

In 1985 Iran launched an offensive on its southern front, north of Basra, which involved heavy loss of life. Iranian troops also fought in the north, in the mountainous area of Kurdistan. Air raids in the Persian Gulf were increasing. To date, more than 300 tankers sailing under the flags of various nations have been attacked by one or the other of the belligerents. Iraq's air offensive is designed to compensate for its disadvantages on land and to weaken Iran by reducing its capacity both to produce oil and to export it. The principal targets for Iraqi air attacks in the Gulf have been oil terminals and complexes, oilfields and tankers which are either Iranian or chartered by Iran. Iran's naval attacks, on the other hand, are principally directed at ships which it suspects of delivering arms to Iraq. Finally, in 1985, a United Nations Report came to the conclusion that both states were regularly contravening the Geneva Conventions in their ill treatment of prisoners.

In 1986, an Iranian offensive, which was launched with the aid of the Kurdish rebels in Iraq, allowed Tehran to make certain gains in Kurdistan in the north-east of Iraq. It was the crossing of the Shatt-al-Arab by Iranian forces, however, followed by the capture of the port of Fao, which was of great strategic importance, for this two-pronged attack opened the route to Basra, Iraq's second most important city, and ultimately to Baghdad. In the wake of this defeat, which had

considerable psychological significance, Iraqi forces took the Iranian city of Mehran in the central sector, but some weeks later Iran recaptured it without much difficulty. Meanwhile the war of the cities continued and was especially effective against the Iranian population.

In January 1987 an Iranian offensive known as Operation "Karbala 5" was launched against the Iraqi lines east of Basra, apparently with the object of either capturing or encircling that city. After six weeks of violent fighting Iran gave up this attempt which had, however, enabled it to occupy territory in the area of Shalamcheh and some islands in the Shatt-al-Arab. Tehran continued to concentrate its troops in this sector of the front which led to speculation that it was planning another offensive for the winter of 1988. However, this offensive never materialized. Elsewhere the two belligerents have persisted in their missile attacks on civilian targets including Tehran and Baghdad.

A large part of the world's oil supply passes through the Persian Gulf, which is thus an area of strategic importance. In 1987 the United States deployed additional air and naval forces in the Gulf in order to facilitate navigation there.² Following Iraq's attack on the frigate USS *Stark*, in May 1987, and in response to several requests from Kuwait, Washington undertook



(Left) Map of the Persian Gulf region. Area in the box is enlarged in the second map (right).