Two Key Cases: Iran and Iraq

The cases most in accord with a theory of petro-aggression are Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Libya under Moammar Qaddhafi, and Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini. Two of them—Saddam and Khomeini—respectively started and sustained an eight-year war between their respective states resulting in roughly a million deaths. We highlight this set of cases, and specifically the Iran-Iraq dyad because, as we hypothesize below and demonstrate in subsequent sections, they are not only crucial cases for the petro-aggression theory but also crucial to the results of the aggregate data analysis.

The Iran-Iraq War: Was it Sui Generis?

One of these states—Iraq—saw the rise to power of Saddam Hussein, who started two interstate wars—with Iran (1980) and Kuwait (1990)—during this period. He initiated the former conflict during the turmoil of Iran's immediate post-revolution consolidation period, gambling that the internal battles within the incipient Islamic Republic would allow him to seize an easy victory. That did not transpire, and the war lasted eight years, ending with the same pre-war borders in place. The duration and human cost of this war suggests that it might be disproportionately influential in the aggregate. Saddam started the latter conflict two years after the termination of the former, in 1990. But it was a relatively short, and by interstate war standards small, conflict in terms of battle deaths. The Iran-Iraq war, on the other hand, was neither, and there are some reasons to believe it might have unique dynamics.

First, Iran and Iraq hold a set of structural conditions that arguably few other country pairs in the world do. Geographically, they share close to 1,000 kilometers of common border as well as a river boundary in the Shatt al-Arab that has been disputed since the two became

independent states.[1] That boundary, in addition to being a long-standing issue of dispute between them, is also Iraq's only access to water deep enough for sizable ships. Iraq's entire coastline, drawn intentionally by British diplomats after the First World War to limit the resource- and agriculture-rich country's military potential, is just 15 kilometers long, making the Shatt al-Arab disproportionately important for Iraq's military and commercial access to the Persian Gulf. Moreover, a treaty concluded in 1937 by Iran and Iraq left many issues vaguely defined, nearly ensuring that conflict would recur. The 1975 Algiers Accord settling the border at the midpoint (or *thalweg*) of the deepest part of it was signed by Saddam Hussein under effective duress, stretched as Iraq's military was at that point by Kurdish militias heavily supported by Iran, Israel and the United States. The 1975 agreement included an Iranian promise to end aid to Iraq's Kurds, but this disproportionate importance for an international boundary-waterway to one country is uncommon.

The two countries have a potentially volatile mix of communal populations across their borders as well. First, their respective Kurdish minority regions are contiguous and both governments have periodically armed the other's Kurdish nationalists as leverage in other disputes (such as that over the Shatt al-Arab). Kurdish mobilization is a larger problem for Iraq given the size of its Kurdish minority, roughly 25% of the population. Second, although Iraq was ruled by Sunni Muslims from central Iraq from independence in 1932 to 2003, the country's population throughout the modern era has been roughly 60% Shi'a, thus religiously in line with Iran's Shi'a majority. This demographic, in addition to the fact that the most holy sites for Shi'a Muslims—Najaf and Karbala—are in southern Iraq has bound the two states' Shi'a populations

[1] The Shatt al-Arab waterway is the meeting point water body for the Tigris-Euphrates confluence from Iraq and a number of smaller rivers from Iran.

together across borders in a way often at odds with their rulers' goals. Third, Iran has a significant Arab minority—some but not all of which is Sunni—in Khuzestan Province in the southwest of the country.[2] This province borders directly on Iraq's Shi'a-dominant southern region, and the two regions faced the bulk of direct combat during the Iran-Iraq war.

In addition to this historically contentious and communally charged border, on either side of it lie some of each country's most important oil fields (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Caselli et al (2015) suggest that proximity of oil fields to international borders increases the likelihood of conflict breaking out over those fields, and here we theorize that the fields on both sides of this border, combined with the historical and communal tension it reflects, make this pair of countries still more inclined to conflict. The relatively greater ease of capture afforded by the location of these fields in both Iraq and Iraq simply compounded the contingent historical and social factors. Moreover, the fact that each ruler miscalculated that his co-communal population in the other country would be supportive of his offensives meant that Saddam and Khomeini became much more willing to incur the costs of war, thinking that Sunnis in Khuzestan and Shi'as in southern Iraq, respectively, would embrace their conquests.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 about here

In addition to these structural factors, the two countries have a lengthy history of intervention in one another's domestic politics that predates both revolutionary leaders. The Shah of Iran openly opposed the Ba'ath party regime that came to power in the immediate aftermath of

[2] Khuzestan is also Iran's predominant oil-producing province and has been so for nearly all of the country's lifespan as an oil producer. For the location of major oil fields (almost all of which are located in Khuzestan), see http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iran_major_oilfields78.jpg. Accessed September 28, 2016.

Iraq's 1958 revolution and then opposed the party's return to power in the 1968 coup. He aided two Iraqi officers in their 1970 coup attempt against the president of Iraq, and openly provided crucial financial and military support to Kurdish militias during their 1970-1975 war against the Iraqi military.[3] More proximate to the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic aided an effort by Iraqi Shi'a of Iranian descent to try to assassinate Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz. Shortly after that, the Iraqi government aided a coup attempt against Khomeini's government in May 1980.[4] The Islamic Republic, from the Iranian revolution through the early 1980s, provided support to the Da'wa Party, a Shi'a organization in Iraq seeking the establishment of an Islamic state there as well It also hosted and gave sanctuary to the Supreme Agency for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq, an organization made up of Iraqi dissidents. For all of these reasons, and especially after the assassination attempt on Aziz, President Saddam Hussein expressed a conviction that his regime's survival was under existential threat from Iran and other foreign actors. It is this belief—rather than the constant revolutionary quality of both his regime and himself as its leader—in early to mid-1980 that was key to explaining the onset of the war.[5]

Another factor shaping the war between Iran and Iraq is that, in 1979-1980 the leaders of both, having been on the receiving end of joint Iraqi-American or Iranian-American intervention, respectively, were convinced of a similar conspiracy underway. This was despite the evident tension between Iran's new leadership and the United States, and despite Iraq's close ties to the Soviet Union under Ba'ath rule. On the Iraqi side, there is strong evidence from now-released state files that Saddam genuinely believed that Iran and the United States were on the verge of

[3] Khadduri 1988, 49; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001, 122.

[4] Gasiorowski 2002.

[5] Gause 2002.

acting together to overthrow him, because of CIA involvement in the 1953 coup in Iran as well as support for Iraq's Kurdish rebellion of the early 1970s.[6]

In this section we have outlined substantial reasons to expect a greater likelihood of war between Iran and Iraq than would normally be the case, independently of whether either state were ruled by radical leaders. Once both came to be ruled by radicals, that additional dynamic simply added to what was already a set of state- and system-level factors making conflict much more likely. Once war broke out, the historical and proximate records of mutual interference in one another's domestic politics by coup attempts, assassination attempts, and active fomenting of secessionist or revolutionary movements made ending the conflict much more difficult. Witness, for example, Khomeini's refusal to accept Saddam's 1982 peace proposal—instead he ordered a series of new offensives the following year. The Iran-Iraq war also became intrinsically woven into the ongoing struggle to consolidate Islamic Republic rule and to marginalize both suspected Shah loyalists and the leftists who had helped the revolution succeed. According to Chubin and Tripp, Iran's domestic politics had by 1983 made peace with Iraq impossible.[7] Total war became intrinsic to the regime consolidation projects of both leaders.

As the war began its fourth year in 1984, therefore, it is not surprising that two new, and especially costly phases began. The first was Iraq's "Tanker War," which sought to inflict damage on Iran's oil sector equal to what Iran had already wrought by attacking fields and refineries in southern Iraq. Between 1984 and 1986, the Iraqi navy and air force launched dozens of attacks on Iranian oil facilities and tankers.

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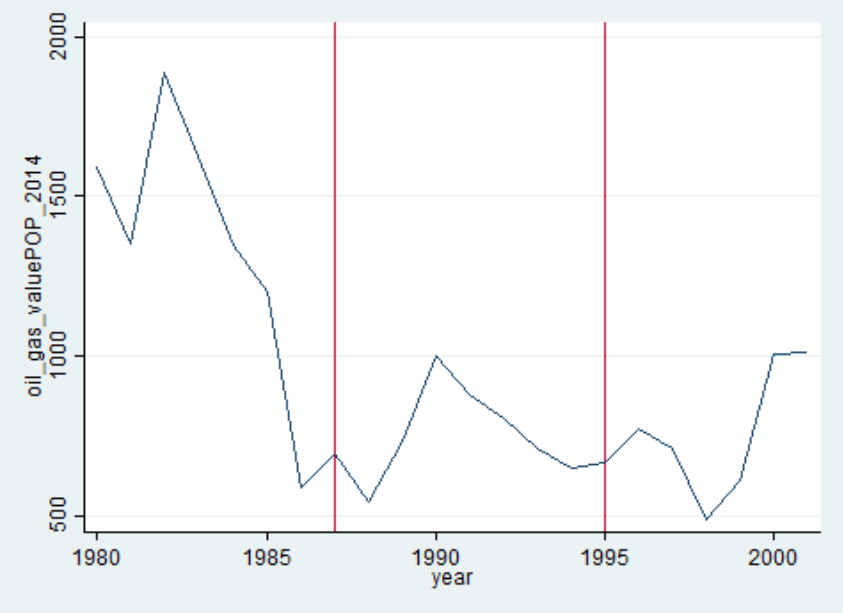
[6] Little, 2004, 694-96 and Brands and Palkki 2012, 626, 629-31.

[7] Chubin and Trip 1988, 35, 37.

The second and much more destructive in terms of human life and economic function was the "War of the Cities," a concerted effort by both sides to target major population centers. Iraq used chemical weapons during this phase of the war against Iran (as well as against Iraqi Kurds in the 1987 Halabja attacks), and both sides engaged in large-scale attacks on urban civilian populations. Because both Saddam's and Khomeini's regimes had couched the war in existential survival terms—one for the Arab nation, the other for Islam itself—and had woven the war effort into their respective regime maintenance strategies, the dynamic of total war became embedded in domestic politics. The conflict became an incredibly destructive stalemate. We mention that here not just because it was an extraordinarily costly war, but also because the war measurement we employ is annual count of revisionist militarized interstate dispute (MID) onsets. As a result, a war in which one or both sides initiate many offensives will measure up as more intense than it would otherwise, even if those offensives are part of an ongoing conflict. For these reasons, the 1980-88 years were extraordinarily intense ones in a war that by late 20th-century standards was already especially costly.

Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3:
Oil Income and Sanctions in Iran, Iraq, and Libya (in order)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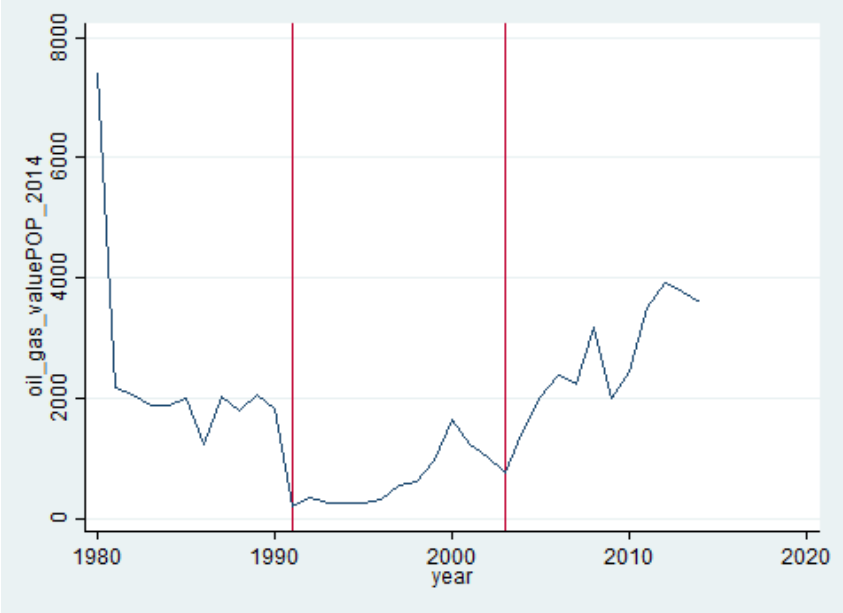
500
1000
1500
2000
1980
1985
1990
1995
2000
year

Iran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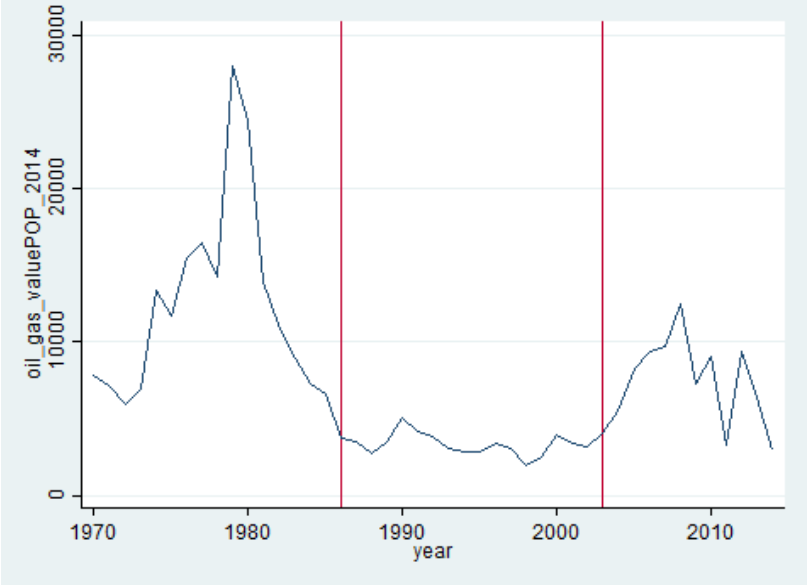
0
2000
4000
6000
8000
1980
1990
2000
2010
2020
year

Iraq


oil_gas_valuePOP_2014
0
10000
20000
30000
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010
year

Libya

Figures 2.1 and 2.2: Border Oilfields in Iran and Iraq

Source: US Energy Information Administration