

The Kuwait-Iraq Boundary: A Geopolitical Perspective

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Geopolitical analysis must be rooted in the real world. Imagery, maps, papers and documentation are vital, but fundamental geopolitical understanding can only be obtained by visiting the relevant landscape. On 6 October 1993, by courtesy of UNIKOM, the authors were flown by Pilatus aircraft and helicopter the length of the Kuwait-Iraq border, from the Khor Abdullah to the Saudi border. As a result, it was possible to modify some previously held perceptions and to identify other factors of geopolitical and potentially legal concern. This particular border is of continuing world interest and it is important that geopolitical assessment should be based on first hand, factual evidence, rather than propaganda.

Key geopolitical issues

The boundary on the Khor Abdullah is a median line, rather than, as might have been expected, one which follows the navigable channel. The coastal areas on both sides are low-lying, but any change in sea-level might well affect the long term equity of the settlement. Furthermore, known rates of settlement, possibly affected by Iraqi activity in the lower area of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, could cause relatively rapid changes in the coastal configuration.

In the case of Khor Zubair, the boundary follows the line of Low Water (Springs), which has been said to be unmarked, but in fact the demarcation is marked on jetties to the south of pillar 106. In this area of the frontier, the original boundary was a median line and thus Iraq has gained sea space in the vital approaches to Umm Qasr. Although according to even the earliest maps and therefore tradition, Warbah and Bubiyan islands have been considered Kuwaiti, it has been argued by Iraqis that, should the concept of the natural prolongation of the land be applied, there could be a possible dispute over their ownership. This argument results from the assumption that the islands are composed of sediments deposited by the Tigris-Euphrates system. In fact, there is evidence from geological studies that sediments from Wadi Al-

Batin may be included in the make-up of the islands. These findings arise from research which has concentrated on the palaeo-hydrology of the Wadi Al-Batin and the head of the Gulf from the Pleistocene period.

Perhaps the point of greatest controversy about the boundary decision has been the position of the demarcated line with regard to Umm Qasr. The port is obviously crucial to Iraq and it has been written that the line virtually bisects the town, leaving the naval base in Kuwait. In fact, the entire area of the new boundary was examined from the air and on the ground and it is evident that Iraq has lost very little. What is now in Kuwait, comprises a small area of housing, some form of military buildings and a series of wooden jetties. The main settlement of Umm Qasr could be seen well to the north. The other interesting structures in evidence, some three to four hundred metres from the boundary, were the silos from which the Silkworm missiles were removed in January 1993. (See Boundary and Security Bulletin).

Between Umm Qasr and Safwan is the area of farms which were established when the *de facto* boundary was moved southwards. From the air, it was clear that several of these farms had been abandoned and several more had hardly been developed. The Kuwaiti government is offering the farmers compensation, the value of which is the subject of a current United Nations adjudication. Until a settlement has been reached, it is intended that the trench and berm, eventually to be constructed along the entire boundary, will not extend beyond pillar 87.

From pillar 87 to the Saudi border, the boundary is demarcated by pillars at two-kilometre intervals and, immediately on the Kuwait side, a trench and a berm. The evidence of flow was clear in Wadi Al-Batin and the actions of both wind and water will ensure that the trench and berm require continuous maintenance.

Conclusion

Although as a result of its extreme sensitivity, this boundary must be among the most studied and surveyed in the world, there still remain many crucial geopolitical issues. Among these, the present and former discharge patterns of Wadi Al-Batin, the exact geological extent of the southern end of the Rumaila oilfield, and the effects of maritime processes on the offshore boundaries are of particular significance.

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