Identity and Border Relations between Iraq and Iran in the 20th Century: The Cases of Khuzestan and Shatt al-'Arab

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, various constructs of clashing identities, including Arab-Persian, Shiite-Sunni, religious-secular, and Iraqi-Iranian dichotomies played a role in escalating bilateral friction between Iraq and Iran. When war broke out between the two countries in late 1980, these conflicts of identity seemed to be among the key factors contributing to the eruption of violence. Additionally, Saddam Hussein’s decision to invade Iran was the culmination of both ancient and contemporary antagonism surrounding territorial, ethnic, strategic, and political issues. Khuzestan and Shatt al-ĆArab each hold indisputable economic and strategic significance; due principally to Khuzestan’s massive oil reserves and port access, as well as Shatt al-ĆArab’s shipping capacity and water resources. This thesis intends to examine the 20th century events involving the Khuzestan and Shatt al-ĆArab disputes and the way that subsequent Iraqi and Iranian regimes shaped cultural identity to advance their political interests in each conflict. This thesis contends that the successive regimes in both Iraq and Iran attempted to shape and manipulate the identity of their respective countries in order to better serve their interests in the conflicts surrounding Khuzestan and Shatt al-ĆArab. By establishing the link between politics and culture, one may determine that using cultural identity to garner support for political matters was indeed a significant factor in the case of Khuzestan and Shatt al-ĆArab during the 20th century.
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The issues of the Khuzestan province and the Shatt al-‘Arab\textsuperscript{1} waterway are both ostensibly deep-seeded political issues. But, as this thesis will suggest, both disputes have intrinsic social, economic, and strategic value that has made them politically vital to the past and present governments of Iran and Iraq. But while the coming chapters will attempt to illustrate how and why identity in modern Iraq and Iran were advantageously shaped and used as a tool to advance each state’s interests in these political conflicts, it is also necessary to first discern why these issues are significant to the cultural field. To accomplish this objective, one must first understand the inextricable link between politics and culture in a theoretical framework that may then be applied to 20\textsuperscript{th} century antagonism between Iran and Iraq surrounding the province of Khuzestan and the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway. This requires the incorporation of a theoretical context to establish viable definitions for both politics and culture and examine their role in the creation of nationalism to substantiate the suggestion that these two political issues also had great cultural significance for Iraq and Iran.

In order to establish the link between politics and culture, the definition of each term must first be clear. Admittedly, each term is unquestionably multifaceted, possessing a range of useful definitions that may be employed depending on the field of

\textsuperscript{1} The simple orthography “Shatt al-‘Arab” will be used in this thesis instead of the accurate transliteration: Shatṭ al-‘Arab.
research. Narrowing the definitions, however, will clarify their innate relationship.

‘Politics’ refers “to the processes of the state and governance, and the challenges and resistance to those [processes]” (Norton 2004, 7), as well as the “efforts to affect the distribution of power and resources in a state community” (Tilly & Gurin 1992, 6). This incorporates individuals like bureaucrats, candidates, and rulers, political actions like boycotts, campaigns, coup d’états and demonstrations, and abstract concepts like power and mobilization. Given the wide range of activities and notions that fall under the umbrella of politics, it seems likely that politics permeate culture, an idea that will be clarified once the definition of culture becomes apparent (Norton 2004, 7-9; Tilly & Gurin 1992, 5-6). Interestingly, political actors, be they individuals or institutions, do not merely affect the political landscapes of their home countries, but have far-reaching effects on other nations and cultures. For example, the decisions of Israel’s Knesset not only impact the lives of Israelis and Palestinians, but also have a palpable significance for the concerns, convictions, and identities of American Jews (Norton 2004, 7-8).

Culture, on the other hand, covers a vast landscape and in essence is the “webs of significance established by men which forge their collective behavior” (Lukitz 1995, 4). These “webs” incorporate beliefs, language, knowledge, laws, symbols, customs, political orientations, avocations, etc. that frame a society and help construct the tenets of an identity (Meisel 1974, 602-607). However, culture is not only abstract, but also material, embodied by artifacts, rituals, buildings, clothing, and books among other things, and it should be recognized as a dynamic entity, rather than a static concept, that exists in time and space (Norton 2004, 34-35 & 126-127). Thus, culture integrates both tangible objects and abstract ideas that function to form a matrix or a network that
provides the people within that culture with a particular meaning. It is from these symbols that cultural meaning is gleaned and social structures are built (Lukitz 1995, 4). The symbols and objects of a certain culture may not be isolated from this cultural network without losing their inherent meaning. The value and significance gleaned from these objects of culture generates an individual’s perspective and affects the way that one approaches each situation and asks questions (Norton 2004, 1-4).

With these two definitions in mind, how then are the concepts of politics and culture linked? First, it is crucial to recognize that the political actors in any given state are constructed by and embedded in a specific cultural matrix, and the same cultural matrix generates the state institutions, parties, and bureaucracies that are made up of these political actors. Culture is essentially the context within which beings make their political decisions (Berezin 1997, 364). The individuals functioning within those political institutions are thus “cultural subjects” whose preferences and identity have been shaped within a particular culture, and whose calculations are derived from and in accordance with culturally specified rationales. In addition, the same cultural matrix generates the state institutions, parties, and bureaucracies that are made up of these individuals. The actors within these political systems operate within fixed cultural limitations, utilizing metaphors, strategies, references, and symbols that are unique to a particular culture. (For example, the bald eagle would scarcely evoke the same reaction or emotion for the citizens of Iran or Iraq that it does for the people of the United States.) Essentially, “politics is in culture”; that is to say that politics is a portion of the cultural network from which individuals garner identity and meaning (Norton 2004, 7-9).
While it seems apparent that politics is a part of (and therefore immensely influenced by) culture, the relationship is reciprocal in nature. In other words, culture is also political. For example, many of the manifestations of culture (i.e. music, media, popular art in general, etc.) have a noticeable and important impact on political action and attitude because they have innate political value. Due to their intrinsic political nature, these cultural displays have powerful effects on the demands people make to the political system and the support they bring it, and are also useful tools for disseminating political information (Meisel 1974, 602-603; Berzin 1997, 371). Politics and political projects are at work not only in the popular arts, but also in science and technology, infusing politics with the most accessible and important aspects of everyday life, sometimes subconsciously (Norton 2004, 10-11). Additionally, language and the way individuals communicate have inherent cultural and political impacts. Language includes “words and phrases [that] carry references to history and politics, literature and popular culture,” evoking particular meanings, images, and practices (Norton 2004, 13). Language is also the medium with which an individual offers its will and thoughts to the external world, extending a particular political opinion by comparing a present conflict to one in the past that has a specific cultural meaning, for example (Norton 2004, 12-14; Berezin 1997, 363). Seemingly, the facets of culture have an ingrained political value and meaning, further entrenching the strong tie between politics and culture.

In fact, one may contend that politics and culture are inseparable by suggesting that culture cannot be free of politics and that politics cannot be isolated from culture. For example, “[culture] influences people’s values and the goals they wish the state to pursue and also the means they consider appropriate for their attainment, [while these]
values and attitudes [...] shape governmental outputs which in turn [...] influence culture” (Meisel 1974, 604). The relationship is seemingly reciprocal due to the fact that governmental decisions affect culture, which in turn influences governmental decision and the process continues in cyclical fashion. It seems fitting to ask if separating culture from politics, or vise-versa, is even an imaginable or necessary task? Regardless, this relationship (whether symbiotic or antibiotic) is important because governments “consciously utilize culture to mould the priorities and postures of all or part of their populations” (Meisel 1974, 612). As the coming chapters hope to illustrate, this was the case in 20th century Iraq and Iran surrounding the Shatt al-Arab and Khuzestan conflicts.

With the link between politics and culture in mind, it seems fitting to analyze the methods used by Iraq and Iran during the 20th century that not only illustrate this connection, but also take advantage of it. The most effective way this can be explained is through Iraq and Iran’s manipulation of historical memory that served to shape cultural perception and assist in each state’s political goals. At this point, it may be useful to examine the concept of dominant ideology, which generally asserts that in class-based societies there exists a pervasive set of beliefs that serves the interests of the dominant class. The dominant ideology serves the dominant class, rather than the dominated class, and the dominant class must convince the subordinate class that their prescribed beliefs and values are viable and legitimate. While the issue is immensely complicated within pluralist societies (both Iraq and Iran qualify as pluralistic), there seems to be a “bedrock” set of core beliefs that manage potential crises between competing sets of beliefs, a view that Abercrombie and Turner refer to as “functionalist” (Abercrombie & Turner 1996, 129-139). Meisel’s contention (1974, 604-612) that government action and culture share
a reciprocal relationship that impacts one another is particularly useful here, because regimes in both Iraq and Iran manipulated historical memory and glorified ancient cultures, intending to feed a synthesized cultural consciousness to the masses, hoping it would take root and in turn function to further their political goals. To that end, culture is both “a model of and a model for experience,” which is also true of political experience, in that it effects and is affected by politics (Swidler 1986, 278). In fact, as Davis (2005, 19) asserts, “a shared collective memory represents a critical prerequisite for effective nation building.” To be certain, much of a society’s collective cultural memory evolves and gradually becomes embedded within its culture, typically via religion and folklore, but the state may impose or alter certain aspects of this memory. By doing so, the state may impress a specific ideology or way of thinking upon its populace, in turn helping them arrive at shared understandings of the state’s past (Davis 2005, 19). This is perhaps the ultimate connection between politics and culture in the sense that it represents politics shaping culture, using manipulation of culture to serve certain interests, a point that proves particularly important for each state.

At this point nationalism, in its various forms, enters the relationship between politics and culture. Like politics and culture, nationalism has numerous definitions, but for all intents and purposes, nationalism is “a special type of politicized social consciousness [obtained] from and within society” (Norbu 1992, 31). In other words, it is the synthesis and standardization of politics and culture that lead to the formation of a nation [and nationalism] (Lukitz 1995, 155). Nationalism will be a central theme of this thesis, considering that nationalist manifestations played a significant role in 20th century Iraq and Iran, particularly as they emerged from the burden of their respective imperial
powers. At its core, nationalism is politics *fused* with culture, hence the disputes over Khuzestan and Shatt al-ČArab could correctly be labeled cultural, political, or nationalist issues, though they are seemingly a synthesis of all three. One particular statement captures the permanent correlation between nationalism, politics, and culture:

>Nationalism] is a specific historical phenomenon arising out of […] especially higher levels of integration into the *political* and economic spheres typically associated with the rise of the industrial state. Such an all-around integration cannot help but increase social communication among members of a given society which is already a *cultural* and social entity. (Norbu 1992, 31, emphasis added)

This statement reaffirms the connection between politics and culture, suggesting that integration into the political realm increases cultural communication and awareness. Additionally, cultural nationalism became unyieldingly important since both Iraq and Iran had formerly been the location of an ancient civilization (Mesopotamia and Persia, respectively), which made the manipulation of a narrative historical memory critical to Iraqi and Iranian state interests (Davis 2005, 19-20; Vaziri 1993, 102-103). As this thesis will recount, the 20th century regimes of Iran and Iraq made concerted efforts to manipulate national consciousness by emphasizing specific cultural tenets intended to unite the disparate populaces of each state and maintain political interests in Khuzestan and Shatt al-ČArab.

Being cognizant of the association between politics and culture, social identity theory seemingly holds a significant position in this relationship. Social identity theory refers to an individual’s cognitive self-conception as a member of a group. Groups consist of three or more people that share common attributes that distinguish them from
others and lead them to an “us versus them” self-construal. According to this theory, individuals may have multiple identities simultaneously, but they will only employ one identity at a time, whichever is most pertinent according to the given situation. Put simply, identity may change along with the context in which an individual is found. Group association may also be employed (and may even be more prevalent) when one is extracted from a group, since one’s social identity is still defined by a larger group connection. Additionally, groups come in vastly different shapes and sizes, and they are rarely homogenous, but they still share a common fate, interdependence, interaction, and group structure (etc.) that function to strengthen the entity (Hogg 2006, 111-117). This theory has far-reaching implications for 20th century relations between Iraq and Iran because each state consistently drew negative attention to the “other” to legitimize the antagonism of political goals, a prime example of the collision between politics and culture (Vaziri 1993, 197).

Authoritarianism also played a significant role drawing attention to the “other” noted in the social identity theory, and Iraq and Iran were each ruled by outwardly authoritarian regimes throughout the 20th century. Davis (2005, 9) suggests, “where authoritarian rule prevails, historical memory is invariably manipulated to vilify nation-states perceived as threatening and to sharpen the cultural boundaries between the domestic populace and the “Other” for purposes of social control.” This strategy encourages an “inward-looking” cultural view that reduces the need for borrowing from other cultures, and was employed at various times by subsequent regimes in both Iraq and Iran (i.e. Persianization in Iran and Mesopotamianism in Iraq). By drawing attention to foreign “others” and painting them as threats to a particular culture, regimes were able to
serve their own domestic goals, particularly concerning Khuzestan and Shatt al-\(\text{c}\)Arab (Davis 2005, 9).

Notably, Iraqi and Iranian citizens are decidedly heterogeneous, which seems to contradict the idea that such manipulation of historical memory could affect each group. However, as the social identity theory suggests, the identity that prevails is the one that is most pertinent to a certain situation, and it may even exclude a personal identity in favor of a larger social consciousness (Hogg 2006, 111-117). So it is plausible, for example, that an Iraqi Shiite might favor their Iraqi identity over their Shiite character in given situations, especially when faced with anti-Iranian propaganda. Equally, an Arab Iranian may in fact identify more completely with their fellow countrymen rather than their Arab brethren across the border in Iraq. This process, however, is unique to each individual, and it is not the goal of this thesis to determine how and why people chose certain identities, but rather to suggest that the administrations of 20\(^{th}\) century Iraq and Iran made concerted efforts to shape identity to benefit their political interests in Khuzestan and Shatt al-\(\text{c}\)Arab.

In general, the purpose of this brief section is to clarify the link between politics and culture in order to establish a link between this conception and territorial conflicts. It seems correct to say that all political actors and their values are molded by their cultural experience, thus the efforts of political actors and institutions have significant implications for culture. In fact, the relationship between the two entities seems to retain a cyclical nature, considering that political efforts to shape culture affect societal perception and those same perceptions then govern individuals’ attitudes toward a government and politics in general. The fusion between politics and culture seems to
take the form of nationalism, and a shared sense of culture is necessary to forge a united sense of nationalism (Davis 2005, 19; Lukitz 1995, 155). State efforts to mold and reshape culture are ultimately attempts to form a cultural landscape that is advantageous to a particular administration’s political goals, and this thesis intends to illustrate that this phenomenon was most certainly present throughout the 20th century in Iraq and Iran.
A Historical Overview of Persian & Arab Relations prior to the 20th Century

As topics like terrorism, oil prices, and fundamental Islam dominate headlines, strategic and geopolitical focus remains tightly locked on the Middle East, perhaps more so now than any other time in history. At the center of the muddled Middle East, Iraq and Iran represent two of the most compelling and important states in today’s political realm. An ongoing American occupation in Iraq coupled with an increasingly dissident Iranian population has shifted the gaze of the world upon these neighbors, especially given their turbulent history. Additionally, Iraq and Iran represent the two largest Shiite-majority countries in the Muslim world, positioned tenuously among predominantly Sunni states. Add issues of sectarian violence, nuclear weapons development, and the presence of terrorist groups like al-Qā‘ida and it becomes apparent that Iraq and Iran embody a great deal of the fragile future of the Middle East.

Yet looking forward would hardly be complete without first looking to the past relations between the two countries. There has long been conflict between the unique Persian and Arab societies, stemming from cultural or religious differences, even prior to Islam, and this conflict has frequently manifested itself in the form of territorial disputes. The forthcoming thesis will focus on these border issues, specifically the issues of the disputed province of Khuzestan and Shatt al-ʿArab waterway (Arvand Rud in Persian). The period of research will be limited to the 20th century, specifically from the years
leading to World War I until the beginning of the Iraq-Iran War in 1980. This period encompasses a time when Iraq and Iran begin functioning as autonomous states, no longer under the constraints of their respective empires, and it culminates with the ultimate conflict between the neighboring states. The issues of Khuzestan and Shatt al-Arab were chosen because they are among the most significant clashes that have shaped the modern interstate relationship, though additional conflicts exist.

Specifically, this paper will look into the conflicts in two separate sections, discussing each significant development in chronological order. The purpose of providing a detailed historical account is to examine how the conflicts have effected and have been affected by the identity of both states and how Iraqi and Iranian regimes have utilized national identity (an integral part of culture) to advance their political goals in the disputes. By drawing conclusions about the myriad factors that exacerbated the conflict, most prominently cultural differences (Persian vs. Arab) and nationalistic outlook (Iraqi vs. Iranian), it is possible to gain insight about the nature of the disputes and why they have manifested themselves in certain ways. Iraqi and Iranian identities were each constructed throughout a turbulent 20th century, and the political disputes over Khuzestan and Shatt al-Arab have played integral roles in identity formation and its relationship to culture. Essentially, the roots of these conflicts stem from incompatible strategic, economic, and political goals that have created confrontations between the distinct identities.

Certainly the region in question has witnessed a myriad of significant events throughout history, including countless wars and the advent and growth of the Abrahamic religions, though there is hardly space to chronicle those events in this particular thesis.
Yet, prior to delving into the 20th century Iraqi-Iranian relations, it seems fitting to give a brief overview of the two entities and the ways in which they interacted prior to the formation of their modern states. Sharing boundaries for centuries both before and after Islam, Persian and Arab culture often found itself intertwined, for better or for worse, and shared cultural and linguistic remnants remain prevalent even today. However, in spite of their common traits, there is a long and complicated history in which each culture made strident efforts both to embrace and differentiate from one from the other. Hünseler (1984, 9) conveys this point eloquently, stating: “Persian-Arab antagonism and the struggle for influence and predominance in the Middle East naturally manifested itself chiefly where Sunni and Shiite population groups, as well as Arabs and Persians, clashed in their settlement areas.”

Prior to the advent of Islam, Persia and Arabia clashed primarily in the overlapping areas of Mesopotamia. The civilizations were naturally separated by the Zagros Mountains, which limited interaction and commercial exchange, aiding the development of two distinct cultures with unique languages (Pahlavi in Iran, Arabic in the Arabian Peninsula/Tigro-Euphrates Valley) (ad-Duri 1998, 4-6). While the Sassanid Empire was firmly entrenched during this time, both sedentary and nomadic Arab tribes (not yet united by religion) frequently raided Persian territory, particularly during the reigns of Shapur I and Shapur II (Daniel 2001, 64-65). The aggression was not unilateral, as Persians made military and commercial forays into Arab lands as well, at times occupying portions of Oman and Yemen (ad-Duri 1998, 4-5). Already preoccupied by Byzantine threats, the Persians made concerted efforts to prevent and quell significant struggles with the Arabs. In fact, “the general policy of later Sassanid rulers was to
prevent destructive incursions by Arab nomads by establishing a buffer state on [the Mesopotamian] border ruled by a friendly and loyal Arab dynasty, the Lakhmids” (Daniel 2001, 65). The two groups exchanged many religious elements as well, with Zoroastrianism spreading to some degree into Mesopotamia and Manichaeism and Mazdakism seeping into Iran from Iraq (ad-Duri 1998, 6-7).

Seemingly, the most significant interactions between Persian and Arab culture began after the spread of Islam into Persia via the Arab conquests. The conquests in the 7th century permanently entrenched Islam into Persian culture and altered a number of characteristics of the civilization. In fact, the rise of Islam was coupled with an already weakening Sassanid Empire, meaning these invasions spelled the end of the “last truly imperial dynasty of Iran,” the Sassanids, and gravely undermined the dominance and class system of Iran’s unique religion, Zoroastrianism, replacing them with ostensibly Arab elements (Daniel 2001, 64; ad-Duri, 1998, 4-5). However, Persian society survived and was even enriched by the Arab incursion, which had discernable impacts on the Persian language and many elements of the Sassanian culture (Daniel 2001, 68-69). Arab culture and Islamic theory were also modified by Persian influence, specifically by the institutions and attitudes that prevailed in Persia (McLachlan et al., “Iran”, in EI2).

Ultimately, the Arab conquests involved a gradual absorption of Persian lands, with several other military campaigns slowing Arab progress, thus it was not until approximately 700 A.D. that the majority of Iran had been taken under the caliphate (Daniel 2001, 68-69; McLachlan et al., “Iran”, in EI2). Interestingly, Daniel (2001, 68) notes that approximately one-fourth of the invading conquest armies consisted of Persian converts to Islam, indicating an allegiance to religious rather than nationalist or ethnic
tendencies. These individuals, known as the Hamrā’ and Asāwira, were accorded a special status and received privileges for joining the Arab armies (McLachlan et al., “Iran”, in EI²).

After the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate, several important splinter groups developed and played an increasingly important role throughout the expanded empire. Factions such as the Kharijites, and perhaps most importantly, the Shiites, emerged around this time and were founded primarily by Arabs. Further complicating the diverse landscape of the caliphate was the large number of mawālī (sing. mawlā), or allied non-Arab converts to Islam, that became important allies and that were integrated into the tribal society. The mawālī played an important role in the new caliphate, heavily influencing social, intellectual, and cultural exchange among Arabs and Iranians (ad-Duri 1998, 5; Wensinck & Crone, “Mawlā”, in EI²). These primarily Persian citizens were afforded greater rights than slaves, functioning initially as artisans, skilled laborers, and administrators of patron estates. Eventually they attained various administrative and military positions with greater responsibility within the caliphate, as well as important positions of scholarship, like Ḥammād al-Rāwiya the assembler of the Muʿallaqāt who championed Arabic poetry (Fück, “Ḥammād al-Rāwiya”, in EI²; Wensinck & Crone, “Mawlā”, in EI²). Needless to say, the mawālī played an integral role in the growth of the expanded caliphate, and their predominantly Persian ethnicity further linked the two cultures.

In the 8th century, the Umayyad caliphate began losing favor with Arabs and non-Arabs alike, particularly with the Persian mawālī. Disparate groups began undermining Umayyad rule with the hope of ending it, the most prominent leader of which was Abu
Muslim, a Persian mawlā. The Umayyad armies would soon fall to Abbasid forces in 749-750 A.D., signaling the beginning of a new caliphate (McLachlan et al., “Iran”, in EI²). In spite of the caliphate’s unceremonious ouster, the Umayyad period contained large-scale cultural exchange among Persians and Arabs. As widespread Arabization penetrated Iranian lands, enriching Persian culture and language, so too did Arabic fields of knowledge develop, granting Persians the opportunity to begin making significant contributions to these fields. Additionally, Arabs began to intermarry with many mawālī, further mixing cultures (ad-Duri 1998, 5-6). Though eventually torn apart by dissidents and detractors, the Umayyad caliphate was in a sense a model for Islamic unity and the merging of two diverse cultures.

While the Umayyad caliphate seemingly contained a simultaneous mixture of cultural acceptance and discord, the Abbasid caliphate endured a similar trend. Shortly after the Abbasid victory, the disparate groups that had united against the Umayyads now fought amongst each other. In the twenty years after Abbasid rule was established, five major revolts broke out in Persia, all associated with Abu Muslim, an important military mind of Persian descent. Additionally, an anti-Islamic, pro-Persian group emerged during this time known as the zindīks, consisting of individuals who were thought to have retained their Manichean convictions in spite of converting to Islam. Throughout the five centuries of Abbasid rule, the caliphate splintered into various smaller dynasties and autonomous regions, many of which rose up in Persia (McLachlan et al., “Iran”, in EI²). In spite of the great divisions, the Abbasid period is that of remarkable continuity, though unfortunately the complete history is far too complex and detailed discuss at length here.
Notably, there was a significant movement that opposed the rise of Arabism and glorified Persian culture during this time, known as the Shuʿubiyya. Arab culture was imposed on Persians in a relatively short period of time to varying degrees, spurring resentment, and they had long been taxed, mistreated, and killed (particularly during the conquests), that fortified this resentment (McLachlan et al., “Iran”, in EI²). Cultural in nature, the Shuʿbis sought “to break the nexus between Islam and Arabism, partly because this nexus stood in the way of non-Arab self-esteem and more particularly because it obstructed the reception of non-Arab culture” (Wensinck & Crone, “Mawlā”, in EI²). Certainly this sentiment existed during the Umayyad caliphate, but it became public and increasingly relevant during the early Abbasid period in the 8th century. This faction was not necessarily anti-government, since their primarily upper-class proponents benefited from a strong centralized state, but rather developed a strong anti-Arab attitude, criticizing everything from the Arab language to Arab war tactics that supposedly paled in comparison to the Persian equivalents (Enderwitz, “al- Shuʿubiyya”, in EI²).

Additionally, social status was quickly transforming into a fluid rather than static entity, a phenomenon that threatened the privilege afforded to Persian secretaries. Notably, the actions of the Shuʿubiyya served to strengthen the Arab-Islamic literary movement, ultimately solidifying the link between Arabic literature and Islamic tradition (Enderwitz, “al- Shuʿubiyya”, in EI², 2010). It seems difficult to argue the exact intent of the Shuʿūbis, as there is little remaining evidence that illustrates their ultimate aim, but at the very least the movement seems to be a continuation of the antagonism between Persian and Arab culture and civilization.
In spite of the troubles incurred during the Abbasid rule, the time witnessed widespread cultural exchange and development between Arabs and Persians. The caliphate relocated its capital from Damascus to Baghdad, a move that immediately made Persian influence more significant. Persians also continued to heavily infiltrate bureaucratic, military, social, and scholarly circles, furthering intertwining the two cultures (Daniel 2001, 70). Additionally, Persian literary works were intentionally integrated to further enrich the prevailing Arab-Islamic culture, just as Greek and Indian sources had been. In the 3rd century A.H., echoes of Iranian autonomy began with the Tahirid, Saffarid, and Samanid dynasties emerging in Khurasan, Transoxiana, and Sijistan respectively. These dynasties encouraged the revival and development of Persian literature and language, and though Turks, Mongols, and Turcoman dynasties would rule Persians over the coming centuries until the 1500s, the language and culture continued to develop. It was the appearance and ascension of the Safavids in 1502 that changed the face of Iran and brought about Iranian consciousness (ad-Duri 1998, 8-11).

Soon after the Safavid Empire gained power in Persia, the Ottoman Empire solidified its presence in much of the modern Middle East. Shah Ismail, who successfully brought Shiism to most of his empire with little resistance, led the Safavids, annexing the cultural center of Baghdad in 1508. Sultan Selim of the Ottoman Empire headed eastward to confront the Safavids, harshly suppressing the Shiites throughout his campaign. After defeating Shah Ismail in 1514, his imperial appetite drove him to conquer Damascus and Egypt, and gain allegiance in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. His successor, Sultan Suleyman, continued Ottoman expansion, capturing Baghdad and much of Iraq by 1534 to form the relatively ambiguous boundaries between
the two powers. In 1555, the empires signed the Truce of Amsaya, which signified the first modern interaction between the neighbors (ad-Duri 1998, 12). Again, unfortunately there is not sufficient space to recount the entire history between the two empires, but the intention of this background information is to provide a brief sketch.

The Ottoman Empire existed in some form for roughly five hundred years, reigning over much of the modern Middle East. Spanning across Europe, Africa, and Asia, the Ottoman Empire encircled numerous cultures, languages, religions, and peoples. Additionally, the empire contained a range of identities, including Inner Asian, Anatolian, Byzantine, Islamic, Near Eastern, and European, and its endurance was attributed to a uniquely flexible political system. In fact, the Ottomans are given credit for successfully managing an incredibly diverse population without significant setbacks (Barkey 2005, 10). One scholar describes the delicate balance, stating:

[Ottoman Success] was based on their successful negotiating between contradictory, yet also complementary political structures, organizational forms and their cultural meanings. In their attempt to construct such rule and establish legitimacy, they had to balance ruling Christians and Jews, Slavs, Vlachs and Armenians, Muslims of Sunni, Shi’a and many Sufi beliefs, incorporate each and every one of their communities and their local traditions, but also collect taxes and administer the collectivities. This had to be done by allowing space for local autonomy, a requirement of negotiated rule. (Barkey 2005, 10)

Additionally, the empire represented the continuation of the Islamic caliphate and glorified Sunni Islam in various ways (i.e. through building extraordinary mosques and Islamic madrasas), and remained free of religious conflict for the most part (Barkey 2005, 10). Seemingly, the Ottomans ran a model empire for hundreds of years until their dissolution after the First World War in the second decade of the 1900s.
The Persian Empire was the eastern neighbor of the Ottomans, and the two possessed a rivalry initiated by proximity and exacerbated by religious differences. The modern Persian Empire began in 1501 with the aforementioned Safavids, spanning portions of Western Asia, including all of modern Iran, part of Mesopotamia, and limited parts of Central Asia (Daniel 2001, 86-87; Salibi 1979, 73). The Shiite Safavids were sandwiched between the Ottomans and the Uzbeks, both Sunni powers, which gave a tenuous feeling to their existence. While the Ottoman Empire was generally more dominant, the Persians provoked confrontations in the 17th and 18th centuries when they felt strong enough to challenge their neighbor (Salibi 1979, 73). After more than two hundred years of rule and firmly entrenching Shiite Islam in the region, invading Sunni Afghans of the Ghilzai tribe defeated the Safavids in 1722. After a series of puppet Safavid rules and a relatively brief interregnum, the Qajars began their reign over the Persian Empire in the late 1700s, reigning until their ouster by Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose Pahlavi dynasty was officially in place by 1925 (Daniel 2001, 93-96)

Unmistakably, there were numerous power shifts and conflicts between the neighboring empires throughout the centuries. Operating under the pretext of the Sunni Muslim caliphate, the Ottoman Empire represented a legitimate Sunni state where Sunni Islam predominated, whereas the Persian Empire was more nationalist in nature as well as the principal Shiite state (Salibi 1979, 72). The Sunni-Shiite rivalry helped them readily identify the “other” in the conflict, ensuring clashes and disagreements particularly along shared geopolitical areas. Also contributing to the identity of the empires were the linked yet distinctive cultures that shared so much throughout history. The mutual frontier between the Ottomans and Persians has been disputed for the better
part of five centuries, particularly during the Safavid reign when Mesopotamia was viewed as a destitute region integral for transit and trade routes (Swearingen 1988, 408-409; Philipp 2004, 406-407). These clashes were not so much ethnic disputes as much as they were reflections of the power struggle between the two empires seeking hegemony, though occasional cooperation did exist (Karsh 1990, 257-258; Salibi 1979, 75).

The relationship forged between these two powers has had long-standing implications for much of the Middle East and Asia, particularly in the 20th century and beyond. The Ottoman-Persian border in Mesopotamia had an unmistakable strategic and political value thanks to a variety of factors. Both the Shatt al-ʿArab waterway and the province of Khuzestan are located upon this border, and these two geopolitical factors clearly impacted Ottoman-Persian relations. The issues created by Ottoman and Persian actions bled into the 20th century and impacted the modern world long after the empires had fallen. In fact, Karsh (1990, 258) suggests “that just as the geopolitical factor had figured prominently in Persian-Ottoman affairs, so has it constituted the framework for twentieth-century Iraqi-Iranian bilateral relation”. This fact will have an immense bearing on the forthcoming survey concerning Shatt al-ʿArab and Khuzestan, and hopefully the short historical account in the previous pages has provided a sufficient background, in spite of its brevity.
Part I
Khuzestan: Introduction

The conflict surrounding the province of Khuzestan stands among the most prevalent and influential conflicts between modern Iran and Iraq. Taking root in the early period after the advent of Islam, the dispute symbolizes and reflects the persistent collision of Persian and Arab cultures. On the surface, the conflict is purely territorial in nature. However, on a deeper level the province has been subjected to nationalistic, political, religious, cultural, and economic interests throughout history. Exploring the history of Khuzestan reveals inextricable cultural links that maintain the complicated nature of the conflict. In addition, considerable foreign interference from various British, Russian, and American administrations has had a significant impact on the dispute, while waxing and waning power among the neighboring states has also contributed to the shifting and unstable character of the dispute. Seemingly, thanks to a combination of foreign influence, political jockeying, and cultural discord, the rift created by this friction has greatly impacted the politics of the region, shaping policy even today.

Khuzestan (alternately known as Arabistan depending on perspective) is located on the eastern side of the Fertile Crescent in the Tigro-Euphrates River Valley, abutting the Persian Gulf and falling in the lowlands of the Zagros Mountains. Abundant water resources from three major rivers, Persian Gulf access, and valuable trade routes make the region tremendously desirable for agricultural and strategic interests (Savory,
“Khūzistān”, in EI²). The region housed two successful pre-Islamic empires, the Achaemenids and the Sasanids, and has changed hands a number of times, on different occasions being under the rule of Alexander the Great, Persians, Arabs, Mongols, the Buyids, and the Seljuks among others (Savory, “Khūzistān”, in EI²; Firzli 1981, 65-67). Rich in natural resources and covering more than 25,000 square miles (66,532 sq. km), the region is thought to have been populated consistently since 8000 B.C., with Arabs intermixing with Aryan peoples well before Christ, though it was not until the Arab conquests in the 7th century that Arabs had fully infiltrated the province (Savory, “Khūzistān”, in EI²; Minahan, 2002). The Arab occupation of Khuzistan was organized by the governor of Basra, Abū Müsā al-Ashʿarī, around 640 A.D. and endured a number of raids and small pockets of rebellion as Arabs began to dominate the area (McLachlan et al. 2010).

The province returned to Persian rule in the 16th century during the Safavid dynasty, though it was under the reign of the Mushaʾshaʾ sultans, and attained the moniker of ʾArabistan. The Mushaʾshaʾ sultans gradually lost ground to massive Arab immigrations of the Banū Kaʿb and Banū Lām tribes, who began intermarrying with Persians, adopting a sedentary lifestyle, and combining elements of Arab and Persian cultures. To further dilute the cohesiveness of the province, Banū ʿl-Muntafiq Arabs replaced the Banū Kaʿb as the premier power holders in the region in the early 19th century, but remained predominantly Sunni while the Banū Kaʿb and Banū Lām tribes converted to Shiism. This influx of Arabs kept the name ʾArabistan prominent among inhabitants and Persian administrators alike, and Arab sheikhs would rule there semi-autonomously for over a century during the Qajar dynasty (Minorsky, “Lām, Banū” in
EI²; al-Najjar & Safwat 1984; Minahan, 2002; Savory, “Khūzistān”, in EI²). Thus from this point, the struggle to rule the region began, pitting two prominent empires against one another. Yet again, due to confined space, it is necessary to gloss over many of the pre-20th century details.

The definition of the border between the Ottoman and Qajar empires quickly became a pressing issue. The border remained relatively indeterminate until the Treaties of Erzurum in 1823 and 1847, which functioned to make the boundary only slightly less vague. The First Erzurum Treaty (1823) defined the border based on the Treaty of Zuhab (1639), which merely designated border areas without actually specifying explicit boundaries (ad-Duri 1998, 13-15). When tensions reignited less than two decades later as Iran advanced on the cities of Felahiye and Muḥammara, the Ottomans attacked a fort in Khuzestan to protect their valuable trade routes. This led to the designation of the Second Treaty of Erzurum (1847), with both Russia and Great Britain assisting in the process to protect their interests in the province. The treaty granted the western lowlands in the Zuhab area to the Ottoman Empire and gave the eastern mountainous territories to the Iranian government. Iran also pledged not to interfere with Kurdish affairs and gave up the city of Sulaymaniyyah to the Ottoman Empire in exchange for sovereignty over the port of Abadan, the city of Muḥammara, and the eastern bank of Shatt al-Ṣ Arab (ad-Duri 1998, 14; Firzli 1981, 74-76; Soucek 1984, 205). Yet much like the treaty before it, imprecise wording marred the Second Erzurum Treaty, thus providing little resolution to the conflict (Hünseler 1984, 11-12). These two treaties, devised to designate boundaries once and for all, would set the stage for 20th century conflict.
Chapter 1: Khuzestan under Sheikh Khaz‘al and the Emergence of Iraq

The first quarter of the 20th century proved to be formative for Khuzestan and its role for the rest of the 1900s. This period witnessed a myriad of important events, including the First World War, the Bolshevik revolution, and the developing independence of modern Iran and Iraq, all of which at least minimally affected the societal landscape in Khuzestan. Under the rule of Sheikh Khaz‘al, r. 1897-1924, Khuzestan became increasingly autonomous and uncooperative with the central Qajar government, even declaring independence in 1902 (Firzli 1981, 83). Though legally granted limited autonomy by the state, Sheikh Khaz‘al slowly developed and strengthened a sense of modern Arab nationalism, vowing to defend his Arab lands against aggressive Persian intruders and often aligning himself with Ottoman interests (Soucek 1984, 206-207). Khaz‘al provided constant headaches for the Persian government by establishing amicable relationships with neighboring leaders and sheikhs, diminishing Persian leverage and exacerbating the Persian-Arab antagonism along the boundary (Firzli 1981, 82-89).

The scene grew more complicated in the coming years as foreign interference became increasingly common. For decades, British and Russian imperial interests had clashed throughout Iran and Central Asia, but tensions eased after the Anglo-Russian convention divided Iran into three spheres of influence in 1907, with Russia asserting
dominance in the north, Britain in the south, and a neutral zone in the middle (Hünseler 1984, 11). In 1908 British prospectors discovered large oil reserves in Khuzestan, giving the province a renewed economic and strategic value, and the following year the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was founded, further strengthening Britain’s economic interest in Iran. Additionally, Sheikh Khaz‘al would receive a portion of the oil profits, which illustrated his growing power leading the province. As Britain invested in Persian mines, roads, trade routes, and telegraph lines, the first oil refinery was opened in 1912 on the island of Abadan in the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway, firmly entrenching British presence in Khuzestan (McLean 1979, 127-129). This marked the beginning of renewed prosperity for the region and made Shatt al-‘Arab, Khuzestan’s port entrance into the Persian Gulf formed by a confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, immensely important (Savory, “Khūzistān”, in EI²; Schofield 1986, 27).

This increased investment and strategic attention occurred while the Constitutional Revolution gained steam in Iran, pitting secular nationalists against religious leaders. In fact, the internal strife caused in part by the revolution weakened the Qajar dynasty to the point that the shah possessed very little power over the constitutionalists and parliament (Ansari 2007, 7). Various uprisings and general unrest also brought Russia into the fold militarily, though Russian interests had long existed in the northern provinces of Iran, particularly in Azerbaijan (Daniel 2001, 119-127). In addition, the rise of German prominence at this time disturbed the delicate balance of influence sought by Russia and Britain, with Germany establishing commercial relations in Basra, Ahwaz, and Muḥammara (Firzli 1981, 68).
As Iran grappled with various imperial powers, the Ottoman-Persian antagonism not only pitted two proud and distinct cultures against one another, but also allowed the Sunni-Shiite division to play an important role. Viewing themselves as primarily secular rulers, the Safavid dynasty had adopted Shiism as Persia’s official state religion in the early sixteenth century and afforded immense power, wealth, and influence to Shiite theologians. Subsequent Qajar rulers allowed the same phenomenon to occur, giving Shiite clerics legitimate power in Persian politics as their Sunni rival, the Ottoman Empire, continued to grow. This was a new addition to the existing friction between Persian and Arab culture that has long since manifested itself in mutual and/or disputed settlement areas (Hünseler 1984, 9). While it is difficult to discern the extent to which this religious divide impacted the boundary issues, this rift created an interesting aspect of the Khuzestan issue. It undoubtedly created a complex religious dichotomy since the vast majority of the Arab tribes populating the region had converted to Shiism in the 18th century, including the aforementioned Banū Lām and Banū Kaʿb tribes (Minorsky, “Lām, Banū” in EI²; al-Najjar & Safwat 1984, 20-22).

The increasingly convoluted situation developing in Iran benefited Sheikh Khaz’al immensely. Britain drew closer to Sheikh Khaz’al since many of their interests laid in the oil and water resources located in Khuzestan, and the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 granted Khaz’al full rights over Khuzestan, implicitly acknowledging the Arab character of the province (Firzli 1981, 78). Iran hoped the Constantinople Protocol would define the rights to Shatt al-ʿArab along the thalweg line (median navigation line)² and resolve various minor land disputes between the Ottoman and Persian Empires once

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² The definition of the thalweg line concept is admittedly ambiguous and several definitions exist, but for the purposes of this thesis thalweg will refer to a mid-river division (Schofield 1986, 36-39).
and for all, though like many of the preceding agreements it accomplished little (Schofield 1986, 48-51). Thanks to growing British interests in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), the protocol was negotiated with favorable terms for the Ottoman Empire (i.e. granting Shatt al-Arab entirely to the Ottomans), terms to which the weak Qajar dynasty was hardly in a position to oppose due to British desires (Hünseler 1984, 12-13).

Furthermore, the Protocol called for an official demarcation of Ottoman-Persian borders, an assignment that failed to materialize due to the outbreak of World War I (ad-Duri 1998, 14).

During the First World War, Iran found itself haplessly in the middle of British and Russian strategy, though the state remained officially neutral. With the Ottoman Empire joining the Axis Powers, the province maintained a high priority as the British launched invasions from there into Ottoman Iraq and fed their swelling oil needs. In fact, a modest militia under Sheikh Khaz̄al was established in Khuzestan to support British war efforts. However, the whole of Iran suffered a great deal during the war as its weak defenses and rampant administrative corruption were exposed. Additionally, fighting in the northwest province of Azerbaijan between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, in conjunction with growing tribal unrest, left much of the population vulnerable. The final years of the war witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, an event that not only shaped a great deal of modern politics, but also temporarily eliminated Russia as a foreign player in Iranian affairs. When the war ended in November 1918, the global and political landscape had changed dramatically, though the most important event for Iran was the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Importantly, the United Kingdom ceded the entire territory of Khuzestan to Iran at the end of WWI, setting the stage for future

Growing British presence and support in Khuzestan emboldened Sheikh Khaz‘al, who continued to operate autonomously and frequently challenge his Qajar overlords, whose government had been on the verge of disintegration since the early 1900s (McLean 1979, 106). In fact, the Allied Powers had supported and equipped Arab resistance groups throughout the war to undercut Ottoman stability, a call that echoed through the province and became a rallying cry for the Arabs and Khaz‘al (Minahan 2002, 160). As Soucek (1984, 207) asserts, “in the confused years of World War I and immediately afterward, the tired Qajar government was at a loss as to how to deal with Khaz‘al’s growing independence”, and Britain would not have necessarily been opposed to an autonomous Khuzestan at this point. Thus there were legitimate fears that Persia may lose the province. Sheikh Khaz‘al would appeal to the British (hoping to incorporate his province into the new British mandate in Iraq) and other local chieftains to support him in his rebellion as he declared himself the protector of shari‘a law against Persian secularism. Financial assistance even flowed from many of the new Arab states formed from the pieces of the Ottoman Empire, seemingly indicating region wide support for the sheikh (Abdi, 2001; Daniel 2001, 134; Minahan 2002, 160). However, though Britain had recognized the province’s independence in 1902 and pledged protection to Khaz‘al against Iranian aggression in 1922, it is believed that British oil interests trumped this promise by the mid-1920s. Both Persia and Britain saw Khaz‘al’s autonomy and growing Arab nationalist tendencies as an impediment to their economic and political
plans in the region, thus Britain reneged on its agreement (Schofield 1986, 52-53; Firzli 1981, 85-89).

Concerned about the growth of ethnic nationalism within Persian terrain, the Iranian central government, now led by Prime Minister Reza Khan who had seized power in 1921 in a coup d’état, undertook a campaign of subduing the disparate tribes and factions throughout Iran (Lotfian 1998, 330). Khazāl declared the independence of Khuzestan in 1923, and Reza Khan focused his attention on the province in 1924. As Reza Khan (whom Khazāl considered the “enemy of Islam”) threatened Khuzestan, the British threatened to intervene and sent war ships to protect the province, though they were merely concerned with the protection of oil pipelines and ultimately did not act in Khazāl’s defense (Firzli 1981, 85-86; Minahan 2002, 160). Sensing Britain’s bluff, Reza Khan personally led the march on the province. Abandoned by the British, Khazāl was unable to confront Reza Khan’s forces, anticlimactically surrendering almost immediately and submitting to Iranian authorities that would soon send him into “comfortable exile” in Tehran (though he would be strangled in his prison cell in Tehran in 1936). April 30, 1925 marked the end of Sheikh Khazāl’s turbulent reign, finally solidifying the Persian borders and officially drawing the Arab province into the Persian state (Daniel 2001, 134; Firzli 1981, 87-88; Minahan 2002, 161).

By centralizing his power and keeping the valuable province under Persian control, Reza Khan firmly established his political and military prowess as the Qajar dynasty collapsed. His centralization program to which Khazāl succumbed was met with widespread resistance, particularly from the Kurds, but it was still effective and set the stage for his policies in the future (Bayat 2005, 43). Essentially, Reza Khan had
controlled and pushed his own policies through parliament for several years, rendering the Qajar shah powerless. In late 1925, parliament voted to depose the shah and abolish the Qajar dynasty, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty under the reign of Reza Khan (heretofore known as Reza Shah Pahlavi) in April 1926 (Daniel 2001, 133-134). He would prove to be one of the most significant figures in modern Iranian history, particularly for Persian-Arab relations, by focusing heavily on Khuzestan and developing a new sense of Persian nationalism (Firzli 1981, 89; Soucek 1984, 207).

Just on the other side of the border, the modern state of Iraq was emerging as Iran’s primary adversary, naturally assuming the Ottoman position concerning most of the issues that had plagued Ottoman-Persian relations. Occupied since the end of WWI by British troops, Iraq was awarded to Britain as a mandate in 1920, formed from the amalgamation of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, three provinces of the former Ottoman Empire. However, thanks to pressure put on the British by tribal uprisings and vociferous calls for independence, Iraq emerged as a semi-autonomous state under the British mandate system on August 23, 1921 after the proceedings at the Cairo conference. This placed King Faisal in power under a constitutional monarchy with a representative and democratic government. Iraq assumed control over the Shatt al-Arab waterway just as the Ottomans had. Demographically, southern Iraq was overwhelmingly Arab Shiite, the central part Arab Sunni, and the north included substantial non-Arab populations, primarily Kurdish and Turcoman (Schofield 1986, 52; Dawisha 1999, 553-554; Miquel et al, “Irāḳ” in EI²). The political future of the nascent state remained tenuous.

As if the situation were not already exceedingly complex, the infusion of nationalism into Iraqi-Iranian identity further intensified the conflict. The developing
independence of Iraq in conjunction with the changing political scene in Persia merely maintained the uneven mixture of cultural and political antagonism that persisted throughout the preceding centuries. In fact, Iran refused to recognize the legitimacy of Iraq for several years after its independence due in large part to their claims over the Shatt al-Arab waterway (Hünseler 1984, 14). But while both states contained large Shiite majorities, a number of factors concerning identities should still be recognized. For example, the concept of “Iraqi versus Iranian” now exacerbated the Persian-Arab dichotomy, particularly as King Faisal promoted Iraqi nationalism to ease the tensions between his own Sunni and Shiite populations. Nationalism was more politically viable for King Faisal, especially since Pan-Arabism was inherently secular and Sunni-dominated, which was not viewed favorably by the conservative Shiites in Iraq (Swearingen 1988, 411-413). Iranian nationalism also gained momentum during this period thanks to Reza Shah Pahlavi, though much of the country grappled with what exactly nationalism entailed and if it somehow conflicted with Islam (Ansari 2007, 5). Essentially, a clash existed “between two mutually exclusive types of legitimacy, two different and opposing sets of values”, and it served only to aggravate existing tensions between Persian and Arab culture (Swearingen 1988, 412).

Not only did this struggle for identity effect relations between the two nation-states, but it also was significant within each country. For example, clashing factions in Iran emerged with wavering allegiances to secular, dynastic, or religious factions, which provided the country with a complicated domestic situation, though it would be religious nationalism that would ultimately prevail and gain popular support among the masses (Ansari 2007, 16-17). Iraqi nationalism was equally, if not more, brittle than that of Iran,
thanks to the lack of any “essential underpinning of nationhood”, as Dawisha states (1999, 553). The reality of a Shiite majority ruled by the Sunni minority sprouted tension, as did identity conflicts between tribal (rural) and urban populations, as well as different ethnicities. In fact, Iraq’s first ruler, King Faisal stated:

> There is still - and I say this with a heart full of sorrow - no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatever. (Dawisha 1999, 554)

However, while it accomplished little in the way of independence, unity seemed at least plausible when Sunnis and Shiites united in the Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920, ignoring secular divides in favor of nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment (Davis 2005, 46-47). Clearly, domestic as well as cross-border identity tensions have contributed to the feeble situation that defined much of Iraq and Iran’s 20th century history.
Chapter 2: The Clash of Emerging Identities

As the first chapter illustrated, the opening quarter of the twentieth century was particularly eventful and defining for Iraqi-Iranian relations. Events like World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, oil discovery, and the fall of the Qajar and Ottoman empires not only had a great impact on the Middle East, but also rippled throughout the entire world. The modern states of Iraq and Iran emerged with new rulers, evolving senses of nationalism and identity, and a delicate bilateral relationship. Khuzestan represented a central issue to these neighboring states as Reza Shah Pahlavi undertook an aggressive “Persianization” policy in the province and King Faisal worked arduously to keep Iraq intact. While the decades leading to World War II witnessed fewer “century defining” events than the previous quarter century, it may have been equally crucial for the interstate relationship because it redefined their respective identities. Thanks to the concept of modern borders, groups like those in Iraq and Iran would no longer define their territory, but instead territory would function to define them (Knight 1982, 516).

Reza Shah Pahlavi made it his ultimate goal to unify Iran into a modern nation-state, and Sheikh Khazäl in Khuzestan had represented the largest obstacle in the way of that goal. Ansari (2007, 35) suggests that Reza Shah “had to conquer Iran from the inside out before he could even contemplate ruling it.” Therefore, to complete the construction of Iran as a successful nation-state, Reza Shah sought to neutralize competing ethnic, religious, and particularly tribal identities that may interfere with a purely Iranian
character. Emphasizing his own Persian roots (over his Turkish ancestry), he made a concerted political effort to construct a sense of Iranian nationalism by lionizing the pre-Islamic portions of Iranian history as well as Persian language and culture. Interestingly, he even insisted that the state be called Iran rather than Persia, apparently associating the former with greater prestige. The bolstering of Iran’s military was instrumental to the success of his goals as well, since it was a necessary element he utilized to put down various uprisings like the Jungalis and Sheikh Khaz’al that undermined Iranian nationalism. Additionally, Reza Shah was not afraid to reject Persian tradition if he conceived that it may interfere with his effective rule, as witnessed particularly by his treatment of the old Persian aristocracy (Daniel 2001, 135-136 & 140; Ansari 2007, 36-54). Undertaking a series of bizarre policies, the shah utilized every conceivable way to champion Iranian nationalism.

The Persianization policy was adopted without haste in Khuzestan after the surrender of Shiekh Khaz’al in the 1920s, stripping the province of its autonomy and attempting to reduce any evidence of non-Persian influence, especially Arab. Reza Shah’s first order was to change the name of the province from ṢArabistan to its former Persian administrative name, Khuzestan. This was primarily a symbolic gesture because locals continued to refer to it as ṢArabistan. He would also rename or Persianize various cities throughout the province (i.e. changing Muḥammara to Khorramshahr). In general, all aspects of Persian culture were championed, including language, literature, and archaeology, while the pressure for Arabs to assimilate grew exponentially. For example, archaeological exploration was encouraged to draw attention to the ancient aspects of Persian culture while Arab institutions were simultaneously suppressed and special
cultural commissions were set up to purge the Persian language of its Arab influences on grammar and vocabulary. The government also disallowed the use of Arabic in schools in favor of Farsi, even prohibiting the publishing of Arabic literature and the wearing of traditional Arab ethnic clothing in pursuit of reducing the Arab character of the province (Firzli 1981, 91-92; Daniel 2001, 136-137; Minahan 2002, 160-161).

Additional reforms aimed at diluting the Arab influence of the region continued. Perhaps the most aggressive of the shah’s Persianization policies was the forced relocation of thousands of people. For several decades Persian settlers had received preferential treatment over the Arabs in the region, but at this time the repopulation became increasingly aggressive (Minahan 2002, 160). Thus, in portions of Khuzestan thousands of individuals from Arab tribal descent were relocated to northern Iran, while families of Persian origin were ushered in to replace them. In many areas, the speaking of Arabic in courts and legal proceedings was forbidden, precluding much of the Arab population from jurisprudence. The administration even went as far as expropriating Arab lands to Persian peasants, allowing the arbitrary arrest of Arabs, and levying heavier taxes upon Arab workers. The attempt to eliminate existing foreign traditions was overt, and Persianization policies even made the *invention* of tradition necessary, as seen in Reza Shah’s coronation ceremony (Firzli 1981, 91-94; Ansari 2007, 50-52; al-Najjar & Safwat 1984, 20).

Persianization, modernization, and Iranian nationalism ostensibly succeeded in taking hold under Reza Shah Pahlavi, though they had inherent contradictions. While the policies intended to eliminate the non-Persian influence, they simultaneously sought to

3 However, a significant Arabic influence is visible even today.
imitate them. The shah’s intense efforts to modernize Iran witnessed the institution of Western style infrastructure and laws; however, many of these changes admittedly benefitted the state. The relaxing of women’s dress codes (i.e. abolition of the veil) and the institution of a Western-style male dress code also illustrated the odd nature of his policies. Interestingly, the dress code was wildly unpopular and weakened national support for him throughout his reign as he targeted the individuals that did not fit his vision of Iran. In any event, these measures aimed to unify the state and were relatively successful, and Iran’s heightened sense of cultural and historical superiority seemed to compensate for the loss of Iran’s status as an empire. The shah had sought to differentiate Iran from the rest of Middle East through modernization and Persianization, policies that instinctively pitted Persians against Arabs (Ansari 2007, 78-87 & 223).

As Reza Shah undertook his new policies to strengthen nationalism in his country, a similar phenomenon was taking place in Iraq. Iraqi intellectuals had initiated this process several decades earlier in response to growing Turkish nationalism under the Ottomans, but concerted efforts were made after independence (Davis 2005, 35-36). As mentioned, King Faisal acknowledged the difficulty of unifying such disparate groups of people now contained with Iraq’s borders, and he and his royal successors utilized a combination of nationalism and secularism in hopes of unifying the multiple ethnic and religious groups throughout the state (Dawisha 1999, 554). When the British mandate in Iraq ended in 1932, nationalists had hoped for greater independence, but British presence was still visible, and nationalist fervor grew in opposition to Great Britain. Efforts to subdue tribes in the Iraqi countryside, much like in Iran, were undertaken to bolster the central authority. However, the unexpected death of King Faisal in 1933 followed by a
military coup in 1936 jeopardized Iraq’s delicate political stability. Pan-Arabism also emerged during this time, which was particularly popular among Sunni Iraqis, and occupied a central place in Iraq’s educational policies. The stressing of Pan-Arabism intended to strengthen unity within the state, but instead deepened sectarian divisions (Davis 2005, 58-64). Above all, Iraqi identity was far from cohesive and the power struggle within the nascent country made the situation increasingly untenable.

Not to be overlooked, religion also occupied an increasingly substantial position in the tug-of-war between the neighboring countries. Shiism predominated in Iran, and it constituted a large part of their identity and assisted in Iranian unification. It was seemingly Shiism that freed Iranian nationalism from an elitist sensibility and turned it into a popular movement. The Persian and Shiite characters were thus inextricably linked, and it was Shiite Islam that sanctified Iran as an acceptable state for most individuals (Ansari 2007, 15-19). In spite of the occasionally tense relationship among Reza Shah, the majlis, and Shiite clergy, Shiite doctrine and Islamic law heavily influenced the country. And while the shah sought to break the hold the clerics had on the state by reducing their political role, he still afforded respect to religion and the clerics by codifying large parts of sharī’a law into the modernized legal system. Pre-Islamic notions of identity extolled by the shah ultimately remained secondary to the devout Shiite population. At any rate, Shiism was inarguably the primary religious influence in the state, though Reza Shah’s attitudes toward religion would cause unrest in the future (Daniel 2001, 137-139; Keddie 2003, 89 & 103).

Shiism assumed an equally vital role in Iraq during these formative years, largely due to sectarian divides and discrimination. In spite of the vast majority of the population
(50-60%) identifying themselves as Shiite, the British had established a government that institutionalized discrimination against them. Sunnis and Shiites united against the British in pursuit of Iraqi independence, but the results were a Sunni-dominated provisional government and severely limited Shiite participation in state and local politics. Discrimination was common even during Ottoman times and this persisted throughout Britain’s mandate over Iraq and long after independence, as the Hashemite monarchy tried to stress Arabism and nationalism over religious sectarianism in hopes of downplaying the religious inequalities. Ironically, Shiites viewed Arabism as a Sunni undertaking since most Muslims beyond Iraq’s boundaries were Sunni, thus the government focus of Arabism actually functioned to widen sectarian divides (Davis 2005, 34-64).

Furthermore, ruling politicians as well as British administrators were consistently wary of Shiite loyalties, especially that of Shiite clerics, due to their role in inciting revolts in 1918 and 1920. This led to the British dispelling many influential Shiite clerics from Iraq, many of who would settle in Iran. Parliament was the one portion of Iraqi politics where Shiites would eventually grasp some semblance of political power and participation, though this was a part of Britain’s “divide and conquer” policy, and any Shiite presence in government was largely symbolic. In spite of this, Shiite clerics still held legitimate authority amongst much of the Iraqi population, often possessing thousands of followers and collecting large quantities of religious taxes (Davis 2005, 34-64; Wiley 2001, 56-58).

As the states struggled to develop their unique identities, the status of Khuzestan still occupied a significant political position. In 1924 Reza Shah and the Iranian
government had denounced the tenets of the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 as unfair, hoping that the League of Nations might approve a revision. When this did not happen, Iran decided that recognizing Iraq’s independence in 1929 (nearly a decade late) might encourage support from the League of Nations to reconsider the current agreement concerning the Shatt al-ţArab waterway in the province (Schofield 1986, 52-53). Much of the tension revolved around the access and rights to Shatt al-ţArab, an issue to which the second section of this thesis will be devoted, but the fate of Khuzestan as a province was still a delicate subject.4

Khuzestan’s oil fields also functioned as the de facto economic stabilizer for Iran during this period. In fact, Khuzestan proved to be a boon for Reza Shah’s success since it provided him with immediate economic and political clout while he struggled to stabilize the remainder of the country. Oil revenues would peak at a record thirty percent of government revenues in the early 1930s, leveling off at twenty-five percent for much of Reza Shah’s reign, and the majority of that oil came from Khuzestan. Overcoming agricultural profits, oil became the prime supplier of Treasury income and foreign exchange, at one point paying for one-third of all imports under the shah (McLachlan 1988, 38). Oil occupied such a central part of Iran’s economy at this time that more individuals worked in oil fields than all other industries combined. In fact, the focus on oil led to frequent work stoppages that the communist Tudeh party used as bargaining tools against the increasingly authoritarian government (Keddie 2003, 101 & 113). The prosperity garnered from Khuzestan’s oil revenues seemingly served to remind Iraq of the treasure that it had lost, and Iraq would frequently interfere in the coming decades.

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4 See chapters 5-8 for the discussion on the Shatt al-ţArab dispute.
Irked by Iran’s success in Khuzestan, Iraq supported various attempted to undermine Iranian success in the province. For example, from 1929 to 1939 Iraq housed a movement that lobbied for the independence of "Arabistan that made an unsuccessful appeal to the League of Nations to reconsider the autonomy of the province. This period also saw several insurgencies within the Khuzestan province led by Arab sheikhs that undoubtedly aroused Persian-Arab tensions, as did continued Iranian requests to reexamine the status of the Shatt al-etched Arab waterway (Firzli 1981, 95-96; Schofield 1986, 53). Various Arab-led raids in the province during the early 1940s, including one led by the son of Sheikh Khaz'et al, undermined central authority, but ultimately failed to produce any significant results (Keddie 2003, 113). Finally, in the years leading up to the Second World War, Reza Shah linked Khuzestan to Tehran through the construction of a nationwide railway system, making Khorramshahr and Bandar Shapur the principal port cities of Iran and urbanizing much of the province. This endeavor illustrated that Iranian interests would not bend to Arab subversion and that Khuzestan was a valuable part of Reza Shah’s plans for the country (Bagley 1976, 26-27).

Yet, even as animosity swelled over Khuzestan’s importance, this period was marked by fickle cooperation between the two states. The countries routinely exchanged delegations in the 30s and 40s, and the Sa'dabad Pact of 1937 represented a relative breakthrough for the states. The pact recognized the mutual borders of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan, calling for mutual non-interference and cooperation in the event that any of the states came under foreign attack. Though it was primarily recognized for Turkey’s reentrance into Middle Eastern affairs, the pact was nonetheless a sign of

5 Formerly Mu'hammarah
normalization between Iraq and Iran. This led to the Iraq-Iran Treaty of 1937 that
reconfirmed the tenets of the Constantinople Protocol of 1913, also making some
concessions to Iran concerning rights over Shatt al-ʿArab and commissioning a group to
delimit the official boundaries. The neighbors had appealed to the League of Nations for
help concerning their border disputes, but entered into bilateral negotiations after
receiving minimal attention. However, there is some doubt about whether Iraq signed the
treaty under pressure from Iran, considering that Iraq had a newly appointed and
relatively weak central government under Bakr Ṣiddiqī (Schofield 1986, 54; Daniel 2001,
140; Hünseler 1984, 14; Mango 1968, 229).

Meanwhile, foreign interests and interference also significantly impacted this era
in Iraqi-Iranian history. The British remained in Iraq as the mandate power until 1932,
but administrators lingered and Britain remained Iraq’s principal trade partner long after
independence was achieved. Additionally, the British found themselves on the receiving
end of Shiite anger and aggression for concentrating most political power in the hands of
Sunnis. Yet Sunnis and Shiites united in several instances to blame Britain for the lack of
Iraqi national harmony and attempted to oust British presence from the state (Davis 2005,
33, 48-53). Meanwhile, Britain tiptoed around Reza Shah Pahlavi in order to maintain its
economic interests in Khuzestan. In many ways Reza Shah attempted to diminish British
influence, and though the Brits continued to exploit the massive oil reserves in Iran, he
would renegotiate the oil concessions granted to the British in 1932 ensuring higher profit
returns for his country (an action supposedly encouraged by the Soviet Union).
However, these renegotiations were still advantageous to Great Britain and it remained
the economic overlord in Khuzestan who influenced retail trade and Khuzestani politics.
In general, the British ingratiated themselves with compliant actions toward Reza Shah in hopes of limiting Soviet and German influence in Iran (Daniel 2001, 139-140; Keddie 2003, 101; McLachlan 1988, 37-38). Thus British presence in the region was still a significant political factor for both countries, although it was seemingly waning.

The Soviet Union also made their presence felt in each country during this period, posing as the primary antagonist to the British. After breaking off diplomatic relations with Great Britain in 1927, due largely to dissatisfaction with the state of its economic interests in Iran, the Soviets competed for the oil concessions in Iran. The British retained their oil rights, but fear of Soviet penetration into Iran rose despite the Russo-Iranian Treaty of 1921 that assured Russian non-interference in Iranian affairs. However, fears heightened after extensive Soviet espionage was uncovered in Iran in 1930, causing the shah to begin a campaign against communists and Russophiles within Iran (Ansari 2007, 69-70; Keddie 2003, 81-82 & 101). In Iraq, the establishment of several Marxist-based political parties raised fears of Soviet penetration; the most popular of which was the Iraqi Communist Party, though it remained largely a minority opposition party until World War II (Davis 2005, 71 & 77; Dawisha 2005,18). Russian presence in the region had seemingly waned since the Bolshevik Revolution, though much of the interference was now covert or indirect.

Likewise, Nazi Germany began breaching the borders of Iraq and Iran with a goal of becoming the primary European power in the region. German presence in Iran had existed since the early 1900s, and there was considerable sympathy for Germany among Iranians during WWI. In fact, German agents operated in Iran overtly in support of their Ottoman allies. This influence expanded in the 1930s as Reza Shah grew wary of British
manipulation, granting Germany heavy influence in the Trans-Iranian Railroad and much of Iran’s mining and construction industry. In fact, from 1939 until 1941 Germany controlled nearly half of Iran’s international trade, replacing the British as the primary trade partner. Nazi Germany’s ideology spread rapidly in Iran during this time as well (Germany even declared Iran an Aryan ally), and the shah frequently utilized Nazi phrases and methods in tune with his nationalistic visions. The association was strengthening as Iran housed numerous German agents, but the relationship proved detrimental to the shah and Iran’s autonomy as the Second World War approached (Ansari 2007, 78; Keddie 2003, 101; Daniel 2001, 125-128). German influence also pervaded Iraq at the height of Britain’s imperial aspirations and became more worrisome in the early stages of the Second World War. Additionally, German ideas of nationalism had pervaded Iraq for several decades thanks to Ottoman influence, especially among Sunnis in the north, because it related closely to Pan-Arab ideology. Organizations were even developed and modeled after German fascism, one of which carried out violence against Iraqi Jews in the summer of 1941 (Dawisha 2005, 27; Davis 2005, 78).

1941 marked another drastic alteration in each state’s political landscape, due primarily to the escalation of the Second World War. The shah’s aforementioned sympathy for and association with Germany unnerved the British, who began drawing parallels between the tendencies of Reza Shah and Hitler. When Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Great Britain and the Soviet Union once again aligned in hopes of preventing Iran from becoming Axis territory (motivated largely by the importance of Khuzestan’s oil and the Trans-Iranian railroad). When Reza Shah delayed the expulsion of German agents from Iranian soil, the Soviet Union invaded Iran from the north and
Britain entered from the south. The allies began a campaign to smear the shah, who fell rapidly with little populist outcry, exposing the apparent hollowness of his regime. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, in August 1941 and went into exile in South Africa where he died in 1944 (Keddie 2003, 105-107; Ansari 2007, 85-86; Daniel 2001, 141).

Iraq experienced a similar obstruction of its autonomy during World War II. Already unstable due to an ineffectual government that mixed the military with the monarchy, the Anglo-Iraq War deepened Iraq’s troubles. When a Pan-Arabist group led by Rashīd ʿAlī al-Ḡīlānī seized control of the government in 1941, Britain immediately viewed them as a threat to British strategic and political interests. The so-called Thirty Days War pitted Iraqi forces against the British army, though Iraqi troops were summarily defeated and the former government was restored by the end of May 1941. This event not only meant another British occupation of Iraq for the duration of the war, but also proved to be a watershed in Iraqi history, as it would have far-reaching implications for Iraqi identity and politics in the coming decades because another period of conspicuous British occupation served to rouse Iraqi national consciousness (Davis 2005, 68-72).

This portion of Iraqi-Iranian history undoubtedly served to shape the majority of the political landscape between the two states. The development of new identities, amplified foreign influence, and various treaties and events (particularly WWII) defined this as a period of increased cultural and political tension between Iraq and Iran. Meanwhile, Khuzestan remained an economic and political focal point for Iran and the object of much Iraqi meddling. Competing Sunni-Shiite, religious-nationalist, and
Persian-Arab identities deepened the divisions, both inside each country and between them. Religion characterized much of Iran’s unity as it mixed with nationalism, while Iraqi leaders downplayed religious differences in favor of nationalism in a deeply divided nation with an oppressed majority. Additionally, foreign powers assumed economic and political roles that were inherently imperialistic, though they reduced their physical presence in each state. This period would function as a catalyst to the coming Iraqi-Iranian conflicts, particularly in Khuzestan.
Chapter 3: Khuzestan after Reza Shah: Pan-Arabism Meets Iranian Nationalism

The Second World War temporarily hampered the autonomy of Iraq and Iran, thanks to both countries strategic and economic value. Iran’s economy suffered during the war and tribal discontent again began to blister throughout much of the state. Meanwhile, Iraq experienced similar economic panic (i.e. bank runs and credit freezes), as well as ethnic unrest from Iraqi Kurds. Khuzestan retained its importance throughout the war, primarily because of its oil and valuable position in trade and transportation routes. The son of Sheikh Khaz’al even attempted to organize another revolt in the province and other minor Arab revolts broke out around the port city of Abadan and elsewhere in Khuzestan, but were easily and ruthlessly put down because the groups lacked cohesiveness (Longrigg 1953, 279 & 324-328; Firzli 1981, 96). Unfortunately, there is not sufficient space to explore all the important occurrences of WWII here, but the post-war decades witnessed numerous events that further altered the political landscape between the two countries.

At this point Pan-Arabism became the dominant theme in Iraqi politics and influenced the antagonism with neighboring Iran. Seeking to consolidate cultural links among Arabs by reinforcing their Arab language heritage, Pan-Arabism at its height hoped for a single Arab federated state, but never achieved its potential (Lukitz 1995, 110; Vatikiotis et al, “Ḳawmiyya” in EI²). The Iraqi defeat in the Thirty Day War and
subsequent British occupation strengthened Arab nationalist feelings in Iraq immensely, as the intrusion entered into Iraq’s collective memory and helped sustain this sentiment. Pure Iraqi nationalism became associated with occupation and the failed monarchy, while Iraqi sovereignty and military prowess became linked with the Pan-Arab movement. Ultimately, the monarchy made a series of decisions that helped Arabism take hold in Iraq, though the population still lacked any strong sense of cohesion. Pan-Arabism naturally pitted primarily Sunni Arabs against any identifiable “other”, whether Shiites, Persians, communists, or any number of minorities. Thus, it exacerbated existing tensions in Iraq, sustaining the dubious political situation (Davis 2005, 69-71).

Appeals for supranational Arab unity were surprisingly effective in Iraq, despite the Sunni nature of Pan-Arabism. Sunnis had long since dominated the Shiite majority in Iraq, but Shiites were initially attracted to the potential for social and cultural unity that Pan-Arabism presented, though a true realization of Pan-Arab goals would have served to further marginalize Shiites in the greater Arab world. Baghdad viewed itself as a central component to the Pan-Arab vision, helping the ideology take hold in the state (Davis 2005, 15-17 & 146-147). This had far-reaching implications for the issue of Khuzestan since the province was viewed as an important part of the Arab world that was under foreign control (much like the thoughts toward Palestine). The “Arabness” of the province was unquestioned for many Iraqis, especially in the government, and the success of Pan-Arabism in Iraq served to entrench the “liberation” of Khuzestan deeper into Arabist mythology. Thus the issue of Khuzestan adopted a complex cultural character that had linked it to conceptions of territorial nationalism (Hunter 2001, 437-438).
Growing Pan-Arab attitudes in Iraq appealed to the Arabs under Iranian rule in Khuzestan. The creation of the Arab League in 1945 gave Iranian Arabs a new outlet to which they could vent their frustrations with Iranian rule. The issue of Khuzestan was brought before the League in 1946 when the Arab tribes of the province requested that the subject of Persian occupation be placed on the agenda. Arab leaders in Khuzestan made two separate appeals for the League to address the fate of the province, though disagreement among Arab leaders quickly pushed the issue into the background. Additionally, the representatives of Khuzestan petitioned to be granted Iraqi citizenship, gaining the attention of many Iraqi political parties. In the same year, a political party (As-Sa’āda, “Happiness”) and a youth association were established to draw international attention to the Khuzestani issue. However, any momentum gained from these efforts fizzled out by the winter of 1947 (Firzli 1981, 96-97; Longrigg 1953, 339). With the conflicts resurfacing in Khuzestan, Pan-Arabism managed to simultaneously undermine political stability in both Iraq and Iran.

Pan-Arabism would largely define the Middle East in coming years with events around the region. The creation of Israel in 1947 and the subsequent defeat of the Arab coalition at the hands of Israel kept Pan-Arabism resonating throughout the region (Davis 2005, 89). Furthermore, the coup by the Free Officers Movement in Egypt in 1952 would soon expel the British from the state, and perhaps the most ardent Pan-Arabist, Ġamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, would assume the Egyptian presidency in 1954. ʿAbd an-Nāṣir would have widespread influence through much of the Middle East, including with Iraqi Pan-Arabists. When Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, and Iran joined the Baghdad Pact of 1955, ʿAbd an-Nāṣir viewed it as an attempt by the British to shift regional power from Egypt
toward Iraq. When the British and Americans withdrew loan proposals to fund the construction of the Aswan Dam, the Egyptian president nationalized the Suez Canal, a move that provoked Britain, France, and Israel to invade Egypt. American and Soviet pressure forced a withdrawal by the foreign aggressors, an event that cemented ʿAbd an-Nāṣir’s reputation as a strong Arab leader throughout the region, granting him immense power and influence (Keddie 2003, 139; Hopwood, “ʿAbd al-Nāṣir, Djamāl”, in EI²).

Thus as Pan-Arabism headed toward its apogee, liberating Palestine was its principal cause, but Pan-Arabists recognized the Arabs of Khuzestan as well.

Meanwhile, Iran was facing another political crisis, this time at the hands of the United States. While the U.S. had long possessed political and economic interests in Iran, they typically remained in the background to respect British interests there (Keddie 2003, 83). This was not the case concerning Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, a democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister who undermined American and British interests with his policies of nationalization and his anti-Western rhetoric. While still beloved by many Iranians, a series of political moves, primarily the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, drew the attention of the West and led to the CIA-directed ouster of Mossadeq in 1953, known as Operation Ajax (Farber 2005, 55-56). This occurred as ʿAbd an-Nāṣir strengthened Pan-Arabist momentum, and Iranians viewed the hazard of Arab designs on Khuzestan as a serious threat (Parsi 2006, 496). In fact, Mossadeq’s successor, Prime Minister Zahedi, vowed to become the “Iranian Nasser”, a telling comment that illustrates ʿAbd an-Nāṣir’s perceived power and that Persian identity sought an equally prodigious leader. The manufactured coup was particularly meaningful for the Iranian nationalist narrative, transforming Mossadeq into an enduring national

As the political situation in Iran and much of the Middle East nurtured delicate stability, 1958 marked a significant change in Iraqi politics and the fate of Khuzestan. After Iraq formed a brief federation with Jordan under the Hashemite crown, the Iraqi military instigated a coup d’état, ending the reign (and the lives) of the Hashemite royal family on July 14, 1958 (Miquel et al., “Irāḵ”, in EI2). Despite the efforts of General āBd al-Karīm Qāsim, the new leader, to combat sectarianism and champion Iraqi culture in a deeply divided state, he quickly fell out of favor for purportedly straying from the Pan-Arab vision and possessing an aversion to āBd an-Nāṣir’s brand of Pan-Arabism; he would be overthrown in February 1963. But the revolution was ostensibly Pan-Arab and the subsequent regimes adopted an overt strategy of Pan-Arabism when addressing Arab Iranians in Khuzestan (Bayat 2005, 44). However, any positive changes Qāsim had made (i.e. equal rights for men and women) were quickly overturned by āBd as-Salām Ārif who took power in another coup in 1963 with the Baʿth party. Iraq regained many of its sectarian fissures thanks to the Baʿth party’s restructuring of the political scene, though Ārif would expel Baʿth party members from the government later that year. In spite of the initially promising nature of this revolution, the non-oligarchic leaders weakened Iraq’s fragile polity immensely (Davis 2005, 109-147; Abdi 2008, 9 & 12). Notably, this revolution was particularly worrisome to Mohammad Reza Shah considering he was among the few remaining monarchs in the region (Ansari 2007, 188).

The weakening of Iraq’s polity would lead to the seizure of power by the Tikriti Baʿthist party in the July 1968 Revolution. Taking advantage of Iraq’s weak political
parties and institutions, the Ba‘thists utilized a unique strategy that simultaneously championed a sensitive mixture of Pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism (perhaps “Mesopotamianism”) that emphasized Iraq’s unique heritage to forge unity between disparate communities. In a sense, the Ba‘th party simply revamped previous administrations’ efforts to indoctrinate citizens with nationalist sentiment (i.e. through manipulating textbooks and school curriculum), but ‘Abd an-Nāṣir’s diminishing reputation after Egypt’s emphatic defeat in the Six Day War (1967) at the hands of Israel encouraged them to abandon pure Pan-Arabism. Unadulterated Pan-Arabism (a predominantly Sunni undertaking) risked alienating Iraq’s diverse ethnic, religious, and political groups, particularly among Iraqi Shiites, but they also could not promote pure Iraqi nationalism because it ran contrary to their Pan-Arab tenets (Davis 2005, 148-164; Abdi 2008, 11-14). Though it lost much of its momentum in the late 1960s, residual Pan-Arab sentiment in Iraq and much of the Middle East kept Khuzestan firmly in Arab sights, a fact that consistently worried Iran (Parsi 2006, 496). In fact, it seems logical that claims to Khuzestan appealed to Iraqi nationalism, making the cause of liberation a perfect fit for Iraq’s blend of Arabism and nationalism. Training attention on the province dispute served this “Mesopotamian” vision of Iraqi identity and avoided exacerbating sectarian fissures because the people of Khuzestan were both Shiite and Arab.

Notably, it was with the 1968 Ba‘thist Revolution that one of the faces of Middle Eastern authoritarianism, Saddam Hussein, entered the political fray. At the advent of aforementioned July 1968 Revolution, Hussein was only thirty-one years old, but he entered into a power sharing position with many of his Ba‘th party members.
Additionally, he served as the principal overseer of Iraq’s pro-Arabistan campaigns throughout the 1960s (Swearingen 1988, 415). Gaining prominence throughout the 1970s, he framed himself as the “paramount sheikh” that presided over Iraq and Iraqi interests, including the fate of Khuzestan. The concept of “paramount sheikh” appealed to broad senses of tribalism across ethnic and religious barriers in Iraq, a fact of which Hussein was keenly aware. Hussein would try for years to differentiate himself from other Ba‘thist political opponents as the Ba‘th party’s second in command, and he would eventually force Ḩasan al-Bakr’s resignation and assume the presidency in 1979 (Davis 2005, 172-175; Dawisha 1999, 555; Abdi 2008, 414-415).

All the aforementioned events, however brief or simplified, had profound effects on the Iraqi and Iranian governments’ behavior toward Khuzestan. For example, the arousal of Pan-Arab sentiment by Egyptian and Syrian parties in the mid-1950s led to the creation of the Arabistan Liberation Front (ALF) in Khuzestan. As the first contemporary political party of the province, the ALF encouraged armed resistance against the Iranian government, accounting for dozens of attacks against the state and, in an apparent tribute to Arab unity, even protesting on behalf of Egypt during the escalation of the Suez Crisis in 1956. In 1958 the new Iraqi regime under General Qāsim pledged support to Arab militants in Khuzestan who sought independence. Initially, the new Iraqi administration treaded carefully on the issue of Khuzestan to reduce bilateral friction with Iran, while Egypt (the bastion of Pan-Arabism) voiced most of the rallying cries for the province during this time. An amalgamation of political organizations in Khuzestan formed the National Congress of Arabistan in 1959, yet another sign of growing unrest in the region (Firzli 1981, 97-98; Karsh 1990, 263). Interestingly,
Jordanian textbooks at this time showed Khuzestan as a part of the Arab world, despite Jordan’s friendly relations with Iran (Hunter 2001, 437).

Iraq positioned itself as the principal supporter of Arabistani liberation for several decades despite several regime changes. Within the Arab League in 1963 Iraq spearheaded the discussion of Khuzestan’s independence, though opinion was severely divided among other Arab states. Yet the Ba’thists stood firmly behind the irredentist movement in the late 1960s. Into the 1970s, Iraq supported parties with the goal of independence like the aforementioned ALF and the Ahvaz Liberation Front. By the same token Iraqi radio continued the campaign by regularly referring to the province as “occupied Arabistan” (Hunter 2001, 437; Karsh 1990, 263; Swearingen 1988, 415).

Nascent Iraqi regimes frequently invoked different loyalties to their people, but Arabism was always at least a part of the identity they aimed to forge. So, while Baghdad would not rely solely on Pan-Arabism, it maintained strong Arabist tendencies of which rallying around Khuzestan was an essential part (Dawisha 1999, 554-555). Needless to say, the renewal of Arab consciousness throughout the Middle East bolstered the confidence of Arab liberation parties in Khuzestan thanks to increased support.

In spite of (or perhaps at least partially as a reaction to) growing Pan-Arab sentiment, Mohammad Reza Shah had confidently consolidated his power by the mid-1960s, drawing closer to Western allies and allowing him to impose his will on Iran. During the 60s and 70s, significant American financial support provided the means to bolster the shah’s military, but as opposition parties grew, the hollowness of his power, like that of his father before him, became apparent (Daniel 2001, 159-164; Keddie 2003, 135). However, as part of his modernization campaign known as the White Revolution
he pursued a strategy against revolutionary Iraq to weaken it internally. Already stretched thin from efforts to consolidate its power domestically, the new Iraqi government could scarcely combat the actions of the more powerful shah, thus the Ba'athists were essentially powerless in 1969 when Iran abrogated the Iraqi-Iranian Treaty of 1937. The shah rescinded the treaty in an effort to dominate and control shipping routes in the Shatt, hoping to assume the position of hegemonic power in the Gulf region. The new Ba'ath regime could not afford to commit troops outside the country as they busily tried to consolidate power, thus Iran had distinct military and political advantages over their neighbor that could only exacerbate ethnic tensions (Hünseler 1984, 17-18).

The shah’s actions against Iraq in conjunction with other economic and land reform successfully renewed Iran’s economic stability after years of uncertainty. While infrastructure, education, and social welfare all improved during this period, the shah’s actions (like his infamous celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy or his attack on the Feyzieh seminary in Qom in 1963) and growing corruption began garnering massive opposition (Keddie 2003, 148-169; Moazami 2009, 53-54). This opposition was rallied in part by Shiite clerics who began regaining much of their political influence during this period, much to the chagrin of the shah. Additionally, the lack of democratic political development roused antiroyalist attitudes because the shah had so long championed democracy in his rhetoric. However, his role in the 1973 oil embargo and the Yom Kippur War catapulted the shah onto the international stage, earning the nickname “The Emperor of Oil” by much of the West, and he remained complacent in this position throughout the 1970s. With oil playing such a central role in the rise of the shah’s power, the importance of Khuzestan was certainly not lost on
Mohammad Reza Shah because its oil fields supplied much of Iran’s incomes (Ansari 2007, 178 & 226-230).

Meanwhile, the Ba’th regime in Iraq grappled with economic and political stability during this same period. Prior to the coup in 1968, Iraq and Iran had endured a sort of “balance of weakness” as Karsh (1990, 263) deems the relationship, generally practicing the policy of accommodation with one another. Yet by 1968, Iraq remained relatively weak while Iran headed toward regional dominance (Karsh 1990, 260-263). As mentioned, the Ba’thists sought to unite the disparate groups of Iraq by championing a mixture of Pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism to appeal to the diverse nation-state (Vatikiotis et al, “Ḳawmiyya”, in EI²). At any rate, the shah’s burgeoning confidence led him toward aggressive undermining of the Iraqi Ba’thist regime in the late 1960s and early 1970s and he was even partially implicated in an attempted coup against the Ba’thists in 1969. Moreover, and perhaps most damningly, he pledged financial and military support to Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq in order to further undermine stability and neutralize the Iraqi military. In cooperation with the United States, Iran backed Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani, while Iraq struggled against Kurdish forces with the support of the Soviet Union (Karsh 1990, 263; Swearingen 1988, 407 & 414).

Iraq was reeling from the Kurdish insurgency, but Iran offered to withdraw support in exchange for Iraq agreeing to the Algiers Agreement of 1975, a treaty principally negotiated by Saddam Hussein. The treaty heavily favored Iran by establishing the mutual river boundaries along the thalweg (mid-river) line, relinquishing Iraq’s total ownership of the river border it had possessed for decades, and mandating
that Iraq give up claims to Khuzestan (Hünseler 1984, 18-19; Davis 2005, 174).

According to Karsh (1990, 265), the treaty was significant in that it:

[…] reflected Baghdad's painful realization that an effective enforcement of Iraq's internal sovereignty depended on the goodwill of [Iran]. Within less than a decade, the shah [managed]…to substitute a relationship that presupposed unquestioned Iranian dominance for the old Iraq-Iran status quo based on the 1937 agreement. […] Iraq, for its part, was neither in the position to undermine the newly established regional order nor did it have any inclination to do so. Instead, the Ba’th regime turned inward to halt the Kurdish insurgency, to reconstruct its armed forces, and to stabilize the country's social, economic, and political systems.

Accordingly, the agreement signaled a period of diminished tension between the neighboring states that would last until the overthrow of the shah in 1979 (Karsh 1990, 265). The treaty had greater implications for the status of Khuzestan in Iraq as well. For years the Khuzestani issue had been utilized as pro-Arabist call around which all Iraqis could rally. However, with the Algiers Accords forcing Iraq to drop its claims to Khuzestan, Iraq sacrificed its chief symbolic representation of Arab-Persian antagonism that had been called on for decades.

The signing of the Algiers Agreement represented the final accord between the two countries before the outbreak of war. Pan-Arabism rapidly tumbled from its apogee, but its effects kept Khuzestan firmly entrenched in Arab sensibilities in Iraq. Additionally, the ascendancy of Saddam Hussein as the powerful Iraqi leader coupled with rising antiroyalist sentiment against the shah in Iran made the final few years of the 1970s particularly formative. Khuzestan supplied the shah with a large portion of his oil wealth, while Iraqi leadership struggled to keep possession of their oil-producing provinces in the rebellious northern Kurdish provinces. This stirred tension for two reasons: not only was Iran benefiting from oil that was seen as “rightfully Arab”, but also
jeopardized Iraq’s remaining oil reserves by helping the Kurdish insurgency. After the Algiers Agreement, Iraq superficially abandoned its claims to Khuzestan and its support for liberation groups while Saddam and the Ba‘thists secured their domestic situation (Swearingen 1988, 415). Meanwhile, Mohammad Reza Shah’s hubris and growing authoritarianism did not augur well for his future. The remaining years of the 1970s would finally pit Iraq against Iran as the political landscape again shifted.
Chapter 4: Rise of Saddam & Fall of the Shah: Iraqi-Iranian Antagonism Peaks

In the waning years of the 1970s the political landscape changed dramatically in both Iraq and Iran yet again. The Ba’thists remained regionally weak while fortifying their domestic political position, and the shah acted in hopes of achieving regional hegemony. The Algiers Agreement of 1975 had forced Iraq (in humiliating fashion) to give up complete control over Shatt al-‘Arab and drop claims to Khuzestan in order to ensure the more powerful Iran would halt support for the debilitating Kurdish rebellion. The agreement hinged on the perceived balance of power being in Iranian hands, but as Saddam Hussein collected power as the Ba’th party leader and the shah fell to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the balance again shifted and led to the Iraq-Iran War. Khuzestan would remain a strategic and geopolitical issue between the changing states, though domestic turmoil would dominate each state until the outbreak of war. To be certain, numerous factors contributed to the escalation of violence between the states, but the delicate sentiments of identity concerning Khuzestan made this short period particularly notable between Iraq and Iran.

Just as the shah had apparently established the regional dominance that he had sought, the tides turned against him. As the shah’s health declined and Iran’s economy recessed, massive outpourings of protest and dissent emerged. Bazaaris, women, subproletariat, Shiite clerics, youths, and millions of others united against the shah in favor of the emerging ideas of Ali Shariati (d. 1977) and especially Ayatollah Ruhollah
Khomeini. These individuals were particularly revered for their respected religious reputations and ideas, which maintained importance because numerous actions by the shah were perceived as attacks on Islam. Demonstrations with traditional Shiite religious elements were organized to memorialize those killed by government aggression, thus the regime could scarcely ban them due to their religious nature without massive outcries. Mohammad Reza Shah felt the pressures of these protests, promising political liberalization and free elections while still hoarding most of the political power. These superficial concessions did little assuage the masses and the tides of revolution became visible (Keddie 2003, 200 & 214-232; Parsa 2009,12).

In the meantime, exiled in France since 1964, Ayatollah Khomeini became increasingly popular as the opposition leader, standing confidently against the shah. In the 1960s Khomeini spearheaded a movement against legislation seen as an attack on Shiite clerical power, bringing political Islam firmly into Iranian politics and leading to his exile. He came to symbolize the force of “religious nationalism” and was seen as transcending the modern and the traditional elements of Shiism. As the shah overextended his boundaries and eschewed religion, many Iranians sensed a loss of authentic Iranian culture of which Shiite Islam was an integral part. The revolution was inherently nationalistic, though its relative ambiguity allowed individuals from a variety of different groups to unite against a common enemy: Mohammad Reza Shah. Though Western powers did not initially regard a revolution as very likely, Khomeini’s support peaked from December 1978 until February 1979, with massive media coverage monitoring Khomeini’s every statement. The ayatollah returned to Tehran on February 1st, receiving a hero’s welcome, and the shah was officially deposed while Khomeini’s
administration took shape (Moazami 2009, 48-59; Ansari 2007, 246-286; Keddie 2003, 222-239). The Islamic-nationalist identity Khomeini championed stood in direct conflict with the “Mesopotamianism” that Ba‘thists had carefully constructed, with Khuzestan standing directly in the middle as both a symbolic and tangible manifestation of the antagonism.

The character that Khomeini’s government developed in the coming months would rouse tensions in many tribal areas, Khuzestan included. Minority groups saw the revolution as an opportunity to appeal for increased autonomy that had previously been forbidden under the Pahlavi shahs, and the Arabs seized the opportunity as well (Beck 1981, 120). The Arabs, like many groups, had taken an active role in undermining Mohammad Reza Shah, thus they hoped their support for Khomeini would earn them some semblance of autonomy. While complete independence was no longer a realistic goal, the Arabs asked for various steps toward equality and federated autonomy, such as freedom of Arabic press, the establishment of an Arab university, job creation for the Arab minority, and a share of oil profits garnered from the province’s reserves. Led by Ayatollah Mohammad Ṭāhir Khāqānī, Khuzestani Arabs protested for these rights in March and April of 1979, drawing fire from government troops. Overall, Khomeini was not receptive to these requests, viewing the movement with suspicion thanks to longstanding Arab claims to the province as part of the “Arab homeland”. Khomeini sought to minimize the distance between Tehran and Khuzestan due to immense oil interests that supported the fledgling regime. Furthermore, the ayatollah believed if he had made concessions to the Arabs, he would likely have had to make similar
concessions to Kurdish, Turcoman, and Baluchi groups who lobbied for greater autonomy simultaneously (Firzli 1981, 99-101; Daniel 2001, 185).

As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, this period was equally important for Saddam Hussein and his rise to political prominence. The Ba‘thists had established relative peace in Iraq through brutal and superficial means, while Saddam endeared himself to the country as the “prominent sheikh” and methodically (though not subtly) eliminated many of his political opponents. In 1979, Saddam forced the resignation of his predecessor, al-Bakr, and assumed the presidency five months after the Islamic Revolution had drastically altered Iran’s political landscape. He would subsequently embark on a campaign of state privatization and self-aggrandizement, turning himself into a larger-than-life caricature with his image adorning nearly every government office, home, city plaza, and even the currency. Iran was immediately positioned as the “other” that functioned to bolster Iraq’s unique nationalism, because Baghdad feared the importation of Shiite rebellion from Tehran. Anxiously, Hussein’s sights were also opportunistically fixed upon Khuzestan, sensing that the event of Iran’s transition provided a perfect opportunity to return the province (as well as its economic and strategic stakes) to Iraq (Abdi 2008, 1-30; Davis 2005, 172-175 & 179).

Iran’s revolution had already put considerable stress on the delicate peace between Baghdad and Tehran that the Algiers Agreement had established in 1975, and Hussein’s ascension to power accelerated the destabilization of relations. He and Khomeini already possessed a sour relationship because Hussein had forced Khomeini to leave Baghdad in 1978 at the behest of Mohammad Reza Shah. A few months after becoming president, he renounced the Algiers Agreement that he had helped engineer
only four years earlier, suggesting that the accord was struck merely to keep a more powerful Iran from engineering Ba'ath collapse. With Iran exhibiting signs of military, administrative, and infrastructural weaknesses, Hussein had observed a noticeable decline in Iranian state cohesion as it grappled with a new government and sorted out the mismanagement of Mohammad Reza Shah. Saddam was particularly alarmed by the new Iranian ambassador’s overt call for a popular revolution in Iraq and his denunciation of the Iraqi regime (Schofield 1986, 62-64; Parasiliti 2003, 156; Ansari 2007, 287-288; Keddie 2003, 250-251).

The advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran unnerved Saddam Hussein in his pursuit of authoritarian power and prestige in the Middle East. He spent the late 1970s persuading other Arab states that Iraq was the new face of Arab unity and stability. Yet, in the years leading up to Hussein’s assumption of power, Iraqi Shiites had been involved in large-scale riots and assassination attempts on Ba’ath party members, implying that efforts to appeal to Iraqi nationalism over sectarian loyalties had not charmed Iraq’s Shiites majority. The regime harshly quashed these actions, but unrest in the Shiite community made Hussein’s regime particularly paranoid about the spreading of the Islamic Revolution to Iraq. To this end, prominent Shiite leaders were disappeared or executed while thousands of Iraqi Persians were driven to the border and forcefully deported to Iran. Khomeini stressed that the revolution was fit for all Muslims, Sunni and Shiite, and that it was to be spread through persuasive rhetoric and debate rather than violence. Still this ideology undermined Saddam Hussein and his efforts to propel Iraq to Middle East primacy, and Khomeini even made several overt calls for the overthrow of
Iranian Arabs began more violent resistance against Khomeini in 1980 as well. Insurgents targeted government offices as well as oil installations in hopes of drawing attention to their demands. Groups like the Movement of the Mujahidin of the Arab Muslim People and the Popular Movement of 'Arabistan led the resistance against Khomeini’s policies that largely resembled those of Mohammad Reza Shah. The most distinct incarnation of this resistance occurred on April 30, 1980, when several Arab rebels from Khuzestan stormed the Iranian embassy in London, taking numerous hostages. The intent of the attack, supported and partially orchestrated by Iraq, was to draw attention to the Iranian Arabs’ plight under the Islamic regime, recognize 'Arabistan’s limited autonomy, and secure the release of several hundred Arab prisoners. While many of the details remain obscure, everything apparently went according to plan and the media paid close attention to the confrontation, but when an Iranian diplomat was murdered by one of the insurgents, Britain put a quick and violent end to the standoff, killing all but one of the Arab rebels. Iran made no concessions, acknowledging that intranational differences were to be recognized, but internal insurgency would not be tolerated. However, the event served the interests of Saddam Hussein in that it demonstrated that the province was ready for “liberation” from Iranian tyranny and prepared to reunite with the Arab motherland (Firzli 1981, 100-101; Ansari 2007, 288-289; Daniel 2001, 203).

Five months later, on September 17, 1980, Saddam Hussein unilaterally annulled the Algiers Agreement of 1975 by publicly tearing a copy of the text in half. Neither Iran
nor Iraq had fulfilled their legal obligations laid out by the treaty and it had long signified a humiliating agreement for the Iraqi government. The United States lamented the loss of Khuzestan’s oil after the Islamic Revolution, and Iranian exiles convinced American administrators that Khuzestan would fall rapidly, a fact that encouraged American support for Iraq. Less than a week later, Iraq launched an attack on Iran through Khuzestan that would officially begin the Iran-Iraq War. Iraqi intelligence had anticipated little resistance from Iran and expected a short and decisive military campaign could regain Khuzestan in three weeks; thus within the first week of the war Baghdad demanded the return of parts of Ṣubāh-Vali (including Shatt al-Ṣubāh) to Iraq in exchange for the end of hostilities. However, Iran resisted stridently, and the war actually functioned to strengthen the Islamic Revolution rather than undermine it. The war eventually unraveled into one of the deadliest conflicts of the 20th century, leading to immense casualties and financial costs (Schofield 1986, 64-65; Ansari 2007, 290-291; Davis 2005, 176; Seliktar 2008, 30).

Prior to the invasion, Hussein had estimated that many of the Iranian Arabs would unite in armed resistance against Khomeini’s regime, perhaps hoping that the symbolism of the thwarted embassy hostage situation would arouse Arab sentiment against their “Persian oppressors”. Insurgent groups (armed by Iraq) had sabotaged Iranian interests in Khuzestan for months by bombing oil pipelines, bridges, and city centers, and Baghdad discerned that Iranian Arabs, roused by recent action and propaganda, would rise in support of Iraq (Alem 1993, 61-62; Keddie 2003, 251). This proved to be a legitimate miscalculation on the part of Hussein. Iraq was able to occupy Khuzestan without much trouble initially, and Hussein seemingly had no plans to proceed far.
beyond the province, but these gains would be temporary. Khuzestan held a place in Arab nationalist mythology as an occupied Arab homeland, much like that of Palestine, so reclaiming the province would have been critical for the reputation and future of Saddam’s administration. Yet, the economic benefits begotten from the province would be equally crucial for Iraq’s future, given Khuzestan’s large oil considerations and increased access to the Persian Gulf via Shatt al-Č- ārib. Perhaps the Iranian Arabs were aware of this and saw through Saddam Hussein’s rhetoric due to the fact that they never revolted against Iran en masse like Iraq had anticipated. Rather, the Iranian Arabs likely hoped for self-determination rather than mere subjugation by Iraq. Certainly some Iranian Arabs lobbied for greater autonomy and hoped to join the Arab world, but the vast majority seemingly never felt connected to Iraq, even though Iraqi rhetoric suggested that Khuzestan was and should be a part of Iraq (Hunter 2001, 433 & 437-438; Knight 1982, 519; Tehrani 1993, 12). In fact, the Khuzestani Arabs demonstrated little interest in contributing to the Iraqi offensive, opting instead to remain relatively pro-Iranian throughout the conflict (Daniel 2001, 203).

Interestingly, Pan-Arabism reentered the political landscape when the war began, becoming an inextricable part of Saddam Hussein’s vocabulary. Hussein had long avoided rousing strong Pan-Arab sentiments for fear of stirring sectarian divisions within Iraq, instead nursing the careful image of Mesopotamian Iraqi nationalism. This strategy was seemingly abandoned now that Iraq was at war with Persians. Saddam had been creeping back into the Pan-Arab spotlight since 1978 as Egypt’s power diminished, hoping to establish Iraq as the leader of the Arab world with himself at the helm. Thus, he framed the Iran-Iraq War as “Saddam’s Qadissiya”, a restaging of the 7th century
battle where the Arabs defeated the Persians. Throughout the Middle East, the idea of Iraq (and Iraqi troops) defending the eastern front of the Arab world (and Khuzestan in particular) gained mass appeal, thanks largely to Iraq’s effective propaganda campaign. While Khomeini espoused messages of Muslim unity, Saddam asserted that Iran was using religious revolution to disguise Persian racism against Arabs. Arab supranational sentiment garnered support for the war and viewed Saddam’s mission against the non-Arab enemy as a noble effort that could reunite Khuzestan with its Arab brethren (Davis 2005, 188-189 & 277; Dawisha 1999, 557-558; Parasiliti 2003, 156-158). However, while Arab leaders were concerned with Khuzestan’s fate and preventing the spread of Iran’s revolution, they had little interest in making Saddam the leader of the Arab world, a lesson he would learn upon his decision to invade Kuwait in 1990 (Davis 2005, 227).

Emerging ideas of identity ultimately defined this period in the conflict over Khuzestan. While Saddam attempted to appeal to Pan-Arabist sentiment to win over Arab Iranians in Khuzestan, this aspiration fell on deaf ears. Simultaneously, Iranian Arabs expressed displeasure with Iranian rule under the new Islamic government, in spite of common religious allegiances. The Arabs in Khuzestan province apparently occupied a unique identity between their Iraqi and Iranian courtiers, due to their seemingly ambivalent allegiances. Yet they expressed at least minimal faith in the Iranian regime by not aligning with Iraq upon the invasion of Khuzestan in 1980, though this could be duly assessed as apathy toward an Iraqi administration to which Khuzestanis felt little connection. Regardless of Iranian Arabs’ dissatisfaction with Khomeini’s government, maintaining their position within the Iranian state provided a sense of security and potential opportunity. In order for Khuzestani Arabs to fully identify with Iraqi Arabs,
they would have to be linked by psychological, social, and physical factors, some of which are apparently present. However, the basis of nationalism also relies on a series of events, political movements, attitudes, and ideas, and Iranian Arabs seemingly did not share these elements with Iraq as much as they did with Iran (Knight 1982, 517-521). In any case, the Arabs of Khuzestan did not share a national consciousness with the Arabs of Iraq, despite Saddam Hussein’s best efforts and their displeasure with Khomeini’s regime, and this ultimately kept Khuzestan under Iranian jurisdiction.
Part II
Shatt al-ČArab: Introduction

With the importance of Khuzestan in mind, an additional issue within the province commands a more intricate look: the Shatt al-ČArab dispute. The rights of the Shatt al-ČArab channel represent perhaps the most vehement struggle between Tehran and Baghdad, around which many of the incidents in Khuzestan have revolved. If Khuzestan represents the overlap of Persian and Arab cultures, then Shatt al-ČArab has been the tangible line to be crossed whenever the conflict manifested itself. In a sense, this dispute “serves as the barometer reflecting the vicissitudes and political temperature in Iraqi-Iranian relations” (Abdulghani 1984, 200). The coming section will examine the Shatt al-ČArab clash as well as the diplomatic efforts that have attempted to resolve the dispute and the role that identity has played in the mutual antagonism. While the waterway is primarily of economic importance to both states, the animosity has manifested itself in cultural, ethnic, political and religious friction throughout the 20th century. In all, nearly twenty treaties have been signed between Iraq and Iran concerning the status of Shatt al-ČArab since the 16th century, a fact that points to the tremendous importance of the channel (Swearingen 1988, 409). Please note that the previous chapters laid out many of the complex historical interactions of Iran and Iraq, thus to avoid repetition there will be references back to pages of the preceding chapters.
The Shatt al-ʿArab waterway, Arvand Rūd in Persian, is formed by a confluence of Tigris and Euphrates rivers, joined by the Karun River approximately sixty-five miles from the Persian Gulf. Today it forms the common boundary between Iraq and Iran in southwestern Khuzestan, and for centuries has proved invaluable for the fishing, navigation, shipping, and irrigation of Persians and Arabs. Prior to the 20th century, a series of weak and vague treaties sought to define claims to Shatt al-ʿArab. The first was the Treaty of Zuhab between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Persian Safavid Dynasty in 1639, which, after the Ottoman conquest of Baghdad, delimited their borders based on tribal and village loyalties. However, this proved to be an insufficient resolution because Persians viewed the river as a natural border between the civilizations, while the Ottoman Empire viewed the presence of Arab tribes on both sides of the river as their de facto justification for ownership (Schofield 1986, 27-32; Hünseler 1984, 8-13; Karsh 1988, 409). These opposing points of view would function to define the Shatt al-ʿArab dispute for centuries to come.

The other pre-20th century treaties that dealt with the Shatt al-ʿArab issue were the two treaties of Erzurum. When unrest erupted in Muḥammarah in 1823, the first Erzurum Treaty was formulated based on the previous (albeit vague) understandings between the Ottoman sultans and the Persian shahs. The second Erzurum Treaty was approved in 1847 in an effort to define the borders once and for all. Persia was awarded important locations on the waterway including Muḥammarah and Abadan (later the site for Britain’s oil refinery in Khuzestan), while the Ottomans received Shatt al-ʿArab in its entirety. Importantly, the treaty granted Persia full navigation rights in the channel, though it legally belonged to the Ottomans. Like the agreements before it, the second
Erzurum Treaty suffered from ambiguous wording and different interpretations of the terminology when the time came to draw the boundaries. Significantly, the Russians and British oversaw this treaty, hoping that greater territorial definition would facilitate their economic ambitions in the region (Hünseler 1984, 11-12; Schofield 1986, 44; Karsh 1988, 409). This agreement would carry the two parties into the 20th century, a period that endured Arab-Persian tug of war over the channel.

The coming chapters will analyze the numerous events that affected the status of Shatt al-Arab throughout the 20th century, the ramifications these incidents had on Iraqi-Iranian relations, and how national identity manifested itself in the feud. The ebb and flow of the hostility surrounding the waterway was influenced by a myriad of events in both states, including numerous regime changes, the effects of the two world wars, and the simmering of interstate tensions. Various treaties reevaluated the status of Shatt as Iraq and Iran jockeyed for regional hegemony, and the successive governments manipulated cultural identity by painting the political issue of river rights as an issue of national and cultural importance.
Chapter 5: The Beginning of the Shatt al-\textsuperscript{c}Arab Dispute in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century

With a tenuous agreement in place over the ownership of Shatt al-\textsuperscript{c}Arab, both empires entered the 20\textsuperscript{th} century well aware of the strategic and economic importance of the channel. With neither side particularly satisfied with the arrangements, they each made numerous appeals to amend and define the border more specifically. During the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Persians grappled for power with Sheikh Khaz\textsuperscript{e}al, the Arab sheikh of Mu\textsuperscript{h}ammarah who consistently undermined the power of the central government and sought complete autonomy from Persia (see chapter 1 for details). It was during this period that Iranian interests necessitated a reevaluation of the status of Shatt al-\textsuperscript{c}Arab, thus Iran began to question the legitimacy of the second Erzurum Treaty. Russia and Great Britain entrenched themselves into Persian affairs early in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, agreeing on the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907 that divided Persia into zones of influence, the British exerting influence in the south and the Russians exerting influence in the north (Schofield 1986, 44-48; Hünseler 1984, 12).

Furthermore, the discovery of oil in Khuzestan in 1908 roiled the already fragile arrangements along the waterway. British prospectors’ uncovering of expansive oil reserves resulted in an influx of shipping traffic and shifted anchorage points from the Karun River into the Ottoman controlled Shatt al-\textsuperscript{c}Arab. This also led to development of both Mu\textsuperscript{h}ammarah and Abadan as important Iranian economic locations. The increased
European and Iranian presence in the channel led to significant administrative problems between the neighboring empires (largely due to British interference), warranting a reevaluation of the current agreement. The Tehran Protocol of 1911 stipulated that an (ideally) impartial commission be established to delineate the boundaries yet again, though Russian and British involvement in the negotiations sacrificed the impartialness of the future delegation (Swearingen 1988, 409-410; Schofield 1986, 46-48).

This commission would gather two years later and generate the Constantinople Protocol of 1913. In addition to resolving the standing of various Arab sheikhdoms in Iranian territory (most notably, the area under the influence of Sheikh Khaz' al) and disputed islands, the newest protocol addressed the status of Shatt al-'Arab. After extended negotiations involving the Turks, Brits, Russians, and Persians, the channel remained entirely under Ottoman jurisdiction, though Persia retained navigational rights as well as the jurisdiction over Muḥammarah and the junction where the Karun River met Shatt al-'Arab. The protocol called for the establishment of a boundary delimiting committee comprised of all negotiating parties that would adjudicate the final border decisions that would be binding for all countries and not open to revision. This committee worked diligently, planting nearly 250 boundary pillars along the shared border, though their progress was ultimately stalled by the outbreak of the First World War (Abdulghani 1984, 111-112; Schofield 1986, 48-51). The treaty made one exceedingly significant concession: granting Iran a five-mile tract near Muḥammarah where the boundary ran along the deepest median river line (thalweg line). The zone began at the mouth of the Karun River, stretching one mile beyond the port city. This element of the treaty was primarily a product of British lobbying to facilitate the
expansion of the aforementioned oil interests in the region due to the inadequacy of existing facilities in Muḥammarah (Swearingen 1988, 409-410; Schofield 2001, 215).

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire struggled to keep its power in tact, and Mesopotamia was no exception. Ottoman administrations undertook efforts to minimize tribal allegiance and promote cohesion in the empire as they sought to be a legitimate player in the world market in the middle of the 19th century. Entering into the world market successfully developed Iraqi industry and exports (i.e. wool, dates, grain), but also exposed Iraqis to European-style nationalist sentiments. The Ottomans aimed to curb growing nationalism by expanding the military to include more Arabs, drawing primarily Iraqi Sunnis into the military fray. This practice concentrated political power in the hands of Iraqi Sunnis, whom would seek to exclude non-Sunnis from political participation in the future. The advent of the 20th century brought the Young Turk Revolt in 1908, a movement that sparked Ottoman Iraqi officers (and Arabs in general) to examine their own political identity and future (Davis 2005, 29-34). These developments in Mesopotamia would prove integral to the continuation of Persian-Arab (and soon Iraqi-Iranian) antagonism.

Persia simultaneously struggled to consolidate its identity much like neighboring Iraq. Persians became increasingly indignant toward the corrupt Qajar dynasty plagued by economic mismanagement and overrun by British and Russian influence. This led to the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, which culminated in the creation of a constitution that limited royal authority, established an elected representative assembly (majlis), and granted freedom of speech, assembly, and press (albeit limited). The Qajars struggled against constitutional supporters, often violently, and lost a great deal of their legitimacy.
as a result (Bakhash 1989, 23-24). At that time, Iran reflected three principle competing identities: Islamic, Iranian, and ethnic. The struggle with the ethnic Arabs in Khuzestan led by Sheikh Khaz'al and additional unrest (i.e. the Kurds) around the country complicated any effort to create a unified Persia under the Qajar shahs⁶. Meanwhile, prevailing secular currents ensured that Iran’s diverse religious and ethnic groups could maintain a cohesive territorial identity. The sense of being Iranian overshadowed Islamic sentiments during this period, though the balance was discernibly fragile, and the nascent sense of nationalism found in Iran made the neighboring Arabs a suitable rival (Vaziri 1993, 188-189).

Essentially, the Shatt al-‘Arab dispute during the early 20th century embodied the growing antagonism between the neighboring empires. And while the Constantinople Protocol would temporarily satisfy the needs of both parties, the status of the channel would soon be reevaluated. The issue was essentially an economic and strategic dispute exacerbated by ethnic friction between two stabilizing states. In addition, both parties struggled to establish a cohesive identity during this period, forcing them to deal with serious internal disputes and growing external pressures simultaneously. As each empire weakened in the early years of the nascent century, the advent of the First World War would ultimately disband the Ottoman Empire with the newly created Iraq assuming its position in the dispute. Additionally, the Bolshevik revolution, the rise of the United States as a world power, and the ascension of Reza Shah to the Persian throne would all have a profound effect on the Shatt al-‘Arab conflict in the coming period.

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⁶ See Chapter 1 for additional background information.
Chapter 6: The Shatt al-Ľ Arab Dispute After World War I

The Shatt al-Ľ Arab dispute functioned to define Iraqi-Iranian politics in the second quarter of the 20th century. The conclusion of the First World War saw the creation of Iraq under the British mandate system after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. As Iraqis fought for autonomy and independence from the British, Persia came under the rule of the indomitable Reza Shah Pahlavi who worked incessantly to unify his country at any cost, quietly seeking to reduce the grip that Islam had on Iranian society (Daniel 2001, 138). His campaign of Persianization forced the settlement of Iran’s disparate tribes and ended the insubordinate reign of Sheikh Khaz‘al in Khuzestan, adding additional fuel to the flames of Persian-Arab tensions. With Reza Shah pitted against the newly seated Iraqi Hashemite monarchy, the two states would soon return their focus to the issue of the Shatt al-Ľ Arab waterway.

The channel had continued to develop as a commercial asset despite WWI and Great Britain worked diligently to protect its interests in the area. To this end, the British (still occupying Iraq at this time) asserted authority over the river from Basra to the oil facilities at Abadan and Khorammshahr while also supporting Shiekh Khaz‘al in the eastern river territory of Khuzestan. Thus they had neatly encircled the strategic zone to

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7 See chapters 1 & 2 of the Khuzestan section for further detail.
8 See chapter 2 for further explanation of the shah’s Persianization efforts.
9 Persian name of Muḥammadrah, changed during Reza Shah’s Persianization campaign
ensure the preservation of their economic stakes. However, in 1924 Reza Khan (he would become shah the following year) defeated and deposed Sheikh Khaz‘al, who had been abandoned by the British, making Shatt al-‘Arab an increasingly contentious zone. Reza Khan viewed growing Arab consciousness in Khuzestan as a threat to Iran’s stability, while the British saw the phenomenon as a threat to their oil prosperity, making Sheikh Khaz‘al disposable. Britain’s betrayal of Sheikh Khaz‘al only embittered Iraqi Arabs further, contributing to growing disdain for British presence in the country. Iran declared sovereignty over the area, furthering the bilateral tensions while Britain occupied its usual position in the middle (Schofield 1986, 52-53; Daniel 2001, 133-134).

The 1930s was a decade of consistent dispute over the status of Shatt al-‘Arab, though capricious cooperation existed. With Reza Khan having consolidated his power and taken the throne (henceforth, Reza Shah) and the budding Iraqi monarchy struggling to unify their diverse country, tempers flared on the river border. Great Britain continued to dominate and benefit from the commercial sector of the area, thanks largely to their heavy presence in Iraq and financing of the oil sector development. Additionally, thanks to full ownership of the Shatt, Iraq profited immensely by collecting taxes from each vessel that utilized they waterway, even Iranian flagships. In 1929, angry over a treaty that afforded Brits special treatment in Iraq, the shah threatened to abrogate previous border agreements if Iranians were not given the same privileges. When his request was granted, Reza Shah officially recognized Iraq’s independence with the caveat that the status of Shatt al-‘Arab be reevaluated. In 1932 he requested that the boundary be readjusted to the median river live in accordance with international norms. This roused the ire of King Faisal (who had made an official visit to Tehran a few months prior) and
The Iraqis, with their sovereignty blooming and the League of Nations preparing to admit their unsteady state (Schofield 1986, 52-54).

The neighbors brought the dispute before the League of Nations in 1934 as Iran’s modest navy continually confronted the British river authority positioned in Iraq. Pointing to the legitimacy of the 1913 Protocol and the 1847 Erzurum Treaty, Iraq asserted that it legally retained exclusive rights over Shatt al-Ṣarḥ, especially considering Iraq’s limited sea access when compared to Iran’s 1,200-mile coastline. Iran decried that the treaties were signed under heavy foreign (British and Russian) pressure without Iran’s best interests in mind, rendering them illegitimate. When the League reached no solution, Iraq and Iran withdrew their cases and entered bilateral negotiations. Unsurprisingly, these negotiations were heavily influenced by British officials who sought continued protection of their oil interests in Abadan as well as protection of their unofficial Iraqi colony (Schofield 1984, 53-55; Swearingen 1988, 410).

The deliberations culminated in the signing of the Frontier Treaty on July 4, 1937. Iraq made only small concessions to Iran, renewing the allowance of a four-mile stretch of the Shatt that was marked along the thalweg line, thanks primarily to British involvement yet again. This was a far cry from the equal sharing of the channel the Reza Shah initially envisioned. Iran rejected the proposed establishment of a three-party Shatt al-Ṣarḥ Conservancy Board, which would have given Iraq, Iran, and Great Britain an equal say in the status of the waterway. Schofield (1986, 55) contends that there is evidence that Iraq was prepared to concede a thalweg delimitation along the entire channel. However, the British feared this change would adversely affect shipping in the estuary, ninety percent of which belonged to Britain at the time. In addition, the prospect
of another world war appeared at this time in Europe, particularly after Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. This made Britain keen to maintain the current agreement because it feared that equal ownership of the channel (since Iran was expected to, and did, remain neutral in the outbreak of war) would complicate the free passage of British warships into the region. Finally, Iraq allowed Iran to share in the maintenance of the channel, which had previously been the exclusive right of Iraq (Swearingen 1988, 410-411; Karsh 1990, 261; Schofield 1986, 53-; Abdulghani 1984, 116-117).

Depending on the perspective, this treaty has evoked various opinions concerning the party that benefited the most from its creation. Abdulghani (1984, 116-117) and Swearingen (1988, 410) contend that Iran benefited greatly from this treaty by taking advantage of the tumultuous political situation in Iraq after the coup of Bakr Ṣidqī in 1936, attaining additional portions of Shatt al-Arab in exchange for simply reaffirming previous agreements. Others, like Karsh (1990, 261), suggest that the concessions were mutual, though merely minor for Iraq and major for Iran. However, it seems that Iraq, in a sense, maintained its position almost completely, ceding only a few miles of the river at Abadan that had been granted to them in the 1913 Constantinople Protocol. Melamid (1968) even points out that Iran lost a bit of territory since the deepest part of the river (on which the thalweg line is drawn) at Abadan fell closer to Iran’s eastern bank than the middle of the river where they had previously claimed their boundary. Regardless, the treaty was initially viewed as satisfactory by both parties; in fact, Iraq and Iran would enter the Sa‘adabad Pact less than two weeks later, a regional security treaty with Afghanistan and Turkey that sought to protect each country’s sovereignty (Karsh 1990, 261).
Economic and strategic interests made Shatt al-ʿArab particularly important for each growing country, whose leaders sought to solidify their position in the region, but growing senses of identity undoubtedly played a part as well. Reza Shah’s efforts to settle Iran’s tribes in the name of national unity forcibly forged a sense of solidarity, while his championing of Persian culture over all others (especially Arab) grew national pride exponentially. Additionally, he built a strong military and the transnational railroad, both of which Iranians looked upon with great pride. Influenced by Atatürk’s success in Turkey, forging a strong sense of nationalism over ethnic and religious allegiances was key to the strength of the state. The shah’s plans required total control (as much as possible) over the population in order to dictate and form the specific identity that the shah sought. Thus rival politicians and parties were suppressed or eliminated, and while Reza Shah succeeded in constructing Persian nationalism, his oppressive policies garnered massive opposition from all classes and would ultimately turn his people against him (Daniel 2001, 134-137; Ansari 2007, 53-57). In pursuit of developing a strong Iranian consciousness, Reza Shah made efforts to settle Iran’s nomadic population since nomads typically disregard territorial identity. According to Vaziri (1993), his regime was successful in its development of nationalism, so much so that it formed a sort of “chauvinism grounded in a supposed superiority to [Iran’s] neighboring states” (195). Much of the shah’s philosophy was based on racial propaganda that espoused theories of Aryan supremacy over Semitic people in particular, deepening Persian-Arab rancor (Vaziri 1993, 193-195). Thus, it can be ascertained that potentially changing the status of Shatt al-ʿArab in Iran’s favor would be viewed as an important contribution to strengthening Iranian nationalism.
Similarly, the Iraqi government had been searching for a way to unite its disparate population. As mentioned earlier, King Faisal lamented the fact that there was “no Iraqi people but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea”, indicating that forging unity within the state would be no small task (Dawisha 1999, 554). Faisal adopted an exclusively Pan-Arab political strategy, hoping to unite his people via their Arab consciousness instead of their tribal or religious character. However, Pan-Arabism is primarily identified as a Sunni undertaking and his Arabist policies proved to be immensely exclusionary of the majority Shiite population. In particular, the government’s educational policy that intended to increase and strengthen Iraqi unity functioned to promote sectarian divides instead, widening the distance between mutual sectarian understandings. After Faisal’s death, his son Ghāzī assumed the throne and proved to be an ineffectual leader. Unrest grew exponentially during his reign, especially as Bakr Ṣidqī staged a military coup in 1936 that took power from the political elites, forming a government that unabashedly lionized Pan-Arabism. Tribal and ethnic unrest reached a boiling point during this time as well while many resisted assimilation (i.e. Kurds and Assyrians). Soon violence was the government’s primary tool for reconciling political rivals rather than negotiations, further undermining the development and unity of Iraq’s civil society (Davis 2005, 60-62; Dawisha 1999, 553-555). Much of Iraq’s population remained relatively unmoved by Pan-Arabist and leftist politics, but most were united in their anti-British sentiment. Iraqi Shiite elite resented Sunnis for assuming guardianship of Arab culture centered in Baghdad over Shiite centers like Najaf or Karbala, but Islam remained the principle means of identity for the illiterate Shiite masses (Lukitz 1995, 110-114). Needless to say, Iraqis had no cohesive sense of nationalism to
match their Persian neighbors, but like Reza Shah, the Iraqi government’s efforts to unify the population led to widespread dissatisfaction with the regime.

While both states struggled to achieve stability and unity, the Shatt al-ʿArab waterway remained central to each country’s economic, political, and strategic interests. After the Frontier Treaty of 1937, Iraq and Iran would find themselves tossed into further tumult. World War II placed the Middle East in the middle of a tug of war between the Allied and Axis powers. In Iraq, the assassination of Bakr Șidqi in 1937, the death of King Ghāzī in 1939, and the Golden Square (Four Colonels) coup d’etat in 1941 served to destabilize the state. Additionally, Nazi Germany began exerting its influence throughout Iraq and Iran, worrying Russia and Great Britain tremendously. After the onset of the Second World War, Iraq’s Four Colonel regime was viewed as a threat by Britain, and Iraq was again occupied after the brief Anglo-Iraqi War secured British interests in 1941 (Davis 2005, 67-69). Likewise in Iran, Germany’s invasion of Russia in 1941 put Iran firmly in the sites of the Allied Powers. Reza Shah’s growing Nazi sympathies spelled the end of his tumultuous reign in Iran, forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. The shah fell with little fanfare, proving that while his regime had achieved many of its goals, it lacked true support from the Iranian people (Ansari 2007, 83-84). World War II would temporarily stalled the fragile development of both states, but each would emerge after the war with new leadership and a renewed interest in their position in the region and the status of Shatt al-ʿArab.
Chapter 7: The Shatt al-ʿArab Dispute Continues after World War II

With Iraq and much of Iran occupied during the Second World War (despite Iran’s declared neutrality) and commercial interests in tact, the Shatt al-ʿArab conflict stagnated and river traffic stayed consistently high. However, the years following WWII witnessed myriad events that would set the stage for future disagreement over the channel. Increased oil production for both Iraq and Iran made the export capacity of the Shatt increasingly valuable to their respective economies. In addition, both states found themselves under new leadership after periods of political turmoil, leaving them with particularly uncertain paths toward the future. Concerted efforts were also made to forge cohesive national identities in each state, further entrenching the rivalry into national consciousness. Seemingly, during this period each country renewed its interests in Shatt al-ʿArab and ownership ostensibly became an issue of national pride for Iraqis and Iranians alike (Schofield 1986, 57-58; Melamid 1968, 355).

After the clouds of WWII dissipated, Iraq and Iran emerged with their pride dented, but their independence nominally reinstated. The British handed power back to Iraq’s Hashemite monarchy after their extended postwar occupation, but in 1948 the Portsmouth Treaty extended British presence in Iraq, producing massive demonstrations and added revulsion toward the monarchy. Iraqis found themselves pulled in opposite directions by Pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism, but they were decidedly anti-British. Both movements had large followings during this time, but as the monarchy lost public
support and became increasingly linked to Iraqi nationalism, the Arab world continued to rally around Pan-Arabism, which would soon be revitalized due to the creation of Israel and the subsequent defeat of the Arab armies (Davis 2005, 86-91; Abdi 2008, 8; Dawisha 2005, 19).

While Iraqi nationalists made efforts to draw attention to domestic issues like inflation and social reform, the population focused on the fate of Palestine, making Pan-Arab fervor dominant once again. However, the population remained deeply divided, which allowed Iraqi nationalists to continue mobilization and support of Iraqi Jews while Pan-Arabists blamed the Jews and Zionism for the country’s ills. By associating the Jews with international Zionism, the government was able to divert attention from its own errors toward a common enemy, but it became increasingly reliant on this position and ignored serious calls for social change, which would soon turn the people against the regime (Davis 2005, 85-95). All this in conjunction with the rise of an-Nāṣir in Egypt\(^\text{10}\) effectively revived Pan-Arabism, bringing the Middle East to the international stage, as it became an important region in the escalating Cold War (Walker 2003, 36). Iraqi identity remained fragile and heterogeneous, again undergoing a transformation in a direction that very few people could predict; but in any form, Iraqi identity would play a large role in the coming disputes over Shatt al-ʿArab. In 1950, Iraq and Iran disagreed about Tehran’s role in a joint commission charged with maintaining the channel. The Iranian administration saw its powers as executive, whereas Iraq viewed Iran’s role as merely consultative. Iranian plans to divert water resources from the Shatt in 1953 also raised enmity among the states, since Iraq considered the scheme as inimical to Iraqi interests.

\(^{10}\) See Chapter 3 for additional details on the rise of al-Nāṣir
(Abdulghani 1984, 117). These events marked the beginning of serious deteriorations in the interstate relationship over the rights and usage of Shatt al-\(^{c}\)Arab that lasted for decades.

The political scene in Iraq would drastically change in 1958 as a result of the 14 July Revolution, brutally ending the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq and establishing a republic. While the revolution initially occurred under the auspices of Pan-Arabism, the first leader, General Qāsim, soon strayed from that vision, more concerned with maintaining power than uniting the populace. The new regime seemingly abandoned pure Pan-Arabism by fighting against Pan-Arab elements domestically and internationally, while also ending their union with Jordan established by the former monarchy and subsequently withdrawing the Baghdad Pact. In short, Pan-Arabism was no longer a priority. Qāsim championed Iraqi culture and history in hopes of healing sectarian and ethnic fissures, and a portion of this policy revolved around the Shatt al-\(^{c}\)Arab dispute (Davis 2005, 142-159). In autumn 1958, Iran lobbied the new Iraqi government to participate in a new commission aimed at settling the demarcation of the frontier, though Qāsim’s regime declined and responded by declaring the 1937 treaty null and void. The new government drew the ire of Mohammad Reza Shah by not only claiming total sovereignty over the entire Shatt al-\(^{c}\)Arab, but also expanding its claims to the province of Khuzestan, soon supporting rebel groups in the province and bringing their claim before the Arab League. The principal dispute surrounding the channel during this period was over the use of the Khosrowabad port, the ownership of which was ambiguous under the previously agreed upon treaties. Iran claimed rights to utilize the port under the right of free navigation set out in the 1937 Frontier Treaty, while Iraq
contended that it owned this territory, including that port, according to the same treaty. International courts reaffirmed Iran’s position, since free navigation of the river was properly deemed to include the right of ships to reach the port freely, but the Shatt would continue to be the center of disputes among the politically immature and unstable countries (Tehrani 1993, 11-14; Schofield 1986, 58-60).

The political landscape would be razed yet again when the Ba’th party staged a coup in 1963, ousting Qāsim and restructuring Iraqi politics along the sectarian lines that plagued Iraq for much its existence. The new administration continued to lionize Iraqi nationalism in conjunction with Pan-Arabism (“Mesopotamianism”), initially sparking hopes that efforts would be made to confront sectarianism, though those hopes were short-lived. Exclusive Pan-Arabism risked complete disenchantment of Iraqi Shiite and Kurds, but Ba’thist doctrine preached Pan-Arab sentiment, thus the government could not fully commit to Iraqi nationalism\(^\text{11}\). The Ba’thists’ contradictory policy of rewriting Iraqi history to indoctrinate Iraqis led to further Shiite marginalization and resentment toward the government (Davis 2005, 142-159; Abdi 2008, 8-9). The Ba’thists unequivocally declared that Shatt al-’Arab was Iraqi territory and echoed previous beliefs about Khuzestan belonging to Iraq, assertions that were central to the Ba’thist Mesopotamian vision (Tehrani 1993, 12-13; Schofield 1986, 59-62; Abdulghani 1984, 116-124).

Following Iraq’s aggressive rhetoric, Mohammad Reza Shah abrogated the 1937 interstate treaty, reiterated the desire for delimitation of the river along the thalweg line, and decreed that all Iranian ships entering the river would receive a military escort. Baghdad quickly backed down, hardly in a position to risk military conflict while Iraq’s

\(^{11}\) Additional background information in Chapter 3
domestic situation remained volatile. In 1971, relations soured further after Iran reasserted authority over the disputed islands of Great and Lesser Ţūnbs and Abū Mūsā, causing Iraq to officially sever its diplomatic ties with Iran and request that the rest of the Arab world to do the same. Friction escalated as Iraq promptly expelled thousands of Persian Iraqis and frequent armed border skirmishes occurred in the aftermath. Notably, it was this Iraqi aggression that prompted Iran to pledge support to Kurdish Iraqi insurgents, a move that would cripple the Ba‘thists in the coming years and prove important for future negotiations (Tehrani 1993, 12-13; Schofield 1986, 59-62; Abdulghani 1984, 116-124).

As it struggled to contain the political volatility of Iraq, Iran dealt with its own issues of identity and sovereignty. For example, the intensely nationalistic Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq’s rise to power in 1951 roused Iranian nationalism further, hoping to rid Iran of the “yoke of imperialism” once and for all. His plans to nationalize Iran’s oil industry quickly met with British and American disapproval, and the two governments orchestrated a campaign that led to his ouster in 1953. With Mohammad Reza Shah’s power consolidated, the United States replaced the British as the major foreign presence in Iranian affairs, but Iranian nationalism continued to grow and strengthen throughout this period. Concerned about the future of the monarchy, particularly in the wake of the Iraqi Revolution, the shah embarked an extensive and poorly planned modernization campaign known as the White Revolution. Additionally, the shah’s aggressive territorial claims (over the aforementioned Greater and Lesser Ţūnbs and Shatt al-‘Arab) strained the bilateral relationship between Iraq and Iran. And

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12 Refer to Chapter 3 for additional details about Mossadeq.
though he was the unchallenged leader of Iran during this time, the shah’s actions ultimately drew the ire of Iranian clergy and his people as well. Iranian resentment of the shah bred rapidly and his regime became increasingly hollow. By this point, Iranian identity had developed an inextricably Shiite character, and the shah’s apparent disdain for the Shiite clergy angered large portions of the population (Abdi 2001, 64-66; Ansari 2007, 188-199).

With the historical background of the conflict in mind, there seems to be an inextricable link between the dispute and each country’s sense of developing identity. The conflict symbolized the historical Persian-Arab antagonism and, in fact, seemingly came to represent the tangible tug of war between the increasingly bellicose neighbors. At this point, an ostensible “cold war” developed between the two neighbors, with each side consistently lodging complaints against one another (some petty, others more serious) in the early 1970s (Abdulghani 1984, 122-124). In Iraq, the Ba’th regime drew on a mix of Iraqi historical experience and Pan-Arab ideology to rally opposition to the perceived evils of Iran and Mohammad Reza Shah (in addition to the evils of western imperialism and Zionist oppression of the Palestinians) (Davis 2005, 158-161). Iranian nationalism, meanwhile, became a unique blend of Shiism and Iranian state pride, which simultaneously championed both elements. This process was expedited by individuals like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati who influenced Iranian nationalism immensely with their unique philosophies and mass appeal, taking advantage of Iranian desires to return to cultural authenticity of which Shiite Islam was an essential facet (Parsa 2009, 10-11; Ansari 2007, 256-257). Judging by the increasingly heated rhetoric
and political jockeying, nationalistic fervor was used as a tool to garner national support for the Shatt al-‘Arab dispute.

This period of escalation illustrates the importance that identity played in the Shatt al-‘Arab conflict. Growing political turmoil in both states motivated each regime to make an attempt to unify its diverse populations, and the channel was ostensibly a convenient means used to this end. The strategic, economic, and territorial value of the waterway made it a perfect manifestation of nationalistic pride for both states, as both governments pointed to its neighbor as imminent threats. Iraq’s limited shipping access and historical ownership of the Shatt made the issue a useful medium with which to demonize its Iranian neighbors. Likewise, the Iranian government appealed to Persian pride by indicating that the current arrangement was not in accordance with international norms, and that Iraq’s refusal to compromise had an adverse effect on Iranian economic interests. Iraq’s position, however, would soon become untenable as Iran’s support for Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq would become far too taxing on the stability of the country.
Chapter 8: The Culmination of the Dispute

With the escalation of the Shatt al-\(^{c}\)Arab conflict in the early 1970s, the ensuing “cold war” between Iraq and Iran seemed headed toward military engagement. National identity in each state continued mercurial development, particularly as the Ba’th party persisted with their forging of Iraqi nationalism and Iranians turned on Mohammad Reza Shah to follow Ayatollah Khomeini. While it is well known that military action would soon take place, there was a short interval that seemed to suggest that violent conflict could be averted, an opportunity that manifested itself in the Algiers Accords of 1975. However, this treaty merely represented a temporary solution and the interstate rivalry would soon descend into one of the deadliest wars in modern history (Davis 2005, 176). Seemingly, the ascension of Saddam Hussein to the Iraqi presidency coupled with the rapid empowerment of Ayatollah Khomeini and the already bitter relationship between the two men ensured that the path to war was all but inevitable.

Iraq found itself in an incredibly vulnerable position at this point, due primarily to Iran’s rapid climb to regional hegemony. Mohammad Reza Shah envisioned Iran as the “guardian of the Gulf,” expanding the Iranian military vastly and putting immense pressure on the reeling Iraq with actions that jeopardized unfettered Iraqi ownership of Shatt al-\(^{c}\)Arab (Karsh 1990, 264). Iran had been implicated in an unsuccessful coup attempt against the Ba’th party in 1969, abrogated the 1937 Frontier Treaty the same year, and, most importantly, began supplying Kurdish insurgents in Iraq with extensive
military and economic assistance. Iran even oversaw the establishment of the Kurdish intelligence service, the Parastin, with Israel. In other words, the shah was suffocating Iraq with domestic turmoil. As Iraqi rhetorical assertions over Shatt al-`Arab and Khuzestan continued, so did Iranian support for Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq, an action aimed at occupying Iraq’s army so that it could not carry out its designs on Iranian territory. As tensions mounted, Iraqi politicians tried to paint the conflict as an Arab-Persian conflict, rather than merely an Iraqi-Iranian dispute, but the death of Ġamāl ʿAbdan-NāṢir and recent Israeli defeats of Arab armies rendered such Pan-Arab appeals moot (Karsh 1990, 263-265; Abdulghani 1984, 139-141 & 152-154; Schofield 1986, 62).

As the hostilities seemed inevitably headed toward a violent clash, the domestic situation in each country was ominous. In Iran, while Mohammad Reza Shah made his state the premier economic and military powerhouse in the region, his people grew decidedly discontent with his rule. His confidence grew in conjunction with his coffers, but the shah failed to make any meaningful political reforms and managed to alienate Iranian society (Ansari 2007, 230). The Baʿthists in Iraq, meanwhile, carefully constructed a mix of Pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism, not allowing either one to become particularly dominant, that formed a sectarian society that afforded Shiites and Kurds limited political rights while remaining under Sunni Arab authority. The regime carefully tiptoed around the Islamic character of both Arabism and “Iraqidom,” rarely stressing it unless convenient to their goals. Like Tehran, Baghdad refused to move toward democratic reforms, citing threats from the Iraqi Communist Party (Davis 2005, 151-153 & 180-182; Baram 1983, 430). In spite of growing malcontent among their people, the Baʿth party and the shah carried out their policies of mutual antagonism.
Iran’s efforts to undermine Iraq’s domestic stability and engulf the Ba’th regime in mayhem eventually proved to be too much for the Iraqi government. The winter of 1974-1975 saw tensions transform into border violence laden with heavy artillery, tanks, and aircraft, bringing the Iraqi army to the verge of collapse. Iraq sought to end Iranian support for Kurdish insurgents, thus entering into negotiations in 1975 that led to the signing of the Algiers Accords. Negotiated by future president Saddam Hussein, the treaty called for the determination of boundaries and mutual assurance of security and peace along the shared borders. With Iran inarguably the more powerful party, Iraq was forced to grant delimitation in Shatt al-‘Arab along the *thalweg* line (again, the mid-river line). Iran had finally obtained the rights to the channel that they had sought for decades and Iraq was no longer threatened by the Iran-backed Kurdish rebellion. Dividing the channel was a small price to pay for the Ba’thists to avoid the political collapse, though in general the agreement was viewed as humiliating for Baghdad. The treaty seemingly marked the beginning of a détente between Iraq and Iran, and both Saddam Hussein and Mohammad Reza Shah expressed relief that war had been averted (Abdulghani 1984, 152-161; Karsh 1990, 264; Schofield 1986, 64; Swearingen 1988, 408). According to Karsh (1990, 265), “the agreement reflected Baghdad’s painful realization that an effective enforcement of Iraq’s internal sovereignty depended on the goodwill of its [Iranian] neighbor,” though this reality would quickly change in the eyes of Iraq.

In the few years that followed the signing of the Algiers Accords, Iraq normalized many of its relationships with neighbors and the Arab states. While Iran and Iraq managed to set aside their differences, Iraq also made strides in its relationships with Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, South Yemen, and Syria. Furthermore,
agreements were reached extending interstate commercial ties, and Baghdad and Tehran were united against the imperial interests of the Soviet Union and the United States in the Gulf. With Iraq regaining much respect in the region and Egypt signing of the Camp David Accords with Israel (a decision widely condemned by Arab leaders), Baghdad took on a new leadership role in the region. Thus, it seems that the Algiers Accords inadvertently undermined Mohammad Reza Shah’s goal of regional hegemony by allowing Iraq to regain prominence in the Middle East (Abdulghani 1984, 165-172; Karsh 1990, 265). Interestingly, in 1978 Iran would move its naval forces from Khorramshahr in the Shatt to the Gulf port of Bandar Abbas, significantly reducing the channel’s importance for Iran, though the economic benefits were still considerable (Hünseler 1984, 19).

With the Kurdish rebellion having collapsed and Baghdad climbing to the top of Arab politics, the Ba‘thists began to reevaluate the status of the Shatt al-‘Arab territory they had desperately ceded only a few years earlier. While Iraq saw its power and influence increase, the shah focused on establishing Iran as a “great civilization” while ignoring domestic unrest that steadily built against him. He became increasingly disconnected with Iranian identity and sensibilities as he abjured political reform and glorified the “divine monarchy” (Ansari 2007, 236-238). Notably, the Algiers Accords opened Iraq’s borders, allowing Iranian Shiite pilgrims to journey to Iraq’s holy sites, and many individuals visited Ayatollah Khomeini during their travels, stirring up immense support for him when they returned home. By late 1978, anti-shah sentiment reached its apogee, with demonstrations and bazaar closings interrupting economic and social proceedings. In the early months of 1979, the shah would finally fall to Khomeini’s
strong consortium of support, paving the way for the Islamic revolution that would again alter the entire landscape of the region (Ansari 2007, 246-257; Parsa 2009, 13-15).

Although Khomeini’s revolution would lead to the establishment of the first Islamic government, the movement was intensely nationalistic in nature, fused with a religious character that helped legitimize it. Khomeini appealed to all demographics, developing a reputation as the champion of Iranian nationalism poised to resurrect Iran’s cultural authenticity after the shah’s era of (moral and political) corruption, and Shiism was glorified as an integral part of Iranian cultural identity. The new regime worked swiftly to consolidate power and, though a government would emerge with which the general population was satisfied, the task would prove difficult (Ansari 2007, 257-258 & 271-283). Constructing a sense of Persian consciousness by glorifying the past achievements of the civilization had been the basis for cultivating Iranian nationalism for decades, and the Islamic revolution represented another great achievement for Persian culture (Vaziri 1993, 195). Iranians therefore emerged from the revolution with a sense of invincibility; the Western puppet ruler had been ousted, the people had been permitted to forge the future of their state without foreign interference, and regional hegemony seemed to be a realistic goal, especially given the weakened state of Iraq and Iran’s newfound position in Shatt al-ŠArab. In November 1979 the hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran would symbolize growing Iranian momentum against the “Great Satan” (as the United States was affectionately known) and further solidify Iranian confidence and nationalistic enthusiasm (Ansari 2007, 284). Iranian nationalism, though a complicated mix of religious fervor and nationalist zeal, was strong and eager to demonstrate to the world that Iran was an important actor on the world stage.
However, Saddam Hussein had different ideas about the relationship between the two neighbors, particularly after he forcefully assumed the Iraqi presidency in July of 1979. Fearful that the Islamic Revolution would spread to already disenchanted Iraqi Shiites and jeopardize his power, Hussein arrested and executed numerous Shiite clerics and abruptly deported thousands of Persian Iraqis to Iran (Davis 2005, 189-191). Hussein had reluctantly ceded half of Shatt al-\(^c\)Arab to Iran in 1975 partially because it did not put Iraq’s vital need for uninhibited use of the channel at risk. However, the potential spread of Shiite rebellion from Iran to southern Iraq would jeopardize Iraqi access to the Shatt, a possibility that was not palatable for Hussein (Balfour-Paul 1984, 128-129). In October 1979, Baghdad renounced the Algiers Accords, a move that suggested it had been signed merely to keep the Ba‘th regime afloat and that Saddam Hussein now felt the balance of regional power was in his favor. Less than a year later in September 1979, as Iranian Arab unrest boiled in Khuzestan, Hussein attacked Iran and began the Iran-Iraq War. His first move was to invade Khuzestan, effectively controlling Shatt al-\(^c\)Arab and flexing his military muscles (Schofield 1986, 64). This was Saddam’s opportunity to take back territory that he viewed as rightfully belonging to Iraq, though he likely cared less about what the territory meant to Iraqi identity than it did to his political goals.

The ensuing war would turn into one of the deadliest confrontations in modern history, forcing both states to pay immense costs. However, the events of the Iraq-Iran War are not the focus of this thesis, though they are admittedly fascinating. Rather, the interest here lies in one of the factors that precipitated the conflict: namely Shatt al-\(^c\)Arab. While it would be ludicrous to suggest that the war broke out based solely on this dispute,
it would be equally daft to underestimate the role it played. As tensions mounted toward the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war, the cohesive security of Iraq was inextricably linked to the security of Shatt al-\textsuperscript{c}Arab (Balfour-Paul 1984, 129). Thus, Iraqi nationalist interests were tied to preserving Iraqi interests in the waterway. Likewise, the Islamic nationalist identity in Iran stressed Iran’s Islamic character over its Iranian essence, in part to tie disparate ethnic groups (i.e. Arabs and Kurds) to the rest of the state. For most of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Iran had rallied around the possibility of equality for all Iranians in exchange for loyalty to the state. As a result, there was a relatively strong sense of nationalism propagated by cultural education efforts and the solidifying of territorial identity, of which Shatt al-\textsuperscript{c}Arab was an integral part (Vaziri 1993, 199-201). In general, the river’s economic and strategic value made it an indispensable tool for promulgating a unified national identity in both states.
Conclusions and Remarks

“Nationalism is chameleon-like. It takes its color from its context.”

Anthony D. Smith (Lukitz 1995, vi)

The intent of the previous chapters is to provide a view into two of the most significant territorial disputes between Iraq and Iran in an effort to better understand how the conflicts surrounding Khuzestan and Shatt al-"Arab relate to identity. It is not the aim of this thesis to define the identity of either country, since identity is undoubtedly unique for each individual, but identity should also be recognized as a dynamic entity that governs the actions of most states and individuals. Furthermore, culture should be recognized as a constitutive factor of identity, while territory and sovereignty are integral to maintaining identity as well. Thus, when the issues of Khuzestan and Shatt al-"Arab were politicized under the aegis of identity, they became integrated into each national culture. In the early years of the 20th century both Iraq and Iran were each an amalgamation of ethno-national groups lassoed by modern political borders, though as the century progressed each state developed strong senses of nationalism inextricably linked to their territory. Myriad strategies were utilized to shape this nationalistic unity and integrate it into culture, and both Tehran and Baghdad appealed to their nebulous national identities to further their political efforts for regional hegemony in general, and in Khuzestan and Shatt al-"Arab in particular.
Vaziri (1993, 171) states that “from a tribal, ethnic, regional, religious, or even a political standpoint, it is an impossible task […] to sort out the multilayered complex of loyalties and identities possessed by the population of Iran in the nineteenth century.” While it may not literally be impossible, the leaders of Iran had to deal with this exact issue in the 20th century. In the early 1900s, Iran’s constitutional revolution served to form the initial bonds of territorial consciousness among the disparate classes. A combination of glorifying ancient Iranian civilizations, the class politicization, and the rise of an anti-Arab outlook forged the unprecedented sense of Iranian territorial consciousness (Vaziri 1993, 184-187). At the advent of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1925, Reza Shah undertook efforts to rapidly undermine nomadism by forcing the settlement of many tribes and centralizing the government’s power. In conjunction with that effort, the shah began his aggressive campaign of Persianization, championing all things Persian (i.e. language, culture, history etc.) and trying to purge all foreign influences, especially Arab, from Persian culture. His policies sought to bridge existing gaps between differing allegiances within Iran, thus forging a nation; a process reinforced by consistent foreign interference that solidified Iranian territorial sensitivity. These policies were maintained by Reza Shah’s son and successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, with the White Revolution, a series of reforms that suppressed tribal identity, took steps toward modernity, and imposed a singular allegiance to the state. However, it was these reforms that ultimately turned Iranians against the shah and pushed Iranian in a completely different direction with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Vaziri 1993, 197-198).

Likewise, Iraq underwent similar phenomena that had profound effects on Iraqi consciousness. Three geographically distinct areas were fashioned into modern Iraq
under British mandate after the First World War, a far cry from the Ottoman *vilayet*
system to which the people were accustomed. The newly formed regime institutionalized
Sunni Arab dominance over the Shiite majority, and the government firmly entrenching
ethnic and sectarian friction into the heterogeneous population it intended to unite (Lukitz
1995, 13-15). King Faisal lamented the lack of unity and cohesiveness in the state that he
inherited, suggesting there was “no Iraqi people but unimaginable masses of human
beings” (Dawisha 1999, 554). Faisal and subsequent rulers strove to shape these masses
into a unified country, using different strategies to structure Iraqi historical memory.
Throughout the 20th century, a struggle to define the nascent state existed between Iraqi
nationalists and Pan-Arabists, typically romanticizing historical memory in hopes of
building a semblance of unified territorial identity among Iraqis. Iraq, however,
remained deeply divided along sectarian and ethnic lines under the Hashemite kingdom,
and the monarchy soon became inextricably linked to the exclusionary tenets of Pan-
Arabism (Davis 2005, 55-60). The first coup in 1958 continued the trend of Iraqi
regimes reassessing culture and history, intending to construct Iraqi historical memory to
serve political goals; this would also serve as the model for future Ba‘th regimes,
particularly Saddam Hussein’s, in the coming decades. Essentially, Iraqi politicians
manipulated Iraqi folklore and cultural consciousness to downplay sectarian divisions and
serve political goals (Davis 2005, 109-123). Ba‘thists used “Mesopotamianism” toward
this end, which infused Pan-Arabism into Iraqi nationalism, lionizing Iraq as the premier
state among its Arab counterparts while drawing on Iraq’s ancient Mesopotamian
heritage, the only tradition to which all Iraqis could relate. Strict Pan-Arabism was too
narrow to unite a deeply sectarian Iraq, thus Mesopotamian history proved valuable
because Iraqis could proudly identify with a history that was several millennia old rather than recent Arab history that held its share of humiliation and sectarian division (Davis 2005, 150-151).

The cases of Khuzestan and Shatt al-’Arab, two issues central to both Iran and Iraq’s territorial sovereignty, fit nicely into each government’s attempts to construct their respective identities utilizing ancient claims. Khuzestan was the location of the Ouxioi, the people who lived there in antiquity, but as early as 640 A.D. Arab presence began spreading there. However, Persian claims of links to antiquity were equally legitimate since Khuzestan was under the thumb of various Persian empires throughout history, such as the Achaemenids and Sasanids. During the subsequent centuries, competing Arab and Persian influence overran Khuzestan and the Shatt, though neither seemingly became dominant, leading to much of the ambiguity that caused the conflict (Soucek 1984, 195-206). The region in question also appealed to Ba’ath Mesopotamianism because the land is an extension of the ancient Mesopotamian plains (Daniel 2001, 8).

Essentially, each successive regime would “oversee the reformulation and implementation of a new version of nationalism that abundantly selected elements from ancient history and imagery, [and] incorporated them into a new national identity” (Abdi 2008, 4). By aggrandizing historical events entrenched in each culture to construct identity, the leadership of each state managed to make their political goals integral to the preservation and protection of culture. Appealing to ancient Persian and Mesopotamian cultures was an inextricable part of the efforts of each one of the two states to construct identity, but the claims only helped the conflicts simmer (Abdi 2001, 51-52).
However, it seems more realistic to pay attention to the economic and strategic value of both the waterway and Khuzestan as the primary motivations for Iraq and Iran’s behavior concerning the border issues. Vast petroleum reserves in Khuzestan discovered in 1908 coupled with the shipping capacity of Shatt al-Ã¢Arab gave both states sufficient motivation to challenge the status quo of existing agreements in the 20th century (Daniel 2001, 8; Hünseler 1984, 10-12). Specifically, Iran’s challenging of the status of the Shatt represented an opportunity for uninhibited shipping and naval navigation, valuable water resources, and an outlet for Iranian oil production, while Iraq sought to maintain its historical hold on the channel, retain its already limited shipping abilities, and protect the revenue garnered from shipping traffic. Furthermore, Iranian interests in the Khuzestan conflict included the economic benefits of the oil reserves as well as continued access to Shatt al-Ã¢Arab, whereas Iraqi control of Khuzestan would transfer those oil reserves to Iraqi hands, give Iraq unhindered control of the Shatt, greater access to the Persian Gulf, and a victory in Arabic mythology (Soucek 1984, 208; Schofield 1986, 67-79; Parasiliti 2003, 152; Swearingen 1988, 408-410). Yet, justifications were necessary to legitimize claims over territory that legally belonged to someone else, and appeals to identity were used as the basis of these claims. Under the auspices of identity, each state pursued its interests in the disputes, labeling Shatt al-Ã¢Arab and Khuzestan issues of national interest for populations who held a tenuous grip (at best) on their own sense of identity. Every successive regime in Baghdad and Tehran was keenly aware of the political stakes held in each dispute due largely to economic and strategic considerations, and they took advantage of the national identity (that they had a role in creating) to garner support for their political goals.
As mentioned, the 20th century governments of both Iraq and Iran undertook consistent efforts to construct national identity based on their territory, in spite of deep ethnic, cultural, and sectarian divisions. In Iran,

[... ] the Iranian zone had been the home of its inhabitants for centuries, but the meanings associated with the bounded area involved were redefined, and the inhabitants were encouraged by all available means to feel themselves connects as a single, natural nation [ ...and through these efforts ] Iranian national consciousness came to serve the goals of the state and to consolidate its unity. (Vaziri 1993, 190 & 198)

Therefore, while major gaps still existed in Iranian identity throughout the 20th century, a sense of territorial unity existed that the government manipulated to garner support for its challenges of the status of Shatt al-]{-Arab. Likewise, this established unity was seemingly what prevented Arab Iranians from revolting en masse and severely undermining Iran’s stability, even though various Arab irredentist groups existed during this time and managed only minor threats to Tehran’s centralized power (Firzli 1981, 95-98; Daniel 2001, 203). In fact, it is likely that the Iran-Iraq War functioned to further unite the disparate ethnic groups (Kurds, Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Baluchis etc.) of Iran because they set aside their grievances to support Khomeini’s nascent central government (Rouleau 1989, 4). It seems appropriate to suggest that Iran contained many different senses of identity simultaneously, (a concept known as regionalism) and that Arab identity was merely a part of the greater Iranian territorial identity (Knight 1982, 518).

Equally, efforts undertaken by numerous Iraqi regimes managed to forge at least some semblance of territory-based nationalism in spite of unparalleled sectarian, ethnic, and political divisions. This eventually came in the form of the aforementioned Mesopotamian nationalism, which carefully drew on Iraq’s rich cultural heritage and
Arab roots, because its Baʿthist proponents could not afford to alienate Shiites, communists, and Kurds with pure Pan-Arabism and could not risk neglecting Arabism completely for fear of jeopardizing their revolutionary roots. Beginning in the 1950s, playing on ancient ethnic tensions and modern nationalist sentiments, the Baʿth party focused its attention on the Iranian threat in order to advance political goals with relative success (Davis 158-160). Hence, challenging Iran’s ownership in Khuzestan by calling it “occupied ‘Arabistan” and “a part of Iraq’s soil annexed to Iran under foreign rule” fell in line with Iraq’s forged Mesopotamian identity since Khuzestan was both an extension of the ancient Mesopotamian plains and an important part of Pan-Arab mythology (Daniel 2001, 8; Hunter 2001, 433 & 437-438; Soucek 1984, 208; Tehrani 1993, 12).

Additionally, support for insurgencies in Khuzestan were easily justifiable under the auspices of Arab unanimity while the province became “ripe for liberation” (Daniel 2001, 203). Like the Iranian Arabs, the Shiites in Iraq (and much of the Arab world) ignored Iran’s calls to overthrow their governments in the name of Islamic revolution, despite Iraq’s overwhelming Shiite majority (Hunter 2001, 433; Davis 2005, 192).

That is not to say that extensive divisions did not remain in both Iran and Iraq in spite of the apparently successful forging of unity; divisions were most definitely still present. But in many ways these border conflicts were also used to distract from domestic fissures by focusing attention on a nearby rival (Davis 2005, 160; Vaziri 1993, 197). In fact, both burgeoning territorial nationalisms took on distinctly anti-Arab (for Iranians) and anti-Persian (for Arabs) tones, which seem to have only exacerbated the border disputes (Vaziri 1993, 207-208; Davis 2005, 158-160). Despite the acknowledged divisions in each state’s sense of identity, Knight (1982, 516-517) suggests “[perceptions]
by the occupants can have powerful symbolic links to a group’s territorial identity.”

Hence, by utilizing the territorial-based identities that were constructed throughout the 20th century to shape these perceptions, Iranian and Iraqi regimes were able to legitimize their claims in each complex land dispute. This idea is reinforced by the fact that, despite deep societal divisions, several hundred-thousand Iraqis and Iranians sacrificed their lives in the Iran-Iraq War, a fundamental expression of nationalism of which Khuzestan and Shatt al-\(^c\)Arab were central parts (Tehrani 1993, 18; Davis 2005, 192-193). So, even though most Iraqi and Iranian citizens possessed divergent religious, tribal, and political allegiances, nationalism still provided the most stable option for ontological security (Kinnvall 2004, 742).

Importantly, there existed an extricable connection between politics and culture that manifests itself in identity in each state. Culture can be viewed as the set of beliefs, language, knowledge, laws, customs, political orientations, avocations, etc. that help construct the tenets of an identity. Furthermore, politics and culture possess a reciprocal relationship in which the decisions of a government influence cultural character and that developed cultural disposition in turn influences future government decisions (Meisel 1974, 604-607). Thus the intentional use of politicized rhetoric appeals to cultural perception, and once that cultural acuity resembles the goals of the state, a government is free to act in its own interests. In this sense, Iraq and Iran intertwined political border disputes with popular national identity in order to firmly link them to cultural preservation. Furthermore, culture is “interwoven in many of its manifestations with national sentiments and national tradition and has been used […] as an instrument in fostering national solidarity” (Meisel 1974, 610). This aspect is key to the understanding
of 20th century Iran and Iraq, because each one of these two countries made explicit cultural appeals by drawing on both ancient (Persian or Mesopotamian) and modern (Iraqi or Iranian) glory to solidify national identity and therefore pursue their political goals.

Iraqi and Iranian governments exerted extensive efforts into constructing nationalism in their respective countries, drawing on their nationalistic differences to evoke powerful popular responses. This relates to the social identity theory (ingroup vs. outgroup identity), which asserts that certain groups develop an enhanced sense of self-identification in conjunction with a negative outlook on the “other” (Schafer 1999, 830-831; Hogg 2006, 111-117). For example, as the Iraqi government asserted that Iran was illegally occupying Arab territory against the will of Iranian Arabs, Iraqi Arabs increasingly viewed Iran as a threat to their own security (Davis 2005, 9). Similar phenomena occurred in Iran against Iraq, and these actions functioned to exacerbate the Shatt al-€Arab and Khuzestan conflicts, among others, and eventually led to the outbreak of war. In this case, it seems likely that intergroup tensions inflamed the conflicts, while the conflicts simultaneously worsened intergroup friction (Schafer 1999, 831). Political actions stirred the enmity and contributed to the heightening of mutual antagonism in various ways; for example, Iraq consistently referring to Khuzestan as “occupied €Arabistan” rallied anti-Iranian sentiment among Iraqis, while Tehran roused anti-Iraqi sentiment by asserting that Iraq owed much of its culture and history to Iran (Abdulghani 1984, 20-21; Hunter 2001, 437). The goal of drawing attention to the traits of their neighbor, the “other,” was to secure and confirm one’s own identity by diminishing the characteristics of the other, making the friction not merely political, but simultaneously
cultural. Thus by insinuating that the border issues were instances of one cultural identity attempting to erode the other, the Iraqi and Iranian regimes managed to manipulate national identity in a manner that was advantageous to their political goals (Kinnvall 2004, 749).

The aim of this thesis was to provide a historical background into 20th century border conflicts that shaped many of the interactions between Iraq and Iran. At the advent of the 20th century neither state was particularly unified, so the subsequent regimes sought to construct a sense of unity with methods that drew on a combination of historical, ethnic, and territorial pride. As nationalism emerged as the strongest identity in both states, intermingled with Shiism in Iran, the leadership utilized these sentiments to justify their actions in the Khuzestan and Shatt al-Arab confrontations. Both neighbors stood to benefit greatly from challenging the legal status quo in each dispute, thus they garnered support for their political maneuvers under the auspices of national interest. In spite of the many elements shared by Iraqi and Iranian culture, attempts to delimit the intangible border between them spurred mutual antagonism and perpetuated the cultural feud that ultimately led to war. There are, without question, numerous factors and identities at play in this case study. Both states represent incredibly complex societies with deeply divided classes, as well as intricate sectarian, tribal, and political divisions. And today the landscape is vastly different since the Islamic Revolution in Iran has encountered massive popular discontent and Saddam Hussein has since been ousted by the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003. International eyes remain trained on relations between Baghdad and Tehran and how the two states will continue to coexist.
along the shared border, but understanding how border conflicts have fueled interstate friction in the past can provide a great deal of insight into the future of their relationship.
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