



International Boundary Study

No. 25 (Revised) – February 28, 1978

Iran – U.S.S.R. Boundary

(Country Codes: IR-UR)

**The Geographer
Office of the Geographer
Bureau of Intelligence and Research**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
I. Boundary Brief.....	2
II. Background.....	2
Geographical.....	2
Historical.....	4
III. Boundary Analysis	6
IV. Treaties	8

IRAN - U.S.S.R. BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary is approximately 1690 kilometers (1,050 miles) long, and there is no line in the Caspian Sea. The boundary to the west of the Caspian Sea is 699 kilometers (434 miles) in length and to the east of it 991 kilometers (616 miles). Eastward from the tripoint with Turkey, the line follows the thalweg of the Aras and then passes southeastward across the Dasht-e Moghan to the Caspian Sea. East of the Caspian Sea, the boundary crosses salt steppes, follows a dry channel of the Atrek and then continues along the thalweg of the Atrek. Eastward and southeastward from the Atrek, it next utilizes the ridges of the Koppeh Dagh. From near Sarakhs the line follows the thalweg of the Harirud southward to the Afghanistan tripoint.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geographical

The western part of the Iran - Soviet border area consists largely of uplands, rising to nearly 13,000 feet in the Zurskiy Khrebet (mountains) of Soviet Armenia and over 1,000 feet in the Qareh Dagh massif of northwestern Iran. The highlands are largely volcanic, with extinct cones, lava plains, mineral springs, and occasional earthquakes. In northwestern Iran, average elevations are from 3,000 to 5,000 feet. This area is comprised of rolling, treeless uplands with mountain spurs rising above them. Fifty miles south of the boundary is Daryachen-ye Re za' iyeh (formerly called Lake Urmia), a shallow salt lake at 4,300 feet elevation, which has no outlet. In Soviet Armenia, average elevations are from 4,000 to 7,000 feet. The Armenian plateau is more rugged than the Iranian uplands, with more deeply entrenched streams.

The Aras (Araks) valley, skirting south of the Armenian plateau, is bordered by plains generally 10 - 20 miles wide except for short stretches below Jolfa (Dzhul' fa) where the Aras River flows through a narrow gorge. Beyond this gorge the Aras becomes a braided, meandering stream with many islands, gradually widening its bed until it leaves the uplands to form a broad delta in the Kura plain.

Near the Caspian coast are the Talish (Talyshskiye Gory, Kuhha-ye Tavalesh) Mountains, rising to nearly 8,000 feet - an important climatic divide since between this range and the Caspian is the warm, humid Lenkoranskaya Nizmennost (Lenkoran coast).

Climate in the uplands is generally semi-arid with cold winters and warm summers. Precipitation is less than 20 inches annually northwest and north of Daryachen-ye Reza' iyeh, becoming 20 - 30 inches in the highlands farther east. Dry farming is possible in the uplands of northwestern Iran, but in the Aras valley irrigation is necessary. Steep slopes, rather than precipitation, limit agriculture in Soviet Armenia. The annual precipitation drops

to less than 15 inches in the Kura lowlands along the Caspian coast, and here are extensive salt flats in the region of the Moghan Steppe. In the extreme southeast, however, precipitation rises to over 40 inches annually, with a monthly temperature range at Lenkoran from 36° F. in January to 75° F. in July. The mountain slopes in this region are covered with hardwood forests.

Much of the border area comprises the ancient region of the Azerbaijani although there are other ethnic groups here, including Kurds in the northwest, Armenians, and Talyshes; the latter belong to the Iranian family but speak an independently developed language. Tabriz is the principal city. Located on the eastern border of the lowlands of Daryachen-ye Reza'iyeh, 35 miles from the lake and 50 miles from the Aras, Tabriz is a commercial, communications, and administrative center. It is connected by rail with Tehran to the southeast and with Jolfa to the northwest. Ardabil and Khvoy are smaller Iranian centers, located 20 and 40 miles, respectively, from the boundary. The Soviets have few cities in the border area except for Nakhichevan, capital of Nakhichevanskaya A.S.S.R., and Lenkoran along the Caspian coast.

In Iran there are only a few villages and one town (Astara) on or immediately adjacent to the boundary, and the Soviet side is also sparsely populated. A Soviet rail line parallels the Aras on its left bank, and another line runs south along the Caspian coast through Lenkoran to Soviet Astara. Only at Jolfa does the Iranian rail system approach the boundary. A Soviet highway also follows the Aras, but there are no highways on the Iranian side except at Jolfa and for a few miles along the Astara River in the southeast.

East of the Caspian, the boundary passes through arid plains and semi-arid uplands. Immediately adjacent to the Caspian are salt flats, lying below sea level, in the area of what once was the delta of the Atrek. East of the flats is a low, sandy plain bounded on the south and east by mountains. The Reshteh-ye-Alborz (Elburz Mountains) rise to 13,000 feet south of the lowlands; to the east, the Koppeh Dagh range reaches 8,700 feet.

The international boundary runs east and southeast along the Koppeh Dagh system. The mountains are largely barren or covered with short grasses; only in scattered areas are there forests. Annual precipitation on the northward-facing slopes ranges from 10 to 16 inches, decreasing to less than 8 inches away from the uplands. Along the north side of the northern foothills are fertile alluvial fans formed by descending streams. In this area, a series of oases stretches northwest - southeast at the foot of the mountains, including Bakharden, Geoktepe, and Ashkhabad, administrative and commercial center for the Turkmen S.S.R. These oases are joined both by a highway and by the Trans-Caspian rail line, terminating at Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea. North of the oases stretches the desert Peski Karakumy (Kara-Kum Desert).

Across the mountains in Iran, precipitation is less than on the northern slopes; vegetation is sparse, except for grasses on the higher slopes. A longitudinal depression stretches northwest - southeast along the Koppeh Dagh. The western part of this depression is occupied by the Atrek system; here are the towns of Shirvan and Bojnurd. Quchän, farther

east, is watered by streams from the Koppeh Dagh. Still farther east in the valley are tributaries of the Harirud system. Here is located the city of Mashhad (Meshed), holy place of the Shia Muslims and the third largest city in Iran.

In the extreme east, the boundary turns away from the mountains, crossing the foothills to the Harirud, which flows northward from Afghanistan to lose itself in the sands of the Peski Karakumy. This river marks the boundary in its final sector to Afghanistan.

Excluding the Mashhad area, most of the border area east of the Caspian Sea is sparsely inhabited. Population densities are even less on the Soviet side of the boundary. The people are mostly Turkmen in the Soviet boundary area and are mixed Turkmen and Iranian in Iran. Away from the oases in the foothills, there are only scattered villages; many areas near the boundary are uninhabited.

The Soviets' Trans-Caspian railroad parallels the boundary in its central sector for about 250 miles, and a highway crosses the Koppeh Dagh, connecting Ashkhabad with the Iranian town of Quchan, northwest of Mashhad. Mashhad itself is connected by rail with Tehran and by highway with Quchan and Bojnurd. A Soviet highway follows the western part of the boundary, crossing the Atrek delta to connect with the Iranian highway net. At Lotfabad, southeast of Ashkhabad, the boundary comes within a mile of the Trans-Caspian railroad, and a road here crosses the boundary between the two countries. Both Soviet and Iranian roads also follow the Harirud in the sector where it forms the boundary.

B. Historical

The history of the northern boundaries of Iran has been one of constant political pressures. In 1801, the Russians crossed the Caucasus; by the Treaty of Gulistan (1813), they acquired the Kura lowlands. The Azerbaijani, who in the Middle Ages had ruled a prosperous state in Transcaucasia, were divided by the new boundaries. In 1828, following a war with Persia, the Russians acquired Armenia and Nakhichevan through the Treaty of Turkmanchai, thus establishing the Aras as the international boundary. One clause in the treaty gave Russia a semi-circular bridgehead of territory along the right bank of the Aras opposite the fort of Abbasabad, near Nakhichevan', a concession the Russians held until 1893. During the past century there has been little change in the Russo - Iranian boundary west of the Caspian, other than the Abbasabad bridgehead and some minor changes made in 1957 and 1970.

East of the Caspian, Russian expansion was not felt by Iran until 1869. By that time, Russian conquests of Muslim groups east of the Caspian brought them close to settled Iranian territory, and an agreement in that year confirmed the lower Atrek as the common boundary between Russia and Persia. Twelve years later, the boundary was extended eastward to the region of Badaburmaz, east of Ashkhabad, and in 1893 the remainder of the boundary was delimited to the tripoint with Afghanistan. Several protocols, following both the 1881 and the 1893 treaties, provided for minor exchanges of territory and for more exact delimitation.

During the next 60 years, the boundary remained relatively unchanged. However, an Anglo - Russian Convention in 1907 made a de facto division of Persia with Russia in control in the north, the United Kingdom in control in the south, and a neutral zone between the spheres of influence of the two countries. By the Moscow Treaty of 1921, the oasis of Firyuza (Firuze), which the Russians had received in 1893, was to be returned to Persia, although actually this exchange never took place. The Russians also agreed to recognize Persia's possession of several small islands off Persia's Astrabad (Gorgán) coast in the southeastern corner of the Caspian Sea, which the Russians had at times used for naval defenses.

During World War II, Iran was again under Russian influence in the north and British influence in the south. In January 1942, the de facto occupation of Iran was acknowledged in a British-Iranian-Soviet Tripartite Treaty. Between December 1945 and December 1946, a Soviet-sponsored autonomous republic existed in northwest Iran. Since that time, the Iranian Government has undertaken to strengthen its ties with the Azerbaijan area in an effort to forestall any future separatist movements in that region.

In December 1954, a convention was signed at Moscow providing for certain boundary rectifications and for the establishment of a bi-national demarcation commission. West of the Caspian, there were boundary changes in Iran's favor in the Moghan Steppe, at Dyman, and at Yedi Evlar at the mouth of the Ástara, the Soviets at Namín. The international boundary was taken as following the thalweg of the Aras, rather than its right (Iranian) bank as provided for in the 1828 Treaty. East of the Caspian Sea, there was provision for a compromise line at the delta of the Atrek. The old boundary followed the main channel to the Caspian Sea but, because of the shrinking of the Caspian, the river's distributaries now lose themselves in the sand some distance inland from the seacoast. Farther east, the Soviets' possession of the oasis of Firyuza was upheld, while near Sarakhs, where the boundary reaches the Harirud, there was a small change in Iran's favor.

By 1957, the boundary west of the Caspian had been demarcated by the mixed commission and provision was made for stone markers to be erected from the Turkish border to the Caspian. A three-meter "no man's land," into which no one might enter, was established on each side of the boundary; in another established on each side of the boundary; in another strip 20 meters wide on both sides of the boundary, only authorized military personnel might enter. A boundary commission is to meet regularly to discuss problems of border control. In the area east of the Caspian Sea, no provisions were made in 1957 to demarcate a line, nor were decisions reached on the question of a boundary or national sovereignty in the Caspian Sea.¹

¹ Two sets of polychrome bilingual (Persian and Russian) maps have been prepared in conformity with the 1957 Demarcation Protocol, at a scale of 1:25,000 for the sector west of the Caspian Sea and at 1:50,000 east of it. A Border River Agreement was also signed on April 11, 1957, which provided for surveys of the Aras and the Atrek.

Signed in Moscow on May 7, 1970, a supplementary protocol to the agreement of 1954 redelimited the Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary in the Aras along the reservoir of the "Araks" Hydro-Electric Station Dam near Nakhichevan' and the reservoir of the Mil' sho-Mugan Water-Intake Dam in the vicinity of Goradiz. In addition to the dam near Nakhichevan', two hydroelectric plants were completed in 1971. Emanating from the Mil' sho Dam completed in 1970 are two major irrigation canals: (1) the Mil' skaya Canal in the U.S.S.R. north of Aras, and (2) the Mugan (Moghan) Canal in Iran south of the Aras.

III. BOUNDARY ANALYSIS

The entire Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary was delimited in 1954, and the part west of the Caspian Sea was demarcated in 1957. The boundary begins in the west at the junction of the Aras and the Rudkhaney-ye Qareh Su (Kara Su) and continues along the Aras for 268 miles, following the thalweg for most of the distance.

For the first 80 miles, the boundary separates the Nakhichevanskaya A.S.S.R. from the Iranian province of Azarbaijan-e Gharbi (west). The "Araks" Hydro-Electric Station

Dam is located in this sector at approximately 39° 05' N. and 45° 24" E. In accordance with Article 2 of the supplementary protocol of 1970, the boundary in the reservoir behind the dam was redelimited for 41 miles by geodesic lines utilizing 14 turning points.

Below the juncture of the Aq Chay with the Aras, the Iranian province of Azarbaijan-e Sharqi (east) lies on the right bank of the latter river. At the Gorge of the Aras, 35 miles below Jolfa, the administrative boundary between the Nakhichevanskaya A.S.S.R. and the Armenian S.S.R. reaches the river. The boundary between the Armenian S.S.R. and the Azerbaijan S.S.R. is 25 miles farther downstream. The Mil' sho-Mugan Water-Intake Dam is located on the Aras between the Azerbaijan S.S.R. and the Iranian province of Azarbaijan-e Sharqi at approximately 39° 26' N. and 47° 23' E. The boundary in the reservoir behind this dam was redelimited by Article 3 of the supplementary protocol of 1970 for 1.95 miles by geodesic lines through four turning points.

At a point in the lower Aras near the Iranian village of Tazeh Kand (Tazakend), the boundary leaves the river and trends southeast across the Dasht-e Moghan for 30 miles to the Soviet village of Belyasuvar. On its northeastern side, the boundary is closely paralleled by a Soviet road. In the Dasht-e Moghan, the line in 1957 was shifted northeastward from the existing *de facto* boundary at the expense of the Soviet Union. At Belyasuvar, the boundary turns southwest following the channel of the Bolgarchay upstream for 40 miles to the village of Aliabad, close to its headwaters. From here the boundary follows the crest of the Talish Mountains, except for a point near the Soviet village of Dyman (Deman), where, according to the 1957 Protocol, it cuts almost directly south for a distance of 6 miles across former Soviet territory, linking the crest of the hills at Siqnaq Rock with that at Qaravoltash. Farther along the crest, at Namin, there were small boundary changes in 1957 along sections of a Soviet road.

For its final 15 miles, the boundary follows the thalweg of the Astara, separating the Azerbaijan S.S.R. from the province of Gilan. At the mouth of the Astara is Yedi Evlar, an uninhabited island which was ceded to Iran in 1954. The 1828 Treaty had stated that the international boundary would follow the thalweg of the Astara; when the channel, originally north of the island, shifted to the south, the island became Soviet territory.

The limits of Iranian sovereignty in the Caspian Sea have never been determined. The Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmanchai gave Russia the sole right to maintain naval vessels on the Caspian but, by Article II of the 1921 Treaty, both Iran and the Soviet Union have full rights of commercial and military navigation on the sea. This treaty has not been superseded or modified by subsequent agreements. Since no other country borders the Caspian, the sea would appear to have a condominium status of joint Soviet - Iranian jurisdiction. In this situation, it is questionable whether the normal rules of territorial waters would apply.

East of the Caspian Sea, the boundary leaves the seacoast at a point 14 miles north of the Iranian lagoon of Naftlijeh and proceeds in a straight line east - southeast across the desert for 18 miles to join the old boundary at Senger Tepe (Hill). Here it turns northeast across the desert for 13 miles to the Musa Khan, or "dry bed" of the Atrek, which it follows for 20 miles to a point near the Iranian town of Inchaburun, meeting there the permanent channel of the Atrek. Above this point, the boundary follows the thalweg of the Atrek for 57 miles across the arid Caspian lowlands to the Iranian village of Chat. Along its entire length east of the Caspian, the boundary is bordered on the north by the Turkmen S.S.R. On the south, it adjoins the province of Mazandaran to a point 54 miles east of Chat; beyond this point, the boundary follows the administrative border of the province of Khorasan.

East of Chat, the boundary for 62 miles follows the mountain ridge separating the waters of the Atrek (Rud-e Atrak) from those of the Sumbar. At approximately 56° 19' E. longitude, it turns north and then east for 32 miles before reaching the upper Sumbar. After following the channel of the Sumbar for 26 miles, the boundary turns northeast for 8 miles to the Tapparov, a ridge of the Koppeh Dagh Mountains. It follows this and two other ridges, the Masinev and the Zerinkukh, in a southeasterly direction for 110 miles to a point north of the oasis of Lotfabad. Near Lotfabad is the Firyuza oasis, 10 miles from the present boundary, which has been involved several times in territorial disputes between Iran and the Soviet Union.

East of Lotfabad the boundary again trends southeastward, following the Koppeh Dagh system for 173 miles to the Iranian town of Chahchaheh (60°20' E. longitude), where it turns directly east for 48 miles to the Harirud. A boundary change in 1954 in Iran's favor extended the easterly line for 2 miles to the thalweg of the Harirud.²

Finally the boundary turns south to follow the Harirud for 75 miles to the tripoint with

² The old boundary angled from Khomli Tepe through Zesi Tepe southeasterly to the main channel, leaving about 10 square miles of territory west of the main channel in the Soviet Union.

Afghanistan near Zulfiqar.

IV. TREATIES

West of the Caspian Sea, the Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary was delimited early in the 19th century by the Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmanchai. To the east of the Caspian Sea, the line was delimited more than a half century later, in 1881 and 1893. Subsequent treaties provided for minor ratifications of the boundary.

A. Traite de Paix et d' Amitié perpétuelle, conclu entre l' Empire de Russie et celui de Perse, le 12 October, 1813, dans le Camp Russe, sur la Rivière de Sieiwa dans le Gulistan, par les Plénipotentiaires nommés à cet effet par les 2 parties, et qui a été confirme le 15 Septembre, 1814, à Tiflis, par les Plenipotentiaires respectifs, au moyen de l'echange des Ratifications des 2 Monarques. *British and Foreign State Papers (BFSP)*, Vol. 5 (1817 - 1818), pp. 1109 - 1113.

Article II confirmed Russian possession of the Kura lowlands.

B. Treaty of Peace between Russia and Persia, signed at Turkmanchai, February 10, 1828. *BFSP*, Vol. 15 (1827 - 1828), pp. 669 - 675.

Article IV delimited, with minor exceptions, the present boundary west of the Caspian Sea.

C. Agreement between Russia and Persia, recognizing the Atrek River as the boundary, December 13, 1869. *Treaties & c. concluded between Great Britain and Persia, and between Persia and Other Foreign Powers, wholly or partially in force on the 1st April 1891*, published 1891, pp. 133 - 134.

This boundary agreement covered an area extending eastward of the Caspian Sea for a distance of about 30 miles.

D. Convention between Persia and Russia of December 9 - 21, 1881, defining the boundary between the two countries east of the Caspian Sea (Akhai - Khorassan Boundary). *Treaties & c. in force on the 1st April 1891*, pp. 137-138.

Article I delimited the boundary east of the Caspian Sea as far as Babadurmoz. The choice of the lower Atrek as the boundary along the Caspian coast had been confirmed by the agreement between Russia and Persia concluded on December 13, 1869, and was reaffirmed in the 1881 Convention.

E. Convention between Russia and Persia for Territorial interchange, signed at Teheran, May 27 - June 8, 1893. *BFSP*, Vol. 86 (1893 - 1894), pp. 1246 - 1249.

Articles I through V delimited the boundary east of Babadurmaz and provided for the cession by Persia to Russia of the oasis of Firyuza and adjacent district in exchange for Russian relinquishment of the bridgehead on the Aras opposite Abbasabad and the oasis of Hissar near Lotfabad.

- F. Treaty of Friendship**, signed at Moscow, February 26, 1921. *Soviet Treaty Series*, Vol. I (1917 - 1928), pp. 92 - 98.

Article III provided for the return of the oasis of Firyuza to Iran and for Soviet recognition of Iran's possession of the islands off the Astrabad coast.

- G. Agreement between Iran and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Concerning the Settlement of Frontier and Financial Questions**, signed at Tehran on December 2, 1954 (came into force on May 20, 1955). United Nations, *Treaty Series* (UNTS), I : 6497, Vol. 451:227.

Articles I and II delimited boundary changes in the Moghan Steppe, at Dyman, Yedi Evlar, the Atrek delta, and near Sarakhs, as well as confirming Soviet possession of Firyuza. An attached protocol delimited the boundary in the Namin area.

- H. Treaty between the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Imperial Government of Iran** concerning the Régime of the Soviet - Iranian Frontier and the Procedure for the Settlement of Frontier Disputes and Incidents, signed at Moscow on May 14, 1957 (came into force on December 20, 1962). *UNTS*, I:6586, Vol. 457:161, Article I, Part I states that the Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary established by the Agreement of December 2, 1954, is the line on the ground as determined in the demarcation and redemarcation documents signed on April 11, 1957.

- I. Supplementary Protocol to the Agreement between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Iran on Regulating Border and Financial Questions of December 2, 1954 - Azar 11, 1333**, on a New Border Line between the U.S.S.R. and Iran along the Reservoirs of the "Araks" Hydro-Electric Station and along the Mil' sko-Mugan Water-Intake dam on the Araks River, signed in Moscow on May 7, 1970.

Article 2 delimits the Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary in the area of the reservoir of the "Araks" Hydro-Electric Station, and Article 3 delimits the Iran - U.S.S.R. boundary along the reservoir of the Mil' sko-Mugansk Water-Intake Dam. The protocol was accompanied by a map indicating the new boundary.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Office of the Geographer, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of the Office of Management and Budget Circular No. 16.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Office of the Geographer, Room 8742, Department of State, Washington, D.C. 20520 (Telephone: 202 632-2021 or 632-2022).