1 Introduction

> *Love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause of all these evils. To this must be added the violent fanaticism which came into play once the struggle had broken out. Leaders . . . had programmes which appeared admirable . . . but in professing to serve the public interest they were seeking to win the prize for themselves. In their struggle for ascendancy nothing was barred; terrible indeed were the actions to which they committed themselves.*[1]
>
> – Thucydides

The Iran–Iraq War was a struggle for dominance between competing regimes with deeply opposed worldviews. During the course of the eight-year-long conflict, the opposing sides inflicted hundreds of thousands of casualties on each other. The leaders of the two states, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, each 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 leadership of the Arab world and to creating an Arab superpower.[2] Khomeini, however, believed Iran should export its revolution to the world, beginning with the countries of the Islamic world.[3]

In retrospect, the opposing sides failed the basic tests of strategic competence. Both leaders began the conflict apparently believing that emotion, simplistic rhetoric, and a motivated population would deliver victory. When those failed, their response was to shovel more men and more resources into the struggle, while issuing ever more fanatical and ferocious pronouncements. Neither side proved competent in applying the most rudimentary ends–ways–means test to the war. The result was a bloody, inconclusive struggle that at times appeared to

[1] Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London, 1954), 243.
[2] See, in particular, Kevin M. Woods, Michael Pease, and Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis, MD, 2006), 6.
[3] See Ayatollah Khomeini, "We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology (20 March 1980)," *MERIP Reports*, no. 88 (1980), 22.

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[4] – indicates the desperation and hatred that pervaded the conflict.[5] And once the taboo was broken, the Iraqi regime would later employ such weapons against elements of its own population. Similarly heartless, the Iranians deftly merged notions of religious martyrdom to include symbolic "keys to heaven" with patriotic fervor to send 12 to 17-year-old boys to clear minefields.[6] 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. One suspects that, had one or both sides possessed nuclear weapons, they would likely have used them.

In military terms, there were no decisive victories. At the beginning, neither side was capable of applying coherent tactics to the battlefield, much less effective 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

[4] There are indications that the Egyptian military forces dropped poison gas during several air raids during their intervention in Yemen's civil war in the mid-1960s. See Jonathan Tucker, *War of Nerves: Chemical Warfare from World War I to Al-Qaeda* (New York, NY, 2006), 190–201.

[5] Evidence that Iraq used chemical weapons is undisputed. From August 1983 until the final campaign in July 1988, Iraq employed various combinations of mustard gas and VX nerve agents against Iranian forces. Iran developed a chemical weapons capability (offensive and defensive) in response to Iraq's first use; however, there is no compelling evidence, including Iraqi intelligence reporting at the time, that Iran employed chemical weapons to any significant degree on the battlefield. See Javed Ali, "Chemical Weapons and the Iran–Iraq War: A Case Study in Noncompliance," *The Nonproliferation Review* 8, no. 1 (2001). A March 1987 Iraqi military intelligence report noted only five small-scale Iranian chemical attacks (specifically one phosgene and four mustard gas attacks; excluding CS and white phosphorus attacks) between 1983 and 1987, but noted the likelihood of captured Iraqi weapons being the source. See Memorandum from GMID to Deputy RE: Chemical Weapons (26 March 1988) in SH-GMID-D-000-898, General Military Intelligence Directorate (GMID) Memoranda Discussing Iranian Chemical Weapons Capability, October 1987–September 1988.

[6] Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York, NY, 2008), 146.

effectiveness at the tactical level improved somewhat, especially on the Iraqi side. While military professionalism slowly crept into the picture in Baghdad, it never entirely replaced Saddam's amateurish decision making, because he alone made the significant military decisions. On the other side of the hill, 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 own 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 the difficulties of learning in the midst of a war, especially a war for which neither side was intellectually prepared.[7] Once again, the conflict underlined that cognitive factors, such as initiative and military professionalism, are of greater consequence on the battlefield than mere muscle and technology. Iran's performance during the war also suggests the lengths to which human beings are willing to go to continue a conflict 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, that is, unit cohesion, generalship, tactical sophistication, information management, technical skills, logistics, morale, and training.[8] However, such an approach poses problems because it rests largely on Western concepts. For Western military analysts, military effectiveness seems to be relatively straightforward.[9] In the West – at least since the military revolution of the seventeenth 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. Thus, in the West, military organizations exist to protect the state, first from its external enemies, and second from internal enemies who would overthrow it from below. Given the rapacious, fractious nature of European international relations from the seventeenth through the first half of the

[7] One of the authors (Murray) has recently completed a study of military adaptation in war, focusing largely on the twentieth century. A major lesson emerging from that study is that military organizations have great difficulty adapting to combat conditions when they embark on war. Organizations careless in their intellectual preparations and training during peacetime, however, will only learn by filling body bags. See Williamson Murray, *Military Adaption in War* (Alexandria, VA, 2011).

[8] Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln, NE, 2002), 4–10.

[9] Among others, see Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds. *Military Effectiveness, Volumes 1–3*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2010).

twentieth centuries, the focus on the external enemy is not surprising. At the same time, the constant competition for mastery in Europe, accompanied in the eighteenth century by the competition for global dominion, honed military institutions on violence and war. Even in times of peace, those institutions have prepared with the same ruthlessness the Romans had brought to the business of war. Moreover, starting in the nineteenth century, they learned to adapt to the technological world born of the Industrial Revolution.

At times, the military has also provided a crucial bulwark to protect its masters, but for the most part, that has been regarded as a subsidiary, if important, role. Admittedly, in some cases, Western armies have focused on the latter mission to the exclusion of the former – the Italian military in the twentieth century being a particularly good case.[10] Nevertheless, rarely in the history of the West have military organizations overthrown the existing political elite. Napoleon Bonaparte's 18 Brumaire coup, which overthrew the Directorate in France and launched the Napoleonic Empire, certainly springs to mind as one such exception.[11] This reliability of military organizations has rested considerably on the fact that the state's leaders, much of the population, and the majority of the officer corps have accepted the regime's legitimacy, however much they might disagree with some of its policies.

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 the ability of such organizations, proven in war, to destroy the state's external enemies. Such criteria led many in the United States to rate the German military extremely highly for its performance on the battlefield, but at the same time to miss the salient reality that its approach to strategy was so appalling that Germany not only lost two world wars, but also repeated nearly all of the major strategic mistakes it had made in World War I in the second great conflict.

[10] In this regard, see MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, Facist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge, 1983).

[11] Indeed, what goes around comes around. Napoleon was also one of the few state leaders to be overthrown by the military. In March 1814, his marshals refused to fight any longer, and Napoleon, confronted by the massive Allied invasion of France, was forced to abdicate. The Directorate's seizure of power in 1795, as well as Napoleon's 1800 coup, did lead many Bolsheviks to fear the potential of a military coup and led Stalin to execute a massive and devastating coup of the Red Army during 1937 to 1940, which had catastrophic results in the opening months of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, how Westerners have rated military effectiveness is not necessarily how those from other cultures and backgrounds have viewed the purpose of their military institutions. Some have adapted to the Western military revolutions with alacrity. But even the Japanese failed to adapt to the combined arms lessons that World War I brought in its wake, as their wretched performance in the ground war in 1942 and 1943 underlined.[12]

Middle Eastern 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 was, in many ways, indifferent to the effectiveness model inherent in the accoutrements and models of Western militaries.[13] 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.[14] He would have been entirely contemptuous of George Patton's

[12] The exception to this rule would appear to have been the Indians and the Vietnamese. The former having absorbed much from the two centuries of British occupation and education, the latter with the thorough and complete education the French provided to its leaders in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

[13] The authors are aware of the danger of addressing a broader regional culture as a factor in military effectiveness. In addition to the definitional and methodological complexity of the task, as others have pointed out, culture's role in military assessments has a poor legacy, having previously been "spun from an ugly brew of ignorance, wishful thinking, and mythology." However, as noted throughout this work, many of the cultural influences, good and bad, were identified to the authors by former senior Iraqi military officers. See also Norvell B. De Atkine, "Why Arabs Lose Wars," *Middle East Quarterly* VI, no. 4 (1999), 16. For more information, see Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 1–13.

[14] Saddam's 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 also, in defending the collective Arabs against their historic Persian foe, he had become "a leader who was victorious according to God's will." Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 179–189. See also Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'athist Iraq, 1968–89* (London, 1991).

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, civil institutions, and a generally accepted legitimacy of the state. A story is told that on his deathbed, the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty warned 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."[15] 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 of his regime's legitimacy created not only a political problem, resulting in his ruthless purge of the Ba'ath Party in 1979, but also 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 or participate in the overthrow of 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 internal as well as the external enemies of his regime. In terms of maintaining his control in Iraq, such an approach was certainly successful.

Like Stalin, Saddam had no qualms with bludgeoning his internal enemies via a minimum effort and maximum of ruthlessness, while ensuring that the army did not develop 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 effective military institutions.[16] He would soon discover, however, that a military built on cultural myths and political oratory would not work so well against an opponent three times its size, with an even deeper faith in bravery and

[15] Mohammad A. Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941* (London, 1982), 183.

[16] On the Ba'athification of the military during this period see Ibrahim al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytic History* (New York, NY, 2008), 107–129.

martyrdom. Iraq's military, in the 1980s, was as effective as Saddam wanted it to be, but not as effective as he needed it to be.

Politically, the war solidified the religious revolution that Khomeini had 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 own 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 "war is a good thing or a safe thing."[17]

The Iran–Iraq War also emphasizes societies' capacity to mobilize and commit resources to battle. The West, for all its relative advantages in military effectiveness, routinely underestimates that capacity in less developed nations. Saddam's regime sought to maintain the burden of a great war of attrition through appeals to Arab nationalism as well as via the multiple methods of coercion available to a totalitarian state. With appeals to Persian nationalism and religious fanaticism, Iran proved similarly able to motivate its people to "pay any price, bear any burden."[18]

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."[19] The availability of Iraqi documents and media captured during Operation Iraqi Freedom presents a unique opportunity to explore this conflict from within Iraq's decision-making processes.[20] It is on the strength of a unique set of

[17] Archidamus, the Spartan king, warning his assembly of warriors that they should not lightly consider going to war with the Athenians at the end of the seventh decade of the fifth century BC. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 84.

[18] John F. Kennedy's words to describe the American people on the occasion of his inauguration in January 1961.

[19] Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 48.

[20] Historians have had no access to the papers and decision-making processes of the regimes of Nasser, al-Sadat, al-Assad, or the other major Arab regimes that have ruled the Middle East since the collapse of the colonial regimes after World War II. The capture of the Ba'athist state records and their availability for scholarship at the Conflict Records Research Center at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, has the potential to change how historians, and ultimately, the people of the region, understand these events.

primary sources that this book examines Iraq's decision-making processes. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive or detailed historical analysis of the Iran–Iraq War.

Thus, this book, the third emerging from the *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, aims to provide insight into the thinking of Saddam Hussein and his senior leadership in the historical context of the war, offering perspectives on past and future autocrats.[21] It explores the rationale and decision-making processes that drove the Iraqis as they grappled with challenges that, at times, threatened their existence. 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.

The authors have no illusions that the events in this war will be repeated. Nevertheless, they believe that examining the Iran–Iraq War based on, to a large degree, the high-level perceptions of one of its participants can offer unique understanding and insight into this type of regime, its regional actors, and the worldviews of those in the region who may yet be making decisions. Strategic realities and long-standing national interests all but ensure that America will find its military forces involved again in the Middle East. The thinking and perceptions of America's future allies and opponents in that crucial area of the world will likely reflect the legacy of or share some similarities to the actions and decisions made by Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran.

[21] The Iraqi Perspectives Project is a trilogy that has worked backwards in time through Saddam's wars. For Operation Iraqi Freedom, see Woods *et al.*, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report*. For Operation Desert Storm, see Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis, MD, 2008).

2 A context of "bitterness and anger"[1]

> *As a rule those who were least remarkable for intelligence showed the greater powers of survival. Such people recognized their own deficiencies and the superior intelligence of their opponents; fearing that they might lose a debate or find themselves out-maneuvered in intrigue by their quick witted enemies, they boldly launched into action; while their opponents, overconfident in the belief that they would see what was happening in advance, and not thinking it necessary to seize by force what they could secure by policy, were more easily destroyed because they were off their guard.*[2] – Thucydides

> *[On] the subject of our relations with Iran – Iran planned animosity for us from the beginning. [It is] as if the change [that] took place in Iran was designed with the intentions to be against the interests of Iraq.*[3] –Saddam Hussein

Not surprisingly, the origins of the Iran–Iraq War lie deep in the past. In fact, until the early twentieth century, when the British stitched together disparate provinces of the Ottoman Empire that they had acquired in the political fallout from that empire's collapse, there was no such political entity as Iraq. Yet, the territory from which modern Iraq emerged has been at the center of world events since the dawn of history. Along with Egypt and China, the Mesopotamian Valley gave birth to the earliest of human civilizations. Beginning in the third millennium BC, small Semitic tribes combined with the Akkadians and Sumerians to build a prosperous city-state culture around Ur and Babylon. Theirs were societies born in the harsh conditions of subsistence agriculture, which forced them to constantly balance their actions in a world caught between disaster and opulence.[4]

[1] Keith Mclachlan, "Analysis of the Risk of War: Iran–Iraq Discord, 1979–1980," in *The Iran–Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression*, Farhang Rajaee, ed. (Gainesville, FL, 1993), 26.
[2] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B Strassler (New York, NY, 1996).
[3] SH-SHTP-D-000-559, Saddam and His Inner Circle Discussing Relations with Various Arab States, Russia, China, and the United States, 4–20 November 1979.
[4] For a readable survey of early Mesopotamia, see Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 3rd edn. (New York, NY, 1992).

Change in Mesopotamia was often swift and violent. The life-giving rivers represented a capricious resource, often failing to flood or flooding too much. This gave rise to a particular fatalism – so-called Babylonian "pessimism" – within a culture where nothing was sure and the future was of little comfort.[5] Nature was not the only source of gloom. During the centuries, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Parthians, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, Britons, and Americans have all invaded, devastated, and then, in a fashion, ruled, but never fully subdued Mesopotamia.

Past as precedent

For much of its history, the region has straddled a border that has divided, and still divides, great civilizations and religions. It has been the means of transmitting ideas as well as economic production. Not surprisingly, given its position on the frontiers of differing cultures, polities, and religions, Mesopotamia has also seen more than its fair share of human conflict.[6] The geography of Mesopotamia's rivers dominated the political and strategic framework of Iraq to an extent similar to that of the Nile in Egypt or the Yellow River in China. With rainfall limited to relatively short periods during the winter, the rivers represented the lifeblood for sustained agriculture and civilization.

To the south and west, relatively trackless deserts provided considerable protection, except for the occasional explosion of Bedouin tribes into the area. But directly to the east of the Tigris and to the north of the valley rises a range of mountains, from which invasions onto the valley plains have often come. Similarly, invaders from the west like Alexander the Great or the Roman emperor Trajan have moved with considerable facility across the valley and from there into the mountains into the Persian heartland. Nevertheless, in the largest sense, the mountains have been a barrier sufficient to delineate a border between Arab and Persian.[7]

Leading a division of the Indian Army in the invasion of Iran in summer 1941, the future Field Marshal Lord Slim noted:

[5] Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 102.

[6] One study of the history of warfare suggests that the Mesopotamian region boasts the dubious distinction of having had more wars than any other area on the planet. This equates to a war every 2.51 years over a study period of 2,190 years. See Claudio Cioffi-Revilla, "Origins and Evolutions of War Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1996), 10.

[7] Turkish tribes converted the Persians to the Shi'a version of Islam in the sixteenth century; then in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Persian missionaries converted substantial numbers of Arabs in the southern portions of the Mesopotamian Valley to their form of Islam.