The canyon is 25-yards wide with red rock walls of about 30 feet, as beautiful and dramatic as anything in the American West. It is an old river gorge and snakes between Iran and Iraq. In such a craggy landscape the eye lights on the smooth and the regular, which is always man-made. First, an upended Iraqi helmet, abandoned 20-years ago during the Iran-Iraq war. Then 10 yards away, the inner lining to an Iranian minefield, with camouflage netting still attached. Once the eye is accustomed, the rest of the canyon's contents scream into view: ancient, but perhaps still potent, munitions.

(30.09.2005)

A landmine. A second. Both -- helpfully -- sitting on top of the carpet of pebbles. In the shadow of the south wall: a mortar round. In the track where an American Humvee has just driven, a half-buried tank round -- the same kind an explosives team is preparing to detonate around the corner. Here and there are rusted tin cans that on closer inspection -- quickly turned -- out to be "Bouncing Betties," a particularly nasty anti-personnel mine that when activated bounces up to shoulder height and sprays shrapnel to maximize the chances of a kill. This one still has a pin in it, which none of the U.S. troops here can decide if it makes it more dangerous or less. In any case, it is given wide berth as they pick their way across the field. This is where they are resting for the afternoon while the explosives team does its work. After a quick survey of the surroundings, most stay near their armored cars.

Concertina wire is strung haphazardly across the hills leading into the canyon. It is impossible to tell from their placement whether one is being warned out of the minefield or fenced into it. The Iran-Iraq war lasted eight years, killed more than a million people on both sides, and was fought over border areas like this. The border didn't change much, but by the end of the war these hard-fought areas were rendered all but uninhabitable by abandoned munitions.

Most historians seem to agree that the war -- at least temporarily -- stored up the support of Iraq's Shi'ites for the secularist, Ba'ath Party regime of Saddam Hussein, who largely chose their national loyalty to Iraq over their relationship with their co-religionists in Tehran. But now as the constitutional referendum draws near, eyes are turning once more to Iran. Figures vary, but Iraq is comprised of about 55 percent Shi'ites, 30 percent Sunnis and the remainder Kurds. Kurds are primarily Sunni, but their ethnic loyalties generally supercede their religious ties. Sunni participation in the last election was low, owing to boycotts and the fear of retribution from insurgents, which gave Shi'ites and Kurds a commanding majority in the transitional government.

Two of the leading Shi'ite parties have strong religious and political ties to Iran, their leaders having fled there during Saddam's regime to avoid persecution. Their number includes the firebrand young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose grand ayatollah father and brothers were gunned down in 1988. "As you know Iran is now all in the Iraqi government," said Lt. Mohammed Sabah Hamid, 30, a Shi'ite from Baghdad who has stood at the Saad Castle on the border for two years. "It is Syria with the terrorists and Iran with the government."

Iraq is the frontier where the mostly Shi'a Iran meets the majority Sunni Arab world and has been a clashing place ever since. It was in Karbala where the two sides finally cleaved in a violent massacre of Ali Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Muhammed, and his small band of followers, mostly women and children, in October 680. The followers of Hussein became the Shi'a.

"As I see it, what is going to be the conflict," said a Shi'a official, "is a conflict between two competing sects, one Sunni, one Shi'a, where each of the sects is looking for a way to win power in Iraq. It's a conflict between the Sunni and the Shi'a."

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