

supremacy in the Gulf.¹ Baghdad has been skilful in manipulating the uneasiness which has arisen in the area as a result of the advent of the Islamic Republic in Iran. In view of their precarious position, several of the Arab monarchies in the Gulf wasted no time in joining other Arab states and supporting Iraq in its confrontation with Khomeini.

In addition to these immediate causes there are historical reasons for the Gulf War which derive from the long-standing ethnic rivalry between the Arabs and the Persians and the ideological rivalry between the opposing versions of Islam practised by the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Persia was converted to Islam after the Arab conquest in the seventh century. In the sixteenth century, during the dynasty of Safavid, Iran adopted the Shi'ite version of Islam as its official religion and thus became the centre of Shi'ism. Henceforth, with over eighty-five percent of the population Shi'ite, it stood out from the rest of the Muslim world which was mainly Sunni, and its influence on Shi'ite communities in other countries was significant. The differences between these two Muslim sects are not only concerned with the question of the prophet Mohammed's succession; they also tend to be separated by political and economic conditions. In the Arab world of today only Iraq and Bahrain have a majority of Shi'ites, although paradoxically enough the Iraqi leaders are all Sunni. During the period which produced modern Iran its successive leaders tried, particularly through the arts and architecture, to give their country a distinct cultural identity which would set it apart from the rest of the Middle East. The advent of both Iranian and Arab nationalism in the twentieth century helped to drive Iran and Iraq even further apart. At the end of the sixties Iraq adopted a policy of pan-Arabism combined with an increasingly secular outlook, just as the Shah of Iran was embarking on an ambitious programme to promote his interests in the area.

THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

Military operations in the Persian Gulf War have been particularly lethal because of the tactics used. Above all, the massive bombing of civilians and the use of chemical weapons have made this conflict different from the usual type of border dispute which frequently occurs in the Third World.

The war was preceded by Iraq unilaterally renouncing the Algiers Agreement and endeavouring to reimpose its authority over the Shatt-al-Arab. A series of border incidents which had taken place in the previous twelve months gave rise to mutual recriminations between the two countries and did much to exacerbate a situation which was already

strained. Nonetheless Iraq's invasion of 23 September and its occupation of a large part of adjoining Iranian territory took Iran by surprise. The offensive took place in three areas: in the direction of Qasr e Shirin in the north, Mehran in the centre and Susangerd/Khorramshahr in the south. Iraq occupied part of Khuzestan, the province which contains Iran's major oil reserves. From 1981 onwards, however, Iraq began to lose its strategic advantage. Iran carried out several successful local attacks with its infantry and retook the village of Bostan and relieved Abadan which had been under siege. Baghdad then switched to a defensive strategy and declared itself willing to accept a cease-fire, under certain conditions. The situation at the front remained virtually at a stalemate until May 1982 when the Iraqi troops were pushed back almost to the frontier. Once it had liberated its territory Iran did not confine its efforts to maintaining military pressure on Hussein. Instead Iranian spokesmen placed more and more emphasis on the need to invade Iraq, which they viewed as a step on the path to "liberate Jerusalem." At the end of the year Iran crossed the border and opened up new fronts in Iraqi territory in the direction of Basra in the south and Mandali in the north, as well as in the central zone. It did not, however, succeed in winning a single decisive victory. From then on Tehran was on the offensive. In 1983 three limited offensives enabled Iran to make some gains, particularly in the north, and the Iranian infantry launched massive frontal attacks on the Iraqi lines. However, the delivery of five French *Super Etendard* fighters armed with *Exocet* missiles strengthened Iraq's air force, which not only attacked strategic and economic targets in the heart of Iran but also opened fire on merchant shipping and oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. It also attacked Iran's main oil terminal on Kharg Island. Unlike Iran, which had never stopped exporting its oil by sea, Iraq had been forced shortly after the beginning of the war to rely on overland pipelines for its exports.

The following year a series of Iranian offensives on the southern and central fronts resulted in the capture of important strategic objectives including almost all the oilfields on the Majnun islands north of Basra. While both sides were stepping up their attacks in the Persian Gulf, Iraq had begun to bomb population centres in Iran, in a prelude to what would become known as "the war of the cities." In response to a request from the United Nations both sides temporarily suspended their attacks on civilians but this lasted for only nine months. Meantime Iran's claims that Iraq was using chemical weapons had led the Secretary-General to ask a team of specialists to conduct an enquiry into these allegations. They issued two reports, in 1984 and 1985, which asserted that chemical weapons had indeed been used in Iran; a later report, issued in 1986, identified Iraq as the country responsible for this.