

Introduction

On his official website, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei periodically posts his views on a range of subjects, often presented as answers to questions, and in December 2012 he released a series of responses to questions about Iran's relationship with the United States. While for many Americans US relations with Iran are defined by disputes over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program and the two countries' often conflicting strategic interests in the Middle East, those were not the subjects that the Supreme Leader focused on.

Instead, he concentrated on history.

In answer to a question asking for "instances of hostility of the American government against our nation," Khamenei listed events that most Americans would know nothing about, and that would seem to have occurred too long ago to matter: "aid to Saddam [Hussein] during the war with Iran" and "the shooting down of an Iranian passenger airplane" in 1988. After further explaining the relevant history of US involvement in the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War, of which those two events were part, the Supreme Leader concluded with two questions of his own: "Has our nation forgotten these things? Can it forget [these things]?"¹

The answer to both questions is "No," as Khamenei clearly implied.

When discussing the same subject of US–Iran relations on ABC's *This Week* in September 2013, Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif went with assertion instead of implication. "We have not forgotten the fact, that when Iraq used chemical weapons [against] Iran [during the Iran–Iraq War], not only [did] the United States [not] condemn it, it went out of its way to blame us for the use of chemical weapons," Zarif said in response to George Stephanopoulos's question

¹ "The Leader of the Revolution's Answers to Ten Questions About the Historical Struggle of the Iranian Nation with America," Khamenei.ir, December 6, 2012 (Persian).

about why Iran insisted on maintaining a uranium enrichment capability if it wasn't interested in weaponizing its nuclear program. In a partial explanation of why he was talking about a decades-old war when the subject was uranium, Zarif proclaimed, "we cannot start history at the time of our choosing. The background has to be addressed, the historical aspects have to be addressed. The historical sources of Iran's very serious and deep mistrust of the behavior of the United States needs to be addressed." The foreign minister then summed up his point before letting Stephanopoulos get on with the interview. "So, these are all facts of history which are very fresh in the minds of Iranians," he said. "We may be willing [to] forgive as [former South African] President [Nelson] Mandela said once, but we're not going to forget."²

While Zarif was explaining the importance of the Iran–Iraq War and its history to Stephanopoulos and his American audience in New York, back in Iran Masoud Jazayeri, a commander in the powerful military conglomerate known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC or Revolutionary Guards), was bringing the same message to the Iranian people. He asserted, like Zarif, that any future ties between Iran and the United States required that Iranians' historic distrust of US behavior and intentions be addressed. And, like both Khamenei and Zarif, Jazayeri traced the source of that distrust to the Iran–Iraq War. The United States' support for Iraq in that conflict meant that it was "complicit in all of the devastation and crimes that occurred during that period," he stated. Accordingly, "before America considers its future relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran," Jazayeri warned, "it must clear the many debts it has to the Iranian nation."³

The ongoing significance of the Iran–Iraq War is likely one of very few issues on which Khamenei, Zarif, and Jazayeri – leaders with very different backgrounds, ideologies, and visions for Iran's future – can agree. Even more important, however, is the fact that while all three leaders are part of a regime that has struggled to maintain its legitimacy among a deeply divided population, in this case all were very likely

² *This Week*, ABC, September 29, 2013.

³ "Commander Jazayeri: Those Who Put Confidence in America Are Not Familiar with America or [Its] Policy," *Fars News*, September 24, 2013 (Persian).

speaking for the majority of Iranians when they said in agreement that the Iran–Iraq War’s impact on Iran is present and profound.⁴

But the problem is that they don’t agree. They all recognize that the war’s legacies loom large, but they don’t all agree on what those legacies mean, on what they should mean. And given that they all appreciate the significance and power, both real and potential, of the Iran–Iraq War and its history, they all understand that the ability to control Iran’s future belongs to those who control its recent past, to those who give content and meaning to the history of the Iran–Iraq War.

This book examines that particular front in the struggle for Iran’s future. It analyzes the IRGC’s history of the Iran–Iraq War and how the Revolutionary Guards have recorded, assessed, and assigned a particular set of meanings to the conflict. Its central questions include how and why the Guards have documented and composed the history of the Iran–Iraq War; how the Guards explain the course and outcome of the war, the relationship between the war and Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, and their own roles in prosecuting the conflict; and what the answers to those questions reveal about the IRGC, the Iran–Iraq War, and the Islamic Republic.

The analysis is based on the massive volume of Persian-language publications on the war produced by top members and units of the IRGC, primarily by the IRGC’s Holy Defense Research and Documentation Center (formerly the Center for War Studies and Research). Those publications provide us with the rare opportunity to go inside the IRGC and to understand Iran’s recent history as the Revolutionary Guards understand it themselves. What we find when we enter upends much of what we thought we knew about the IRGC and the Islamic Republic.

The first thing we discover is that both the experience of the Iran–Iraq War and the project of composing the historical narrative of the war are fundamental to the IRGC and accordingly to understanding

⁴ On the war’s legacies see Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed* (Stanford University Press, 2019); Arta Khakpour, Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, and Shouleh Vatanabadi, eds., *Moments of Silence* (New York University Press, 2016); Pedram Khosronejad, ed., *Unburied Memories* (Routledge, 2013); Lawrence Potter and Gary Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Farhang Rajaei, ed., *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran–Iraq War* (University of Florida Press, 1997).

the organization. Their significance stems from several factors, including the ways in which the war and the ongoing revolutionary process in Iran influenced one another; the war's role in legitimizing and institutionalizing the IRGC and the new Islamic Republic as a whole; the expansion and evolution of the IRGC through its participation in the war into the powerful organization it is today; and the fact that the Revolutionary Guards view history as a vital tool for shaping national identity and power.

Secondly, and more broadly, the IRGC's assessments of the Iran–Iraq War remind us that history must be both made and written. The content of the past is not fixed or singular; it is determined by those who give it meaning and permanence. Indeed, the interpretation and significance of the war's history as it has been written by the Revolutionary Guards challenge many of the prevailing scholarly and popular characterizations of the Islamic Republic, which are often based on Western sources and perspectives. In particular, the latter have given much weight to the rhetoric Iranian leaders used during (and since) the war and to the importance of faith and revolutionary fervor in understanding the Islamic Republic and its prosecution of the conflict. However, the history of the war authored by the Revolutionary Guards demonstrates that this is an essentialized understanding based on a literalized interpretation of the regime's rhetoric, and one that is not reflected in the IRGC sources or the Islamic Republic's actions. Those reveal in contrast that the war was a weighty and calamitous matter for Iran that the Revolutionary Guards and others struggled to prosecute and survive, and that to do so they relied on all the tools at their disposal, which included both faith – religious commitment, revolutionary ideology, and popular morale – and fire-power – careful strategic planning, organized force and offensive power, and military professionalism.

In the process of developing those central arguments, this book also explores several overarching themes that reveal how the analysis of the IRGC's history of the Iran–Iraq War provides extensive new insight into the Islamic Republic's past and present. First, throughout their sources, the Revolutionary Guards examine the close and complex connections between the war and the Islamic Revolution and argue that neither can be understood without the other. In exploring the links between war and revolution, the book contributes to theoretical examinations of those subjects and adds new dimensions to existing interpretations of the Iranian Revolution.

Second, the IRGC's sources on the war offer an internal view of the organization's mission and development, something that has been sorely lacking from existing assessments. The book's analysis of that internal view enhances our comprehension of the IRGC's roles and power in contemporary Iran, a subject that concerns scholars and policymakers alike. Finally, both the IRGC's history of the war and the book's analysis thereof reveal the power and necessity of understanding the past. The IRGC sources demonstrate that the history of the Iran-Iraq War has immense bearing on the Islamic Republic's present and future and therefore that command of the former facilitates the control of the latter. The book makes a complementary argument by revealing how analyzing Iran's history provides the critical tools for understanding its actions today.

In essence, then, this book presents an interwoven analysis of three main subjects – first, the IRGC's roles in the Iran-Iraq War and that conflict as a whole; second, the IRGC's history of the Iran-Iraq War; and third, the significance of that project. This is not a study wholly or exclusively of the Iran-Iraq War, of the IRGC, or of the war's legacy in Iran. Rather, it is a study of the conjunction of those three, of the IRGC's roles in and history of the Iran-Iraq War, and of the sources that contain that particular story.

Revolution, War, and the IRGC

The Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 was a movement of several different groups that were united most strongly in their opposition to the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose policies generated substantial resistance along a variety of lines. The shah's rule was characterized by a lack of freedom and was maintained with a system of violent repression. Many sectors of Iranian society experienced dislocation and economic hardship as a result of the shah's efforts to rapidly modernize the country. Immense wealth was amassed in the hands of a few, especially in the hands of the shah and his family, which created gaping socioeconomic disparities.

Much of Iranian society was alienated from the regime by the shah's program of Westernization and secularization, a fact that helps explain the revolution's Islamic orientation. Over the course of his reign, the

shah worked to limit the power of the ulama (Islamic clergy) and to promote secularism over Islamic norms and customs. He also oversaw a substantial increase in Western and US influence in Iran and its policies. As a result, many Iranians came to feel ostracized from their own country and culture, which prompted them to associate Westernization with suffering and dictatorship, to seek solace and identity in familiar traditions, and to put their faith in the solutions being advanced by Muslim religious leaders.⁵

The most prominent Muslim religious leader and the one who offered an Islamic answer to the problem of the shah was Ayatollah (Imam) Ruhollah Khomeini. Although the shah had him exiled for that very reason in 1964, Khomeini continued to play an important role in the opposition in the following years. The shah had responded to the massive demonstrations that preceded Khomeini's exile with a mix of partial reforms and increased repression, which allowed the monarch to hang on to power for another fifteen years. But his continued despotism and failure to implement meaningful change, combined with economic difficulties, led to the outbreak of opposition again in 1977 and 1978, which he was not able to survive. After a surging wave of demonstrations against the monarchy in the second half of 1978, the regime crashed rapidly and dramatically in the first six weeks of 1979, with the shah's departure from Iran on January 16, Khomeini's return on February 1, and the collapse of the shah's military and government on February 11.

Postrevolutionary rule in Iran was initially carried out by two competing authorities. The first was the Provisional Government headed by Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, and the second was the Council of the Islamic Revolution headed (informally) by Khomeini. Both authorities ruled for most of 1979 while the new regime took shape. A national referendum on March 30–31 led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic on April 1. Immediately following the occupation of the US Embassy in Tehran by students supporting Khomeini on November 4, Prime Minister Bazargan and his cabinet resigned, marking the demise of the Provisional Government and Khomeini's increasing domination of the new regime. The Council of the Revolution took control of the state, joined at the end of January 1980 by the Islamic Republic's first

⁵ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran* (Yale University Press, 2003); Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, trans. R. Campbell (Mizan Press, 1984).

president, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, and was then replaced mid-year when the new Majlis (parliament) convened for the first time.

As has been the case in other postrevolutionary regimes, the Islamic Republic was quick to take aim at the structures and policies that had defined the *ancien régime*, often moving far in the other direction. Social life was Islamicized, especially through the Cultural Revolution, which in spring 1980 began to transform Iran's universities. Political life was also reconstructed. After an acrimonious drafting process, a new constitution was approved in a referendum in December 1979.⁶

According to the constitution, the Islamic Republic is based on the system of *vilayat-i faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist.⁷ The highest governing authority is the guardian jurist (*vali-i faqih*), more commonly known as the Supreme Leader, a role occupied by Khomeini for the duration of the Iran–Iraq War. Executive power is exercised by the president, a position held by Bani-Sadr until his impeachment in June 1981 and then by Ali Khamenei, who became Supreme Leader following Khomeini's death in 1989.⁸ During the war and before the constitutional revisions of 1989, the president shared executive power with the prime minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Legislative authority resides in the popularly elected Majlis, which for most of the 1980s was under the chairmanship of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

In the eighteen-month period between the victory of the revolution in February 1979 and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in September 1980, the establishment of the Islamic Republic was accompanied by extensive conflict both within and against the new regime. The union of diverse groups that had come together to oust the shah gradually dissipated. There was little consensus on the nature and policies of the postrevolutionary state or the scope of religious leadership. Though many of the Iranians who had participated in the revolution supported the creation of an Islamic Republic and the leadership of Khomeini, most did not support the sort of absolute power that he and his allies were increasingly yielding. As Khomeini proved unwilling to accommodate conceptions of the Islamic Republic that differed from his own,

⁶ Website of the Iranian Majlis. The constitution and governmental structure were changed in 1989.

⁷ The concept is based on Khomeini's theory of Islamic government.

⁸ Mohammad-Ali Rajai served as president for less than a month between Bani-Sadr and Khamenei.

his ascendancy was achieved in part by political and violent suppression of the groups that challenged his rule.

The Iran–Iraq War

Though ultimately its causes were political and proximate, the Iran–Iraq War is part of a long history of conflict between the various rulers and peoples of those lands. Iraq’s border with Iran represents the eastern limit of the Arab world where it meets the Persian population that forms Iran’s largest ethnic group.⁹ Though both Iran and Iraq are majority-Shi‘i-Muslim countries, before 2003, Iraq was ruled by governments composed of Sunni Muslims, while Shi‘i Muslims have governed Iran for hundreds of years.

Empires have also fought it out in the territories that comprise Iraq and Iran. Wars between the Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires in the sixth century BCE, between Roman forces and the Parthian and then Sasanian Empires across several centuries, between Arab-Muslim forces and the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century, and between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have bestowed upon the modern rulers of Iraq and Iran a history rich with political and strategic rivalry.

The frequent warring produced an often-shifting and much-disputed border. The importance of historical claims to territory is compounded by the importance of the river that runs along or close to that boundary. Known as the Shatt al-Arab (in Arabic) or Arvand Rud (in Persian), the river provides access to the Persian Gulf, which is of strategic significance for both countries. But while Iran has a long coastline along the Gulf, the modern state of Iraq has a very limited shoreline (of about thirty-six miles). The river is the latter’s best outlet to the Gulf, and as a result Iraq’s leaders have consistently sought control of it.¹⁰

Disputes over the river formed one of the main sources of contention in the decades prior to the Iran–Iraq War. The governments also clashed over leadership of the region, with both seeking a dominant role in the Middle East and especially in the Persian Gulf. Iraq joined

⁹ Persians make up about 61 percent of the Iranian population. *CIA World Factbook: Iran*.

¹⁰ *CIA World Factbook: Iraq*.

other Arab countries in loudly condemning Iran's seizure of three Gulf islands in 1971. There were also efforts by each government to undermine the other by fomenting instability in the Kurdish community that spans the northern regions of the two countries.

But despite these conflicts, the decades preceding the outbreak of hostilities in 1980 were marked not by war but by limited cooperation, even in the presence of rivalry. It was the Iranian Revolution that precipitated open conflict, and it was the revolution's results and reverberations that formed the Iran–Iraq War's most significant catalysts. As outlined earlier, Iran's postrevolutionary government was based on the centrality of Islam in public life, and Ayatollah Khomeini vowed to fight for the freedom of the oppressed throughout the world. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein – who presided over the Sunni-dominated, secular Ba'ath regime ruling a Shi'i majority – saw the policies of the new Islamic Republic as a threat to his power.¹¹

At the same time, Iran appeared to be in a vulnerable position, as violent disputes over the nature of the new regime persisted into its second year. Saddam decided to take the opportunity to launch what he hoped would be a quick military operation to defeat the revolution and safeguard his rule and, while he was at it, to seize the oil-rich territory in southwestern Iran and assert his leadership of the Arab world. So, after a year of steadily worsening relations and several months of clashes along the countries' shared border, Iraqi forces invaded Iran and initiated an aerial assault on Iranian bases on September 22, 1980, marking the beginning of the Iran–Iraq War.

What Saddam intended to be a swift and easy strike to check the revolutionary state quickly transformed into a brutal and drawn-out conflict that in fact revitalized the flagging revolution. After an initial series of victories allowed Iraqi forces to advance into Iran through the beginning of 1981, and to capture the strategic city of Khorramshahr and lay siege to the city of Abadan along the way, Iranian forces halted the Iraqis' march and retook most of their territory over the course of the next year. Iran then pursued the retreating forces into Iraq in the

¹¹ In 1980 Shi'is composed about 60 percent (between 55 and 65 percent) of the Iraqi population. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 13–50; Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Iraq: A Country Study* (GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988), 87–93; Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 13–47.

summer of 1982 but was unable to gain much ground. As the war stalled, it also broadened to entangle the rest of the Middle East and both superpowers, and it spread from the land to a tanker war in the Persian Gulf and several series of aerial attacks on civilian areas, known as the Wars of the Cities.

The war continued largely as a bloody stalemate until the summer of 1988. It ended on August 20, 1988, when the ceasefire terms of United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 (of July 20, 1987) came into force. The end of the war restored the status quo ante, with both regimes still in power and without territorial adjustments. Neither side emerged as the clear victor, but the war had a profound impact on both countries. The conflict was exceedingly heinous, even by the standards of modern warfare, with the belligerents resorting to the most inhumane practices: Both parties targeted civilians and mistreated prisoners of war; Iraq used chemical weapons on a massive scale; Iran sent child soldiers to the fronts and employed unprotected frontal infantry assaults, or human wave attacks.¹²

It is indeed difficult to overstate the significance of the Iran–Iraq War for Iranians and for the Islamic Republic. Ending less than four decades ago, the war has touched, and is still with, nearly every individual Iranian. Hundreds of thousands fought. Tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands died. Many thousands more were wounded and live everyday with the scars of war.¹³ Those who were exposed to chemical weapons are still sick from their effects.

If you yourself didn't fight, then your father or cousin or neighbor did. If you don't remember the frontlines or the airstrikes and weren't alive to experience a society at war in real time, then you live now in a society where the legacies of war are impossible to escape. The massive murals that tower over cities across the country display the scenes and faces of the war reanimated in epic visual fashion. Quotes from the country's leaders emphasizing the importance of the Iran–Iraq War and connecting it to everything from uranium enrichment to relations with the West and economic development appear daily in the news.

¹² See Ige F. Dekker and Harry H. G. Post, eds., *The Gulf War of 1980–1988* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1992).

¹³ Estimates of Iranian deaths in the war range from about 170,000 to 750,000. The Peace Research Institute Oslo, "Battle Deaths Dataset"; The Correlates of War, "Inter-State War Data."