

Military and Strategic Perspectives of the Iran-Iraq War

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

The Problem

Strategic realities and long-standing national interests all but ensure that the United States will find its military forces involved in the Middle East into the foreseeable future. One way to prepare for an uncertain future is to develop a deeper understanding of the relevant past. The legacy of the Iran-Iraq War had a profound impact on the region. Issues of brutal dictatorial regimes, revolutionary religious zeal, deep sectarian divides, complex alliances, the risk of a wider war, all find their contemporary roots in the bloody inconclusive eight-year war that began in 1980. A window into the military and strategic decision making of the Iran-Iraq War can provide insights into the perspectives and world view of regional decision makers still shaping an unfolding future.

In the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who held deeply opposed world views, struggled for dominance in the region. During the conflict, the opposing sides inflicted hundreds of thousands of casualties on each other. The two opposing leaders of the two states had ambitions greater than their national borders. For his part, Saddam and his Ba'athist colleagues calculated that victory over Iran would be the first step to leading the Arab world and creating an Arab superpower (Woods, et al. 2006). Khomeini, on the other hand, believed victory over Iraq would begin "exporting our revolution to the world." (Khomeini 1980)

In retrospect, both failed the basic tests of strategic competence. Both began the conflict apparently believing that emotion and simplistic rhetoric could motivate the masses to victory. When that didn't work, their response was to simply shovel more men and more resources into the struggle, while issuing ever more fanatical and ferocious pronouncements. Neither side proved competent to apply the most rudimentary ends-ways-means test to its approach to the war. The result was a bloody, inconclusive struggle that at times appeared to have no possible ending except the collapse of one or both of the contesting regimes.

That Iraq made the battlefield even more gruesome by introducing poison gas, not used extensively in a major war since Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, shows the pervasive desperation and hatred. Even more remarkable was Saddam's decision to use poison gas against a rebellious segment of Iraq's own population. Similarly heartless, the



If the peoples of the modern Middle East managed to absorb only a smattering of the Western way of war, it was due largely to their contemporary experience with European military institutions, either as "the colonized" or being on the receiving end of Western military power.

Iranians deftly merged notions of religious martyrdom including symbolic “keys to heaven” with patriotic fervor to send 12- to 17-year-old boys to clear minefields. As though no one had learned anything from World War I, a favorite tactic of the *Pasdaran* and *Basij*, Iran’s revolutionary militias, was to launch human-wave assaults into the face of prepared Iraqi defenses. Both sides left few laws of humanity intact. Perhaps the best explanation for the war’s character was that it was about quarrels ancient and modern, political and religious. By the time the war ended, both sides had fired ballistic missiles—with only slightly better accuracy than the V-2s the Nazis fired during World War II—at cities of the opposing side. There is the very real possibility that, had one or both sides possessed nuclear weapons, they would have used them.

Militarily, there were no decisive victories. At the beginning, neither side proved capable of applying coherent tactics to the battlefield, or even operational concepts or strategic thinking. Initially, fanatical political and religious amateurs determined the disposition of forces and conduct of operations. During the war’s course, military effectiveness at the tactical level improved somewhat, especially on the Iraqi side. While military professionalism slowly crept back into the picture in Baghdad, it never entirely replaced Saddam’s amateurish decision-making; he alone made the significant military decisions. On the other side, military professionalism was rarely evident. Until the end of the war in July 1988, Saddam and Khomeini both equated some degree

of military effectiveness with the casualty rates their forces suffered.

Nevertheless, the war’s duration, as well its casualties forced both Iraq and Iran to adapt and learn. How and what they learned suggests much about how difficult it is to learn in the midst of a war, for which neither side was intellectually prepared. Once again, the conflict underlined that cognitive factors, such as initiative and military professionalism, were of greater consequence on the battlefield than mere muscle and technology. Iran’s performance during the war also suggested the lengths to which human beings are willing to go on fighting for a cause in which they fanatically believe.

Equally important in evaluating Iraq’s performance in the war from Saddam’s perspective is the issue of military effectiveness. An important study on that subject focuses largely on evaluating specific areas of military competence, i.e., unit cohesion, generalship, tactical sophistication, information management, technical skills, logistics, morale, and training (Pollack 2002). However, such an approach poses problems because it rests largely on Western concepts of military effectiveness. For Western military analysts, the concept of military effectiveness seems to be relatively straightforward (Millett and Murray 2010). In the West—at least since the military revolution of the 17th century, which brought civil and military discipline to Europe’s armies—states and their political leaders have taken for granted that military institutions would remain loyal to and supportive of the political structure.

As a result, Western military institutions have been able to concentrate largely on dealing with the external enemy, which has pushed the development of new technologies, doctrinal concepts, and more effective means of projecting military power on the battlefield and over great distances. Thus, the criteria for effective military organizations have come almost entirely to rest on their ability, proven in war, to destroy the state's external enemies.

Arab militaries began their descent in the seventeenth century from their historic and relative heights and continued through the final collapse of the moribund Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth. If the peoples of the modern Middle East managed to absorb only a smattering of the Western way of war, it was due largely to their contemporary experience with European military institutions, either as “the colonized” or being on the receiving end of Western military power. The result was that Arab military culture devolved into an echo of its former self, resting on a complex mix of myths and notions of bravery, tribal loyalty, raiding parties, and martyrdom that were, in many ways, indifferent to the effectiveness model inherent in the accoutrements and models of Western militaries. Such attributes have made Arabs extraordinarily brave warriors throughout the ages, but relatively poor soldiers in the context of wars since the nineteenth century.

As Iraq's ruler in 1980, Saddam subscribed fully to the myths of his culture. His aggressive efforts to fashion a common “Mesopotamian”

culture to bind Iraq's multi-ethnic-multi-sectarian society under the Ba'ath in the late 1970s culminated at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War. According to the often crude attempts to rewrite history, not only did Saddam portray himself as the “paramount shaykh” of a tribal culture, but, in defending the collective Arabs against their historic Persian foe, he had become “a leader who was victorious according to God's will” (Davis 2005) and (Baram 1991). He would have been entirely contemptuous of George Patton's famous remark that the business of war is not to die for your country, but to make the other bastard die for his. In the largest sense, Saddam's problem was embedded in the nature and the legitimacy of Iraq's political institutions.

Secular governance in the Middle East has historically rested on power, particularly military power, rather than on political theory, laws, and a generally accepted legitimacy of the state. A story is told that on his deathbed, the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty told his son that “in order to keep the people of Iraq quiet, it was essential to give them a new governor every time they wanted one, however frequently” (Tarbush 1982). It seems that the purpose of the military (Iraq's most representative institution) was defined long before the state came into being.

For Saddam, the question his regime's legitimacy created not only a political problem, resulting in his ruthless purge of the Ba'ath Party in 1979, but a military one. Saddam knew well that the army was the one institution that could overthrow the Ba'ath regime, as it had done in

1963. In fact, since Iraq had emerged from the British mandate in the early 1930s, the legitimacy of its various governments had been anything but secure, while the army had displayed an enthusiastic willingness to overthrow the government of the day. Thus, as so many dictators have done throughout history, Saddam aimed to fully co-opt and, failing that, defang the only Iraqi institution with the independence and power to overthrow his regime.

From his perspective, the ideal senior commanders were those whom he could point in the general direction of the enemy, and who then, by their toughness and bravery, could destroy the external enemies of his regime. In terms of maintaining his control in Iraq, such an approach was certainly successful. Like Stalin, he had no qualms with bludgeoning his internal enemies via a minimum of effort and maximum of ruthlessness, while ensuring that the Army lacked the kinds of leaders who could launch a coup. Thus, in September 1980 on the eve of a war that would require a very different type of military, Saddam had every reason to believe that he and the Ba'ath party had created military institutions effective the way he wanted them to be (al-Marashi and Salama 2008). He would soon discover, however, that a military built on cultural myths and tribal relations would not work so well against an opponent with an even deeper faith in bravery and martyrdom and a population three times as great.

Politically, the war solidified Khomeini's religious revolution that he set in motion by overthrowing the Shah in 1979. Nevertheless,

from the moment the conflict began to its end eight years later, the Iraqis and Iranians consistently overestimated their possibilities as well as underestimated those of their opponents. The war also underlined the extraordinary capacity of human beings, particularly political leaders, to delude themselves that, as the fifth century King Archidamus warned his fellow Spartans, "war is a good thing or a safe thing."

Stripped of its larger context, the conflict may have little to offer in the way of strategic lessons or battlefield accomplishments. Nevertheless, the study of political and military failure, as much as success, develops a deeper understanding of the past, which in turn sheds light on the future and on the nature and character, as well as cultural dispositions, of potential opponents. As the great Greek historian Thucydides suggested, his history, indeed all history, should be "useful [for] those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future" (Thucydides).

The availability of Iraqi documents and media captured during OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) presents a unique opportunity to explore this conflict from within Iraq's decision-making processes. The capture of the Ba'athist state records and their availability for scholarship through efforts like the Conflict Records Research Center has the potential to change how historians, and ultimately the people of the region, understand these events. This study examined Iraq's decision-making

processes, but does not provide a detailed historical analysis of the Iran-Iraq War. Where possible, it also aims to present a sense of Iran's actions and

perceptions, although without access to the records of the Khomeini regime, this account has less to offer regarding Iran's decision-making.

Dr. Murray is a former Adjunct Research Staff Member in IDA's Joint Advanced Warfighting Division. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy in military-diplomatic history from Yale University.



Dr. Woods is the Deputy Director of IDA's Joint Advanced Warfighting Division. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy in history from the University of Leeds, UK.



This book was published by Cambridge University Press, 2014.

“The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic Show”

References

- Baram, Amatzia. 1991. *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'athist Iraq, 1968-89*. London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- al-Marashi, Ibrahim, and Sammy Salama. 2008. *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytic History*. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, Eric. 2005. *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- De Atkine, Norvell B. 1999. “Why Arabs Lose Wars.” *Middle East Quarterly* VI (4): 16.
- Khomeini, Ayatollah. 1980. New Year's Speech: We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology (21 March 1980). *MERIP Reports*, 22.
- Millett, Allan R., and Williamson Murray, 2010. *Military Effectiveness*, Volumes 1-3. Second. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pollack, Kenneth M. 2002. *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness 1948-1991*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Tarbutsh, Mohammad A. 1982. *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941*. London: Keegan Paul International.
- Thucydides. 1954. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex Warner. London: Penguin Books.
- Woods, Kevin M., Michael Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey. 2006. *The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press.