The Oil Wars Myth
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The Chaco and Iran–Iraq Wars appear on many lists of classic oil wars. In the former conflict, Bolivia and Paraguay were supposedly fighting for control over the Chaco Boreal’s prospective petroleum resources, possibly at the behest of two multinational oil companies: Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell. In the latter, Saddam Hussein purportedly attacked his neighbor partly to annex the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, thereby expanding Iraq’s petroleum resources and revenue. Both of these interpretations are widely accepted.

Yet neither is correct. These conflicts were not classic oil wars, where petroleum ambitions are a leading incentive for international aggression. Instead, they were red herrings; the desire to grab more oil resources did not motivate any of the belligerents.

This chapter focuses on the Chaco and Iran–Iraq Wars because these are two of the deadliest historical red herrings, as well as the most broadly misinterpreted. The Chaco War caused over 90,000 fatalities out of the belligerents’ combined populations of fewer than five million. The Iran–Iraq War resulted in over 350,000 battle deaths. If petroleum did not cause these severe interstate conflicts, some of the oil wars myth’s most striking supporting evidence vanishes.

Since these red herrings were not caused by oil ambitions, the four sets of obstacles described in chapter 3 have limited bearing on them. The Bolivian and Paraguayan governments were not contemplating invasion, occupation, international, and investment impediments before the Chaco War because they did not believe that the contested region contained petroleum resources. Oil-related obstacles to aggression were therefore irrelevant to their decision making. The Iraqi
government, in contrast, was attacking a major oil-producing province. Consequently, authorities were more attentive to these impediments and concern about occupation obstacles, in particular, shaped their aggression in Khuzestan. However, since the Iraqis were not fighting to grab Iranian oil resources, petroleum-related impediments did not deter their invasion.

Rather than being driven by oil ambitions, the Chaco and Iran–Iraq Wars, like many other red herrings, were motivated by a combination of national security concerns, domestic politics, and national pride: issues the governments believed were worth fighting for. In addition, belligerents in the former contest were concerned with petroleum transportation; Bolivians wanted to build an oil pipeline across the Chaco Boreal to the Río Paraguay. However, as previous oil war scholars have noted, efforts to secure petroleum transit routes are not classic oil wars. More importantly, in both of these conflicts, transportation concerns were secondary to states’ other motives for international aggression.

As the following case studies demonstrate, the oil war label was attached to the Chaco and Iran–Iraq conflicts not because it accurately reflected participants’ conflict goals but by mistake or for strategic reasons. Belligerents were not prosecuting classic oil wars. However, many people found it convenient to accuse them of it. The case studies present the classic oil war interpretations of each red herring, explain why the explanations emerged, show that each is inaccurate, and identify the other issues that states were fighting for instead of oil.

The Chaco War (1932–1935)

The Chaco Boreal is a large, roughly circular territory located in the center of South America, where Bolivia’s southeast meets Paraguay’s northwest. Approximately one hundred thousand square miles in size, the Chaco is bounded to the east by the Río Paraguay, to the south by the Río Pilcomayo, and to the west by the Andean foothills. Described as a “green hell” by nineteenth-century travelers, it is an inhospitable area, consisting predominantly of dry scrublands. The territory contains few perennial surface water sources so, during the dry season, from May to October, the Chaco is parched. During the wet season, from November to April, much of the region floods, creating muddy swamps that impede transportation and breed insect-borne diseases.¹

In the early twentieth century, sovereignty over the Chaco Boreal was ambiguous. Spanish colonial authorities failed to delimit a border between Bolivia and Paraguay before the states’ independence, and the records and maps officials left behind were incomplete and inconsistent. Both states therefore possessed legitimate claims to the region. Their dispute emerged in 1852, when Argentina and
Paraguay signed an agreement stating that the Río Paraguay belonged entirely to the latter. Bolivia protested, asserting its own rights to the waterway. A quarter century later, Bolivia and Paraguay initiated formal negotiations over the Chaco Boreal. Over the next four decades, they signed numerous treaties concerning the region. However, none of these agreements were ratified by both states’ legislatures, so the dispute remained unresolved.

There was limited economic rationale for the states’ attachments to the Chaco. Bolivia made few efforts to develop the territory before the 1932 war. The country’s economic and political hubs were located in the Andean highlands, in the cities of La Paz and Cochabamba and mining centers like Potosí. These areas, in the Altiplano, were poorly connected to the eastern provinces that bordered the Chaco. Consequently, there was little incentive for Bolivia to develop the contested territory, as transporting supplies to the area would be costly and there were no
outlets for local production. By 1920, the only Bolivian settlements in the region were rudimentary military fortines (forts), housing small numbers of soldiers, along the Río Pilcomayo.  

Paraguay, in contrast, had stronger geographic connections to the Chaco and made a greater effort to develop it. In the late nineteenth century, the government sold off large tracts of Chaco public lands to bolster state revenue. Argentinian investors, who were the primary beneficiaries of the sales, used their newly acquired territories for cattle ranching. They also exploited the Chaco’s indigenous quebracho trees, which were a natural source of tannins and lumber. By 1932, the Paraguayan government claimed, the Chaco was supplying one-third of the state’s income. However, these economic activities were still concentrated near the western bank of the Río Paraguay. The only nonindigenous people to penetrate the Chaco’s interior were Mennonite settlers who began arriving in the territory in the 1920s, with the Paraguayan government’s encouragement. Thus, when the war began, many parts of the Chaco were not under the effective authority of either claimant state.  

No oil development occurred in the Chaco before the war. However, Bolivia possessed an active petroleum industry in the Andean foothills along the Chaco’s western edge, between the towns of Santa Cruz and Tarija. La Paz issued concessions for the area around the turn of the century and prospectors drilled the region’s first oil well in 1911. However, the industry’s early development was slowed by a lack of indigenous capital, the area’s geographic isolation, and limited local petroleum demand. It was only in the 1920s, when the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey acquired concessions in the region, that development accelerated. Standard Oil of Bolivia, the company’s local subsidiary, drilled approximately thirty wells before the war, striking oil near Bermejo in 1922. Standard also built two small refineries, at Camiri and Sanandita, to produce petroleum products. Yet Standard’s Bolivian output was low. Before the war, the company extracted fewer than 150 barrels of oil per day: only enough to supply its local operations. In the early 1920s, Standard had little incentive to increase its output, because a global oil glut had reduced petroleum prices. These failed to recover in the mid-1920s and fell further during the Great Depression. Standard was also deterred from increasing production by a lack of outlets for its oil. At the time, it was impossible to move crude oil or petroleum products from the Andean foothills to the Altiplano. There were no rail links between Santa Cruz and Cochabamba and transporting the resources via pipeline was physically impractical because of a seven-thousand-foot altitude gain. Rail linkages to Argentina were more promising, especially after 1922, when Bolivia and Argentina agreed to extend the Formosa–Embarcación line to Yacuiba and Santa Cruz. However, construction proceeded slowly, as a result of misgivings in both states. In addition, in 1927,
Argentina increased tariffs on rail transportation of Bolivian oil. Buenos Aires also repeatedly refused La Paz’s requests to construct a pipeline across its northern territory, which would allow Bolivia to move petroleum quickly and cheaply from its oil fields to a port on the Río Paraná. For the moment, Bolivia’s oil was trapped.

Meanwhile, competition over the Chaco was mounting. During Paraguay’s civil war (1922–1923), Bolivia had seized the opportunity to intensify its construction of fortresses, extending its Chaco outposts progressively farther down the Río Pilcomayo. By 1927, the state had also begun to spread its installations northward, toward Santa Cruz. Paraguay responded by expanding its own fortresses network. The increased concentration of military forces, combined with rising nationalist sentiment and diminishing prospects of a negotiated dispute settlement, heightened the potential for an international clash.

The states’ first fatal Chaco confrontation occurred in February 1927. Bolivian troops, stationed near Fortín Sorpresa, captured and killed a Paraguayan soldier, Adolfo Rojas Silva, son of the former Paraguayan president Liberato Marcial Rojas. Rojas Silva’s death sparked state-sanctioned protests throughout Paraguay; fifty thousand people demonstrated in Asunción alone. Tensions escalated further in early December 1928, when Paraguayan troops occupied Bolivia’s Fortín Vanguardia. Bolivian soldiers retook the fort a few days later and subsequently attacked two Paraguayan fortresses, Boquerón and Mariscal López. These incidents “inflamed public passion to a dangerous degree” in both states; only foreign diplomatic intervention prevented the confrontation from escalating. In September 1931, Bolivian forces raided Paraguay’s Fortín Samaklay. The Paraguayan government attempted to cover up the loss, provoking riots in Asunción when the deceit was discovered. By the end of the year, “rumors of impending war were rampant.”

The incident that finally tipped the states into war occurred the next year. On June 14, 1932, a Bolivian expeditionary force led by Major Oscar Moscoso Gutiérrez arrived at Laguna Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta. The Bolivians chased off a contingent of Paraguayan soldiers at Fortín Carlos Antonio López and established their own post on the lake. Paraguayan forces retaliated by seizing the Bolivian fort on July 16. Third parties again attempted to restrain the states in order to prevent the confrontations from escalating into outright war. However, Bolivia’s president, Daniel Salamanca, refused to back down. Labeling the Paraguayan counterattack “a new aggression against the dignity of Bolivia,” he directed his forces to seize the Paraguayan fortresses of Boquerón, Corrales, and Toledo. With these new attacks, the Chaco War was under way. It would continue for three years, becoming Latin America’s deadliest twentieth-century conflict.
contest on Standard Oil, claiming that the company had driven the Bolivian government to war in order to seize the Chaco Boreal’s prospective petroleum resources.\textsuperscript{19} By the end of 1934, these accusations had broadened to indict another oil company; believers claimed that Royal Dutch Shell was supporting Paraguay, causing the belligerents to fight a proxy war on behalf of the two multinationals.\textsuperscript{20} Both of these arguments are regularly repeated by contemporary classic oil war believers.\textsuperscript{21} However, at the time, the initial version attracted more popular attention, largely because of its promotion by Louisiana senator Huey P. Long.

In multiple speeches on the floor of the US Senate from May 1934 to January 1935, Long blamed the Chaco War on Standard Oil. As he put it, “The Bolivian and Paraguayan Governments are now engaged in war as a result of the agitation for concessions granted by the Bolivian Government to the Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey.” Long asserted that “this Standard Oil Co. is financing the Chaco war, hoping to get two million four hundred and some odd thousand acres of territory” that belonged to Paraguay. As Long pointed out, in 1878, US president Rutherford B. Hayes had awarded the area between the Río Pilcomayo and the eastern portion of the Río Verde to Asunción through international arbitration. According to Long, Bolivia was therefore trampling on Paraguayan sovereignty and the United States’ political authority, at Standard Oil’s behest.\textsuperscript{22}

Long’s speeches circulated widely, and upon reading them, the Paraguayan government also embraced the oil war explanation. The state’s 1934 submission to the League of Nations, which was investigating the Chaco dispute, extensively quoted Long’s allegations.\textsuperscript{23} The Paraguayan press, which had been accusing Standard of instigating the war for over a year, also lionized the senator, describing him as hero fighting for “justice and truth.” In August 1934, the Paraguayan military rechristened a captured Bolivian outpost Fortín Senator Long.\textsuperscript{24} “The Kingfish” had found new acolytes who persistently reiterated his oil war argument during and after the conflict.

Yet there was no oil in the Chaco Boreal. Geologists from Standard, who had explored the Andean foothills and the Chaco plain, concluded that oil fields were limited to the area west of the sixty-third meridian, between Santa Cruz and Tarija. As one report observed, “It is very doubtful that oil exists in a geological structure such as that of the Chaco.”\textsuperscript{25} Gordon Ireland, a prominent scholar of Latin American territorial disputes, observed in 1938 that there were “oil and minerals in the higher western part” of the Chaco, but not in the contested plains. Ronald Stuart Kain, describing the disputed territory in 1935, asserted that “no petroleum or other minerals have been discovered in the Chaco Boreal, nor is it expected that any will be found, in view of geologists’ reports.”\textsuperscript{26} Following Long’s speeches in the US Senate, one of his opponents observed, “I think it is admitted by everyone that there is no oil to be found in the Chaco.”\textsuperscript{27} Even Long eventu-
ally conceded, acknowledging in January 1935 that he had conflated Bolivia’s oil fields and the contested Chaco territory. Standard Oil’s behavior during the conflict was also inconsistent with classic oil war arguments. Rather than supporting the Bolivian government during the conflict, as one would expect if it sought additional concessions, the company refused the state’s demands to increase petroleum production, as it was contractually obligated to do in wartime. Standard also falsely claimed that its refineries were unable to produce aviation gasoline and shipped drilling equipment and other supplies out of the country. When the Bolivian military appropriated many of the company’s trucks for use in the war, Standard sued. The Bolivian government was so antagonized by the company’s lack of cooperation that it seized its refineries in 1933, in the midst of the war, and expropriated all of its assets in 1937.

The Bolivian and Paraguayan governments were also aware of the Chaco’s limited oil prospects. Bolivia had received Standard’s pessimistic prewar assessments and widely circulated a report highlighting the area’s slim petroleum potential. A Paraguayan military publication issued during the war observed that Bolivia’s oil was in the Andean foothills, “en la immediate proximidad del Chaco Paraguay,” but not in the Chaco itself. Analyses of the dispute published before the war’s outbreak in 1932 failed to mention oil resources as a source of territorial competition. In addition, the states’ leaders did not identify potential oil endowments as a cause of conflict at the war’s outset. President Salamanca emphasized the need for better oil transportation in his public speeches and in discussions with his general staff. However, he did not suggest that the Chaco Boreal contained oil. Paraguay’s president, Eusebio Ayala, initially “scoffed” at the claim that Standard Oil was driving the conflict.

Because neither of the belligerents believed that the Chaco Boreal contained petroleum resources, authorities were not contemplating oil-related obstacles to aggression when deciding whether to fight over the contested territory; the invasion, occupation, international, and investment impediments discussed in chapter 3 did not enter into their thinking. Yet, if petroleum ambitions—and the obstacles to realizing them—did not influence leaders’ decision making, why are oil war interpretations of the Chaco conflict so pervasive? Why was Long’s rhetoric compelling in the 1930s, and why has the classic oil war explanation persisted over time? Finally, if Bolivia and Paraguay were not fighting over petroleum resources, why did they prosecute such a devastating war?

The classic oil war interpretation gained and maintained traction for a number of reasons. The first was geographic confusion. Observers of the war, especially outside the belligerent states, had little knowledge of the Chaco’s geography. Hence, many assumed that Bolivia’s oil fields, located in the Andean foothills,
extended into the plain.\textsuperscript{34} Long contributed to this confusion when he repeatedly asserted that Standard was pursuing oil concessions in the territories that the Hayes award had granted to Paraguay.\textsuperscript{35} However, as Long’s critics pointedly observed, that area was three hundred miles from Bolivia’s oil fields. Unsurprisingly, given people’s enthusiasm for oil war arguments, this geographic correction attracted less attention than Long’s initial accusation. Many observers continued to assume that the contested Chaco Boreal possessed abundant petroleum resources, even after Long acknowledged the misrepresentation.

The second reason for the classic oil war interpretation’s widespread adoption was its instrumental utility for belligerents and conflict observers. Long seized on the Chaco War because it presented an opportunity to lambast his nemesis: Standard Oil.\textsuperscript{36} In the late 1920s, when Long was governor of Louisiana, Standard had stridently resisted his efforts to increase taxes on oil production, going so far as to sponsor an impeachment campaign against him. Although the attempt failed, from that point on, Long seized—or manufactured—any opportunity to attack the company. In his speeches on the Chaco War, Long accused Standard of “criminality, rapacity, and murder” and encouraged the US Senate “to seize this criminal, this culprit, this murderer.”\textsuperscript{37} The company’s avaricious reputation, domestically and internationally, also made it an easy target. People were ready to accept that Standard could and would incite a classic oil war.

The Paraguayan government also latched onto the classic oil war explanation for instrumental purposes. By reiterating Long’s claims, suggesting that La Paz was cooperating with Standard to perpetrate an oil grab, officials could discredit Bolivia’s motives for war and curry international favor for Paraguay’s cause. The Bolivian government employed the same tactic, accusing Paraguay of launching the war at the behest of “foreign capitalists” in order to seize Bolivia’s existing oil fields.\textsuperscript{38} Meanwhile, members of Bolivia’s political opposition used the classic oil war argument to attack President Salamanca. By suggesting that he was in league with Standard, they could intensify populist hostility toward the regime. Lastly, as the war dragged on and losses mounted, more Bolivians embraced the classic oil war interpretation, as it offered some explanation for the ruinous conflict. That explanation may have been false. But it provided some psychological comfort by suggesting that there had been an underlying rationale for a war that seemed increasingly pointless.\textsuperscript{39}

A third reason for the classic oil war argument’s broad acceptance is conflict geography. The final phases of the Chaco War were prosecuted alongside Bolivia’s oil fields. By late 1934, despite having the smaller military, Paraguay had outmatched Bolivia’s army and seized most of the Chaco Boreal. In early 1935, Paraguayan forces attempted to seize Bolivia’s refinery at Camiri and captured the Camatindi oil camp. In March, they approached oil wells at Cerro Teiguate.
However, Bolivian regiments, including one that had been renamed Defenders of the Oil, successfully fought them off. Petroleum ambitions did not drive these confrontations; Paraguay was attempting to terminate the war, and in the states’ 1938 peace settlement, it returned all of the oil-endowed territories to Bolivia. However, the clashes’ location, essentially at the base of Bolivian oil derricks, reinforced popular perceptions that the Chaco conflict was a classic oil war.40

Lastly, the classic oil war explanation gained traction because of Bolivian officials’ concern with petroleum transportation. In the late 1920s, the state was eager to increase national oil output. The country was suffering economically, because of a significant downturn in the price of tin, its primary export commodity.41 To compensate for the drop in revenue, the Siles (1926–1930) and Salamanca (1931–1935) governments pressed Standard Oil to increase petroleum production, with the goal of transforming their state into a major oil exporter.42 However, Bolivian officials recognized that any attempts to export oil would be hampered by transportation impediments. Confronted with a physically untenable transit route through the Andes, expensive rail linkage to Argentina, and Buenos Aires’ refusal to permit a pipeline across its northern territories, Bolivian authorities concluded that their only viable export option was a pipeline across the Chaco to a port on the Río Paraguay, located between Fuerte Olimpo and Bahía Negra.43

Unlike petroleum resources themselves, Bolivia’s desire for an oil outlet contributed to the Chaco War’s onset.44 In a speech to the Bolivian Congress on August 6, 1932, following the confrontation at Laguna Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta, President Salamanca asserted,

On the eastern slope of its mountains, Bolivia possesses great oil wealth, including some drilled wells that could be exploited immediately. We need these resources, yet are forced to view them as sterile wealth. Bolivia cannot transport its oil to Argentina because that country, out of self-interest, has blocked the way with harsh protectionist duties. The natural and logical remedy would be to construct a pipeline to the Río Paraguay. But the Republic of Paraguay is there, occupying Bolivian territory and blocking the path. Bolivia cannot resign itself to live miserably, as an isolated country, and must seek out the necessary conditions for its full life.45

Proponents of the oil war argument, including Long, highlighted Salamanca’s speech as evidence of Bolivia’s perfidious, petroleum-oriented intentions.46 However, as previous authors have noted, conflicts over oil transportation are conceptually distinct from classic oil wars.47 Moreover, Bolivia’s pipeline pursuits were more of a pipe dream than a practical goal. Standard Oil’s engineers had
investigated the Chaco pipeline idea in the early 1920s but abandoned it by 1925. They recognized that the region’s extreme environmental conditions would impede pipeline and port construction and interrupt resource flows. In addition, port sites above Fuerte Olimpo were ill suited to oil transportation. Most were flooded for parts of the year, and in the dry season, water depths dropped to less than 7 feet. The river was therefore unable to handle “even the smallest ocean-going tanker” of the time. In addition, even if Bolivia could load oil supplies along the Río Paraguay, these would still have to travel through Argentina, via the Río Paraná, and Buenos Aires could deny them the use of transit facilities. Shipments could also be intercepted as they passed through Paraguay, especially if the countries had recently fought a major war. The only way to stifle this resistance would be for Bolivia to thoroughly vanquish its neighbor: an outcome the Bolivian general staff deemed impossible.

Salamanca’s attachment to an oil export route via the Río Paraguay was therefore impractical. However, the idea possessed enormous symbolic resonance because of its connection to a larger, long-standing objective shared by most Bolivians: regaining sea access. Bolivia had become a landlocked state when it lost its Litoral province to Chile in the War of the Pacific (1879–1883). Although the country’s goods could still move freely to the coast, successive Bolivian governments considered that insufficient. Thus, over the next fifty years, they persistently sought an independently controlled route to the Pacific. These hopes finally evaporated in 1929, when Chile and Peru formally divided the contested coastal regions of Tacna and Arica between themselves, offering no territory to Bolivia. Since La Paz’s efforts to develop an export route to the Atlantic via the Amazon had already floundered, a port on the Río Paraguay offered the only remaining means of overcoming Bolivia’s “geographical asphyxia.” Consequently, much of the population had embraced the idea, for largely psychological reasons, well before oil transit concerns entered the picture.

In addition to Bolivians’ fixation on an ocean outlet, three other factors, unconnected to oil resources or transportation, encouraged the Chaco War’s outbreak. The first was both belligerents’ fears of additional territorial dismemberment. In addition to losing its Litoral province in the 1880s, Bolivia lost its rubber-rich Acre province to Brazil in the Treaty of Petropolis (1903). In the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), Paraguay ceded territories north of the Río Apa to Brazil and the Chaco Central, a region south of the Río Pilcomayo and north of the Río Bermejo, to Argentina. Both states were therefore loath to relinquish more land. Paraguay, in particular, would lose half of its territory, as well as a third of state revenue, if Bolivia seized the entire Chaco Boreal. Asunción was therefore in a “fight for survival.” Bolivia, in contrast, did not face an existen-
tial threat. However, surrendering more territory would reinforce the country’s loathed position as a “second-class state.”

The second additional factor that drove the war’s outbreak was Bolivia and Paraguay’s historical rivalry over the Chaco Boreal. During negotiations in the late nineteenth century, peaceful dispute resolution seemed possible, as Bolivia focused its territorial claims on the northern Chaco, without challenging Paraguay’s authority farther south. The states’ early treaties also granted Bolivia port sites above Fuerte Olimpo, satisfying the state’s most pressing territorial demand. However, as efforts to ratify the treaties repeatedly failed and the states compiled ever more elaborate documentary evidence to justify their respective territorial claims, positions on the dispute hardened. By 1920, Paraguayans were firmly opposed to any Bolivian port on the Río Paraguay. Meanwhile, Bolivians were articulating ever-greater territorial claims, extending to the confluence of the Río Paraguay and Río Pilcomayo, just outside Asuncióén. The obvious failure of diplomatic negotiations led many people to conclude that a war over the region was inevitable.

Leaders’ increasing obduracy was coupled with rising popular hostility regarding the Chaco dispute. By the end of the nineteenth century, opposition parties in both states had realized that critiquing sitting governments on the Chaco issue was an effective way to foment domestic resentment, thereby advancing their own political agendas. Bolivia’s Colorado Party, which dominated national politics from 1888 to 1904, fell because of its inability to favorably resolve the Chaco contest. In Paraguay, President José Patricio Guggiari (1928–1931, 1932) faced a congressional investigation and interruption of his presidency partly because of his perceived mismanagement of the Chaco dispute. School textbooks, newspapers, and the popular press in both states also publicized the contest, intensifying popular engagement. “The result,” writes military historian David H. Zook Jr., “was an emotional furor which made compromise difficult.”

Leaders recognized that any concessions on the Chaco issue would be met with severe domestic political punishment. As a result, they had difficulty backing down in 1927, when clashes provoked a war fervor in both states. After the Laguna Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta confrontations in summer 1932, it was even more difficult to defy popular sentiments.

The final issue that contributed to the Chaco War’s outbreak was Bolivian domestic politics. In 1931, when President Salamanca came to power, the state was in the midst of an acute economic crisis. Revenue from tin exports continued to decline, and the government faced major budgetary shortfalls. In July, La Paz announced that it would default on its debts, and that autumn, the state went off the gold standard. Later that year, Salamanca’s efforts to increase his executive power and repress unions and communist groups intensified popular hostility
toward his regime. Confronted with these seemingly intractable economic and political problems, which had contributed to his predecessor Hernando Siles Reyes’s downfall, the president looked for a win somewhere else. He believed that the Chaco could offer one. Paraguay was, in Salamanca’s estimation, the one country that Bolivia could defeat. In addition, before becoming president, Salamanca had advocated a more assertive Bolivian position on the dispute. The 1932 clash consequently represented an exceptional opportunity for the president to fulfill his territorial ambitions and rally popular support, thereby enhancing the likelihood of his regime’s survival.

The Chaco War was therefore caused by domestic politics, Bolivia and Paraguay’s long-standing territorial rivalry, both states’ fears of further dismemberment, and Bolivia’s desire for an ocean outlet. All of these issues were also intertwined with national pride. Over time, the Chaco contest had become a litmus test for national honor, so both belligerents were defending that, as well as territory, in the Chaco Boreal.

They were not, however, defending or seeking oil resources. La Paz, Asunción, Standard Oil, and informed international observers all recognized that the contested territory’s petroleum prospects were poor. The classic oil war explanation emerged as an accusation, an excuse, and a mistake after the conflict began. It was not an accurate interpretation of the belligerents’ motives for aggression. It was instead, as Bolivian historian Herbert S. Klein observed, a “mythology . . . universally accepted by all.”

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)

The Iran–Iraq War, unlike the Chaco War, was fought in oil-endowed territory. Iraq’s invasion, launched on September 22, 1980, concentrated on Khuzestan Province, in western Iran. At the time, Khuzestan produced 80 percent of the state’s oil and was home to some of Iran’s most important petroleum facilities, including the world’s largest oil refinery, at Abadan, and a major oil export terminal at Khorramshahr. Iraqi forces targeted these cities and facilities during their initial advance. This oil-oriented assault, coupled with Iranian leaders’ accusations and Iraqi officials’ historical claims to Khuzestan, led many observers to identify the conflict as an international petroleum grab. According to this classic oil war interpretation, Iraq attacked Iran in order to seize its neighbor’s abundant petroleum resources and revenue. As Andrew Price-Smith states, “desire for the possession of oil fields in the region was the primary cause” of the Iran–Iraq War.
However, this oil war interpretation is mistaken. Although the bulk of Iraqi forces assaulted Iran’s richest petroleum province, Baghdad had no intention of holding the territory over the long term. Instead, the Iraqi government aimed to use Khuzestan as a bargaining chip to compel Iran’s Islamist regime to accede to its actual war demands: that Tehran cease its destabilizing interference in Iraq’s domestic affairs, yield small amounts of contested territory along the central portion of the states’ bilateral boundary, and grant Iraq full control over the Shatt al-ʿArab waterway, which forms the southernmost portion of the states’ border. Iran’s oil resources were not an objective of Iraqi aggression.

In the lead-up to the invasion, Iraqi officials persistently maintained that they had no interest in annexing Khuzestan. In early September 1980, Saddam told his cabinet that he did not “covet” Iranian territory. The same day, Iraq’s deputy prime minister, Tariq ʿAziz, announced, “We want neither to destroy Iran nor to occupy it permanently.” In a speech to the Iraqi National Assembly on September 17, Saddam reiterated that “Iraq has no ambitions on the Iranian territories.” On September 22, the state’s Revolutionary Command Council addressed Iranians directly, asserting, “We did not want to harm you; nor do we covet your land.”

As their ground offensive began, the Iraqis doubled down on this public messaging. Baghdad Radio broadcast a statement in Persian to anyone within range: “We do not covet Iranian territory.” On September 26, Iraqi foreign minister Saʿdun Hammadi claimed that “Iraq has absolutely no designs on Iranian lands” and an Iraqi diplomat reiterated this sentiment to the UN Security Council. Iraqi leaders also explicitly challenged oil war interpretations of their attack. In a news conference on September 24, Iraq’s defense minister and deputy commander in chief of the armed forces, Adnan Khairallah, observed that “some foreign news media have begun to hint clearly or between the lines that Iraq wants to control the oil sources in Arabistan [Iraq’s name for Khuzestan].” He rejected this argument, reiterating, “We have no designs on either Iranian oil or Iranian land.”

These messages, while highly consistent, could have been fabrications; Iraqi officials may have collectively lied about their state’s intentions. Iraq’s critics, including the Iranian government, were quick to remind international audiences of Baghdad’s repeated historical claims to Khuzestan. As they noted, multiple Iraqi governments had asserted that the province should be associated with Iraq, not Iran, because of its large Arab population and historical ties to the Ottoman Empire, Iraq’s predecessor state. In international forums like the UN, Iranian officials asserted that Iraq was attempting to seize the province and its oil. Even some Iraqi statements seemed to support this classic oil war interpretation. For example, after the war bogged down in October 1980, Saddam himself threatened
Iran’s oil industry, warning that a prolonged Iraqi presence in Iranian territory “creates certain rights which did not exist before the war began.”

Yet there are numerous reasons to question classic oil war interpretations of Iraq’s invasion. First, Iraqi authorities repeatedly, publicly promised to withdraw from Khuzestan after achieving their war aims. On the first day of the invasion, Iraq’s Revolutionary Command Council stated, “We shall withdraw from the Iranian territory in which our presence is necessitated by our defensive military requirements and army’s security as soon as Iran recognizes our sovereign territory and respects our vital interests.” In press conferences on September 25 and 26, ‘Aziz stressed that Iraq would “withdraw from the Iranian territories it is occupying” if Iran agreed to recognize Iraq’s sovereignty over the Shatt al-ʿArab and contested central border territories, cease its interference in Iraq’s domestic affairs, adhere to “good-neighbor relations,” and withdraw from occupied islands in the Persian Gulf. Three days later, Saddam offered a ceasefire and negotiations if Iran would accede to those demands. At a press conference in November, the Iraqi president repeated the offer, asserting, “Any time the Iranian officials . . . recognize our rights, then we will withdraw from their land.”

At the same press conference, Saddam explained that his threats to Iranian oil resources had been tactical rather than an expression of his state’s actual war aims. By invading Iran, he asserted, Iraq was “twisting the Iranian rulers’ arms. If we find that a certain degree of twisting is not enough, we will add another degree to it.” In October, Iraq’s deputy prime minister, Taha Yasin Ramadan, had issued a similarly conditional threat. He asserted that “Arabistan’s oil will be Iraqi as long as Tehran refuses to negotiate,” but also pledged that Baghdad would control the resources only “until a solution is found.” The public nature of these pronouncements raised the cost of reneging on them. Any Iraqi backpedaling, including a sustained occupation of Iranian territory and oil installations, would incur international costs. Not only would the regime have violated the norm against conquest, it would also have lied to the international community, inviting further censure.

Hence, another reason to doubt classic oil war interpretations of the Iran–Iraq conflict is the Iraqi leadership’s demonstrable awareness of the obstacles to fighting for oil. In addition to recognizing the international impediments to conquering Khuzestan, they were cognizant of invasion obstacles to seizing oil-endowed territories. In 1973 and 1974, Iraq and Iran refrained from broadening a series of bilateral border clashes partly because both governments feared that an outright war would damage their petroleum industries. As Saddam noted in February 1975, “[Oil] is a very inflammable material.” Before attacking Khuzestan in 1980, Iraq’s leader acknowledged that a major conflict with Iran could threaten his own state’s petroleum infrastructure. Saddam decided to take that risk, nonetheless, because he was pursuing other goals, not oil.
Iraqi officials were also sensitive to the occupation obstacles to seizing Khuzestan. They knew that controlling the province over the long term was unviable. Although they believed that Khuzestan’s residents would accede to a temporary Iraqi military presence because of their shared Arab ethnicity and the population’s long-standing desire for greater autonomy from Tehran, they recognized that the local population sought self-government within Iran, not secession. As ‘Aziz noted in a May 1980 interview, the people of Khuzestan aspired to “autonomy within the framework of a single Iranian state.” Locals would therefore resist a prolonged Iraqi occupation and stridently oppose their province’s forced annexation to Iraq. Hence, while Baghdad persistently advocated self-government for Khuzestan, it did not seek to conquer the territory. Instead, Iraq’s claim was “largely rhetorical.”

Iraqi officials also had little incentive to prosecute a classic oil war because, had they wished to boost national petroleum revenue, they possessed a far less costly means of doing so: expanding domestic oil output. Iraq’s petroleum rents had already risen enormously in the decade before the war. After fully nationalizing the oil industry in 1972, the state rapidly intensified exploitation of its historically underdeveloped reserves. In addition, the first and second energy crises (1973–1974 and 1978–1979) triggered sharp jumps in international oil prices. These two developments increased Iraq’s petroleum revenue from $575 million in 1972 to an astonishing $26 billion eight years later. On the eve of the war, there was still scope for further expansion. Accordingly, if the government wanted to augment its already abundant oil income, it could intensify resource exploration and development, rather than invading its neighbor. Iraq’s defense minister, Khairallah, highlighted this point when he rejected classic oil war interpretations of the conflict. “You know very well that we are not in need of the Arabistan oil,” he told reporters. “We have enough oil.” War historian Edgar O’Ballance concurs, observing that Iraq had “ample reserves” of petroleum, so oil ambitions were not “one of the deep-rooted catalysts” of the war.

Iraqi leaders, including Saddam, were therefore aware of the invasion, occupation, and international obstacles to conquering Khuzestan. They also lacked the impetus to confront these impediments, since they possessed an alternative, less costly means of increasing national resource revenue. It is consequently unsurprising that the Iraqis pledged to withdraw from the province as soon as they achieved their war aims. They were not trying to grab Iran’s oil, so there was no need to stay.

Rather than fighting for oil, Iraq’s central reasons for attacking Iran were threefold. One was historical rivalry; the states have competed for dominance in the Persian Gulf region for more than a millennium, and this contestation intensified in the two decades before the war. The second motive was territorial; although
Iraqi leaders did not aim to conquer Khuzestan, they did aspire to regain full authority over the Shatt al-ʿArab waterway and some “usurped” territories along the central portion of the international land boundary.\textsuperscript{91} The third, and most important, reason for Iraq’s attack was national security; Saddam aimed to weaken Iran’s revolutionary Islamist government, which he perceived as an increasing threat to his regime’s survival.\textsuperscript{92}

The first incentive for aggression, Iran and Iraq’s historical rivalry, dates back to at least the seventh century, when Arabs conquered the Sasanian Persian army in the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah. In the mid-twentieth century, the modern states remained two of the Middle East’s most powerful countries and were still divided by ethnicity and religion; the majority of Iraqis are Arabs and traditionally ruled by Sunnis, while most Iranians are Persian and Shiʿa. These ascriptive divides contributed to contemporary animosity. However, between the late 1950s and mid-1970s, two additional political developments intensified the states’ bilateral hostility.\textsuperscript{93} One of these was the Iraqi revolution (1958), which overthrew the state’s Hashemite monarchy. Iraq’s new Republican regime was more aggressively nationalistic than its predecessor and more assertive in its territorial claims. In late 1959, Iraqi prime minister Abd al-Karim Qasim pointedly highlighted Khuzestan’s historical associations with the Ottoman Empire and proclaimed Iraq’s authority over the entire Shatt al-ʿArab waterway.\textsuperscript{94}

The second contemporary development was the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in December 1971. This retreat created a power vacuum in the region, which British and American authorities encouraged Iran to fill, as they believed that Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was the best local substitute for Western authority.\textsuperscript{95} The United States and Britain provided the shah with arms and diplomatic support to strengthen his regional position, antagonizing Iraq’s new Baʿthist regime, which had seized power in July 1968 and adopted a more overtly anti-Western stance than its predecessor.

Over the next decade, both of the rival states employed a variety of strategies to shift the regional power balance in their favor. One was direct attacks; during the spring of 1972 and winter of 1973–1974, Iraq and Iran engaged in repeated clashes along their shared boundary. A second strategy was territorial expansion. In November 1971, on the eve of Britain’s withdrawal from the Gulf, Iran seized several islands near the Strait of Hormuz, which had belonged to Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, two of the future United Arab Emirates. Many Arab states, including Iraq, protested the confiscation.\textsuperscript{96} However, Iran’s growing regional clout and great power backing left them powerless to reverse it.

Third, Baghdad and Tehran supported opposition movements within each other’s territory. The Iranians provided significant military and financial support to Iraq’s Kurds, who were waging an armed struggle for autonomy against Bagh-
dad. The Iraqis supplied aid to Arab autonomy movements in Khuzestan and antigovernment groups in Iranian Kurdistan and Balochistan. These Iraqi initiatives had little impact on Iran. However, by the mid-1970s, Tehran’s support to Iraq’s Kurds constituted a major security threat to Baghdad. The Kirkuk oil fields, which contain up to 40 percent of Iraq’s oil reserves, are located in Iraqi Kurdistan. Consequently, the state would lose a significant portion of its petroleum revenue if the Kurds obtained independence. By late 1974, Baghdad was on the brink of losing control of the territory. Although the government had deployed one hundred thousand troops to the region, it was unable to contain a renewed Kurdish uprising, bolstered by Iranian aid.

To curtail Tehran’s support for the Kurds, the Ba’athists were compelled to participate in the Algiers Agreement (1975), in which Iran and Iraq pledged to cease their interference in each other’s domestic affairs. The accord also contained provisions for the states to shift their boundary in the Shatt al-ʿArab from the river’s eastern bank to the thalweg (primary navigable channel) and delimit their land boundary in accordance with the Constantinople Protocol (1913) and the Proceedings of the Border Delimitation Commission (1914). The Iraqis perceived the former provision as a major concession and only acceded to the Algiers Agreement because they believed that they had no other choice. As Foreign Minister Hammadi stated, “It was either that or lose the country.” Saddam, who signed the accord as Iraq’s vice president, described it as “his only political failure.” He felt personally humiliated by the agreement and was determined to reverse it.

Iraq’s territorial goals—the state’s second motive for the Iran–Iraq War—were directly related to the Algiers Agreement. Baghdad aspired to return the Shatt al-ʿArab boundary to the river’s eastern bank and regain control over small amounts of territory located along the central portion of the states’ boundary, which Iraqis believed had been promised to them in the accord. The first ambition initially appears dubious; why was Iraq so invested in control over half of a waterway? Yet the riparian dispute had been one of the central sources of bilateral animosity since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1847, the second Treaty of Erzurum recognized Iraq’s control over the entire river, setting the states’ boundary along the waterway’s eastern bank, rather than the thalweg. This unusual delimitation method aimed to compensate Iraq for its diminutive Persian Gulf coastline, which is only forty miles long. Iraq was therefore highly reliant on its Shatt al-ʿArab ports, whereas Iran possessed expansive coastal territories. The 1847 treaty nonetheless granted Iranians the right to navigate the waterway and recognized Tehran’s authority over the port of Khorramshahr and the island of Abadan.

Between 1847 and 1975, Iraq’s control over the waterway gradually diminished. In the Constantinople Protocol, Iran gained authority over the anchorage at Khorramshahr, and during the subsequent delimitation process, the riparian boundary
around the city was shifted to the thalweg to accommodate the port’s increasing traffic, driven by Iran’s burgeoning oil industry. In 1937, the Tehran Treaty moved the international boundary to the thalweg for several additional miles around Abadan. During the 1940s and 1950s, the Iraqis successfully evaded repeated Iranian requests for joint administration of the waterway. They also resisted Tehran’s demand, in 1961, that all ships entering Iranian ports be piloted by Iranians. The Basra Port Authority, the Iraqi organization that handled river
traffic, responded to this initiative by barring passage to all Iranian ports along the waterway. Oil exports from Abadan plunged 60 percent and, after nine weeks of crippling blockade, Tehran was forced to rescind the order.¹⁰³

However, when power in the Persian Gulf shifted in the late 1960s, so did authority in the Shatt al-'Arab. On April 19, 1969, the shah abrogated the Tehran Treaty and claimed a thalweg boundary for the entire waterway. To underscore this change, Iranian commercial vessels, piloted by Iranians and escorted by the Iranian navy, traveled up the river without paying navigational tolls to the Basra Port Authority. The Iraqi regime, beset by instability in Kurdistan, was unable to respond to the challenge directly. Instead, it sent letters of protest to the UN Security Council, increased funding for Khuzestan separatists, and expelled thousands of Iranians from Iraq.¹⁰⁴ Yet these actions failed to alter Iran’s river behavior. From that point on, the Shatt al-'Arab’s de facto boundary was the thalweg; the Algiers Agreement merely formalized the riparian status quo. After the accord, the Iraqi government was committed to shifting the boundary back to the eastern shore, both to secure control over a vital transportation route and to restore national pride.¹⁰⁵

Iraq’s second territorial goal in the Iran–Iraq War was to regain sovereignty over approximately 130 square miles of territory located along the central portion of the states’ land boundary, between Qasr-e Shirin and Mehran. The Iraqis believed that the Algiers Agreement compelled Iran to return those territories, which the state had gradually occupied between 1913 and 1975.¹⁰⁶ The areas were strategically located along the main transit route from Tehran to Baghdad and included higher elevations, at the foot of the Zagros Mountains, overlooking Iraq’s Diyala Province.¹⁰⁷ Iraq’s broader interests in the territories, like its interests in the Shatt al-'Arab, were therefore to strengthen state security and restore national honor.

The Ba’athist government initially attempted to regain the border territories peacefully. The states began to delimit their land boundary, as stipulated by the Algiers Agreement, in May 1978.¹⁰⁸ However, before the border issue was fully resolved, the Iranian Revolution interrupted the process. On January 16, 1979, the shah fled Iran, bringing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power. Acknowledging the disruption, the Iraqis accepted a temporary pause in delimitation activity. However, as time passed, they became increasingly convinced that the new Iranian regime had no intention of ever completing the procedure. As Hammadi stated on September 10, 1980, “When the revolution took place in Iran, the Iraqi Government gave the new regime some time to organize its affairs, so that it would be in a position to complete the handing over process. But the abovementioned territory was not delivered to the Iraqi side. On the contrary, as time passed the Iranian officials showed hostile intentions and the inclination to expand at the
expense of Iraqi and Arab territory.” Iran’s president, Abolhassan Banisadr, eventually confirmed Iraqi suspicions; his regime did not plan to fully implement the accord.

Saddam concluded that the only way to retake the central border territories and regain control over the Shatt al-ʿArab was by force. On September 7, 1980, Iraqi troops began to seize the contested areas, beginning around Zain al-Qaws. Over the next few days, they occupied additional territory around Saif Saad and Qasr-e Shirin. In a meeting with his advisers on September 16, six days before the Iran–Iraq War’s internationally recognized start date, Saddam asserted that Iraq had successfully retaken all of the territories promised to it in the Algiers Agreement. As he put it, “Today we can say that all of the lands extorted by Iran are back under our sovereignty.”

However, the Shatt al-ʿArab issue remained unresolved. Saddam and his advisers recognized that retaking the waterway would be more contentious than seizing the central border areas and could escalate into a “full-scale war.” Nonetheless, they were determined to proceed. On September 17, Saddam publicly abrogated the Algiers Agreement, tearing up his copy of the accord on state television. The Iraqi government also attempted to reassert control over river navigation by compelling foreign ships to raise the Iraqi flag and accept guidance by the Iraqi navy. Fighting in the Shatt al-ʿArab, which had been limited up to that point, intensified; Iran deployed its navy and began firing on Iraqi patrol boats.

On September 23, Iraq launched a major ground offensive in several of Iran’s western provinces. This assault aimed to secure Iraq’s control over the contested central border territories and the Shatt al-ʿArab. However, its primary goal—and Iraq’s third and most important reason for prosecuting the war—was to moderate, or ideally eliminate, the Islamist regime’s threat to the Iraqi government. This menace was unanticipated. Iraqi leaders had initially welcomed the Iranian Revolution, as they were pleased to see the shah replaced by a movement that was hostile to Western intervention in the Gulf region. In February 1979, Saddam had reached out to Iran’s new government, stating that “a regime which does not support the enemy against us and does not intervene in our affairs, and whose world policy corresponds to the interests of the Iranian and Iraqi people, will certainly receive our respect and appreciation.” However, by that summer, the prospect of improving bilateral relations seemed remote.

Ideologically, Iran’s Islamist regime was diametrically opposed to Iraq’s Ba’athist government. The Ba’ath Party was secular, nationalistic, and committed to pan-Arabism, which aspired to informally unite the Middle East under the banner of shared ethnic identity. The Islamists were Persian, intensely religious,
and aspired to build a universalist, pan-Islamic republic. More worrisome than these ideological differences, however, were Iranian leaders’ public attacks on the Iraqi regime. In spring 1979, Iraq experienced a resurgence of Shi’a activism, including protests in the cities of Najaf and Karbala. The Ba’athists attempted to contain the movement by declaring membership in the Da’wa Party, a Shi’a organization founded in the late 1960s, a capital offense. However, in June 1979, Khomeini and his followers began to encourage Iraqis to overthrow their “infidel” leaders. By the end of the year, the Iranian regime was actively supporting al-Da’wa and had resumed its assistance to Iraq’s Kurds. In December, Iraqi intelligence sources reported that Iran, Syria, and Libya were collaborating to provoke a sectarian civil war in Iraq, which would overthrow Saddam’s regime.

Relations deteriorated further in spring 1980, as Iranian officials intensified their calls for the Iraqi regime’s overthrow. On March 15, Khomeini urged Iraqi citizens to revolt against their government, and less than a week later, his son called for the “export” of the Iranian Revolution. On April 8, Khomeini said that Iraqis should “wake up and topple this corrupt regime in your Islamic country before it is too late.” Nine days later, he inveighed that “Iran will break Iraq and advance to Baghdad.” Earlier that month, Iran had supported an assassination attack against Tariq ‘Aziz, which was claimed by al-Da’wa. In June, Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh “revealed . . . that his government had taken the decision to topple the Baath regime.”

Escalating border skirmishes intensified the Iraqi government’s sense of peril. On April 4, 1980, Banisadr put Iranian border forces on alert and warned that Iran would go to war if the situation deteriorated further. Clashes subsequently escalated, and in May, internal Iraqi memoranda from the air force and Air Defense Command asserted that, over the previous forty-five days, Iran had committed thirty-seven border violations. Many of Saddam’s generals, interviewed after the 2003 US invasion, stated that they were anticipating an Iranian attempt to overthrow their government, either through direct attacks or via support for Iraq’s domestic opposition groups.

By summer 1980, Saddam had concluded that Iranian interference constituted an existential threat to his regime. He also believed that his options for resisting the threat were increasingly limited. A failed military coup in Tehran on July 9–10 convinced Saddam that Iran’s internal opposition would not be able to topple the Islamists. Hence, Iraq would have to intervene directly to eliminate the threat. In mid-July, the president met with his chiefs of staff and instructed them to prepare for war with their neighbor. On August 16, Saddam told his generals that Iraq would definitely attack, although he left the date unspecified.
Meanwhile, border skirmishes continued to intensify. By early September, the Iraqi National News Agency was reporting persistent Iranian attacks, many of them launched from the contested central border zones. According to Iraqis, the Iran–Iraq War began on September 4, 1980, when the Iranians purportedly launched intensive artillery assaults on Iraqi border posts at Khanaqin, Mandali, Badra, and Zurbatiyah.127

Iraq’s goals, in responding to these assaults and, eventually, invading Iran, were to eliminate a perceived existential threat to the Ba’athist regime, regain control over lost territories, and shift the regional power balance in Iraq’s favor. The state did not aim to annex Khuzestan and seize its oil resources. The Iraqi invasion nonetheless targeted Khuzestan for several reasons, some of them linked to the province’s petroleum endowments. First, the territory is relatively accessible. In comparison with the central border area, where Iranian territory climbs rapidly into the Zagros Mountains, Khuzestan is fairly flat, which permitted a longer military advance. Second, the Iraqis believed that Khuzestan’s Arab population would offer little resistance to their invasion. Third, attacking Khuzestan would interrupt Iranian oil production and transportation, severing the regime’s vital petroleum supplies and income.128 All of these factors gave an Iraqi attack in Khuzestan greater impact than an attack elsewhere, increasing the likelihood that the Iranian government would accede to Iraq’s demands.

Iraq’s strategic aims in attacking its neighbor were nonetheless imprecise.129 However, an invasion of Khuzestan could moderate the perceived Iranian menace in at least four ways. First, a forceful demonstration of Iraq’s military power, coupled with Iranian battlefield losses, might push the Islamists to yield to Baghdad’s demands to cease their interference in Iraqi domestic affairs and cede control over the contested territories. Second, an invasion could draw military forces away from Tehran, leaving Khomeini’s regime exposed and vulnerable to a domestic coup.130 Third, attacks on Khuzestan’s oil infrastructure could facilitate the Islamists’ overthrow by “paralyzing the Iranian economy” and undermining national defense.131 Fourth, by supporting Khuzestan’s long-standing bid for self-government, Iraq might detach the province’s oil from Tehran, permanently reducing the amount of petroleum revenue that the Iranian government could use to foment unrest in Iraq.

Khuzestan’s oil therefore contributed to Iraqi leaders’ decisions about how to prosecute their war with Iran. However, the province’s petroleum resources were not a prize that the Ba’athists hoped to win. Instead, they were prepared to withdraw from the region after accomplishing their actual war aims. The classic oil war interpretation of Iraq’s aggression was a wartime construction, often asserted with little supporting evidence.132 It gained additional traction after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, as, in the wake of that oil gambit, observers were quick to as-
sume that Saddam’s earlier aggression had also targeted petroleum. Subsequent authors have repeated this interpretation; as Pierre Razoux surmised in his recent history of the Iran–Iraq War, “One could also conceive that Saddam’s thuggish disposition instinctively led him to attempt to rob Iran’s oil reserves.” Yet, as this chapter’s two case studies have demonstrated, intuitive assumptions often fail to hold up to critical scrutiny. The Iran–Iraq and Chaco conflicts were red herrings, not classic oil wars.