

The United Nations' Settlement Of The Iraq-Kuwait Border, 1991-1993

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Introduction

"I believe that the work performed by the Commission will have a beneficial effect on the restoration of international peace and security in the area concerned..." wrote United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in presenting the final report of the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Demarcation Commission [UNIKBDC] before the Security Council in New York on 21 May 1993. Surely no-one familiar with the tragic history of the northern Gulf during the last one-and-a-half decades would disagree with such a laudable sentiment.

Ever since the United Nations first announced a detailed land boundary delimitation in mid-April 1992 (or more accurately ever since Kuwait's UNIKBDC representative, Tariq Razouqi, stated somewhat gratuitously two months earlier that "...the demarcation of borders in 1992 will be totally different than 60 years ago"), there has been fairly widespread criticism that the international body was somehow reallocating territory to Kuwait at the expense of Iraq. This is a charge that the United Nations has resolutely denied, most recently in the Secretary-General's same letter of 21 May 1993, when stating that UNIKBDC was "...*simply carrying out the technical task necessary to demarcate for the first time the precise coordinates of the boundary...*".

This note first reviews the decisions of UNIKBDC, since the five-man commission is now regarded by the United Nations to have "*fulfilled its mandate*". It then looks further at the whole question (detailed briefly above) of whether Kuwait's international boundaries have migrated northwards into territory previously supposed to belong to Iraq. The issue of whether UNIKBDC's activities have been limited strictly to demarcation, their original mandate, is then touched upon. Finally, it is asked whether Iraq's traditional defensiveness and restlessness about its lack of frontage on the Gulf is likely to be

assuaged by the recent deliberations of the United Nations.

UNIKBDC fulfils its mandate

When Resolution 833 was passed unanimously by the Security Council on 27 May 1993, formal recognition was given to the coordinates nominated by UNIKBDC as constituting the final configuration of the Iraq-Kuwait boundary. The coordinates had been released for the first time only a week earlier when UNIKBDC's final report was presented by Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali to the Security Council. In accordance with an undertaking given two years earlier by the then Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar when instituting the boundary demarcation commission, the three original sets of these all-important coordinates have been respectively despatched to the national archives in Baghdad and Kuwait and lodged for safe-keeping within the UN Secretariat in New York.

Previous *IBRU Bulletin* articles by both this author and others have reviewed the initial steps taken by the United Nations to finally settle this troublesome territorial limit in the spring of 1991. It should be recalled that Iraq and Kuwait committed themselves irrevocably to the vague colonial boundary delimitation introduced by an exchange of correspondence of the summer of 1932 (but essentially in existence as early as 1913 with the Anglo-Ottoman Convention of that year) with their acceptance in early April 1991 of the Kuwait "ceasefire" resolution (Security Council resolution 687 of 3 April 1991). Technically, in agreeing to this resolution, the two sides (Iraq with evident reluctance) had committed themselves to "*the inviolability*" of the boundary as mentioned in the 1963 agreement between the two states, in which Iraq had recognised formally an independent Kuwait state with its borders for the first time. By agreeing later in April to the

Secretary-General's proposed arrangements for the demarcation of the aforesaid boundary - these were unveiled in his report of 2 May 1993 to the Security Council - Iraq and Kuwait committed themselves to accepting the following:

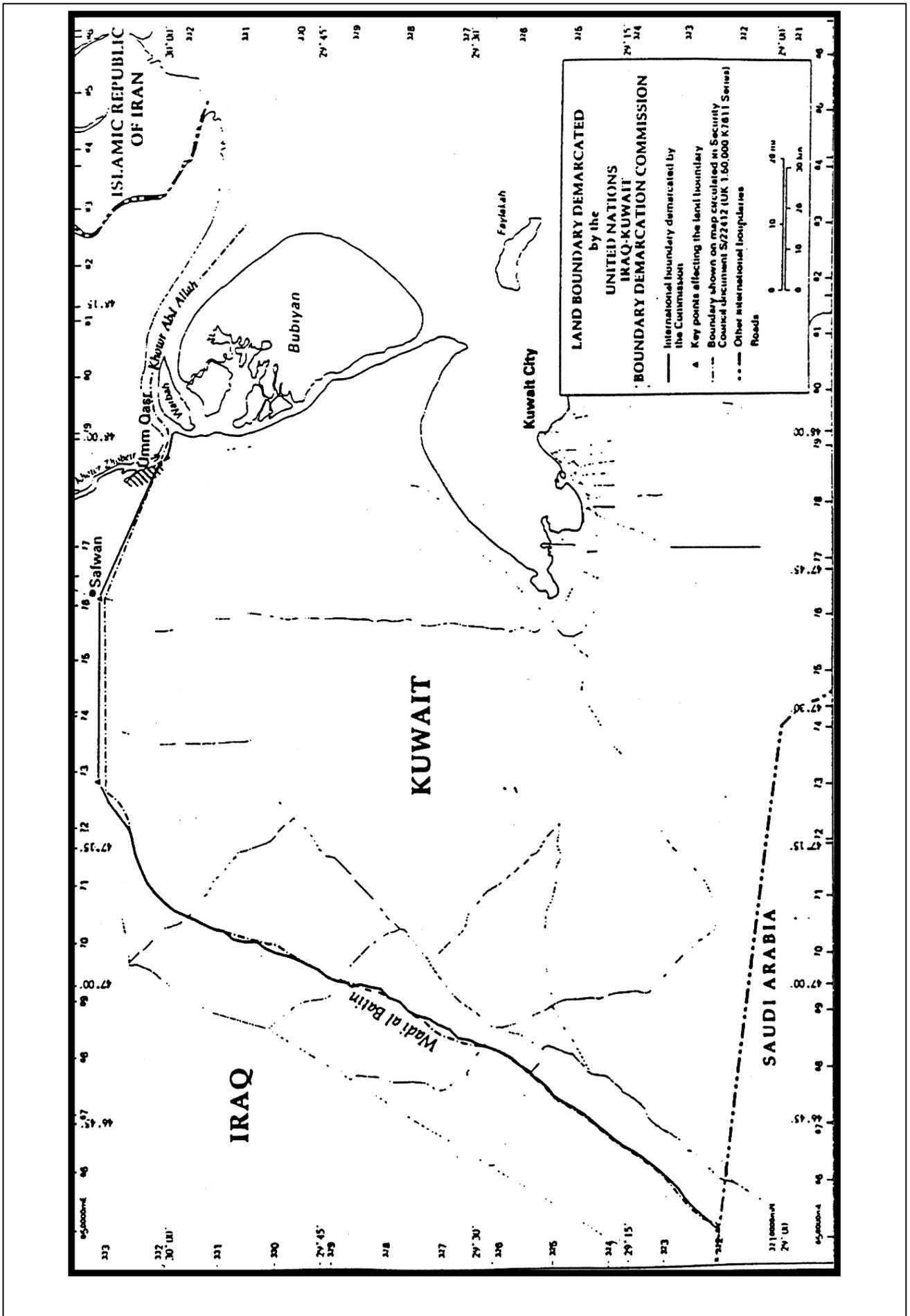
- that UNIKBDC (on which nominees from each side as well as a neutral chairman and 2 neutral cartographers/surveyors were to be represented) was to demarcate in geographical coordinates of latitude and longitude as well as by a physical representation the international boundary between Iraq and Kuwait.
- that UNIKBDC would accomplish the above by drawing upon appropriate material and by utilising appropriate technology.
- that UNIKBDC would carry out physical representation by the emplacement of an appropriate number and type of boundary pillars and arrangements made for maintenance on a continuing basis.
- that UNIKBDC would take its decisions by majority and that they were final.
- that the coordinates established by UNIKBDC will constitute the final demarcation of the international boundary.

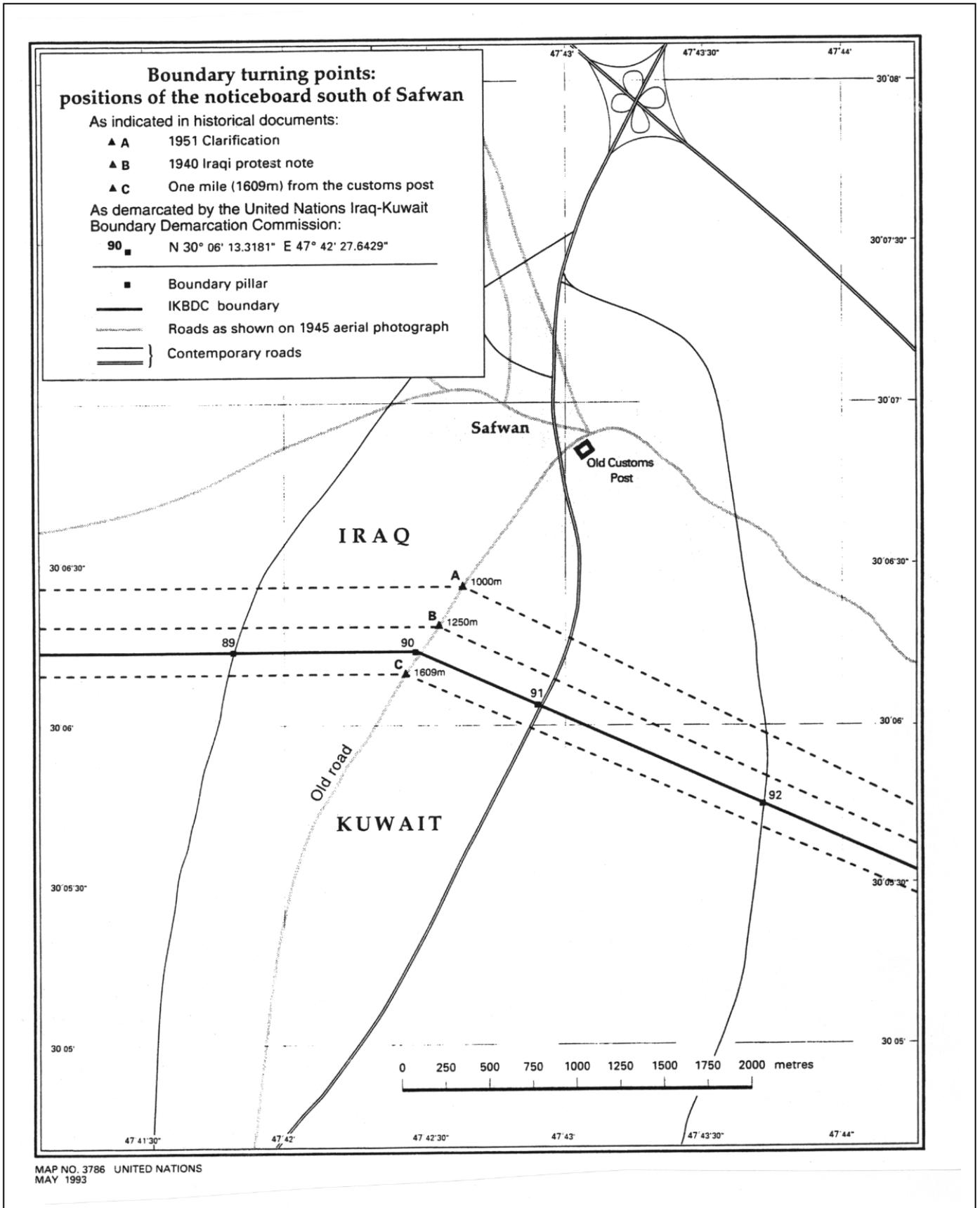
By mid-April 1992, within a year of its formation, UNIKBDC had announced its decision on the course of the Iraq-Kuwait land boundary. The line which they intended to demarcate (this did not actually take place until November 1992) was in effect a refinement of a detailed demarcation proposal submitted unavailingly by Britain (with Kuwait's prior approval) to Iraq in December 1951. Right the way up until its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Iraq made demarcation along the lines of Britain's 1951 interpretation contingent upon Kuwait first agreeing to cede or lease the islands of Warba and Bubiyan. Control of the Kuwaiti islands was sought so as to improve Iraqi access from Gulf waters to its second dry cargo port of Umm Qasr on the Khor Zubair. Now, following the Security Council's approval of the UNIKBDC's decision on the border in the early summer of 1993, Iraq has a

land boundary which corresponds closely to many aspects of Britain's 1951 demarcation proposal. Iraq has demarcated borders with its southern neighbour but, obviously, no concessions on the islands.

The land boundary first announced on 16 April 1992 utilised the thalweg of the Batin in the west, as had done Britain's 1951 interpretation (figure 1). The point south of Safwan was defined as lying 1430 metres south of the compound wall of the old Iraqi customs post. Britain's 1951 demarcation proposal had nominated a point lying 1,000 metres south of the customs post as the nodal point of the border (figure 2). The 1,430 metres distance for the turning point of the border south of Safwan had been arrived at as a compromise between the two most likely locations of the old notice board which had marked the border before the Second World War. To compare the 1951 and 1992 figures here is slightly misleading since it was not until the recent survey operations of UNIKBDC that the exact location of the former Iraqi customs posts could be established and then mapped with any degree of certainty. The final section of the land boundary running from the point south of Safwan in a straight line to the junctions of the Khor Zubair and the Khor Abdullah west of Warba island was defined to follow Britain's 1951 demarcation formula with its following modification - hitting the Khor Zubair south of Umm Qasr (or its geographical extent before the 1960s) and then following the low water springs line of its western shore until the mouth of the water inlet was reached, after which the delimitation ran in a north-easterly direction through water until it met the junction of the Khors (figure 3).

Up until the United Nations' announcement of the land boundary in mid-April 1992, Iraq's representative on the demarcation commission, Riyadh al-Qaisi had participated in its various sessions, even if Baghdad appeared frequently to be going through the motions. In a memorandum delivered to the Arab League as early as September 1991, Kuwait had complained that Iraq had not taken "*any serious steps for the demarcation of official international borders with the state of Kuwait*", while the Iraqi representative





did not even bother to cast a vote against the 16 April 1992 land boundary delimitation. In the early summer Iraq withdrew al-Qaisi from UNIKBDC to protest against its decision on the land boundary. It was obvious, since he never returned to further meetings of the commission, that while Iraq had accepted, albeit with considerable reluctance, the existence and aims of UNIKBDC, it could not live with its findings. The Iraqi National Assembly issued a strongly-worded denunciation of the 16 April 1992 decision on 17 May 1992, which was soon followed by an extraordinarily long letter of protest from its Foreign Minister to the UN Security Council. UN Security Council Paul Noterdaeme warned Iraq that such protestations appeared "*to call into question Iraq's adherence*" to the UN resolution 687. Though Kuwait was generally most satisfied with the land border the UN had nominated for demarcation, the emirate complained about the course of the boundary along the low-water mark of the Khor Zubair's western shore. Its representative had argued unavailingly that the most easterly Safwan-junction of the khors section of the land boundary should follow a straight line with no modifications so that part of the lower course of the Khor Zubair would have fallen within Kuwait. The 1990 British Military Survey maps submitted in late March 1991 as an "*appropriate material*" upon which the United Nations Secretary-General might draw when taking steps to demarcate the border, shared such an alignment for the border in the Khor Zubair.

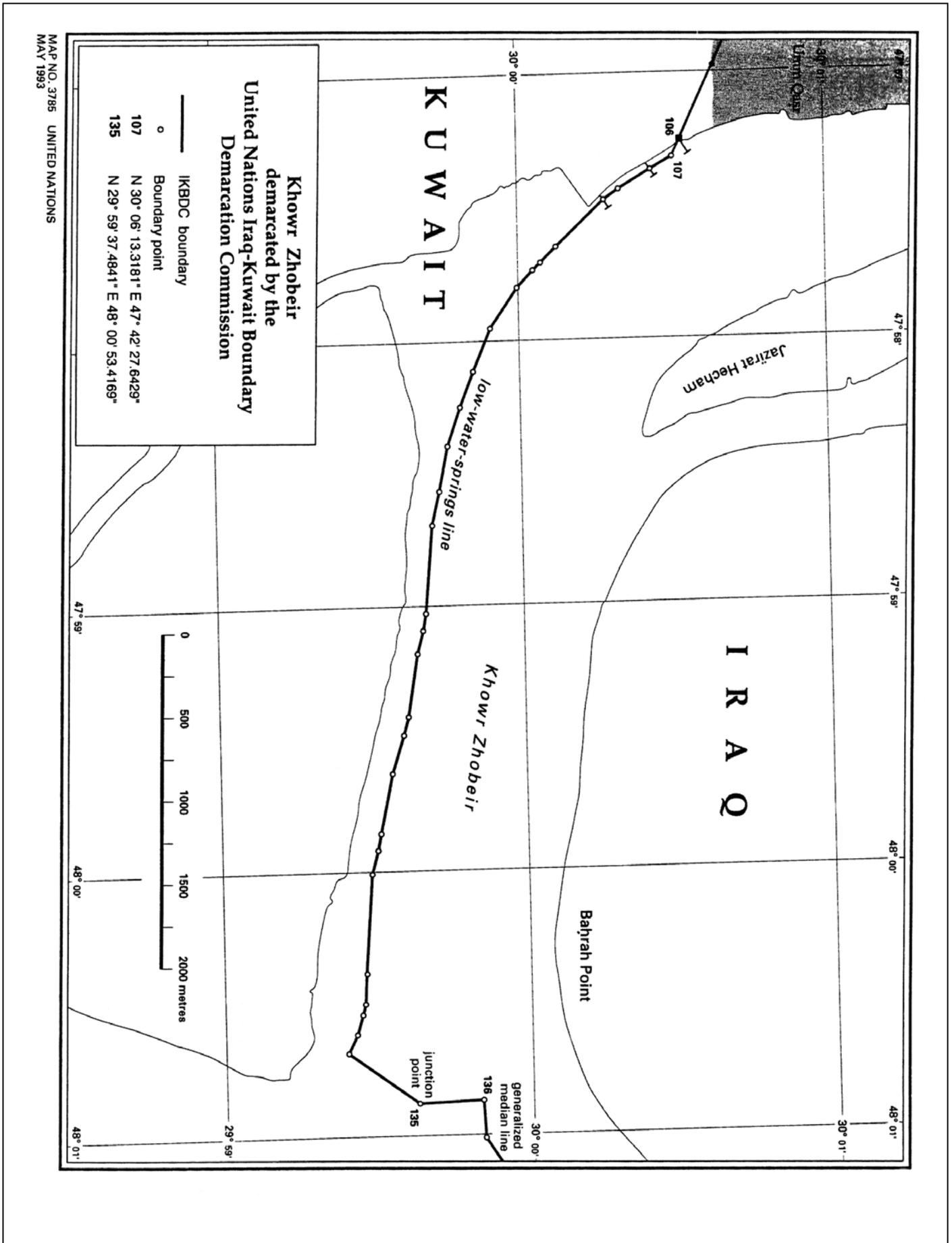
In a substantial interim report dated 24 July 1992, UNIKBDC explained the basis upon which their decisions on the course of the land boundary had been reached. A press release of the same day reaffirmed the land boundary decision first announced in mid-April. This time, however, following widespread criticism from sections of both the Western and Arab media that Iraqi territory had hereby been reallocated to Kuwait (this is a contention which is reviewed in the next section), it was couched in much more defensive terms. UNIKBDC's detailed interim report was presented to the Security Council by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on 19 August 1992. Within a week UN resolution 773 had been passed, welcoming UNIKBDC's decision on the course of the Iraq-Kuwait land

boundary while urging the commission to go on and finally settle water boundaries further east between the two states. By this time, Iraq's historic claim to the entirety of Kuwait had been enthusiastically restated during officially-staged "celebrations" held during the first days of August 1992 on the second anniversary of the invasion of the emirate.

Before the water boundary could be settled - not accomplished until March 1993 because of a number of complicating factors such as the resignation of the Indonesian chairman of UNIKBDC and his replacement during November 1992 by a well-known Greek jurist and also the need for further technical information - the land boundary was demarcated by permanent pillar. On 23 November 1992 the UN announced that the last of 106 boundary markers demarcating the line announced in the spring of that year had been laid. The markers were 1.5 metres high and spaced at intervals of two kilometres. Interestingly, considering Iraq's rejection of the UN boundary decision of 16 April 1992 and the withdrawal of its delegate from future UNIKBDC proceedings, a UN spokesman noted that there had been "*full cooperation from both sides*" in the pillar-laying operation. Well-publicised Iraqi incursions south of the demarcated land border contributed significantly to the West renewing its bombing of southern Iraq on 13 January 1993, albeit in a far more limited form than previously.

The penultimate series of meetings of UNIKBDC held in Geneva during March 1993 saw the median line decided upon as the water boundary between Iraq and Kuwait along the Khor Abdulla (figure 4). Britain's 1951 demarcation proposal had nominated the thalweg as boundary along the Khor but Coucheron-Aamot, a Norwegian hydrographer, had proposed a median-line boundary during his study of possible maritime territorial limits for Iraq at the turn of the 1960s.

In deciding upon the median line - perhaps slightly more beneficial to Iraq than would have been a thalweg line, UNIKBDC had been mindful, as stated in UNIKBDC's final report of late May 1993, that "*navigational access should be possible for both States to the various parts of their respective territory bordering the demarcated boundary*". UNIKBDC added that



"the right of access implies a non-suspendible right of navigation for both States".

From a geographical point of view, the completed Iraq-Kuwait boundary as announced by the United Nations, contained one or two anomalies. Firstly, in the west, the Batin, a far from prominent dry wadi, was to be demarcated along the thalweg line (that is the line of continuous deepest soundings), used generally for navigable rivers. Conversely, the Khor Abdullah, a navigable water channel, was to be demarcated along the median line, used generally, following the Versailles treaties of 1919, for non-navigable water courses.

A demarcated boundary constitutes in no way a protected or defended boundary. This is especially so for the new Iraq-Kuwait limit, which, as we have seen, has been marked by pillar since November 1992 at intervals of two kilometres. Kuwait has been considering for some time what type of defences would be most appropriate and effective for what is generally an unpopulated desert border. At the time of UNIKBDC's demarcation late last autumn, there had been some talk of a giant, 15-foot high fence or wall, and altogether more sophisticated combinations such as a fence with rotating laser guns or a barrier supported by ground radar. Current talk from Kuwait is of a nine-foot deep security ditch, to be dug immediately to the south of the demarcated line. The desire on the part of Kuwait for border defences is understandable. Aside from its tribulations from August 1990 to March 1991, there are justifiable fears about continuing Iraqi encroachments over the newly-demarcated boundary. The several hundred UNIKOM (United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission) troops have to stretch themselves thinly over the demilitarised zone which was instituted with the ceasefire resolution (UN resolution 687 of 3 April 1991) and, even then, they possess the mandate only to observe transgressions of the border, not to act upon them. Despite UNIKOM's presence, Iraqi and Kuwaiti civil authority begins and ends at the border. There is widespread belief that most of the Westerners arrested and imprisoned in the last year by Iraqi troops (most recently the Englishman and German during the early summer of 1993) for "*straying over the*

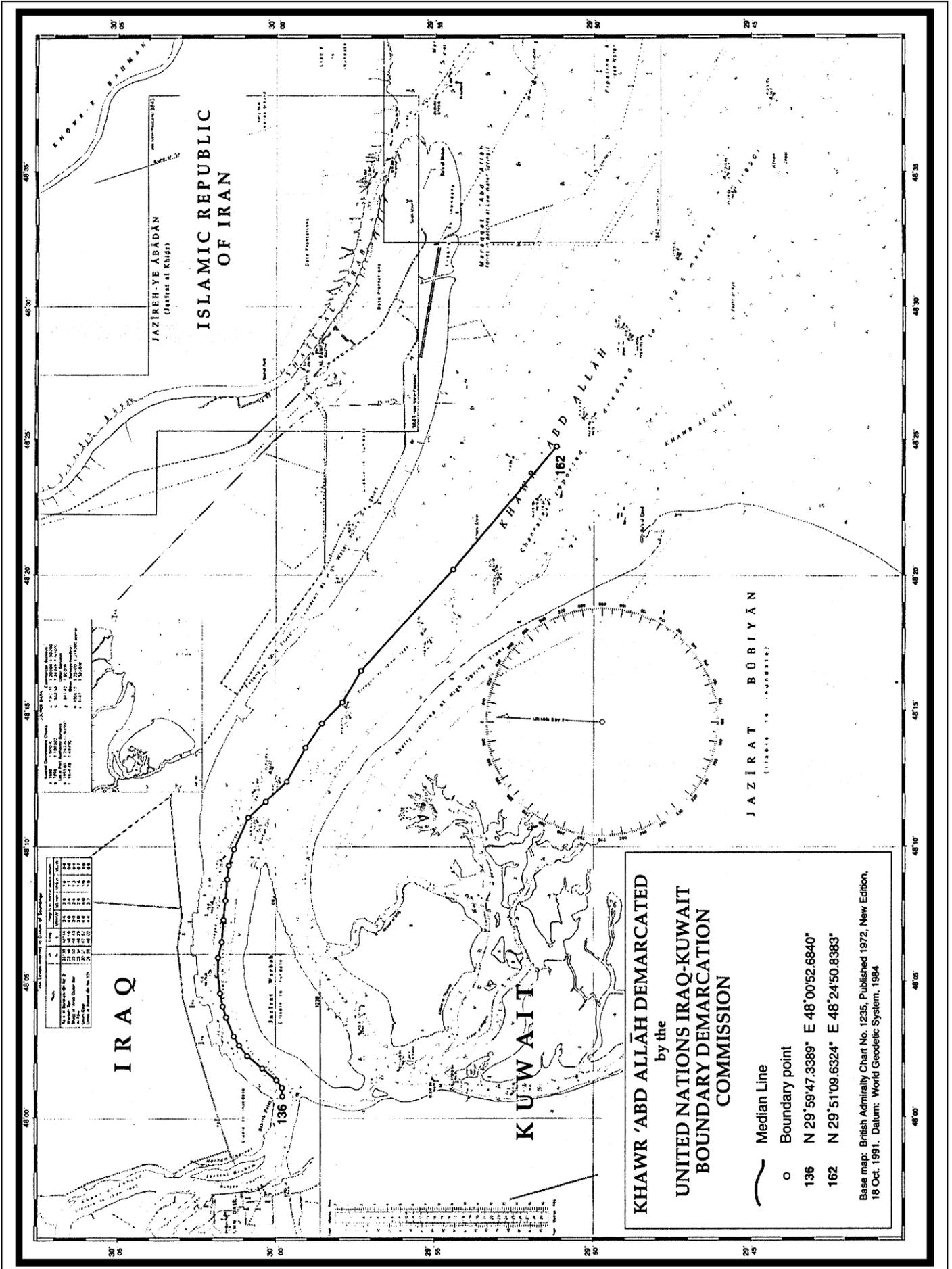
border" were probably apprehended south of the demarcated line within Kuwaiti territory.

The northwards migration of Kuwait's international boundaries with the UN announcement of April 1992

Numerous factors have contributed to the widespread belief that the international boundary has moved northwards with the recent UN decision. As stated at the outset, the comments of Tariq Razouqi during February 1992 helped very little. Most important of all has been the little-known difference - certainly before the spring of 1992 - between the notional legal border (i.e., that established by the vague 1932 exchange of correspondence) and the southernmost extent of territory occupied by Iraq up until its move on Kuwait in August 1990.

In late August 1991 the Kuwaiti media had broadcast alarming reports of an armed Iraqi incursion on to Bubiyan island. Though the US and British governments formally upheld the Kuwaiti complaint, UNIKOM reports suggested that the Kuwaiti government's original account of the incident was heavily exaggerated. The significance of the event, characterised by British journalist as "*a shabby episode*", was that the specialised Western media began to doubt the authenticity of Kuwaiti claims concerning Iraqi infiltrations. Hence genuine future violations of Kuwaiti territory were barely reported and the Western media all too readily jumped on Razouqi for his insinuation in February that Kuwait's international borders were moving northwards as a result of UNIKBDC's deliberations. It was certainly not the demarcation commission's mandate or intention to draw a new boundary.

The difference between the de jure and de facto Iraq-Kuwait borders certainly confused the Western media. It was UNIKBDC's mandate to establish and then demarcate the line of the boundary as defined, albeit vaguely, by the 1932 correspondence. One might have expected the commission to come up with a line for what we might term the notional border which corresponded closely to the most detailed clarification of the 1932 definition which had made up until this point, i.e. Britain's 1951



demarcation proposal. As we have seen, UNIKBDC's eventual decision did share important elements of Britain's 1951 interpretation. The trouble was that for nearly 30 years, following the settlement of the "first" Kuwait crisis of 1961, Iraq had extended its administration across the whole length of the notional border with Kuwait to the Arab League Line, a track which ran roughly parallel to it but anywhere up to 2 kilometres further south. This track had been laid down by the British forces stationed to defend Kuwait during the 1961 crisis. It was then used by the Arab League force, who took over responsibility for the defence of Kuwait on Britain's departure later that year, staying until a conducive change in regime in Baghdad early in 1963. On its departure Iraq extended its administration south to the Arab League Line. During the 1960s and 1970s wells were sunk by Iraq at the southern tip of the super-giant Rumaila oilfield directly above this de facto territorial limit and in the period thereafter wells were sunk south of the Arab League line itself (indeed the majority of wells lying nominally within Kuwaiti territory which the Iraqis have been required to abandon in Rumaila's southern tip as a result of the findings of UNIKBDC lie south of the Arab League Line).

The modern port of Umm Qasr, opened in 1961, soon expanded south to the very same Arab League line. Urban sprawl continued further south of the extended Iraqi port unchecked during the 1970s as the Baghdad government strove to change the political geography of the border zone - the most important development was the construction of a naval base with Soviet support in the early 1970s, entirely within Kuwaiti territory according to the 1951 British interpretation of the boundary and modern maps produced of the border. Kuwait, not generally in much of a position to protest against the encroachments of its more powerful northern neighbour, turned a blind eye to such developments. With the UNIKBDC decision on the boundary, Iraq is now required to abandon all infrastructure south of the notional de jure boundary. The implications for Iraq have been most serious in the Rumaila and Umm Qasr regions of the border, though Iraqis farming near the northern Kuwaiti strategic agricultural settlement of Abdaly will also ultimately be required to vacate their land. Kuwait has already

made provisions to compensate Iraqis at Abdaly and within the southern extension of Umm Qasr for their impending removal from Kuwaiti territory.

So, the very fact that nearly half of modern Umm Qasr has been recognised as belonging to Kuwait by the United Nations, seemed to provide those arguing that territory was being reallocated with considerable ammunition. UNIKBDC maintains that its decision on the border has left "*the Umm Qasr port complex and Umm Qasr village within Iraqi territory*". In a strict, historical sense it is correct. Umm Qasr as it existed before 1961 has been recognised as lying within Iraq. The extension of Iraqi infrastructure southwards during the last three decades has been disallowed by the demarcation commission.

Few commentators in the West, with the exception of British journalist Simon Henderson, had picked up upon the fact that Umm Qasr lay half within Iraq and half within Kuwait at the time of the Iraqi invasion. Yet pre-1990 British air charts (tactical pilotage and operational navigation charts) clearly showed much of the modern settlement lying south of the border. Indeed the series of 10 Military Survey maps (1990) provided by the British government to assist the United Nations as "appropriate material" when attempting to finalise the border back in the spring of 1991 showed this very same division of Iraqi old and Kuwaiti new Umm Qasr. It should be noted that the boundary at Umm Qasr as finally decided upon by UNIKBDC is exactly the same as that shown on the 1990 British Military Survey series. The southern half of the modern settlement of Umm Qasr which Iraq has been required to abandon consists, therefore, of its naval base, modern planned and unplanned housing and significant downtown areas.

The British Military Survey maps of 1990 have in themselves confused the issue of de facto and de jure borders still further. This series of maps, compiled from an array of sources including previous maps dating back to the mid-1930s, clarifications of the vague 1932 border definition made over the years - most significantly Britain's 1951 demarcation proposal - and modern surveys necessarily limited to the Kuwaiti side of the border zone, represented the de jure border as the

Military Survey was best able to depict it. There were standard disclaimers concerning the status of international boundaries - even so, as the best set of maps that existed at the time of the Iraqi invasion, UNIKOM's demilitarised zone was measured from the border approximation shown on the Military Survey series - an action which probably prompted an Iraqi complaint of late April 1991 that the United Nations' employment of the British maps was prejudging the course of the boundary before UNIKBDC had even got to work.

With UNIKBDC's interim report of 24 July 1992, a map was released showing the difference between the de jure border as depicted on the 1990 British Military Survey maps and the line decided upon to constitute the final course of the international boundary by UNIKBDC (first announced on 16 April 1992 it will be remembered). It would certainly have been useful had UNIKBDC taken the same opportunity to plot the de facto international boundary as it existed immediately before the Iraqi move on Kuwait (that is the southernmost extent of territory effectively administered by Iraq), but this will have to wait for an official Kuwaiti publication later in 1993. What was surprising about the UN July 1992 map was that for the section from the Batin eastwards to Safwan, UNIKBDC's final decision of 1992 ran parallel but some distance north of the line shown on Britain's 1990 Military Survey maps. There was no dispute over Umm Qasr. Both showed the land boundary meeting the Khor Zubair in exactly the same place, as discussed above. The reasons given to this author for the divergence was simply that inadequate information existed in 1990 to depict the border accurately. After all, UNIKBDC's operations had involved the first survey of both sides of the border zone. The technical support lent to UNIKBDC's deliberations was impressive. In order to produce new and accurate maps of the border, four datum stations, 25 primary control stations and 137 photo control points were established between September and December 1991. Their positions had been respectively determined by GPS and Doppler observations. A series of 31 orthophoto maps was produced at 1:25000 and several more ultimately produced for critical points on the boundary (e.g., Safwan and Umm Qasr) at the smaller scale of 1:7500.

Extensive aerial photography was also undertaken to assist with the preparation of maps - a series at 1:2500 to depict the discontinuity in the Rumaila/Ratqa oilfields and settled areas of the border near Safwan and Umm Qasr: a series taken at a later stage to provide false colour infrared imagery for the determination of the boundary along the low-water spring line for the west bank of the Khor Zubair and the for the determination of the median line along the Khor Abdullah.

There is no reason to doubt the explanation given for the divergence in the de jure boundaries shown by the British Military Survey in 1990 and the line ultimately demarcated by UNIKBDC. It is a pity that it has not dealt more fully with the disparity however. At a time when sections of the international media were convinced that Iraq's southern boundaries were being foreshortened, the map enclosed within UNIKBDC's interim report of July 1992 only intensified arguments, especially since the point at which the 1990 Military Survey map and the UNIKBDC's demarcated line diverged most coincided with the disputed Rumaila/Ratqa oilfield.

Once the international media had become aware of the disparity between de jure and de facto borders, there were calls, many of them articulate and intelligent, both preceding and following UNIKBDC's announcement of the land boundary on 16 April 1992, for the Iraq-Kuwait demarcation team to show more flexibility in the execution of their tasks, to come up with a line which was "*politically defensible*" rather than valid in a strict technical and historical perspective. It was suggested that this "*politically defensible*" line might extend southwards of the de jure border at Umm Qasr and Rumaila so that Iraq need not abandon its oil wells and infrastructural development. The criticism seemed flawed and unfair. UNIKBDC was only carrying out its mandate when finalising the existing boundary in law as previously defined by the 1932 exchange of letters. By extension, it had to ignore any temporary or de facto lines. Even had the criticism of the UN line been fair, it had certainly come too late. The time for debating the wording of the boundary clauses in the settlement of the Kuwait crisis was March 1991, as UN resolution 687 was being drawn up. Yet there were no criticisms then in the Western

broadsheets. The belated calls of spring 1992 for UNIKBDC to recognise the de facto rather than the de jure border were, of course, enthusiastically received in Baghdad. Unequivocal external support for its argument that UNIKBDC's verdict was an unjust and unwarranted imposition probably encouraged Iraq to withdraw al-Qaisi from the demarcation commission as quickly as it did. Certainly, Iraqi Foreign Minister Ahmad Husain had few difficulties in finding sufficient supporting (or apparently supporting) "neutral" opinion to fill nearly half of his extraordinarily long letter to the UN Secretary-General of 21 May 1992, protesting against UNIKBDC's decision on the land border.

Delimitation or demarcation?

UNIKBDC's mandate was to demarcate an existing boundary delimitation. Demarcation is the comparatively easy process of physically representing on the ground a detailed definition of the boundary on paper, i.e. a delimitation. The constant confusion between the terms in the media coverage of UNIKBDC's tribulations is, for a geographer, somewhat irritating. That the terms were, in their strictest sense, evidently confused in the directives originally given by the UN Secretary-General to UNIKBDC (see earlier in this note) and then within the demarcation commission's May 1993 final report itself is a little more surprising. UNIKBDC's terms of reference had been to "*demarcate in geographical coordinates of latitude and longitude as well as by a physical representation the international boundary between Iraq and Kuwait...*". Boutros Boutros-Ghali's cover to the final report confirmed that UNIKBDC had fulfilled its mandate since it had "*demarcated in geographic coordinates the boundary set out in the (1963) Agreed Minutes*". At the risk of sounding pedantic, how can a border be marked out on the ground by anything other than a physical object?

Perhaps a more important question to be asked is whether the vague 1932 definition of the border constituted a delimitation which could then be demarcated. As far as the land border was concerned, there can be no doubt that most of UNIKBDC's energies were taken up with clarifying the delimitation introduced by the 1932

exchange of correspondence. It is possible that some geographers would have argued that the Iraq-Kuwait border had only been allocated by the 1932 definition. Allocation is the first stage of an international boundary's evolution, where the powers responsible merely allocate a strip of territory within which a boundary will, in future, be delimited more precisely. Whether the 1932 definition was an allocation or a vague delimitation of territory, at least UNIKBDC had something to go on. The 1932 definition, which became known as the delimitation formula, ran as follows:

"From the intersection of the Wadi-el-Audja with the Batin and thence northwards along the Batin to a point just south of the latitude of Safwan; thence eastwards passing south of Safwan wells, Jebel Sanam and Um Qasr leaving them to Iraq and so on to the junction of the Khor Zobeir with the Khor Abdullah."

Whether the 1932 definition provided a delimitation for the water boundaries between Iraq and Kuwait is much more open to question. All the 1932 formula effectively stated was that Warba and Bubiyan islands belonged to Kuwait - "*The islands of Warbah, Bubiyan, Maskan (or Mashjan), Failakah., Auhah, Kubbar, Qaru and Umm-el-Maradim appertain to Koweit*". With all due respect this is rather like saying that the English Channel was delimited by a French coastline in the east and an English coastline in the west. Although UNIKBDC concluded, probably with good reason, "*that all the historical evidence pointed to the existence of a general agreement between the two countries on a boundary in the Khowr Abd Allah*", the 1932 definition said nothing of any line, however vague. It took until Britain's first clarification of the boundary (the demarcation proposal of October 1940 which was succeeded by the December 1951 proposal already mentioned) for an actual line to be nominated for the Khor Abdullah. This ran along the thalweg (though it will be recalled that UNIKBDC eventually plumped during March 1993 for the median line as the water boundary. Iraq never accepted either of the British demarcation proposals. In November 1992 former Indonesian Foreign Minister Mr Kusuma-Atmadja resigned ostensibly

for personal reasons from his post as Chairman of UNIKBDC, to be replaced by the Greek jurist, Mr Nicolas Valticos. There were rumours circulating at the time that he was unhappy about UNIKBDC's mandate and the finalisation of water boundaries, that he believed insufficient historical evidence existed upon which to draw a boundary line. Certainly there seemed to be no delimitation to be demarcated. UNIKBDC's final reported itself stated that "[t]he boundary line in the Khowr Zhobeir was not physically demarcated. Instead it was demarcated by geographic coordinates determined photogrammetrically using false colour infrared photography".

A big garage with a small door

It is very much to be hoped, as Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated on 21 May 1993 (quoted as the first sentence of this piece), that "...the work performed by the Commission will have a beneficial effect on the restoration of international peace and security in the area concerned...". A few ominous developments suggest, however, that in the medium to long-term the last may not have been heard of the islands and access question. The very groups that the West would rather see ruling in Baghdad rejected the UNIKBDC announcement of 16 April 1992 on the course of the land boundary with some unanimity. The United States government has been surprised that its subsequent efforts to persuade Iraqi opposition groups to accept the UNIKBDC verdict on the boundary have been resisted so strongly.

The acid test for the newly-demarcated Iraq-Kuwait international boundary will probably come at some point in the future, when UNIKOM no longer polices the border zone, when relations with Iran next sour seriously over the status of the Shatt al-Arab - traditionally the cue since the late 1930s for Iraq to press Kuwait for concessions on Warba and Bubiyan. In the summer of 1993 the Shatt al-Arab dispute remains dormant though far from being finally settled. It could, like that other established cyclical Irano-Arab territorial dispute over Abu Musa and the Tunbs, be resurrected at short notice. If and when it is, Iraq may look to compensate itself for any temporary loss of the Shatt by trying to expand once again at Umm Qasr on the Khor Zubair.

Clearly territorial instability has characterised the recent history of the northern Gulf. United Nations peacekeeping forces have until very recently manned two disputed international boundaries, dispute over which was, nominally at least, an important factor in Iraq's decision to prosecute war with Iran during 1980 and its attempt to annex Kuwait ten years later. While UNIIMOG left the Iran-Iraq border early in 1991, satisfied that it had fulfilled its mandate, UNIKOM continues to be kept busy by Iraqi incursions into the demilitarised zone along the Iraq-Kuwait border.

Territorial stability will probably only come to this part of the world when Iraq reconciles itself to its disadvantageous position at the Head of the Gulf, when it no longer perceives itself as "squeezed out" of this water body and when it no longer continues to expect Kuwait to compensate for its geostrategic misfortune. For the long-term stability of the northern Gulf it is perhaps more important that Iraq loses its negative consciousness surrounding access than it is that the Baghdad government has demarcated boundaries at the Head of the Gulf. Whether or not access has been a genuine problem is less important than the fact that successive Baghdad governments and, to an extent, Iraqi public opinion also, has always believed it to be so. Even had the United Nations demarcation team possessed a different mandate to confirm the de facto rather than the historically-vague de jure Iraq-Kuwait border, Iraq would still in the words of a prominent Kuwaiti Minister of the early 1970s, feel akin to a "big garage with a very small door".

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