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Review

The Iran-Iraq War, Pierre Razoux, Nicholas Elliott (trans.), Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2015, ISBN 978-0-6740-8863-4 (hbk), 688 pp.

Following the 1979 victory of Iran's Islamic revolution, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 marked the beginning of an eight-year-long war. One month into the war, Iranian forces lost swathes of territory, most notably the city of Khorramshahr, the country's main commercial port. Iran retaliated, successfully recapturing most of its occupied territory by May 1982, including Khorramshahr. Many had expected the war to end there, yet it persisted for a further six years without a clear victor. Iraq was unable to shift Iran's borders, nor did Saddam Hussein succeed in his mission to "establish himself as the leader of the Arab world" (p. 7). Iran meanwhile failed to penalize Saddam, destroy the Baʿath Party or export its revolution to Iraq (pp. 2–3). Both nations emerged with considerable loss, with the war wreaking a toll of over a million dead and injured, including child soldiers and civilians from both sides. Today, its victims in Iran continue to lose their lives from the long-term physical effects of Iraq's use of banned chemical weapons against Iranians and the Kurds. Many survivors have been left with disabilities or housed in psychiatric centers, where their lives continue in hardship and bitterness.

Other facets of this under-examined war have yet to be brought to light due to the lack of access to primary sources, particularly on the Iranian side. Pierre Razoux,

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Research director at the Institute for Strategic Research in Paris, offers fresh insights into the twentieth century's longest conventional war in his book, *The Iran–Iraq War*. The work is based on extensive interviews as well as documents seized by the American forces in Baghdad after the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein (the documents are now stored at the Institute for Defense Analysis in Washington, DC). Razoux effectively unearths several important dimensions of the conflict in this meticulously researched text, helping to reveal some of the causes behind the human tragedy. Central here are questions around why Saddam initiated the costly campaign and why the war was prolonged beyond the liberation of Khorramshahr—a controversial topic that is still debated by Iranians themselves.

Where abundant English-language scholarship has portrayed the Iran–Iraq conflict as a religious and political struggle between Sunni Iraq and Shiʿite Iran, Razoux's work contains revelations that challenge this commonly held theory. The text reassesses the war as a global conflict, examining the involvement of powerful foreign nations to highlight how it was driven by other regional events, principally the cold car. Through resisting the questionable narrative of a Shiʿa–Sunni conflict, Razoux reveals that religion was not the basis of the war, but rather a goad for rallying forces in the hands of leaders.

Questioning the motives for involvement on the part of various states, Razoux's work adeptly foregrounds the international facets of the war. He offers some unprecedented insights into the role played by global and regional superpowers at the time, among them the United States, the Soviet Union, France, Turkey and Israel. In doing so, he reveals how the war became a prime opportunity for weapons sales for the outside powers. International involvement, however, was not a simple matter. Rather, the book emphasizes how global participation was at the same time complex and problematic. For example, Razoux asserts that various violent events in the Middle East, terrorist activities in France and the kidnapping of western nationals and keeping them hostage in Lebanon, alongside shifting regional and global alliances, all played into the political games arising from outside states' involvement in the war and their respective support for either party.

Razoux's work casts this foreign involvement in the Iran–Iraq War as the last major conflict of the cold war. As he highlights, both the United States and the Soviet Union were unintentionally aligned in the conflict through their ultimate support for the Iraqi regime, which brought the war to an end. In the light of a breadth of new evidence, the text underscores how a peace treaty could not be signed between Iraq and Iran until such time as international powers allowed it. In this regard, Razoux refers to Ronald Reagan's four-day visit to Moscow in May 1988, which he sees as definitive point in ending the war. As he notes, when Russia and the United States agreed on the latter bringing an end to the conflict in Afghanistan through pressure on Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Moscow reciprocated with a promise to exert pressure on Iran to end its war with Iraq (p. 451).

The work, however, is not limited in focus to the international aspects of the war. Rather, Razoux opens up a new window into various internal factors that shaped its course, in particular the Baʿath party decision-making process. The author reassesses

common perceptions of the conflict by examining its military facets and rigorously detailing its battles. The latter are closely narrated and analyzed through the prism of the political context as Razoux addresses internal political power structures, diplomacy and struggles within Iran and Iraq's military systems. The attendant analysis of military tactics and troop movements as well as political factors highlights the fallibility of political and military systems in modern combat.

Razoux's fresh perspectives on a war that is so little understood in the West yield other positive outcomes. The book's uniqueness lies in its extensive use of previously unobtainable documents to examine the realities of the war. The primary source documents contain a rich array of formerly classified Iraqi information, such as audio recordings of meetings between Saddam Hussein and his inner circle and generals. These and other important documents were made available to Razoux following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and after obtaining access the author spent ten years completing the book.

Where Razoux had less access to Iranian sources, he relies primarily on those from Iraq. Iran's Revolutionary Guards still retain control over wartime documents, so analogous sources have remained inaccessible to scholars. The text therefore narrates the war primarily from Iraq's standpoint. Despite the practical limitations on research, it appears that Razoux could nonetheless have drawn more extensively on Iranian sources to convey Iran's experience in greater detail. Although Iranian war documents remain unavailable, information about the war might have been obtained through published memoirs in Iran, such as those of Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri.[1]

Online oral resources have also been released inside Iran and are now accessible to researchers in this field—for instance, interviews conducted by the program *Tārikh Online,* currently banned in Iran, which reveal fresh and vital information on the war. Of particular interest is the interview with former Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps naval commander Hossein ʿAlāʾi, in which he details Iran's motives for continuing the war after 1982, and that with Mohsen Kangarlu, an adviser to former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who provides significant information about the Iran–Contra affair.[2] Notable also is an interview with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, the deposed president of Iran and first commander-in-chief of Iranian forces, who later fled to France, where he still lives.[3] Scholars in the field might rightly expect to see the names of these key figures from the war among Razoux's interviewees. The author's reliance on Iraqi resources does not result in a biased or impartial account, yet the reader does miss out on elements of the Iranian war narrative, notably Iran's justifications for advancing the war beyond May 1982.

These deficiencies notwithstanding, the work closely details Iran's suffering as a result of the arms embargo which led the Iranian authorities to adopt a strategy of "human wave" attacks by deploying thousands of volunteer fighters. The motivation for Iranian volunteer soldiers' participation in this campaign are explored by Razoux

[1]See respectively, Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Majmue-ye Khāterāt-e*; Montazeri, *Khāterāt*.
[2]See respectively, Alāʾi, Interview with Dehbashi; Kangarlu, Interview with Dehbashi.
[3]Bani-Sadr, Interview with Dehbashi.

in relation to themes of "mysticism and religious devotion," "patriotism," "social pressure," and joining the Basij volunteer militia "out of opportunism." What is overlooked in Razoux's account is the fact that these motivations gradually ebbed among volunteer soldiers. Evidence suggests that voluntary participation in the war diminished over time, in turn affecting Iran's military power in the final years of the war, as revealed by former Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps naval commander, Hossein ʿAlāʾi in *Analytical History of the Iran–Iraq War*, where he states that "reducing the Basijis' desire to join the front" undercut Iran's offensive power.[4]

As the dispatch of volunteers to the battlefield in human-wave assaults played a significant role in both advancing and ultimately ending the war, examining soldiers' motivations brings significant value to Razoux's work. However, the author arguably needs to address one feature of the campaign to motivate soldiers more carefully. A number of western scholars working on the Iran–Iraq War have referred to the so-called "plastic keys to heaven" which were produced on a large scale by Iranian authorities to encourage volunteer soldiers to sacrifice their lives in the war. Razoux's text similarly highlights this theme to emphasize the complexity of the role volunteers played in the war. Sources have confirmed that volunteer soldiers were encouraged to sacrifice their lives via a range of political and ideological strategies, including the promotion of the concept of martyrdom, with victims being regarded as exalted martyrs who would ascend to Heaven. However, the use of plastic keys as emblems of entry to heaven does not in fact appear to have occurred and the practice is not commonly known or otherwise recognized among Iranians as a decisive tactical measure. In fact, in the voluminous published war memoirs and a very large archive of photographs from the war front as well as numerous documentary films that were taken directly in the battlefield, there is no trace of such plastic keys.

Razoux concludes the book with an insightful analysis of the conflict's role as a catalyst for most of the subsequent crises in the region. For example, Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the subsequent marginalization of Iraq and the revival of Iran's nuclear program are all linked to the war in some respect. As such, Razoux's research paves the way for enhancing our knowledge of the war generally and the role of international players more specifically—an element that is vital for any understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics. *The Iran–Iraq War* provides the reader with valuable historical evidence that offers fresh perspectives on the war. Despite the shortcomings in research on the Iranian role, it is a very illuminating text that offers insight and analysis into the international dimensions of the war as well as its complex operational details.

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[4]See ʿAlāʾi, *Tārikh-e Tahlili-e*, vol. 2, 416.

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