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THE WAR IN THE GULF

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The Gulf War between Iran and Iraq, which has been going on for the last seven years, is one of the bloodiest conflicts which has raged anywhere since 1945; its victims are estimated at close to a million. Iraq launched the offensive in September 1980 and the conflict remains unresolved despite efforts at mediation on the part of various governments and organizations. This war is unusual not only for the length of time it has already lasted but also for the complexity of its origins, the way in which its military operations have been conducted, the role played by third parties, and the nature of what is at stake.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

On 22 September 1980, Iraqi troops invaded adjoining Iranian territory. This action arose from a certain combination of circumstances but must also be viewed in the wider context of historical relations between Iran and Iraq. There are many apparent reasons for Iraq's action, some of which are more important than others.

It seems that Iraq's initial objective in launching the offensive was to stifle the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which it saw as a threat to the stability of Saddam Hussein's regime. The latter was anxious to forestall the possibility that the Iraqi Shi'ites, who constitute almost sixty percent of the population, might take Iran as their model. The moment chosen to launch the attack may have seemed opportune because of the chaotic situation in Iran following the political and religious revolution, a situation which was aggravated by the claims for self-government which were being put forward by several of its ethnic minorities including the Kurds and Arabs. In addition, Iran's declared intention of exporting its revolution, and its meddling in internal Iraqi politics did nothing to reassure Baghdad, which hoped that in launching this offensive it would receive

support from the Arabs of Khuzestan, a southwestern province of Iran also known as Arabistan; these Arabs had been receiving help from Baghdad. The mullahs in Tehran had frequently called on the Iraqi Shi'ites to rebel and Iran also provided considerable economic and military assistance to the Kurdish rebels in Iraq. Shortly before the war broke out the Commander in Chief of the Iranian Armed Forces had even gone so far as to announce the formation of a "Revolutionary Islamic Army to free Iraq."

Another objective of the Iraqi offensive was to regain the territory which it had ceded to Iran in the 1975 Algiers Agreement. The dispute over the location of the boundary and the navigation rights on the Shatt-al-Arab, connecting the port of Basra with the Persian Gulf, had been a particularly sore point between Iran and Iraq for more than three centuries. As far back as the fifteenth century the neighbouring powers, at that time the Persian and Ottoman Empires, had contested each other's right to control this river. The border between them, which was then somewhat vague, had been defined more precisely in the second half of the nineteenth century, and since then several agreements had been concluded with a view to settling this dispute. They established the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire (later Iraq) over the river, while guaranteeing navigation rights to foreign shipping. Iran was dissatisfied with the agreement, however, and in 1975 it succeeded in negotiating the Algiers Agreement in which Iraq, which at the time was considerably weakened by its war with the Kurds, conceded territory to Iran. The most notable concession was that henceforth the frontier between Iran and Iraq would be located in the middle of the Shatt-al-Arab instead of on the eastern bank as was formerly the case.

A third reason for Iraq's action was that it probably believed that if Iran were to be weakened by war this would serve Iraqi interests in their struggle for

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