The United Nations Secretary-General Investigations in Iran and Iraq

The Iran–Iraq war

This chapter examines the events during the 1980s starting with the tension between Iran and Iraq, which developed into war from 1980 to 1988, during which the United Nations Secretary-General sent a number of specialist missions to investigate the allegations made primarily by Iran and also by Iraq that chemical weapons had been used in the conflict.

There has been a long tradition of border disputes between Iraq and Iran concerning their boundaries. A particular issue related to the use of the southern waterway, known as Shatt-al-Arab, which was a strategic access route to oil terminals for both countries. Tension mounted and in 1980 the Security Council urged ‘Iran and Iraq to refrain immediately from any further use of force and to settle their dispute by peaceful means and in conformity with principles of justice and international law’. However, the situation continued to deteriorate and resulted in war. In September 1980, Iraq attacked Iran in order to capture the historically-contested territory of Shatt-el-Arab. With the outbreak of war, Iraq’s chemical weapons programme was reactivated. The inability of Iraq to achieve speedy victory, and a series of successful counter-offensives by Iran in early 1981 may have been an influencing factor. To an increasing extent, starting in 1981, chemical weapons were used, primarily by Iraq but also by Iran. Allegations of the use of chemical weapons were made in letters from both Iran and Iraq circulated at the United Nations and Figure 2.1 demonstrates the increasing frequency of these allegations.

The number of such letters increased steadily from 1983 to 1987 and 1988, the year in which Iran and Iraq agreed a cease-fire on 20 August 1988. The great majority of these letters were from Iran concerning the use of chemical weapons by Iraq against Iranian targets; a few were from Iraq either refuting the Iranian allegations or more rarely, alleging use of chemical weapons by Iran against Iraqi targets.

The UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, initiated a number of investigations into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Iran or Iraq.

G. S. Pearson, The Search for Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction © Graham S. Pearson 2005
These investigations were initiated following requests initially from the Government of Iran to the Secretary-General for such an investigation and later from the Government of Iraq alleging that chemical weapons had been used against Iraq. These investigations by specialists appointed by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar generally visited the scene of the alleged attack and also examined casualties from the alleged attack.

Table 2.1  UN Secretary-General investigations during the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Mandate</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
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| 21–26 May 1983 | Dezful, Andimeshk, Poldokhtar, Musian, Dehloran, Abadan, Khorramshahr, Hoveyzeh, Susanogerd, Sar-e-Pol-e-Zahab, Qasr-i-Shirin and Baneh, Iran | ‘(a) to determine whether civilian areas had been subject to damage or destruction by military means…
(b) to assess the extent of such damage and destruction as far as possible;
(c) to indicate, where possible, the types of munitions used.’ | Separate reports are provided for each location visited setting out the observations made by the mission. In various locations fragments from Scud-B and Frog missiles were identified as well as fragments from aerial bombs, cluster bombs and artillery shells. |