

32. THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

Background

The offensive which Iraq launched against Iran on 23 September 1980, appears to have been motivated by a desire to forestall the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to the Iraq Shi-ites (who form 60 per cent of the population) and to regain territory ceded to Iran in the 1975 Algiers Agreement. In addition to frontier disputes tension had arisen between the two countries because of ethnic problems, rival nationalisms (Persian versus Arab), religious antagonisms (Shia versus Sunni) and the struggle for political supremacy in the region.

Until 1982 Iraq occupied a large section of adjoining Iranian territory. Nonetheless from 1981 on, at a time when Baghdad was beginning to lose its strategic advantage, the Iraqi head of state, Saddam Hussein, declared himself in favour of a conditional cease-fire. Iran then demanded, and continues to demand, unacceptable conditions for ceasing hostilities, involving Saddam Hussein's withdrawal from politics and several billions of dollars in reparations. The following year saw an important change in tactics when Iran launched its first mass offensive, which succeeded in breaching the frontier. This led to the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from virtually all the Iranian territory which they had previously occupied. Iraq responded by attacking economic targets inside Iran.

In 1983 the conflict showed no sign of solution and merchant shipping and oil tankers passing through the Persian gulf began to suffer from aerial bombardment. By May 1987 it was estimated that 314 oil tankers had been attacked.

The following year Iran launched a series of offensives on the southern front as a result of which it succeeded in acquiring almost all the oil fields in the Majnoun Islands. In the meantime both governments had been