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Iran-Iraq War Escalates, Civilian Targets Hit

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Iraq Claims Kharg Attacked

The continuing war between Iran and Iraq escalated in February after Iraqi missiles hit the Iranian city of Dizful Feb. 11. Iran responded Feb. 12 with attacks on several Iraqi towns, including the southern port of Basra. The attacks were reportedly the first deliberate bombardments of civilian centers in the three-and-one-half-year war.

The attacks on Iranian and Iraqi towns continued into the following days. Iran said Feb. 16 that it had opened a major offensive on the central front around Mehran and claimed in subsequent days to have captured strategic territory. Iraq claimed that it was containing the Iranian drive. Then, on Feb. 23, Iraq announced that Iran had begun a major drive in the south around Basra. Iraq claimed Feb. 27 that its warplanes had countered with an attack on oil tankers at Iran's oil terminal at Kharg Island. Iraq warned ships not to approach the area.

Iraq Attacks Dizful

The Iraqi missile and airplane attack on Dizful in southern Iran followed a week of mounting tension, as Iraq threatened to attack Iranian cities and Iran repeated previous threats to cut off the strategic Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

Baghdad charged that Iran had shelled civilian targets along the border and said Iranian forces were massing in several towns in preparation for a major offensive to mark the fifth anniversary Feb. 11 of the Islamic revolution that brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power. There had been a lull in the gulf war since Iran's last offensive in November 1983, when Iranian forces reportedly succeeded in capturing the Iraqi town of Penjwin. [See 1983 [Iran-Iraq War: Iran Cuts French Ties over Jets](#)]

Dizful was one of 11 Iranian towns targeted by Iraq for retaliatory attacks in the face of the expected offensive by Iran. After the attack on Dizful, Teheran said that it would respond with attacks on the Iraqi towns of Basra, Mandali and Khanaqin, warning their inhabitants to evacuate. Iran carried out its threat Feb. 12, shelling the three targeted towns and four others. The same day, Iraq claimed to have attacked the Iranian port of Bandar Khomeini and a petrochemical plant located there, as well as other "specific targets" in Abadan, Gilan and Sar-e-Pol-e-Zahab. Iran also reported attacks on the gulf town of Khorramshahr near Abadan.

Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Moussavi-Khamenei said Feb. 12 that the system of advanced warning of attacks on Iraqi towns would be "our method in the future." He said, "This is a method which should be accepted by world opinion."

Iraq announced Feb. 14 that it would halt the attacks on civilian centers for one week if Iran agreed to do the same. Iraq cited an appeal by exiled Iranian opposition leader Massoud Rajavi. (Rajavi had fled to France in 1981. He was the leader of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq guerrilla organization, which favored a settlement with Iraq. [See 1981 [Iran: Bani-Sadr Receives Asylum in France](#)])

It was not until Feb. 18 that Iran agreed to end the attacks on civilian centers. Before announcing its compliance with the Iraqi plan, however, Iran Feb. 15 had launched air attacks on the town of Baquba 40 miles (65 kilometers) northeast of Baghdad and on other towns. The raids were reportedly the first Iranian air attacks across the border in 18 months. Each sides accused the other of sporadic attacks on civilian populations despite their agreement to curb such attacks.

Iran Claims North, South Offensives

Teheran Feb. 13 said it had launched a major offensive into northeast Iraq.

The attack, begun Feb. 11, centered on Darbandikhan in Kurdistan, according to Iran. Iraq denied any invasion of its territory in the area. Then, on Feb. 16, Iran claimed to have begun a major offensive against Iraqi fortifications on the central front. Iraq maintained that it was containing the Iranian drive and that it had destroyed seven Iranian ships near the Iranian port of Bandar Khomeini.

According to Iran, its forces crossed into Iraq near Badrah 90 miles (145 kilometers) east of Baghdad and advanced southeast, regaining territory lost at the beginning of the war, in 1980. Iran said it was attacking along a 100-mile (160-kilometer) front between the Iranian towns of Mehran and Dehloran southeast of Baghdad. Diplomats in Iran said 500,000 Iranians had been sent to the war fronts recently in preparation for the offensive. (A U.S. senior administration official said Feb. 16 Iran and Iraq had lined up a total of 500,000 soldiers against each other in preparation for what appeared to be a "great World War I-type battle.")

Iran claimed to be shelling the main highway between Baghdad and Basra after having moved down from the mountains. The highway was used by Iraq to convey troops to threatened areas along the front, and a successful Iranian attempt to block it could have serious implications for Baghdad.

Iran also claimed to have moved its troops to within 20 miles (about 32 kilometers) of Kut on the Baghdad-Basra highway. Kut was a major communications point and the headquarters of the Iraqi corps defending the central front.

Iran Feb. 23 claimed to have cut the highway in a new offensive, capturing the towns of Al-Qurna and Al-Uzayr north of Basra. Iraq denied that claim. (An Associated Press reporter who was allowed into Al-Qurna reported no signs of a battle having taken place there.) According to Iran, the offensive began Feb. 21. Iraq Feb. 22 said the drive had been crushed, and television broadcasts showed pictures of Iranian prisoners, many of whom appeared to be no more than 12 years old.

Each sides claimed to have inflicted heavy casualties on the other.

In subsequent days, both Iran and Iraq issued conflicting reports on the situation along the highway. Iraq's first deputy premier, Taha Yasin Ramadan, Feb. 29 admitted that Iran had made advances in nonstrategic swamps around Basra but said Iraq had destroyed four Iranian divisions in the fighting there.

Iraq Claims Kharg Attacked

Iraq said Feb. 27 it had begun a blockade of Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export terminal.

The blockade began with an air strike against oil tankers berthed at Kharg, Iraq said, and attacks would continue until Iran agreed to end the war and to abide by United Nations Security Council resolutions. These called for an end to the war and free navigation in the gulf region. Iraq also warned "against dealing with the

Iranian regime, which exports crime and chaos to all states of the world."

Iran was believed to export most of the estimated 1.9 million to 2.4 million barrels of oil it produced daily through the Kharg terminal and through the port of Bushehr to the southeast.

The U.S. said Feb. 27 it could not confirm Iraqi attacks on shipping near Kharg. Earlier that day, State Department spokesman John Hughes said it was "unfortunate that Iran has not heeded repeated calls by the world community for restraint, cease-fires and negotiations toward a settlement of the conflict." He said Iraq had tried to show restraint. Hughes claimed there had been "no significant change" in battle lines, despite higher casualties from the increased fighting.

Iran Feb. 28 denied that the oil terminal or any tankers had been hit, according to Agence-France press. U.S. officials also said intelligence reports indicated no evidence of an Iraqi attack. They added that the U.S. military force in the area was sufficient to guarantee the West continued access to Persian Gulf oil. However, a shipping agency source in Bahrain said Feb. 28 that information reaching Bahrain said some tankers, including a British one, had been hit.

On Jan. 29, Iraq had threatened to attack any vessel approaching Kharg Island, defining a "zone of military operations" that extended from Khor Abdullah at the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway to between 30 and 35 miles (about 48-56 kilometers) south of the Iranian gulf port of Bushehr. Iran had replied with threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S. had said it would do anything necessary to keep the strait open. In a news conference Feb. 22, President Reagan had said, "There's no way that we could allow [the Strait of Hormuz] to be closed." He noted the U.S. naval presence in the Arabian Sea and said, "we'll keep [the strait] open to shipping." [See 1984 [Reagan News Conference: Reagan Rebutts Criticism](#)]

Iraq March 1 claimed to have sunk seven Iranian ships in the Persian Gulf.

U.S. Destroyer Warns Iran

The U.S. Defense Department Feb. 28 confirmed that the U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer Lawrence had fired warning shots at an unidentified ship near the Strait of Hormuz.

The Defense Department also confirmed that the Lawrence had fired warning shots and flares at an Iranian patrol plane and warned away an Iranian frigate by radio. All three incidents took place Feb. 26.

Iran Feb. 29 said the U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf was "an act of aggression and blackmail". In statements broadcast by Teheran radio, Iran said it could not accept the five-mile safety zone the U.S. had declared around its four ships in the Persian Gulf. Teheran claimed that the restriction violated international law and represented support for Iraq.

President Mohammed Ali Khomeini of Iran Feb. 10 had warned that if the U.S. became actively involved in the gulf war, the oil supply to the West would be cut off. He said Feb. 14 that the Strait of Hormuz, through which almost 20% of the noncommunist world's oil flowed, would be closed. He said, "I hereby declare that oil must be used as a weapon against the common enemies of Moslems . . . the closure of the Strait of Hormuz will bring to a stop the wheels of Western industries. We now hold this weapon."

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