



International Boundary Study

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Iran – Turkey Boundary

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IRAN - TURKEY BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Iran - Turkey boundary is 310 miles in length.¹ It begins in the north at the junction of the Aras (Araxes) River with the Kara Su and follows the thalweg, or main channel, of the Kara Su (Qareh Su) to the northwest for 15 miles. It then swings southwest and west for 55 miles, skirting Mt. Ararat before turning south to meander for 240 miles across the highlands of Kurdistan to the junction with the northeastern border of Iraq.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geographical

The area through which the Iran - Turkey boundary passes is composed largely of mountains, rising in places to over 10,000 feet. In the extreme north are lava plains in the vicinity of Mt. Ararat (Agri Dagi); below 39° N. latitude most of the uplands are igneous in nature, although there are extinct volcanic cones here as well. The plateau area in the central and southern regions of the boundary is over 6,000 feet in elevation and is deeply dissected by streams flowing west to Lake Van (Van Golu) or via the Great Zab River to the Tigris, or east to the Aras River or Lake Reza'iyeh (formerly called Lake Urmia). Above the plateau rise a series of mountain blocs, culminating in Turkey's Resko Tepe (13,800 feet). A few miles east of the boundary, elevations drop rapidly to the lowlands surrounding Lake Reza'iyeh 4,000 feet high, while 50 miles to the west a narrower belt of lowlands lies at the eastern end of Lake Van at 5,700 feet.

Average temperatures are high in summer and well below freezing in winter. Annual precipitation is less than 20 inches, except in the mountains south of 38° N. latitude. The predominant vegetation is grass or low bush and forests occur only in sheltered valleys. Good soils are concentrated in the river valleys, in the lowlands around Lakes Reza'iyeh and Van, and in the longitudinal valley northwest of Lake Reza'iyeh in which is located the Iranian town of Khvoy. Most agriculture is carried on under irrigation, the leading crops being grain, cotton, tobacco, and fruits.

The Iran - Turkey boundary passes through an area traditionally inhabited by Kurds, a people of Iranian stock who, like the Ottoman Turks and the Arabs, are Sunni Moslems, but who speak a distinctive language related to Iranian. There are perhaps 800,000 Kurds in northwestern Iran, and just under two million in eastern Turkey. The Kurds have tended to resist assimilation into any particular nation and have remained largely rural or semi-rural, engaged in grazing of sheep and cattle, or in agriculture in the small villages. Many are semi-nomadic, moving their animals to mountain pastures in summer and back to the lowland villages in winter; at times, these movements carry them across the international

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

boundary. Combined with the Kurds are Turks and Iranians, on their respective sides of the boundary, who are settled in the larger towns and villages or in areas of extensive agricultural production, as about the shores of Lake Reza'iyeh.

Although there are many small villages in the border area, population densities are not high, averaging in the uplands less than 25 persons per square mile. In Turkey, the principal city is Van (22,000) located 45 miles west of the boundary, while in Iran it is Reza'iyeh, 25 miles east of the boundary, with 68,000 people. Other towns in Turkey close to the boundary are Dogubayazit (7,000) and Colemerik (4,250); Iranian towns include Maku (5,300), Khvoy (35,000) and Shapur (13,000). The only major highway crossing the boundary is in the north between Dogubayazit and Maku. This highway turns south in Iran to follow the boundary 20 to 30 miles to the east, connecting with Khvoy and Reza'iyeh. In Turkey there is a highway through Van that skirts the eastern end of the Lake; otherwise in the border area, there are only second- and third-class roads, a number of which cross the boundary, connecting small villages with one another. The nearest railroads are from the Iranian - Soviet border south through Tabriz, passing east of Lake Reza'iyeh, or from Soviet Armenia across eastern Turkey, 100 miles northwest of the Iran - Turkey boundary.

Agriculture and grazing are the predominant economies both in the Turkish and Iranian border districts. Southeastern Turkey is one of the most remote and least developed parts of the nation. In Iran, the agricultural regions around Reza'iyeh, Shapur, and Khvoy are within 20 miles of subsistence agriculture. Nothing has been done in the border region to harness the rivers for hydroelectric power, and the only use made of them is for irrigation projects.

B. Historical

A boundary separating the Turkish and Persian empires, located much as it exists today, was laid down in 1639 between the Aras River and the Persian Gulf. This boundary divided the Kurds, who had inhabited the upland areas north of Mesopotamia for at least 3,000 years and who had been virtually independent of foreign control between the 11th and 16th centuries.

During the next two centuries, however, little was done to implement the 1639 Treaty and it was only under pressure from Great Britain and Russia in the 19th century that the governments of Turkey and Persia agreed to stabilize boundary conditions in the uplands between the two countries. In 1843, a mixed commission, including representatives from Great Britain and Russia, was appointed to adjudicate the Turkish - Persian boundary, a move that led in 1847 to the Treaty of Erzerum, whereby the limits of the two empires were vaguely defined, and a second commission (again consisting of representatives of the four nations) was appointed to accurately delimit the boundary.

From 1848 - 52, the commission carried out surveys of the border area but its work was interrupted by the Crimean War (1853 - 56). For 13 years, following the War, the representatives worked to prepare maps of the boundary, resulting in the appearance, in

1869, of the "Carte Identique", a beautifully-executed but highly-inaccurate map which showed a border zone 25 miles in width, within which the boundary somewhere lay. Nine years later, by the Treaty of Berlin, Turkey agreed to cede to Persia the border area of Qotur (Khotour), although this agreement was not implemented for many years.

No new treaties were concluded on the location of the boundary and it remained in an indefinite state until 1911 when an agreement was signed providing for a mixed commission to establish a definite line based on the 1847 Treaty. This commission held a series of meetings, during which about three-quarters of the Turkish - Persian boundary was redefined, the settlement of the rest being left to be determined on the ground. The November, 1913 Constantinople Protocol embodied the work of the commission, and set up a bi-national group which, by October 1914, had demarcated the entire boundary except for about 40 miles in the neighborhood of Qotur.

World War I interrupted work on the boundary and, with the creation of the British mandate of Iraq in 1920, the Turkish - Persian border was shortened by about three-quarters of its length. Kurdish nationalists launched a revolt in 1925 against the Turkish Government, which, although put down by Turkish forces, led to renewed interest in the boundary with Persia.²

Four years later the Angora (Ankara) Frontier Convention was concluded between Turkey and Iran, providing for a review of their common boundary and the settlement of disputed areas. By the Teheran Convention of 1932 three exchanges of territory were agreed upon, one in the neighborhood of Mt. Ararat in Turkey's favor, a second in the Qotur area in Iran's favor, and a third, near Bajirge, northwest of Reza'iyeh, also in Iran's favor, and a third, near Bajirge, northwest of Reza'iyeh, also in Iran's favor. Small areas were involved in all three cases but they settled points of irritation between the two countries. The boundary was again demarcated and a final agreement in May, 1937, provided for a minor rectification some 25 miles above the southern terminus of the boundary.

Since 1937 there has been little diplomatic activity between the two nations concerning the boundary - a boundary which for three centuries was an almost constant source of dispute. From December 1945 to December 1946, a Kurdish Government, sponsored by the Soviets, existed at Mahabad, Iran, south of Lake Reza'iyeh, but this political movement ended after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran. In contrast with Kurdish groups in Iraq, those in Iran and Turkey have shown relatively little propensity for separatist activities since 1946. The strengthening of relations between Turkey and Iran since World War II was reflected in an agreement signed in 1955 concerning the waters of two streams which rise in Turkey and flow into, and along the border of, Iran. Hydrometric stations for measuring the flow of water on both the Kara Su and Sari Su were provided for in the agreement. The two countries were to have equal rights to the waters of the Kara Su along its entire course, while Turkey agreed to a minimum guaranteed supply of water on the Sari

² Articles 62 - 64 of the Treaty of Sevres (August 10, 1920) provided for an autonomous, and possibly independent Kurdistan with Turkey. This Treaty never came into effect.

Su which must flow toward Iran at all times.

III. BOUNDARY ANALYSIS

The Iran - Turkey boundary begins in the north in the thalweg of the Aras River at the point of its junction with the Kara Su. It follows the thalweg of the Kara Su upstream for 15 miles across a lava plain, then turns southwest for 9 miles in a straight line, after which it curves east of Little Ararat, the lower peak of the Ararat massif. It was in this area that a border change was made in Turkey's favor in 1932, permitting the Turks to occupy the eastern flank of the massif; this flank had in the past been used by Kurdish tribes to organize uprisings against the Turks.

A few miles further on, the boundary is crossed first by the Sari Su and then by the Dogubayazit - Maku highways. Beyond the highway, the boundary follows mountain crests forming the watershed between eastward and westward-flowing streams, with two exceptions. The first is in the vicinity of Qotur where two tributaries of the eastward-flowing Qotur Chai rise on the Turkish side of the boundary; the second, north of Reza'iyeh, involves two tributaries of the eastward-flowing Nazlu Chai, which also rise on the Turkish side of the boundary. For a distance of four miles, the boundary actually follows one of the tributaries of the Nazlu Chai. In both of these areas border corrections were made in Iran's favor in 1932. At its southern terminus, the boundary crosses the summit of Kuh-e-Dalamper to meet boundary stone No. 99 of the Turkish - Iraq border.

IV. TREATIES

The general location of the present Iran - Turkey boundary was decided upon in 1639, but despite a number of subsequent treaties between the neighboring countries, the exact determination of the boundary was not carried out until 1937.

A. Treaty of Peace and Frontiers between Persia and Turkey, signed at Zahab, May 17, 1639.

The boundary between the Turkish and Persian empires was rather generally defined.

B. Treaty of Erzerum, signed between Turkey and Persia, May 31, 1847.

The boundary between Turkey and Persia was again rather vaguely defined, and a mixed committee was established for its delimitation.

C. Treaty of Berlin, signed July 13, 1878 by a group of nations, including Turkey.

Article LX provides that Turkey should cede to Persia the territory of Khotour. Delimitation of the boundary at Khotour was made in a Protocol signed at Sary Kamish, July 27, 1880.

D. Frontier Agreement, signed between Turkey and Persia at Teheran, December 21, 1911.

Article 2 provided that representatives of Turkey and Persia were to establish the boundary, based on the 1847 Treaty, and that a technical commission would demarcate the boundary.

E. Protocol Concerning the Turco-Persian Delimitation, signed at Constantinople between Turkey and Persia, November 17, 1913.

The description of the entire boundary, except for about 40 miles in the Qotur (Khotour) area was agreed upon, and provision was again made for demarcation.

F. Angora Frontier Convention, signed between Turkey and Persia, April 9, 1929.

Article I contained a detailed description of the boundary; Article II called for demarcation, based on the 1913 Protocol.

G. Agreement Respecting the Fixation of the Frontier between Persia and Turkey with Exchange of Notes, signed at Teheran, January 23, 1932.

Article I defined the frontier including changes in the Little Ararat, Khotour, and Bajirge sectors. Article II set up a demarcation commission.

H. Agreement Respecting the Rectification of the Frontier between Iran and Turkey, signed at Teheran, May 26, 1937.

Article I annulled paragraph 8 of Article I of the 1932 Treaty, and substituted a new phrasing regarding the boundary in the southern sector.

I. Iranian-Turkish Protocol on the Use of the Waters of the Sari Su and Kara Su, signed at Ankara, November 18, 1955.

Articles 1 and 2 provided for the establishment of hydrometric stations on both rivers. Article 7 called for a minimum guaranteed supply of water of the Sari Su to flow toward Iran during dry years. Article 10 stipulated that each country shall have equal rights to the waters of the Kara Su. The locations of the boundary was unaffected.

V. SUMMARY

The Iran - Turkey boundary passes through a fairly isolated region, inhabited both in Iran and Turkey by Kurds. The boundary has been demarcated, and there are no major points of dispute regarding it between the two nations. Neither government has shown evidence

of latent claims to territory of the other country.

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Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Geographer, Room 8744, Department of State, Washington 25, D.C. (Telephone: Code 182, Extension 4508).