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978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

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The Iran–Iraq War

The Iran–Iraq War is one of the largest, yet least documented conflicts in the history of the Middle East. Drawing from an extensive cache of captured Iraqi government records, this book is the first comprehensive military and strategic account of the war through the lens of the Iraqi regime and its senior military commanders. It explores the rationale and decision-making processes that drove the Iraqis as they grappled with challenges that, at times, threatened their existence. Beginning with the bizarre lack of planning by the Iraqis in their invasion of Iran, the authors reveal Saddam's desperate attempts to improve the competence of an officer corps that he had purged to safeguard its loyalty to his tyranny, and then to weather the storm of suicidal attacks by Iranian religious revolutionaries. This is a unique and important contribution to our understanding of the history of war and the contemporary Middle East.

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*For Colonel Karl H. Lowe, USA, retired – soldier,
strategist, scholar, mentor, and friend.*

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Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	page viii
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Note to reader</i>	xiv
1 Introduction	1
2 A context of “bitterness and anger”	9
3 The opponents	51
4 1980: The Iraqi invasion begins	85
5 1981–1982: Stalemate	138
6 Defeat and recovery	171
7 1983–1984: A war of attrition	205
8 1985–1986: Dog days of a long war	241
9 1987–1988: An end in sight?	286
10 Conclusion	336
<i>Appendix A: Timeline</i>	344
<i>Appendix B: People</i>	348
<i>Appendix C: Place names</i>	354
<i>Appendix D: Order of battle</i>	356
<i>Bibliography</i>	359
<i>Index</i>	385

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

4.1	Geography of the war (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	<i>page</i> 99
4.2	Southern battlefield, Iraqi offensives, 1980 (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	109
4.3	Central battlefield, Iraqi offensives, 1980 (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	111
4.4	Northern battlefield, Iraqi offensives, 1980 (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	112
5.1	Southern battlefield, extent of Iraqi advance, 1981–1982; Iranian defense of Basra, 1982–87; Iranian offensives, 1983–1986; extent of Iranian advance (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	139
5.2	Central battlefield, extent of Iraqi offensives, 1981–1982; Iranian offensives, 1983–1984; extent of Iranian advance (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	140
5.3	Northern battlefield, extent of Iraqi offensives, 1981–1982; Iranian offensives, 1983–1986; extent of Iranian advance (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	141
7.1	Persian Gulf, Tanker War (Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin. Persian Gulf Region (Political) 1981)	238
8.1	Persian Gulf, Iraqi air raids on Iranian islands (Source: Major General ‘Alwan Hassoun ‘Alwan al-Abousi)	256

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of figures	ix
9.1 Southern battlefield, Iraqi offensives, 1988 (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	312
9.2 Central battlefield, Iraqi offensives, 1988 (Source: US Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq,” DI Cartography Center/MPG 802950A1 (C00519), 1–03)	313

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History
Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Tables

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----------------|
| 5.1 | Ammunition issue 19–25 April 1981 for I, II,
and III Corps Chief of the Army Staff, Field Artillery
Directorate | <i>page</i> 158 |
| 8.1 | Estimate of the cost of the Iran–Iraq War: 1980–1988 | 242 |

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

The 1980–1988 war between Iraq and Iran was one of the largest and, yet, one of the least documented conventional conflicts in the twentieth century. Western reporters, regional experts, and a few historians managed during the intervening years to develop useful – if primarily secondary – narratives of the events. Many of these works, cited throughout this volume, remain essential to any study of the Iran–Iraq War.

The relative paucity of primary sources on the Iran–Iraq War changed with the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. Upon entering Baghdad, Coalition forces captured official Iraqi government records and recordings, including thousands from the period of the Iran–Iraq War. Using these records, this book looks at the strategic and military context of the war primarily through the lens of the Iraqi regime and its senior military commanders. The inside view of the war from Baghdad does not resolve the problem of primary source material from the Iranian perspective; however, it does provide a new and significant window into the war.

This book – the third in a series of histories exploring the former Iraqi regime’s perspective on its major wars – is also the final product of the Iraqi Perspectives Project. As with the prior studies, the authors believe that in addition to contributing to the existing scholarship on Iraq, this study serves three purposes. First, in keeping with the traditional purpose of military histories, we believe it will contribute to the education of the next generation of military leaders. Second, it provides an unvarnished look at senior military decision making inside of a totalitarian regime. It is hoped that the material cited here, and which is available at the Conflict Records Research Center, Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, will lead to additional research across many disciplines. Finally, while the events of the Iran–Iraq War may seem distant from recent challenges in the region, the echoes of that war are just under the surface. Many of the organizations, leaders, and narratives that animate much of the recent sectarian divide in Iraq have their modern roots in the Iran–Iraq War. The men who now dominate Iran’s

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978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface

senior leadership were young men on the battlefields of the Iran–Iraq War under conditions of both strict international isolation and the large-scale use of chemical weapons.

More than thirty years after the beginning of the war, Iraq and Iran remain unsettled countries. The reasons, both ancient and modern, seem purposely designed to frustrate all attempts to settle issues by peaceful and violent means. Given this history, it might be tempting for policy makers outside of this region to ignore the past or overinterpret more recent events. This book and the related research seeks to, as a historian once defined his craft, “interpret the past for the purposes of the present with a view toward managing the future, but to do so without suspending the capacity to assess the particular circumstances in which one might have to act, or the relevance of the past actions on them.” The past is never predictive of future events; however, it can be instructive.

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978-1-107-06229-0 - The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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For supporting the overall research effort and ensuring continued access to captured records, the authors are indebted to Dr. Thomas Mahnken, David Radcliffe, Heather Peterson, and Richard Johnson in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (Policy); MG John R. Landry in the National Intelligence Council (Military Issues); and Al Musgrove in the Joint Center for Operational Analysis and Lessons Learned. A special debt of gratitude is owed to the staff of the Conflict Records Research Center, Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. The staff of the CRRC, especially Dr. Lorry Fenner, David Palkki, Michelle Martinez, and Christopher Alkhoury, were enormously helpful in coordinating the use of the captured records. The authors also want to thank a group of senior Iraqi veterans of the Iran–Iraq War who contributed their personal narratives of the war and provided a human context to many of the documents cited: Ra’ad Majid Rashid al-Hamdani, Aladdin Hussein Makki Khamas, ‘Alwan Hassoun ‘Alwan al-Abousi, Abid Mohammed al-Kabi, and Mizher Rashid al-Tarfa al-Ubaydi.

Finally, this work could not have been complete without the dedicated efforts of Ana M. Venegas and Carolyn Leonard who endured innumerable rounds of fact checking, rewrites, and drafts before the final edits were complete. Despite all of the assistance noted above, all errors remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Note to reader

This book draws heavily on Iraqi state records captured during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Most of the Iraqi records cited here can be found in the National Defense University’s Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC). In footnoted citations, captured records are indicated by the prefix “SH.” An asterisk preceding the prefix “SH” indicates that the record was, at the time of this publication, not yet available through the CRRC. The CRRC will eventually migrate all records cited in this volume into its open research collection.