upon crisis followed. There are two main reasons for that. First was that Iraqi population was predominantly Arab while Iranian was predominantly Persian. Also largest portion of Iraqi and Iranian population were Shia Muslims but while they were on power in Iran (1979. Islamic revolution) they were discriminated in Iraq. Shia religious leaders often used Iraq as safe haven when they were expelled from Iran. One of the most prominent refugee was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a leading Shia scholar who settled in Iraq in 1964 after he was exiled from Iran. The second reason was that both countries were politically unstable. When either suffered a revolution or coup other country quickly exploited political weakness to gain a diplomatic advantage.

PRELUDE TO WAR

By the beginning of 1970s both wanted to have more influence in the region. Under Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi Iran felt it could achieve that objective especially with the backing of United States. Iraq governed by Arab nationalist regime was trying to unite Arab world and reject Western influence. In the early 1970s Kurds in Iraq rebelled and Iran was among countries which supported the rebellion. In 1975 Iran agreed to drop support for Kurdish rebellion if Iraq agrees to share Shatt El Arab therefore nullifying 1937 agreement. In January 1979 supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew Shah. Next month Khomeini returned to Iran after 15 years of

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exile and took control of new government. In April following a referendum Khomeini declared establishment of Islamic Republic of Iran. Saddam perceived this revolution in Iran as great threat to Iraqi state but also saw huge opportunity to engage Iran because Iran was never so vulnerable. There were huge divisions between people who overthrew Shah and once powerful Iranian army was in complete disarray because almost all top military leaders were executed by Khomeini.

Successful coup in Iran emboldened Shia Muslims in Iraq to do the same. Although they constitute a majority of Muslims in Iraq, Sunnis held power in Iraq's secular government. One of the most prominent Shia Muslims Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr who promoted ideas of same values like Khomeini was arrested and executed by Saddam. That was basically the end of Shia Muslims aspirations to stage a similar coup in Iraq. Crisis between two states escalated in 1980 as they accused each other of border violations and interference in internal affairs. Iraq responded to the escalation by terminating the 1975 agreement which gave Iran access to the Shatt El Arab. On September 22, 1980 Iraq launched a full scale invasion on Iran.

MAJOR BATTLES OF THE WAR

Iraqi troops invaded Iran with overwhelming force along 500 km frontline. They easily destroyed Iranian border guards who were poorly equipped and unprepared for a major battle. After securing their 1st objective Shatt El Arab, Iraqi forces moved deeper into Iran to secure their next objective oil rich Khuzestan province. Soon they captured Khorramshahr capital town of that province and they began to move deeper into Iranian territory.

However Iranian resistance became much stiffer than they expected. Using their superior naval fleet Iran formed a sea blockade denying Iraq route to export their oil. In January 1981 Iran tried to counterattack but this attempt was quickly decimated by Iraqi forces. War entered into stalemate. During 1983 offensive on southern port city Basra Iran started to use human wave attacks which shocked all known world. Using slogan: „ Road to Jerusalem goes through Karbala” they encouraged young boys to seek martyrdom. They sent tens of thousand of young unarmed boys as an advance force to clean minefields and draw fire from Iraqi defenses and only after they would send regular military to engage Iraqi forces. They thought they could exhaust Iraqis but they were very wrong. Superior defenses meant that tens of thousands were killed and they basically accomplished nothing. They never stood a chance against Iraqis. (Sinisa Kvezic, 2009; p. 3)

At this point Iraqi forces started to use chemical weapons most notably mustard gas and sarin nerve gas. Fassihi Farnaz said: “ Nerve gas killed about 20, 000 Iranian soldiers immediately, according to official reports. Of the 90, 000 survivors, some 5, 000 seek medical treatment regularly and about 1, 000 are still hospitalized with severe, chronic conditions.” (Fassihi Farnaz, 2002.) Iraqs use of chemical weapons wasnt limited just to soldiers, but it was widely used against civilian population killing many in villages and hospitals. In 1986 Saddam used poison gas against Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja. The attack which killed between 3000 and 5000 instantly and injured between 7000 and 10 000 people is defined by some people as genocide and is today known as largest use of chemical weapons against civilian population. Suffering more than 100 000 casualties to Iraqs use of

chemical weapons, Iran is considered one of most affected countries by weapons of mass destruction.

Both Iraq and Iran had numerous supporters including Soviet Union and United States who played a double game and supported both sides but towards the end focused more on Iraq. Henry Kissinger made a famous statement: „ It’s a shame they both can’t lose”, referring to this conflict. United States was in a difficult position. Policymakers were unsure how to react. They certainly didnt want Khomeini to emerge victorious as they felt it would be a danger to their interests in the region and security of Israel would be at stake. However they considered Saddam a psychopath who was backed by Soviet Union. Although he wasnt a threat to United States interests he was no friend either.

As the war continued Iraq abandoned hopes for swift victory and concentrated on preventing Iranian victory. By 1986 Iraqi forces were desperate. Their defensive abilities were endangered by Iranian willigness to suffer massive casualties. Thousands upon thousands of poorly armed soldiers were slaughtered but Iran wasnt prepared to give up yet. (Sinisa Kvezic, 2009; p. 4) In July 1986 leading figures of Baath party gathered in Baghdad to discuss new plan. Iraq was about to go on the offensive for the first time since 1981. At the same time Iranian clerics prepared for the last campaign and promised that they will end war before Iranian New Year (21. January 1987). January 9, 1987 marked the start of battle known as Karbala V which lasted until February 2. The battle was devastating and it was a turning point in the war. After this battle Iran announced that they will stop human wave attacks which were now deemed too costly. Estimates wary but <https://assignbuster.com/iran-iraq-war-and-implications-on-gulf-war-politics-essay/>

most accurate ones suggest that Iran lost over 70 000 troops while Iraqi casualties were at 10 000. Iranian troops were demoralized, and refused to take part in further invasions after Karbala debacle. Iranian war leaders had a meeting at which they concluded that defeating Iraq would require extensive retraining of their forces and that ultimate victory couldnt be achieved in 5 years.

Iraq launched operation Tawakalna Ala Allah (In God We Trust) which was a 2nd phase of the plan agreed on Baghdad Congress. In short time they secured surrounding areas of Basra and Al Faw peninsula. In a number of well executed attacks they captured huge number of troops and weapons caches. While Iraq was reclaiming its territory Iranian army was disintegrating. By July 1988 Iranian army was destroyed and they stopped existing as a military power in the Middle East. Iraq could have easily achieved pre war objectives (secure Shatt El Arab and annexation of Khuzestan province) but suddenly they stopped attacks and agreed a peace treaty under U. N. Security Council Resolution 598. War came to an end on 20th August 1988.

CONSEQUENCES OF IRAN-IRAQ WAR

In 1980 Iraq had one of the strongest economies in the Gulf region. However just during the 1st year of war oil production fell from 3. 4 million barrels a day to just 1 million barrels per day. Oil revenues totaled \$11 billion in 1988 which was less than half of pre-war amount. (Alnasrawi, p. 206) Military spending was huge because at the end of war Iraq had 4th largest army in the world with approximately 1 million men serving active duty. Both

countries suffered devastating losses in human and financial terms. 1. 3 million people were killed and economic damage from the war was approximately 1. 2 trillion dollars . Oil When Iraq went to war with Iran in 1980 for a number of reasons, one of them was to prevent the Islamic Revolution of Iran from extending across the Islamic world. (Mearsheimer, J, and Walt, S. 2003; p. 54) He felt obliged to defend Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from the invasion, in return he expected those countries to support him financially during the war. Approximately \$40 billion of total \$80 billion debt was given to Saddam by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia was very generous and considered all loans given to Iraq as gifts, Kuwaitis demanded that Iraq pay back all the money. Saddam planned to use oil exports to pay back the money owed but just few days after the war Kuwait adopted new policy regarding oil exports. They unilaterally raised oil production and therefore oil price dropped. This policy was very damaging to Iraqs economy since it cost them \$7 billion per year. Kuwait went even further and during 1989 doubled their oil production levels. New policy was completely rejected by OPEC. (Campbell D. 1989; p. 45) Kuwait started to use new technology called “ slant drilling” and deployed it at Rumaila oil field which stretched along the border with Iraq. In July 15 1990, Iraq’s foreign minister, submitted a letter to the Arab League’ secretary general in which Kuwait was accused of harming Iraq “ deliberately and continuously” since the end of the Iraq-Iran war. Iraq accused Kuwait of occupying its territory and used the stolen oil from the Iraqi Rumaila oil field to dump it on the world market and lower oil prices. Iraq declared that the stolen oil worth about \$2. 4 billion. (Karsh. E and Freedman. L. 2002; p. 265)

All these reasons aside, United States were key factor in the Saddams decision to launch invasion on Kuwait. Saddam relied heavily on US support during the war and it would be hard to imagine that just 2 years after they war he would want to provoke war with US. But US had huge interests in the Persian Gulf and for the better part of 20th century have been trying to establish military presence in the area. Kuwait gave them that possibility. Four days prior to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait the American Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, told Saddam that, " We have no opinion on your Arab - Arab conflicts, such as your dispute with Kuwait. Secretary (of State James) Baker has directed me to emphasize the instruction, first given to Iraq in the 1960's, that the Kuwait issue is not associated with America. " (April Glaspie, 1990.) On August 2 Iraq annexed Kuwait.