



International Boundary Study

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Iraq – Turkey Boundary

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IRAQ - TURKEY BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Iraq - Turkey boundary is 219 miles in length¹. It begins in the west on the Tigris River at its junction with the Habur Nehri (Nahr al Khabur), and for 36 miles follows the thalweg, or main channel of the Habur and its tributaries. North of the town of Zakhu (Zakho), the boundary begins a meandering course across the Kurdish Alps, following alternately streams and mountain crests, and rising in places to over 7,000 feet, until its junction with the boundary of Iran. The boundary has been demarcated along its entire length.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geographical

The area through which the Iraq - Turkey boundary passes is one of transition between the Kurdish Alps to the north and the foothills--and beyond them the desert lowlands--to the south. Except for the extreme western sector, the boundary lies at elevations of 4 - 6,000 feet, descending briefly in the steep valleys of southward-flowing streams, or rising to over 7,000 feet, particularly in the easternmost areas. Although the boundary frequently follows minor water divides, the entire region lies within the drainage area of the Tigris River and of one of its major tributaries, the Great Zab. Sixty miles to the north is Lake Van, while Lake Reza'iyeh (formerly Lake Urmia) is thirty miles east of the boundary in Iran. The boundary area itself is maturely dissected by the upper streams of the Tigris system, and, except in the extreme west, is a very rugged area.

Average temperatures range from the mid-thirties in January to the low seventies in July. Because of the terrain, precipitation is higher in the border area than to the south, averaging 20 to 30 inches per year. Although the predominant vegetation in the uplands south of the boundary is grass and low shrub, much of the region in the immediate vicinity of the boundary is forested and timber products are a traditional export from this area, the logs being floated downstream to the drier, treeless regions of Iraq. North of the boundary the rugged, forested Kurdish Alps rise to well over 10,000 feet and extend for over 100 miles through the sparsely-inhabited area of southeastern Turkey.

In northern Iraq, soils are of good quality in the valleys of the Tigris system and in intermontaine basins, but on the Turkish side of the boundary there is little level or gently-sloping land and only thin soils. Major areas of agricultural production in Iraq are (1) north and northeast of Zakhu, and (2) in the broad valley of the Great Zab River. Irrigation is unnecessary for agriculture here. Principal products are tobacco, raisins, gall nuts, wool, and mohair, but the total volume of exports from this region to other parts of Iraq is not great. Manufacturing in the boundary area is virtually nonexistent.

¹ Measured on the AMS 1:250,000 maps showing the boundary.

The Iraq - Turkey boundary passes through an area traditionally inhabited by the Kurds, who are spread also across the northern and eastern borders into Turkey and Iran. There are approximately 1,250,000 Kurds in Iraq, at least 2.5 million in Turkey and another 1.5 million in north-western Iran. The Kurds have maintained their own language and customs and have resisted assimilation into Iraq, Turkey, or Iran. They are settled primarily in the rural and less accessible parts of the boundary area, while Arab Iraqis tend to be concentrated in the towns and villages south of the border. To the north, except for the town of Colemerik (Hakkari), there are only small villages within thirty miles of the boundary; here again Kurds predominate, living in relatively remote areas. The desires of the Kurds in Iraq for political autonomy were recognized by the Council of the League of Nations, which in 1925 suggested that they be given autonomy as part of the general boundary settlement. The final Treaty made no mention of the Kurds. However, when Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations, the Iraqi government was required to subscribe to several guaranties to the Kurds, including bilingual schools, courts, and administration in the Kurdish areas. In recent years, they have frequently pressed the Baghdad Government for recognition of their "national" (primarily cultural) rights. In southeastern Turkey, the Kurds have fared no better so far as autonomy is concerned. The Treaty of Sevres, in 1920, provided for an autonomous and possibly independent Kurdistan within Turkey, but the Treaty never came into effect and a revolt by Kurdish nationalists in 1925 was put down by Turkish troops. There was further trouble in 1930 and again in 1936, but, since then, there has been little organized political agitation north of the Iraq - Turkey boundary.

No railroads or major roads cross the boundary. Prior to World War I, when the Mosul vilayet was part of the Ottoman Empire, a major road connected Zakhu via the Tigris valley with Turkey, while another followed the valley of the Great Zab, linking Al'Amadiyah (Amadia) in Iraq with Colemerik. Today, only secondary roads connect the two countries with one another, and there is little traffic along them. In Turkey, south of the Lake Van lowlands, the only major town is Colemerik (pop. 4,200), located 21 miles from the boundary in the upper valley of the Great Zab. In Iraq, the principal towns near the boundary are Zakhu (pop., 5,000), 3 miles from the border, Al'Amadiyah (pop., 3,000), 13 miles away, and Az Zibar and 'Aqrah (Aqra), both with populations of about 1,000, located 12 and 22 miles, respectively, from the boundary. Zakhu, Al'Amadiyah and 'Aqrah are connected by highway to the south with Mosul (Al Mawsil) but Az Zibar, in the valley of the Great Zab, is linked with 'Aqrah only by a circuitous and very poor road. In addition to these towns, there are a number of small villages and the overall aspect of the boundary area is one of scattered rural populations and poor communications. Thirty miles south of the boundary is the beginning of the rich wheat-growing area of Mosul (Al Mawsil) the "breadbasket" of Iraq, while 25 miles south of the westernmost part of the boundary is the Iraqi town of 'Ayn Zalah, site of one of the country's productive oil wells. The movement of people and of goods southward from the boundary area toward Mosul is either via the highways from Zakhu, Al'Amadiyah and 'Aqrah, or down the valleys of the Tigris and Great Zab Rivers. North of the boundary there is little focus of routes, except along the upper valley of the Great Zab, until one reaches the Lake Van area, relatively flat and low (at some 5,600 ft.) when compared to surrounding mountains.

B. Historical

The area crossed by the Iraq - Turkey boundary has long been a scene of conflict between the Turks and the Arabs. By the 8th century A.D., the Arabs were firmly in control of the Mosul region but, in the 11th century, Turkish mercenaries came to exercise a certain amount of power in this area. To the north, the Kurds, who have inhabited the uplands south and east of Lake Van for at least 3,000 years, maintained an independent kingdom from the 10th to the early 12th centuries, after which it was overwhelmed by the Saljug Turks. Mosul was conquered by Mongol armies in the 13th and 14th centuries and, in 1534, it was incorporated by the Turks within their empire. After this, Mosul and its surroundings were, for the most part, politically subordinate to the Turkish administration at Baghdad; not until 1879 did Mosul become a separate vilayet within the Ottoman Empire, equal in political status to the Baghdad vilayet. Its population on the eve of World War I consisted of 300,000 Kurds, 170,000 Arabs, and 40,000 Turks, as well as a scattering of Christians and Yezidis, an esoteric sect whose following are largely of Kurdish stock.

At the end of World War I, Turkey, a defeated country, signed in 1920 the Treaty of Sevres, which was never ratified. Article 27 defined the southern boundary of Turkey as coinciding for the most part with the northern border of the vilayet of Mosul. A resurgent Turkey denounced the Treaty of Sevres and it was replaced in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne, in which (article 3) it was provided that the frontier between Turkey and the new British-mandated country of Iraq would be "laid down in friendly arrangement to be concluded between Turkey and Great Britain within nine months." In the event no agreement could be reached between the two Governments within the allotted time, the dispute was to be referred to the Council of the League of Nations. Pending the decision to be reached on the final location of the boundary, no military or other movement was to take place which would modify the existing state of the disputed boundary, that is, its existing coincidence with the northern border of the Turkish vilayet of Mosul.

British and Turkish representatives met in May and June of 1924 but without positive results. The British argued that inclusion of Mosul vilayet within Iraq was already a fait accompli, and the only point in question was where the northern border of the Mosul area should be. They suggested a line varying 5 to 25 miles north of the vilayet border on the grounds that it passed through some of the highest elevations in the Kurdish Alps and thus strategically it was a better international boundary for Iraq than was the old Turkish administrative border. The Turks, however, urged that the new international boundary follow the southern border of Mosul vilayet, claiming that if a plebiscite were held in the vilayet it would show a majority of the population in favor of continued Turkish control there. The dispute was then referred to the League of Nations and in October, 1924, the Council established the "Brussels Line" as the provisional boundary between Turkey and Iraq--the line following almost exactly the northern border of the Mosul vilayet.

From November, 1924 to March, 1925, a special three-member Commission, appointed by the League, investigated the boundary problem. Its recommendation, the following July,

was that the Brussels Line be accepted as the international boundary between Turkey and Iraq. The dispute was then referred to the Permanent Court of International Justice at the Hague for advisory opinion, and in November 1925 the Court recommended the awarding of the former Mosul vilayet to Iraq.

By the Treaty between the United Kingdom, Iraq, and Turkey, signed June 5, 1926, the Iraq - Turkey boundary was finally settled. The boundary was to follow the Brussels Line except that in the area south of the Turkish villages of Alumana and Ashuta (Asuta) a minor rectification was made in Turkey's favor in order to include in Turkish territory a road connecting these two points. Demarcation of the boundary was to be undertaken as soon as possible and permanent Frontier Commission was established to meet at least once every six months to handle frontier problems. A frontier zone was set up, 75 kilometers (45 miles) in width on both sides of the boundary, within which each country would seek to insure that no pillage and other hostile acts took place across the border from one country to another. By September, 1927, the entire frontier had been demarcated. A measure of the care with which the Treaty was drawn up may be seen by the fact that, since 1926, there have been no serious incidents whatever along the boundary between.

III. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Iraq - Turkey boundary begins in the west on the thalweg of the Tigris River at its junction with the Habur Nehri (Nahr al Khabur) along the common border with Syria. Its elevation here is approximately 1,000 feet. It follows the thalweg of the Habur River eastward for 15 miles and then that of the Hezil Suyu (Nahr al Hayzal), a tributary to the Habur, for another 21 miles. In this western area, the boundary separates the liwa of Mosul in Iraq from the vilayet of Mardin in Turkey. Leaving the Hezil, at an elevation of about 3,000 feet, the boundary proceeds northeast and then east for 29 miles, rising to elevations of over 7,000 feet and forming a drainage divided between various streams of the Tigris system. After leaving the Hezil River the boundary is joined on its northern side by the Turkish vilayet of Hakkari.

For a distance of 15 miles, the boundary joins the upper Habur River system. Eastward, the boundary again coincides with a drainage divide and continues for 22 miles to reach the Great Zab River, coming from the north to join the Tigris River below Mosul. The valley of this river forms the only natural north-south route through the Kurdish Alps to the lowlands about Lake Van, but, at present, is little used. The boundary follows the Great Zab downstream for less than a mile, then again meanders eastward for 13 miles until it meets the Av-i-Marik, a tributary of the Great Zab, which it follows downstream for 3 miles. This stream marks the border in Iraq between the liwa's of Mosul and Irbil. Turning again east, the boundary crosses the highlands at elevations frequently above 7,000 feet, following for short distances various tributaries of the Shamsdinan River, itself a tributary of the Great Zab. Eighty miles east of its junction with the Great Zab, the boundary meets the gorge of the Kuchuk River, still another tributary of the Great Zab. For the remaining 42 miles the boundary follows the Hajji Bak (Hacibeysuyu), a tributary of the Kuchuk, upstream to the frontier of Iran.

There are no towns or major highways in the immediate boundary area and no important roads cross it along its entire length. To the north is the remote Kurdish area of southeastern Turkey; to the south a smaller, but also remote area, yet one which has at times been the scene of serious fighting between Kurdish and Iraqi forces. Although superimposed on a fairly homogeneous area, the boundary itself has caused few problems to either of the countries it separates in the years since its final delimitation. The boundary divides tribes and kinship groups, but nomadic Kurdish herdsmen customarily cross freely (except in times of hostility) in both directions on informal laissez-passer.

IV. TREATIES

The three treaties relating directly to the delimitation of the present Iraq - Turkey boundary were all concluded in the decade following World War I. The Treaty of Sevres (1920) laid down the Turkish border with "Mesopotamia" along the northern boundary of the vilayet of Mosul. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) provided that the boundary be settled by "friendly agreement" or, failing this, that it be decided by the Council of the League of Nations. The 1926 Treaty between Great Britain, Iraq, and Turkey delimited the final boundary.

A. Treaty of Sevres between Turkey and various Allied powers, signed at Sevres, August 10, 1920.

Article 27, II, 3 defined the Turkish frontier with "Mesopotamia" as proceeding from the Tigris "in a general easterly direction to a point to be chosen on the northern boundary of the vilayet of Mosul...thence eastwards to the point where it meets the frontier between Turkey and Persia, the northern boundary of the vilayet of Mosul, modified, however, so as to pass south of Amadia." The salient in the area of Amadia was subsequently ignored.

B. Treaty of Lausanne between Turkey and various Allied powers, signed at Lausanne, July 24, 1923.

Article 3 (2) provided that the frontier between Turkey and Iraq (the League of Nations having approved the British mandate for Iraq in July 1922) should be laid down in friendly arrangement between Turkey and Great Britain within nine months. If no agreement could be reached within the nine months the dispute would be referred to the Council of the League of Nations. This dispute ultimately was referred to the Council and on October 29, 1924 the Council established the Brussels Line (following almost exactly the northern border of Mosul vilayet) as a provisional boundary.

C. Treaty of Angora, between the United Kingdom, Iraq, and Turkey, signed at Angora (Ankara) June 5, 1926.

Article 1 stipulated that the boundary between Turkey and Iraq would follow the Brussels Line except for a modification south of Alamun and Ashuta so as to include in Turkish

territory all of the road between the two points. Article 3 provided for demarcation of the boundary, which was carried out the following year, while Article 10 set up a frontier zone, 75 kilometers in width on both sides of the boundary, within which each country would guard against hostile acts taking place across the border.

V. SUMMARY

The Iraq - Turkey boundary passes through an isolated, mountainous region, inhabited on both sides by Kurdish peoples. The boundary has been demarcated and there are no major points of dispute on the boundary between the two nations. Continued military action by Kurdish forces in Iraq against the Iraqi government may in time lead to unintentional violations of the border by one or both of the belligerent groups; other than this however there is nothing to indicate potential friction in the boundary area.

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