

Conflict Without Victory: The Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq War was, by the standards of recent international conflicts, a very long one, beginning in 1980 and lasting for eight years. It also arguably marked the end of an Industrial Age style of warfare that began to develop in the mid-nineteenth century and matured in the First (1914-1918) and Second (1939-1945) World Wars. Mass played a critically important role: very large armies possessing great quantities of firepower and supported by complex logistic networks were characteristic of such conflicts. Although Iran and Iraq were not major industrial states, their armies were shaped by the lessons of late nineteenth and early twentieth century great power warfare. However, both belligerents would find the war immensely frustrating, and decisive victory eluded them.

Saddam Hussein had only recently formally secured his position as leader of Iraq; although Saddam became Iraq's most powerful figure in the mid-1970s, it was only in 1979 that he forced the country's incumbent president to resign and organized a meeting of the leadership of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party during which his political opponents (real or imagined) were seized and executed. Hussein's position as President (or, more bluntly, dictator) of Iraq thus was rather insecure in 1980—he only recently had officially seized power and had done so in a distastefully bloody fashion.

Saddam, however, did not see himself simply as just another of the many thuggish dictators scattered throughout the Third World. Rather, he envisioned himself as a great leader and modernizer who would make Iraq into the leading state in the Middle East. Although he sometimes would appeal to the religious sentiments of Iraqis (particularly in his much later struggle with the United States), Saddam's regime was fundamentally secular; Ba'ath Party ideology was based on socialism, not Islamic thinking. Saddam's government undertook numerous reforms, such as secularization of the Iraqi legal code, that were opposed by many Iraqis on religious grounds.

It also should be noted Saddam and most of his key supporters were Sunni Muslims, a minority religious group within Iraq. Iraqi Shias outnumbered the Sunnis by a considerable margin, and this was a source of concern to Saddam, who did not trust the Shias to be loyal to his government. Further creating worry was the fact that Iran, a

geographically larger and more populous state, was on Iraq's eastern border—and Iran was the world's preeminent Shia-dominated country.

In 1979, Iran also underwent a change of government, but it was a more fundamental one than that which occurred in Iraq. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a modernizing, pro-Western monarch, was overthrown by a coalition of opponents who ranged across the ideological spectrum—Communists, Islamist radicals, and others all worked to overthrow the Shah's government. After some months of scuffling over power, however, Islamists led by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to control Iran. This had an enormous impact on the politics of the Middle East, as Iran, which under the Shah had been a close ally of both the United States and Israel, became a bitter enemy of these two countries.

Iran's new belligerence toward the United States would be demonstrated clearly in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. The Crisis began in November 1979 when a large group of radical students stormed the grounds of the American embassy and took its staff hostage. Over the ensuing weeks, it became clear that the Iranian government was manipulating the hostage-taking (an egregious violation of international law, which protects foreign diplomats) for domestic and international political gain. The United States launched a military operation to rescue the hostages in April 1980, but it failed; eight American servicemen were killed when a helicopter and an aircraft crashed into each other in a sandstorm. Although the hostages ultimately were released in January 1981, very shortly after the new US President, Ronald Reagan, had taken his oath of the office, the Iranians had earned the enmity of the United States, a fact which would be significant in the war with Iraq.

The Iranian revolution marked the first time that Muslim clerics harnessed the power of their religious authority to replace a secular, modern state with a theocracy, a key milestone in the "Islamic revival" which began in the latter half of the twentieth century and continues today. Authoritarian Middle Eastern governments, not unreasonably, feared that religious institutions could become centres of resistance to their rule. This was especially worrying because the measures that had been effective in undermining secular democrats—closing newspapers, outlawing political parties, jailing opposition leaders, and so forth—could not be applied easily to "mosque-based" opponents. In the Middle East,

controlling the activities of Islamic institutions was extremely difficult, as the several thousand mosques in any large Muslim country could not all be reliably controlled, the arrest of clerics was controversial, and populations could be expected to react violently to any state activities that were seen as anti-Islamic.

The charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini embodied the fears of secular despots. Although he had been forced into French exile by the Shah's government (which had considered executing him, but did not do out of concern that this would enrage his many followers), this had not neutralized the threat he presented. Cassette tapes of Khomeini's sermons were smuggled into and circulated throughout Iran, and these helped lay the groundwork for the popular revolution against the Shah. Religious authorities had the respect of the Muslim public, and broad clerical opposition potentially could be fatal even to ruthless governments.

The Reasons for the War

There were a number of overlapping reasons for the Iran-Iraq conflict. Some of these, such as the fate of Iran's Khuzestan province and Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf, were very longstanding, although others, including deep Iraqi mistrust of the new Iranian government, were relatively recent. Perhaps the most important catalyst for the war, however, was the personality of Saddam Hussein himself; as he ruled Iraq over the next quarter century, Saddam would prove time and again to be aggressive toward his neighbours.

Khuzestan, which borders Iraq, is an oil-rich province with a predominately non-Persian population (Persians are the largest ethnic group in Iran, and dominate the elite of that country). Khuzestan's residents represent a variety of ethnicities, but many are Arabs with cultural ties to the Iraqi neighbours to their west. Iraq claimed a historical right to control the province, which Iran of course rejected. In addition, Iraq also laid claim to a number of small islands in the Persian Gulf which were occupied militarily by Iran.

Another territorial dispute was over the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Persia/Iran and Iraq (and, before the creation of Iraq, the Ottoman Empire) had long vied for control of the Shatt al-Arab. The dispute supposedly was settled by the 1975 Algiers Accord between the two countries, but when the war began, Iraq revived its claims to complete control of

the waterway. Unlike Iran, which has a long coastline with a number of Persian Gulf ports, Iraq only has very limited access to the Gulf, making the Shatt al-Arab economically and strategically critical to that country.

In addition to its territorial goals, it is likely that Iraq also had a larger strategic reason for going to war with Iran: the desire to establish itself as the leading state in the Persian Gulf region. When the Shah controlled Iran, that country's alliance with the United States helped make it a formidable force in the region. Tehran enjoyed access to very sophisticated American weapons (and purchased substantial quantities of them, including advanced F-14 "Tomcat" fighter aircraft), and had the ear of US presidents. But, given American antipathy for the new Iranian government and the latter's unwillingness to court Soviet favour—the Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were both stridently anti-Western and anti-Communist—Tehran now was cut off from superpower assistance. Iraq, while not a close ally of either superpower, enjoyed a better relationship with both Moscow and Washington. From an American perspective, Iraq, whatever its faults, at least had the virtue of not being Iran, while the USSR and Iraq had enjoyed a friendly relationship, albeit one that had been strained by Iraqi condemnation of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Indeed, much of the large (and relatively modern) Iraqi military arsenal was of Soviet manufacture.

The overthrow of the Shah and the resulting chaos provided Iraq with a very tempting, but temporary, opportunity. At the time that the war began, domestic politics in Iran was still deeply unsettled, with various factions vying for power. Moreover, what had formerly been the Imperial Iranian military was greatly degraded, with much of the officer corps fleeing the Islamic Revolution. Because of all of the above factors, Iraq had a uniquely promising chance to strike a devastating blow at its eastern neighbour, establishing Saddam as the pre-eminent leader in the Persian Gulf region and perhaps so discrediting the new Iranian government as to bring about its ultimate downfall.

The Early Period of the Iran-Iraq War

Tensions between Baghdad and Tehran were high during 1980 for a variety of reasons. In the spring, an Iranian-sponsored group attempted to kill the Iraqi foreign minister, an act which angered Iraq and increased suspicions of its neighbour. In a related event, the Iraqi government arrested and executed Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-

Sadr, a very prominent Iraqi Shia cleric who had publicly defended Iran's Islamic Revolution. The two countries broke off diplomatic ties in June; minor border clashes between Iraqi and Iranian troops also occurred. In September, the Iraqis first declared the Shatt al-Arab waterway to be Iraqi territory and then, on the 22nd, invaded Iran. At first, the invading Iraqis, who were very well-equipped with armour, artillery, and other equipment, were highly successful. They pushed Iranian forces back and gained substantial territory, including in Khuzestan, but their progress soon began to slow. Iraq was surprised by the degree to which the Iranian public rallied against the invaders and the Iranian Air Force also proved to be more formidable than expected. In January 1981 Iran launched a major counteroffensive which failed, and a period of stalemate ensued.

Despite the stalemate, both sides proved to be reluctant to settle the conflict, and Tehran was especially unwilling to negotiate so long as the Iraqi Army occupied Iranian territory. Soon, however, Iran devised methods to harness the fanaticism of the "true believers" in Iran's Islamic Revolution in that hope that this would neutralize Iraq's overall conventional military superiority. Iran's clerical rulers promised that those who died defending the Islamic Revolution from Iraq would receive the rewards of martyrdom in the afterlife, and by 1982 thousands of Iranians were undertaking what effectively were suicide missions. Volunteers, who generally received little or no military training, undertook human wave attacks, cleared the way for Iranian troops by running into minefields, and performed similar missions.

These tactics were controversial internationally, as they not only showed disregard for the lives of those undertaking such missions, but a great percentage of the volunteers were teenage children.¹ However, they also proved to be useful in the Iranian operations of 1982 in which Iran forces retook territory and moved into Iraq.² Iraq was becoming increasingly eager to end the war, but the Iranian government, deeply angered by Iraq's invasion and seeing itself as holding the advantage in the conflict, showed little interest in negotiating a conclusion to the conflict. Tehran's war goals clearly had moved beyond defence of its territory to pressing for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime and the humbling of Iraq.

¹ See Fox Butterfield, "8 Year Gulf War: Victims but no Victors," *New York Times* online ed., 25 July 1988.

² For a contemporary analysis of Iraq's poor military performance in 1982, see Drew Middleton, "Gulf Fight: 2 Questions About Iraq," *New York Times* online ed., 23 November 1982.

American Involvement in the War

Both Iran and Iraq attacked oil tankers bound for the enemy nation in an effort to cut off the enemy's main source of foreign earnings—the export of oil drove the economies of both countries, and as the war stalemated attacks on neutral vessels became increasing common in the mid-1980s.³ This was a concern both to the oil-exporting countries of the Gulf and the oil-importing Western states, which relied on affordable petroleum;⁴ an interruption in the free flow of Gulf oil would have serious global economic ramifications. In 1987, in response to Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti vessels, US President Ronald Reagan agreed to the “re-flagging” of Kuwaiti oil tankers. Allowing Kuwaiti vessels to sail under a US flag placed them under the protection of the United States, as it provided the Reagan Administration the right under international law to retaliate for any attacks on those ships. This was a great boon to Iraq; Kuwait was its *de facto* ally in the conflict, and this served as guarantee that a Iraqi oil, carried by Kuwaitis, would continue to move by sea.

Iran tested Washington's resolve by attacking one of the tankers in October 1987, and the United States retaliated by destroying Iranian offshore platforms which housed military facilities (although the Americans provided the Iranians on the rigs a short warning before the attack so that they could flee).⁵ The following year, a US Navy frigate sailing in international waters was severely damaged when it struck an Iranian mine. Washington, which previously had been highly critical of Iranian mining of international waters, retaliated with an operation in which Iranian military facilities were damaged and a number of Iranian naval vessels, including a frigate, were sunk. Later, in a tragic error in July 1988, a US Navy frigate, the *USS Vincennes*, shot down an Iranian passenger jet that was mistaken for an attacking military aircraft; nearly 300 people died as a result, and the United States was criticized internationally for the incident.

Somewhat earlier, the United States had been involved in a series of events that came to be known as the Iran-Contra scandal. In the early 1980s, a number of Americans living in Lebanon were taken hostage by Iranian-backed terrorists, and officials within the

³ See Anonymous, “Saudi Ship in Gulf Hit by Warplanes,” *New York Times* online ed., 17 May 1984.

⁴ For examples of the latter, see: Paul Lewis, “War on Oil Tankers Heats Up in the Persian Gulf,” *New York Times* online ed., 18 May 1986 and Clyde Haberman, “Tokyo Voices Concern at Attacks on Tankers in the Persian Gulf,” *idem*, 19 May 1984.

⁵ See Steven B. Roberts, “U.S. Ships Shell Iran Installation in Gulf Reprisal,” *New York Times* online ed., 20 October 1987.

Reagan Administration devised plans to secretly sell arms to Iran in exchange for the release of the hostages. Over time, the scheme grew increasingly convoluted, and it was decided that US arms would be sold to Iran at a profit which then would be funnelled to the Contras, a revolutionary group fighting the Soviet-backed government of Nicaragua. The secret program erupted into a major scandal when it was unmasked in November 1986, temporarily causing great upheaval in the Reagan Administration. However, the Administration's critics were unable to prove that the president himself was aware of any illegal activities committed by his deputies, and the crisis dissipated. In any event, the actual impact of the arms sales on the Iran-Iraq war was negligible, as only a small quantity of US weapons actually were transferred to the Iranians.

Despite the curious Iran-Contra scandal, the United States clearly favoured Iraq during the war. Although Washington was not a major arms supplier to Baghdad, it did provide intelligence at various times and displayed a generally favourable attitude toward the Iraqis. However, commonly-heard claims that Saddam was a close ally of the United States are not accurate. While the United States was very close to some of Saddam's local allies, Baghdad and Washington always held each other at arm's length.

The Latter Part of the War

As the conflict dragged on, neither side made a decisive military breakthrough of the sort that would force its opponent to concede defeat, and the war settled into a stalemate. However, Iraq was facing far more difficult circumstances than was its enemy—Iran was far more populous, and the war appeared to have strengthened its regime. Thus, it appeared far better able to survive a long war of attrition. With Iraq unable to make a conventional military breakthrough, it turned to two gambits in an effort to force Iran to agree to end the conflict: the use of chemical weapons and the “war of the cities.”

There were numerous uses of chemical weapons by Iraq against Iranians; apparently, the first Iraqi attacks were conducted in 1982 and used non-lethal “tear gas,” but by mid-1983 Iraq was using lethal chemical agents against Iranian troops.⁶ These

⁶ Javid Ali, “Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq War: A Case Study in Noncompliance,” *Nonproliferation Review* (Spring 2001): 47-8.

attacks resulted in thousands of casualties.⁷ (Chemical weapons also were used by the Saddam regime against Iraqi civilians.) Although very substantial evidence existed at the time that Iraq was using such weapons,⁸ Iraq suffered only relatively mild international repercussions. From one perspective, this was surprising: Iraq clearly was in violation of international law, as it was a signatory to the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning the use of chemical weapons in warfare.⁹ Moreover, most major world leaders regarded chemical weapons with distaste and wanted to strongly discourage the use of these weapons. It appears that the key reason why Iraq escaped serious punishment for its use of chemical weapons was the great international unpopularity of its enemy. The Soviet Union, the United States, most of Iran's Arab neighbours, and many other states did not wish to see a clear-cut Iranian victory in the conflict. Thus, they did not take great pains to pressure Iraq on its use of chemical weapons.

Victory could have strengthened the Islamist Iranian regime in any number of ways. If the Iraqi state were to fall apart, this would have created a power vacuum that Iran would endeavour to fill. If, either as a result of Iraqi collapse or a settlement by a desperate Iraqi regime, much of the Shia-dominated portion of Iraq were absorbed by Iran, Tehran would both gain territory and population, and, more importantly, then would be in control of a greater percentage of the world's total known reserves of oil. Also, it would be in a position to threaten Kuwait and the major oilfields in the eastern portion of Saudi Arabia (further complicating matters, this part of Saudi Arabia was and is home to many Shias, who suffer religious oppression by that country's strict Wahhabi Sunni regime). Even if such worst-case events did not transpire, victory would validate Iran's Islamic Revolution, perhaps encouraging other Muslims to turn to religious radicalism—a matter of grave concern, for example, to the Soviet Union, whose population included a very large Muslim minority.

⁷ For a list of alleged Iraqi uses of chemical weapons, see CIA, "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs," October 2002, 8; available at www.cia.gov/cia/reports/iraq_wmd/Iraq_Oct_2002.pdf. Although there now is great doubt concerning this report's controversial conclusion that the Saddam regime maintained an active chemical weapons program in the latter 1990s and beyond, the use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops and Iraqi civilians in the 1980s clearly occurred.

⁸ See, for example, Anonymous, "UN Team Says Chemical Weapons Were Used in Iran," *New York Times* online ed., 27 March 1984 and Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Say Iraqis Used Poison Gas Against Iranians in Latest Battles," *idem*, 6 March 1984.

⁹ For an analysis of Iraqi noncompliance with norms against the use of chemical weapons, see Ali, "Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq War: A Case Study in Noncompliance," 43-58.

The war of the cities was not a clearly distinct period in the war, and is defined slightly differently by various authors. However, and although there certainly were attacks on cities earlier in the war, it is reasonable to say that the war of the cities began in 1985 with Iraqi air strikes against Tehran and other Iranian cities. Iran, in turn, retaliated with Scud missile attacks against Baghdad.¹⁰ Perhaps the worst period of the war of the cities occurred in early 1988, when Iraq launched a large number of ballistic missiles against Tehran, and much of the population of that city, fearing that missile warheads would be armed with chemical weapons, fled. The war of the cities is notable because of its resemblance to some of the events of the Second World War, particularly German attacks on Britain using V-1 “flying bombs” (an early cruise missile) and V-2 ballistic missiles. Each side clearly hoped to spread terror in the civilian population of the enemy, and used highly inaccurate ballistic missiles and other weapons that were sure to inflict considerable collateral damage. This was very different from many modern urban bombing campaigns (such as the 1991 and 2003 attacks on Baghdad by American-led coalitions), which generally take care to minimize civilian damage to the extent possible.

In 1988, Iraqi forces emerged victorious in a series of battles, gaining considerable amounts of Iranian territory and capturing substantial quantities of Iranian equipment. These defeats, combined with general exhaustion, appear to have pushed Iran into finally agreeing to the settle the war. On 20 August the two sides agreed to a ceasefire.

Conclusion: Much Pain, Little Gain

The Iran-Iraq War greatly weakened the two strongest states in the region. Neither side made significant gains in the war; after the ceasefire the pre-war *status quo* essentially was restored, although Iraq was compelled to recognize Iran’s right to a portion of the Shatt al-Arab. However, this lacklustre outcome came at a terrible price: the Iran-Iraq War was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the latter half of the twentieth century. The number of casualties in the war will never be known, but several hundred thousand, and likely half a million or more, individuals died, while hundreds of thousands more on each side suffered major, oftentimes debilitating, wounds. The war also exhausted the treasuries of both Iran and Iraq, costing each belligerent many billions of dollars in war costs, infrastructural damage, and other losses. Notably, Iraq incurred large debts,

¹⁰ For a contemporary description of the war of the cities, see “Iraq, Iran Vent Frustrations on Each Other’s Civilians,” *New York Times* online ed., 7 April 1985.

particularly to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; Iraq's need for the revenue that Kuwaiti oil would bring and the latter's refusal to forgive Iraq's debt were two key reasons for Saddam's August 1990 invasion of that country.

As noted above, the Iran-Iraq War likely was the major conflict of the type that marked the Industrial Age: a huge clash of tanks, artillery, and infantry, but without the "smart munitions" and other high technology that is closely associated with the "American way of war." The war was one of the longest interstate conflicts of the twentieth century—longer, indeed, than either of the World Wars—but entirely frustrating to both sides. Even the use of weapons of mass destruction (albeit rather crude chemical weapons, not nuclear, or even advanced chemical or biological, munitions) did not break the stalemate. Iraq and Iranian troops suffered the effects of modern weapons but neither of the armies using those devices seized victory.

Questions

- 1) Was the minimal response by the international community to Iraq's use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq War appropriate? If so, why? If not, how should the international community have responded?
- 2) Why might one consider the Iran-Iraq War the last "Industrial Age" military conflict?
- 3) In light of the relatively small military benefit that Iraq derived from chemical weapons, is it appropriate to regard these devices as "weapons of mass destruction" that are qualitatively different from "conventional" weapons? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 4) In what ways might Iran's Islamic Revolution have encouraged Saddam to launch an attack on that country?
- 5) How might a clear victory in the Iran-Iraq War have altered the strategic environment in the Middle East?

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