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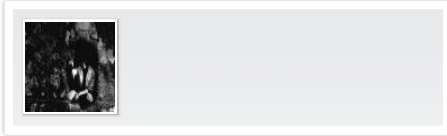
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The Tanker War

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By Ronald O'Rourke

The Iran-Iraq War, which began in September 1980, now ranks as one of the longer interstate conflicts of the 20th century. In a strict military sense, it has been primarily a land conflict. Compared with the often bloody fighting on land, where an uneasy stalemate has developed, the "tanker war" in the waters of the Gulf has been a mere sideshow. The tanker war, however, has attracted considerable international interest because it has involved the shipping of many countries. It is seen as having the potential both to affect world oil exports and prices, and to draw other countries into the conflict.



The tanker war is a campaign of economic attrition and political intimidation. Iraq attacks ships serving Iranian ports—largely to reduce Iran's oil exports, which go entirely by sea and which help finance Iran's war effort. Because Iran destroyed Iraq's oilterminal early in the war, no tankers steam to or from Iraq, and Iraq's oil exports now travel by overland pipeline. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, however, support Iraq's war effort. Iran thus wages its own war on shipping serving the Arab side of the Gulf to reduce Iraq's imports of war material, and to intimidate the Gulf states supporting Iraq.

Iran trapped or destroyed many Iraqi ships in port in the early stages of the war. But Iraq started the tanker war in the Gulf proper in 1981 by initiating attacks on ships steaming to or from Iranian ports at the extreme northern end of the Gulf. Iraq continued these attacks into 1984 without a parallel Iranian response at sea. In March of that year, however, Iraq increased the rate of its attacks and expanded their geographic scope by attacking ships serving more southerly Iranian points, particularly the oil-loading complex at Kharg Island. Two months later, Iran initiated its own attacks, and the tanker war became a two-way affair.

Table 1 provides the most widely published counting in the United States of the number of ship attacks by each belligerent. On a cumulative basis, Iraq has accounted for about three-fifths of the attacks. In 1987, however, Iran drew roughly even with Iraq in the number of ships attacked for the first time in the tanker war.

Table 1. Attacks on Ships in the Persian Gulf By Belligerent

Attacker	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	Total
Iraq	5	22	16	53	33	66	88	283
Iran	0	0	0	18	14	45	91	168
Total	5	22	16	71	47	111	179	451

Sources: *The Washington Post*, 13 October 1987, p. A12, and *The New York Times*, 10 January 1988, p. E3. (From Lloyd's Shipping Intelligence Unit for 1981 through 1986, and Center for Defense Information for 1986 and 1987. The two sources differ slightly on the numbers for 1986. Other sources vary considerably from the numbers presented here.)

Table 2 shows a separate and somewhat discrepant United Nations counting of the number of ships attacked by flag of registry. Aside from Iranian shipping, the most frequent victims have been ships steaming under the world's predominant flags of convenience. The number of Kuwaiti-flag ships attacked is by comparison rather small, but only a fraction of Kuwait's seaborne commerce goes by Kuwaiti-flag vessels. Attacks in 1987 were carried out against ships flying the flags of 12 countries whose shipping had not previously come under attack, including the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China.

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Table 2. Attacks on Ships in the Persian Gulf By Flag of Registry

Flag of Registry	1984	1985	1986	1987	Total
Liberia	7	8	20	26	61
Iran	2	2	8	34	46
Panama	8	6	11	16	41
Cyprus	0	4	13	22	39
Greece	3	6	5	12	26
Malta	0	3	5	1	9
Kuwait	1	1	3	3	8
Saudi Arabia	0	0	3	5	8
Turkey	1	3	2	1	7
Norway	0	1	2	4	7
Singapore	1	2	0	3	6
United Kingdom	1	1	1	3	6
Japan	0	0	1	5	6
South Korea	1	2	0	2	5
West Germany	1	1	0	3	5
India	1	1	0	2	4
France	0	0	2	1	3
Spain	0	1	0	2	3
Bahamas	0	0	0	3	3
Denmark	0	0	0	3	3
Sri Lanka	1	0	1	0	2
Pakistan	1	0	0	1	2
Italy	0	1	0	1	2
Qatar	0	0	1	1	2



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Philippines	0	0	1	1	2
Soviet Union	0	0	0	2	2
United States	0	0	0	2	2
Maldives	0	0	0	2	2
Netherlands	0	0	0	2	2
Belgium	0	1	0	0	1
North Korea	0	1	0	0	1
Hong Kong	0	0	0	1	1
People's Republic of China	0	0	0	1	1
United Arab Emirates	0	0	0	1	1
Yugoslavia	0	0	0	1	1
Australia	0	0	0	1	1
Romania	0	0	0	1	1
Burma	0	0	0	1	1
Unknown/not specified	8	5	4	1	18
Total	37	50	84	169	340

Source: Numbers compiled from individual ship attack summaries presented in the United Nations Security Council document S/16877 of 31 December 1984, with Addendum 1 of 22 January 1985, Addendum 2 of 31 December 1985, Addendum 3 of 31 December 1986, Addendum 4 of 22 January 1987, Correction 1 to Addendum 3 of 10 February 1987, and Addendum 5 of 31 December 1987.

Table 3 shows the United Nations data by type of ship attacked. More than three-quarters of the ships attacked have indeed been tankers or product carriers of one kind or another. Non-petroleum cargo ships, however, came under much more frequent attack in 1987.

Type of Ship	1984	1985	1986	1987	Total
Oil Tanker/Product Carrier	21	35	78	125	259
Cargo/Freighter/Container/Combination	11	9	1	31	52
Supply/Support	3	3	0	4	10

Tug	0	3	3	6	12
Other/Not Specified	2	0	2	3	7
Total	37	50	84	169	340
Source: Same as for Table 2.					

Table 4 shows the United Nations data by weapon used. Mines were employed last year for the first time since 1984. The first 1987 mine attack occurred near Kuwait, within a day of the Iraqi attack on the USS *Stark* (FFG-31). The victim of the mining was one of three Soviet-flag ships chartered by Kuwait only weeks earlier. Even counting some of the unknown attacks as mine-related, however, mining accounted for only a small fraction of all attacks in 1987. The significant attention paid to the mining threat in the middle months of the year by both on-scene naval forces and the Western press might thus be seen in part as a reflection of the psychological effect that mines can generate.

The category "missile/rocket/grenade" effectively blurs the distinction between Iraqi attacks, which almost *always* involve missiles, and Iranian attacks, which more often involve rockets and rocket-propelled grenades. A large share of the 1987 unknown attacks must be missile-related, since the 1987 total for the "missile/rocket/grenade" category is not enough to account for Iraq's 1987 attacks. The 1987 data also reflect Iran's decision to begin using the 4.5-inch guns on its frigates.

Type of weapon used	1984	1985	1986	1987	Total
Missile/Rocket/Grenade	20	37	63	67	187
Mine	2	0	0	8	10
Gunfire	1	1	1	11	14
Other/Unknown	14	12	20	83	129
Total	37	50	84	169	340
Source: Same as for Table 2.					

Table 5 shows the United Nations data on number of people killed, wounded, and missing as a result of the tanker war. Some countings of the total number killed are two or three times as high as the figure in Table 5. Iranian speed boat attackers in 1987 reportedly perfected the art of concentrating their fire on the crew compartments of their target ships. The effect of this tactic on total casualties, however, is hard to assess. The 1987 casualty data in Table 5, though incomplete, do not reflect a marked jump in the number of killed, wounded, and missing per attack.

Casualties reported	1984	1985	1986	1987	Total
Killed	34	7	34	41	116
Wounded	17	20	43	87	167
Missing	9	3	10	15+	37+
Total of above	60	30	87	143+	320+
Attacks with no reported casualties	8	36	55	117	216

Attacks where casualty information was not reported	17	4	6	20	47
Source: Same as for Table 2.					

Table 6 shows the number of ship attacks monthly by each side during 1987. Iraq suspended its attacks on ships in May for a short period after the *Stark* incident, and Iran responded by refraining from overt attacks during this time. On 20 July, both sides again halted overt attacks in response to the passage by the United Nations Security Council of a mandatory cease-fire resolution. The halt lasted until 29 August, when Iraq resumed its attacks and Iran followed. The data do not suggest it, but there was a third brief lull in activity in September, during a peacemaking visit to the area by the U. N. Secretary General.

Attacker	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Iraq	6	8	5	7	5	2	3	4	12	13	8	15	88
Iran	6	3	4	4	10	5	4	5	16	7	10	17	91
Total	12	11	9	11	15	7	7	9	28	20	18	32	179

Source: *The New York Times*, 10 January 1988, p. E3. (From Center for Defense Information.)

Iraq's method of attack in 1987 appeared to be generally the same as that employed in previous years. Most of Iraq's reported attacks on shipping were carried out by missile-armed jet aircraft against ships near Kharg Island, in the waters to the south of the island, and eventually in the vicinity of Sirri and then Larak Island. Attacking ships near Larak, in the Strait of Hormuz, required in-flight refueling.

The Iraqi Government continued to use terms such as "large naval target" to describe its victims. This suggests that Iraqi pilots in at least some instances continued to fire their missiles from beyond positive visual-identification range, on the basis of radar data alone. This method of attack was implicated in the *Stark* incident.

In the wake of the *Stark* attack, U. S. and Iraqi military officials reportedly worked out procedures to avoid future accidental attacks. As 1988 began, however, U. S. ship commanders in the Gulf were still reporting incidents in which Iraqi planes flew close to U. S. ships. In at least a few of these cases, the Iraqi planes reportedly veered away in response to U. S. warnings only moments before they would have been fired on by the U. S. ships.

Iran's methods of attack, in contrast to Iraq's, showed considerable variety and change over the course of the year. When one tactic proved ineffective or was successfully countered, Iran shifted to another. In addition to speedboats, Iran began to employ surreptitiously laid mines; Chinese-made, shore-based Silkworm anti-ship cruise missiles; and traditional naval gunfire, among other weapons.

Iran's use of traditional moored contact mines appears to have begun in May, in waters close to Kuwait. Minefields were later discovered (the hard way) in the shipping channels west of Farsi Island, and eventually in the Gulf of Oman. The mining campaign apparently tapered off or ended in September, following the attack by U. S. helicopters on the Iranian mine-laying landing craft *Iran Air*.

Iran reportedly obtained its Silkworm missiles in late 1986 or early 1987, and test-fired one in February from Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz. With their 50-nautical mile range, 1,100-pound warheads, and fair sea-skimming ability, the Silkworms were seen as a major new threat to shipping in the Gulf. The Iranians did not begin to employ the missiles, however, until September 1987. When they did begin to fire them, it was not from reported installations on the Iranian side of the Strait of Hormuz, but from sites on Iraq's Fao Peninsula, which Iran captured from Iraq in early 1986. The targets were Kuwait's coastal areas and offshore oil-loading facilities.

Iran's attacks in 1987, as in previous years, were generally interpreted as tit-for-tat responses to Iraqi attacks, though the heavy pace of attacks at times made the pattern difficult to discern. In general, Iran continued its pattern of exercising substantial care in positively identifying most of its targets before firing on them. In January 1988, however, there were two embarrassing incidents in which Iranian forces, apparently seaborne Iranian Revolutionary Guards, attacked ships serving Iranian ports. For some, the two mistaken attacks highlighted a division between the personnel of the regular Iranian Navy, which are generally deemed to be professionals under the effective control of the central government in Tehran, and the Revolutionary Guards, who are seen as less predictable and not always under complete central-government control.

To evade identification and attack by Iranian forces, neutral merchant ships in 1987 tried a variety of tactics. Some tried to slip through the Strait of Hormuz on their way into the Gulf at night, when the Iranian capability to attack ships is curtailed. Others, upon being challenged by Iranians at sea, attempted to ignore the challenge or misled the Iranians about their

intended ports of call. One ship carried a false name on her hull. The Iranians, however, either saw through or rapidly caught onto these tactics.

A final option was to remain in close proximity to Western naval vessels, preferably by joining a Western-led convoy traveling through the Gulf. By the end of the year, it was reported that some British and French ship commanders were tacitly allowing some non-British and non-French-flag ships to join the tail ends of some of their convoys. In some instances, this offered real protection from attack.

To evade attack by Iraqi active-radar-guided missiles, ship operators in 1987 reportedly explored the use of towed, radar-deflecting decoys and other passive countermeasures. Iran reportedly deployed decoy barges around Kharg Island some time back, and Kuwait reportedly deployed a group of barges around its offshore oil-loading complex late in 1987. The degree of use and effectiveness of these countermeasures was difficult to determine, but in December it was reported that a Silkworm missile fired at the Kuwaiti offshore oil-loading complex might have been successfully lured away from the complex by one of the surrounding decoy barges.

By the end of the year, comparisons were being made between the tonnage of shipping attacked in the tanker war and the tonnage of merchant shipping sunk in World War II. By one counting, more than 30 million tons of shipping had been damaged in the Gulf from 1981 through the latter part of 1987. The United Nations listed six ships as sunk in 1987, compared with two in 1986, none in 1985, and three in 1984. Another three dozen or more have been declared total losses. As mentioned above, attacks in 1987 led to scores of casualties. They also prompted a further increase in shipping insurance rates.

A cluster of three Iranian attacks on neutral-flag crude carriers in December reportedly endangered Kuwait's ability to meet some of its contracts for delivering crude oil to Europe and the Far East. (The 11 reflagged Kuwaiti ships being protected by U. S. forces carry mostly refined products or liquefied natural gas. Kuwait still relies on other ships for exporting most of its crude oil.) Attacks on ships steaming to or from Kuwaiti ports by one report jumped from 10 in 1986 to 40 in 1987. Sixteen of those attacks, by another counting, occurred after the onset of the U. S. escort operation.

These facts notwithstanding, the tanker war in general has yet to significantly curtail Gulf oil exports or substantially increase world oil prices. In part, this reflects both a greater reliance by the Gulf Arab states on overland pipelines, and an ample supply of oil from non-Gulf sources on the world market. It also reflects the fact, however, that only a small portion of Gulf shipping is coming under attack. Thousands of ships transit the Strait of Hormuz each year, and scores can be found in the Gulf's waters on a given day. Somewhere between 1% and 2% of these are deemed to have come under attack. Figures for the total tonnage of damaged shipping can be misleading, because many of the attacks have inflicted relatively minor (or at least repairable) damage on large tankers with six-digit displacements.

The Reagan administration worked out the basic details of the plan to escort the reflagged tankers in talks with Kuwait in the early months of 1987. The administration informed Congress and then the public about the operation in the latter part of March, and initiated the first convoy on 21-22 July. By the end of the year, 23 escorted transits involving a total of 56 ships were reported to have been completed. The above-normal cost of U. S. operations in and around the Gulf (which include, but are not limited to, the escorting of the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers) was estimated at \$69 million for fiscal year 1987, and \$10 million to \$15 million per month in fiscal year 1988.

Table 7 presents a chronology of selected events in the Gulf in 1987 involving U. S. forces, as reported in the press. In addition to the events listed, two other dates are worth noting. On 21 August, the administration announced the creation of the Joint Task Force Middle East, a new command for directing U. S. forces in the Persian Gulf/Gulf of Oman/Northern Arabian Sea area. And on 25 August, the administration announced that U. S. military personnel serving in the Gulf area would be eligible to receive an extra \$110 per month in danger pay.

Table 7. Events in the Persian Gulf in 1987 Involving U.S. forces

Date	Events
17 May	Iraqi missile attack on USS <i>Stark</i> (FFG-31).
25 May	U. S. Navy warships escort a Kuwaiti-flagged freighter carrying U. S. arms to Bahrain.
21-22 Jul.	First U. S.-escorted convoy of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, including the <i>Bridgeton</i> , begins.
24 Jul.	<i>Bridgeton</i> hit and damaged by mine about 20 miles west of Farsi Island.
30 Jul.	U. S. Navy SH-3 Sea King helicopter crashes into the Gulf while trying to land aboard the <i>La Salle</i> : (AGF-3). Five are rescued; four die.

10 Aug.	<p>F-14 Tomcat from the USS <i>Constellation</i> (CV-64) fires two Sparrow missiles at radar blip thought to be Iranian F-4 showing hostile intent toward U. S. P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft. Neither missile hit any airborne object.</p> <p>The <i>Texaco Caribbean</i>, under charter to a U. S. firm, hits a mine outside of the Persian Gulf in the international anchorage off of Fujayrah. It was the first mine encountered outside the Gulf. Several more were detected over the next two days.</p>
24 Aug.	<p>The USS <i>Kidd</i> (DDG-993) fires warning shots across the bows of two bows when they approach a U. S.- escorted convoy entering the Strait of Hormuz, on its way out of the Gulf. Later, an Iranian warship approaches the convoy. She is met by the USS <i>Jarrett</i> (FFG-33) and <i>Guadalcanal</i> (LPH-7). The Iranian ship turns away after the <i>Jarrett</i> moves between her and the convoy.</p>
21 Sept.	<p>U. S. frigate-based MH-6 Army special operations helicopters attack and capture the <i>Iran Air</i>, an Iranian landing craft being used for covert minelaying, about 50 miles northeast of Bahrain, in an anchorage used by ships, before moving into oil-loading terminals. The next day, SEALs board the ship and take her in tow.</p> <p>Ten mines are found on board. Twenty-six Iranians are rescued; three are reported killed and two are missing. A U. S. Navy frigate fires warning shots across the bow of an Iranian hovercraft that approached the U. s. ships towing the <i>Iran Air</i>.</p>
3 Oct.	<p>Saudi fighter planes and naval forces reportedly turn back a force of about 60 Iranian speedboats heading toward the Saudi offshore oil field at Khafji. Saudis reportedly alerted to speedboats by U. S. forces.</p>
4 Oct.	<p>U. S. Navy helicopter crashes near the <i>La Salle</i> off Bahrain, killing one and injuring three.</p>
8 Oct.	<p>U. S. frigate-based MH-6 helicopters attack four Iranian speedboats about 15 miles southwest of Farsi Island after One of the boats fired on a U.S. helicopter, sinking one and damaging and capturing two. U. S. forces pick up six Iranians, two of whom later die.</p> <p>Also, another U. S. helicopter reports shots fired, not necessarily at it, from Iranian oil platform east of Bahrain.</p>
9 Oct.	<p>Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger reports that parts for U. S.-made Stinger anti-aircraft</p>

	missiles were found on the two speedboats captured in the 8 October attack
14 Oct.	Administration reportedly rejects informal request from on-scene U. S. task force commander to come to aid of some non-U.S.-flag ships under attack.
15 Oct.	U. S.-owned, Liberian-flagged tanker <i>Sungari</i> , at anchor nine miles off Kuwait's Mina al-Ahmadi terminal, hit and damaged by Silkworm missile fired by Iran from, Fao Peninsula. No casualties but ship damaged.
16 Oct.	Reflagged Kuwaiti tanker <i>Sea Isle City</i> , about ten miles off Mina al-Ahmadi, hit and damaged by Silkworm missile fired by Iran from Fao Peninsula. Eighteen injured, including the U. S. master, and ship damaged.
19 Oct.	In response to 16 October missile attack, U. S. destroyers and SEALs shell and blow up Iranian oil platform east of Bahrain, and destroy electronic equipment on nearby platform.
1 Nov.	U. S. frigate fires machine guns at night on boat believed to be Iranian speedboat making hostile high-speed run at U. S. Military Sealift Command cargo ship <i>Patriot</i> as she was being escorted out of the Gulf near the Strait of Hormuz. Boat later discovered to be United Arab Emirates fishing vessel; one Indian fisherman killed; three others on board injured. U. S. Government expresses regret for the incident.
12 Dec.	Helicopters from the USS <i>Chandler</i> (DDG-996) evacuates 11 people from the Cypriot-registered tanker <i>Patriot</i> after the tanker was attacked by Iranian speedboats. A helicopter chartered by CBS News evacuates another 29.
23 Dec.	Norwegian-flagged oil tanker attacked by Iranian force's reportedly turns down offer from U. S. Navy helicopter to help evacuate crew.
24 Dec.	Iranian speedboat fires shots at U. S. frigate-based helicopter, perhaps only to warn it away, when helicopter flies to investigate Liberian-flagged tanker attacked by Iranian speedboats.
25 Dec.	U. S. Navy helicopter evacuates 11 people from South Korean-flagged freighter <i>Hyundai</i> attacked by Iranian frigate about 20 miles northeast of Sharjar, near Abu Musa Island. A helicopter from a British frigate evacuates another nine.

Table 8 presents a listing of U. S. naval forces in the Gulf as of early January 1988. In addition to the platforms listed, an

explosive ordnance team and a team of specially trained bottle-nosed dolphins were reportedly in the Gulf. Operations in the Gulf were also supported by frigate-based Army special-operations helicopters, and U. S. and Saudi AWACS aircraft.

In February 1988, the Reagan administration announced that U. S. forces in the Gulf region would be marginally reduced because the U. S. presence was by then larger than needed to carry out the mission. The amphibious assault ship, which had been serving primarily as a platform for the Navy's mine countermeasures helicopters, rotated out of the area without replacement because the arrival of the Navy's oceangoing minesweepers made the helicopters redundant. The battleship-led formation also left the region without replacement.

Ronald O'Rourke received a B.A. in international studies from the Johns Hopkins University in 1980 (summa cum laude) and an M.A. in international studies from the University's School of Advanced International Studies in 1981 as its Christian A. Herter (valedictorian) Fellow. He has worked as a research assistant on naval integrated logistics support (U.S.) issues for American Management Systems, Inc. of Arlington, Va., and as a consultant on defense issues for then-Governor Pierre S. du Pont IV of Delaware. Since 1984, he has been a naval affairs analyst for the Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress. He has written numerous reports and articles on naval affairs, including two articles, coauthored by Alva Bowen, then also with CRS, for the 1985 and 1986 Naval Review issues, and the CRS report, "Nuclear Escalation. Strategic Antisubmarine Warfare, and the Navy's Forward Maritime Strategy.

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