

**ANALYSIS NOTE No 686*****50 YEARS AFTER THE 1975 ALGIERS ACCORD
BETWEEN IRAQ AND IRAN, A CONTINUUM
OF 'DEFERRED REVENGE' IN THE MIDDLE EAST?*****Myriam Benraad**

The year 2025 marks the turning point of the first quarter of the 21st century, but also the anniversary of international events that may be less mentioned today but are no less central, including the Algiers Accord signed five decades ago between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Shah Pahlavi's Iran. The relative silence surrounding this commemoration is a fact in itself: in the face of particularly heavy current events in the Middle East, such a lack of interest is astonishing. At the same time, this silence is not surprising, given that attention is focused on the immediate history of the region and much less on several of its more distant episodes. The Algiers Accord of 6 March 1975, which was recently the subject of a conference in Iraq in which the author of these lines had the opportunity to participate, is therefore rarely cited, even though it leaves behind traces that are still visible everywhere.

'The 1975 Algiers Accord and long-term feelings of revenge in Iraq and beyond' was the title of the paper presented at this event, one of the aims of which was to renew the state of knowledge on this agreement through new analyses and reading grids. The importance of understanding the past in order to form points of view relevant to the present is illustrated by the continuing evolution of historiographical accounts of the Algiers Accord – an accord facilitated at the time by various Arab states with a view to settling border disputes in the

Middle East. This agreement, which reflected broader geopolitical interests such as strengthening the influence of the United States and Iran's presence in the Gulf to counter the weight of the Soviet Union while sacrificing Kurdish aspirations, is generally perceived as a document of political essence, with numerous ramifications.

After fourteen years of revolutionary struggle, the Kurdish liberation movement collapsed with the withdrawal of Tehran's military support. What is more, over and above the stated aim of resolving the border dispute between Iraq and Iran, the impulse for vengeance stemming from Iraq's indignation at the damage suffered and the symbolic humiliation represented by the Algiers Accord has endured over time. How do the nature and repercussions of these vengeful affects contribute to an understanding of the historical legacy of the agreement, in particular the persistent tensions between the signatory parties and other actors whose positions have remained rigid, if not inflexible? This note raises ten questions likely to revitalise the reflection on the Algiers Accord and its implications over the long term, a reflection that has unfortunately died out in the current debate.

1. What provisions of the accord are likely to have fuelled a long-lasting desire for revenge between Iraq and Iran?

I would like to start by setting out a few points of context in order to better understand the circumstances in which the Algiers Accord was signed on the sidelines of an OPEC summit held in the Algerian capital. On the whole, this accord is both brief and very general in its wording¹. In 1975, it was essentially the product of diplomatic mediation led by Algeria under the presidency of Houari Boumedienne, then in the name of a principle of '*brotherly assistance*' and a '*spirit of disinterestedness*'. This mediation immediately raises questions about the authenticity of the desire of both Iraq and Iran to reach an agreement on the delimitation of their common border, especially as the Algiers Accord specifies that the two states must remain '*in constant contact*' with Algeria. The document also refers to '*a sincere will from both parties to reach a final and permanent solution of all problems existing between the two countries*'. However, there is nothing explicit about the terms and conditions under which the accord will be put into practice. In fact, there will never be any '*comprehensive solution*' for this highly contentious border, either in terms of its definitive demarcation on land and water², or in terms of recognition by the parties of its inviolability and the rule of non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

2. To what extent have the terms of this accord in particular contributed to the persistence of strong resentment on the Iraqi side?

The Algiers Accord stated that there were '*traditional ties of good neighbourliness and friendship*' between Iraq and Iran, but what were they? Did these two states really share interests that justified the start of border cooperation? Saddam Hussein, then Vice-President (but already the strongman of Baghdad), did not come to the negotiating table light-hearted, but determined to crush the Kurdish revolt raging in northern Iraq through

¹ See Appendix.

² The CIA distinguishes three geographical segments: Lower Mesopotamia (Khuzestan), the central plains and foothills, and Kurdistan. See 'The Iran-Iraq Boundary: Geographical Considerations', declassified memo from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 11 October 1980.

this agreement with Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The Shah, for his part, had established close links with Mustafa Barzani since the mid-1960s and provided significant amounts of armament to the insurgents. While the fight was rekindled after the Baathists came to power and the collapse of the first Kurdistan autonomy agreement in 1970, Iran increased its military and financial support, encouraged by Richard Nixon's United States and Israel. From then on, Iraq's difficulties in putting down the Kurdish uprising and the threat to the new regime were sufficiently serious for Saddam Hussein to resolve to compromise. But as we all know, apart from the end of the Kurdish insurrection, described as 'infiltration of a subversive nature' and abandoned by Teheran in the first hours after the signing of the agreement, the rancour between Iraq and Iran was far from over.

3. How has the perceived unfairness of the accord exacerbated vengeful impulses within Iraqi society?

The Algiers Accord provided for the Shah to pay an official visit to Iraqi President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, while Saddam Hussein agreed to visit Iran at a date to be set by the signatories. In reality, none of these visits took place, putting a lasting end to this supposed '*new era in the Iraqi-Iranian relations with a view to achieving the higher interests of the future of the region*'. Resentment among Iraqi elites was matched by social outrage at an agreement that many felt had simply 'traded away' Iraq's natural rights for Iran's benefit. Although the Algiers Accord made only slight changes to the land border, it did not bother with legal considerations regarding the river section of the dispute¹. It granted the Iranians what they had long sought in the Shatt al-'Arab (the "river of the Arabs", known in Iran as the Arvandrud), an outlet located at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flows into the Persian Gulf. The Iraqis remained bitter about this transfer of territory to Iran, which they considered unjustified and arbitrary.

4. Has the Algiers Accord resolved some of the underlying causes of the Iraq-Iran conflict, or has it merely pushed back the horizon of revenge?

In my view, this accord was based on a purely cosmetic settlement. Admittedly, two weeks after it was signed, the Iraqi and Iranian foreign ministers met in Teheran and decided to set up a joint commission to work on the technical determination of their border, more particularly along the thalweg line which follows the lowest part of a river bed. This commission did indeed set to work, and a month later an initial assessment of its achievements was even drawn up on board the Iraqi ship *Al-Thawra* ('the revolution'). Subsequently, a 'Treaty on International Borders and Good Neighbourly Relations' between Iraq and Iran was signed in Baghdad in June 1975, including a protocol on the delimitation of the river border. It cannot therefore be denied that in the space of a few months, the Algiers Accord enabled progress to be made. But as Hussein Sirriyeh rightly writes in a study on the subject, in the absence of mutual trust, '*it was the question of the Shatt al-Arab and the border problems that appear to have been major ongoing issues in the Iraqi-Iranian conflict both before and after the collapse of the Treaty of 1975*'².

¹ Elihu Lauterpacht, "River Boundaries: Legal Aspects of the Shatt-al-Arab Frontier", *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1960, pp. 208-236.

² "Development of the Iraqi-Iranian Dispute, 1847-1975", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 20, 1985, pp. 483-492.

5. Did the accord shape a revanchist Iraqi nationalism and facilitate its subsequent exploitation by the Baathist regime?

There is no doubt about it, although the question remains as to what impact this agreement really had on the configuration of an increasingly retributive Iraqi nationalism and to what extent such revanchism was exploited by the Baathist regime. This nationalism did not begin with the Algiers Accord. Traces of it can already be found in the Treaty of Erzurum, signed in 1847, on which contemporary Iraq, a former Ottoman province, based its claims after the First World War. According to Articles 2 and 3, the Ottomans enjoyed total sovereignty over the Shatt al-'Arab, while Iran's southern border was fixed on the left bank of the estuary rather than its median line. Other documents were put forward by the Iraqi side – the Tehran Protocol of 1911 and the Constantinople Protocol of 1913, for example. This nationalism reappeared clearly in the debates of the Council of the League of Nations in 1934 and 1935, when General Nuri al-Said, Minister for Foreign Affairs, ended up accusing the Ottomans of having allowed Tehran to establish numerous ports along the estuary, as opposed to just one for Baghdad. This vision, which did not change fundamentally over the following decades, was exacerbated under the diktat of Saddam Hussein.

6. How did the Iraqi media present this accord and how did this media treatment reinforce the desire for revenge against neighbouring Iran?

Generally speaking, the media treatment of Iraq was highly disparaging from the outset, for all the reasons I have already mentioned, and became even more so after the revolution in Iran, which put an end to the agreement and to dialogue between the two parties. The work of the joint commission that had mapped the border as provided for in the Algiers Accord came to a halt and was largely vilified by the Iraqi press. In October 1979, Iraq formally denounced the terms of the accord and called for the withdrawal of Iranian troops from its territory. Then, in May 1980, at the height of tensions, the Minister of Information announced that the agreement was now null and void. In September 1980, Iraqi forces began to invade Iran, with the consent of many Gulf states fearing the export of the Islamic revolution within their own borders. This step transformed a 'war of words' into a concrete war. Saddam Hussein stood before the Iraqi National Assembly and declared that the Algiers Accord had been violated and had lost all value. The media coverage thus bore witness to the evisceration of the '*spirit of the Algiers Accord*' – assuming it even existed – and to the brutal end of a short-lived period of coexistence between Iraq and Iran¹.

7. Did the legacy of the accord shape Iraq's vengeful foreign policy in the decades that followed?

What seems indisputable to me is that the Algiers Accord never put an end to what was perceived by both Iraq and Iran as intolerable reciprocal political

¹ In their book *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick review this destructive chronology, which paradoxically followed the signing of the Algiers Accord.

interference. How else would the two states have plunged into the hell of an eight-year confrontation, the consequences of which were devastating on both sides of the border? Then came the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Was not repudiating the Algiers Accord ultimately tantamount, for Saddam Hussein, to a wholesale rejection of the very idea of the inviolability of the borders of the post-colonial Middle East? Was Iraq's revenge the result of a rational political strategy, balancing objectives, means and risks? Or was it a short-sighted act of revenge, with no tangible, measurable goals? In either case, it is clear that when Saddam Hussein broke the momentum established in Algiers in March 1975 and decided to go to war against his neighbours, he misjudged the repercussions of these conflicts. His mistaken belief that he could extend his territory and his regional hegemony led to the worst: the virtual destruction of Iraq, which was subsequently subjected to a decade of international sanctions.

8. Has the accord contributed to the rise of extremist movements and ideologies in Iraq?

The border conflict between Iraq and Iran is objectively a long-standing one, and it was quite natural for groups and ideologues from all horizons to seize upon and exploit it for their own ends. In recent times, one cannot help but think of the references made by jihadists to the 'Safavid enemy' who would constitute a danger for the whole of the Middle East, in this case referring to the Iranians and Shiites to whom Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his cohorts waged an all-out war at the turn of the new millennium. Historically, the Shahs of Persia had come into conflict with the Ottoman sultans after Selim I, known as 'the Grim' (1470-1520), had pushed the empire's borders eastwards and brought Iraq under his sway. The European powers also had their own interests in the area, starting with Great Britain, which set up the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) in 1909 following the discovery of a vast oil field at Masjed Soleiman in Iran, a municipality in Khuzestan on the outskirts of Iraq. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find references to Western interference and wars in the propaganda of factions such as the Islamic State, as well as in that of the most radical Iraqi Shiite militias.

9. Has the accord had any longer-term consequences for the region's generalised revenge dynamic?

The legacy of the Algiers Accord should not be so overdetermined as to suggest that all revenge in the Middle East stems from it. This is clearly not the case – neither with regard to the tortuous relationship between Iraq and Iran, nor with regard to the relations that other countries in the region have with these two states. One wonders, on the other hand, what remains of the '*spirit of the Algiers Accord*', as the text referred to it. Has it not given way to decades of increasingly deadly conflagrations, amplified by the cynical calculations of external players, when the 1975 Accord was intended to protect the region '*from any foreign interference*'? Having brought with it a frantic quest for Pyrrhic victories, on the Iraqi side as well as in the Iranian camp and far beyond, the spirit of the Algiers Accord has clearly mutated into a spirit of revenge which, at the very least, prompts us to examine the serious and deep-seated reasons for the talionic logic that is rampant today, at higher levels of violence than 50 years ago.

10. How does the paradigm of 'deferred revenge' update the previously available interpretations of the Algiers agreement?

There is a wealth of interdisciplinary research on 'delegated', 'displaced' and 'vicarious' forms of revenge. There is less research, however, on what I call 'deferred' revenge, of which the Algiers Accord is highly emblematic. An exploration of both the documentary and historiographical aspects of the conflict highlights its long history¹, but also the delayed nature of the revenge that was linked to each attempt to resolve it. This was the conclusion drawn by the CIA in 1960, in a note that has since been declassified². British sources also go back to disputes over the route of the Shatt al-'Arab (the main channel in the delta) dating back to ancient times³. An analysis of the effects of successive agreements and treaties tends to show an aggravation of the dispute rather than its resolution⁴. In 1990, an exchange of letters between Baghdad and Tehran clearly proved that the dispute was far from settled⁵. From 2003 onwards, it became clear that this accord, if never implemented, would open the door to the vengeful appetites of an Iranian Islamic Republic freed from its existential enemy, Saddam Hussein⁶, after regime change in Baghdad. Finally, it cannot be ruled out that the future will continue to update the Algiers Accord, hopefully in a more peaceful direction.

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¹ Alexander Melamid, "The Shatt al-'Arab Boundary Dispute", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1968, pp. 350-357.

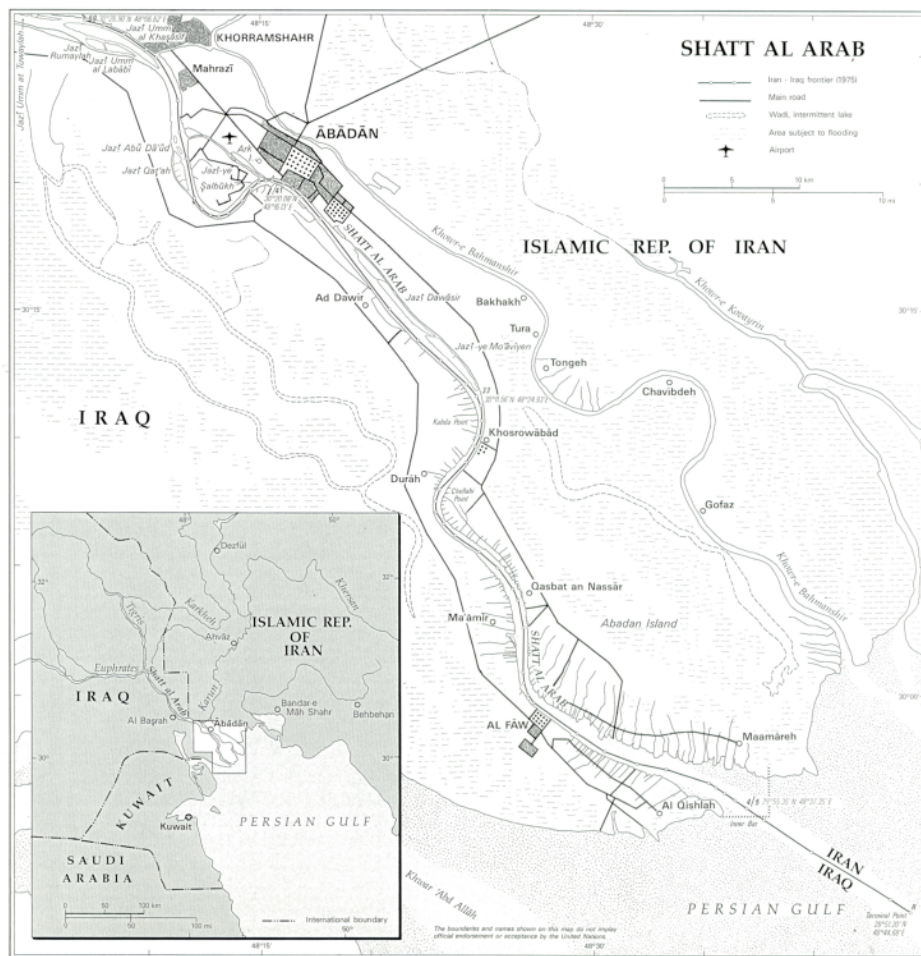
² "The Shatt al-'Arab Dispute, Geographic Intelligence Memorandum", Office of Research and Reports, 7 January 1960.

³ Arnold T. Wilson, "The Delta of the Shatt al-'Arab and Proposals for Dredging the Bar", *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 1925, pp. 225-239. Read also George B. Cressey, "The Shatt al-Arab Basin", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1958, pp. 448-460; Richard N. Schofield, *The Evolution of the Shatt al-'Arab Boundary Dispute*, Cambridgeshire: Middle East & North African Studies Press, 1986.

⁴ "Iran-Iraq: Documents on Abrogation of 1937 Treaty Concerning Shatt al-Arab Waterway", *International Legal Materials*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1969, pp. 478-492.

⁵ Clive Symmons, "L'échange de lettres de 1990 entre l'Irak et l'Iran : Un règlement définitif du différend et du conflit ?" *Annuaire français de droit international*, Vol. 36, 1990, pp. 229-247.

⁶ Amir Taheri, "Remaking the Middle East in Khomeini's Image", *National Post*, 22 March 2006.



APPENDIX

Algiers Accord (6 March 1975)

During the convocation of the OPEC Summit Conference in the Algerian capital and upon the initiative of President Houari Boumedienne, the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein (Vice-Chairman of the Revolution Command Council) met twice and conducted lengthy talks on the relations between Iraq and Iran. These talks, attended by President Houari Boumedienne, were characterized by complete frankness and a sincere will from both parties to reach a final and permanent solution of all problems existing between the two countries in accordance with the principles of territorial integrity, border inviolability and non-interference in internal affairs.

The two High Contracting Parties have decided to:

First: Carry out a final delineation of their land boundaries in accordance with the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 and the Proceedings of the Border Delimitation Commission of 1914.

Second: Demarcate their river boundaries according to the thalweg line.

Third: Accordingly, the two parties shall restore security and mutual confidence along their joint borders. They shall also commit themselves to carry out a strict and effective observation of their joint borders so as to put an end to all infiltrations of a subversive nature wherever they may come from.

Fourth: The two parties have also agreed to consider the aforesaid arrangements as inseparable elements of a comprehensive solution. Consequently, any infringement of one of its components shall naturally contradict the spirit of the Algiers Accord.

The two parties shall remain in constant contact with President Houari Boumedienne who shall provide, when necessary, Algeria's brotherly assistance whenever needed in order to apply these resolutions.

The two parties have decided to restore the traditional ties of good neighbourliness and friendship, in particular by eliminating all negative factors in their relations and through constant exchange of views on issues of mutual interest and promotion of mutual co-operation. The two parties officially declare that the region ought to be secure from any foreign interference.

The Foreign Ministers of Iraq and Iran shall meet in the presence of Algeria's Foreign Minister on 15 March 1975 in Tehran in order to make working arrangements for the Iraqi-Iranian joint commission which was set up to apply the resolutions taken by mutual agreement as specified above. And in accordance with the desire of the two parties, Algeria shall be invited to the meetings of the Iraqi-Iranian joint commission. The commission

shall determine its agenda and working procedures and hold meetings if necessary. The meetings shall be alternately held in Baghdad and Tehran.

His Majesty the Shah accepted with pleasure the invitation extended to him by His Excellency President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr to pay a state visit to Iraq. The date of the visit shall be fixed by mutual agreement.

On the other hand, Saddam Hussein agreed to visit Iran officially at a date to be fixed by the two parties.

HM the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein expressed their deep gratitude to President Houari Boumedienne, who, motivated by brotherly sentiments and a spirit of disinterestedness, worked for the establishment of a direct contact between the leaders of the two countries and consequently contributed to reviving a new era in the Iraqi-Iranian relations with a view to achieving the higher interests of the future of the region in question.