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Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xiv, 397. ISBN 978-1-107-67393-2.

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This book analyzes the first of the modern conflicts fought by Iraq. Its long war against Iran (1980–88) affected its foreign policy and the conduct of the wars it fought with the United States over the following two decades. The authors are very well qualified: Williamson Murray is a leading modern military historian and Kevin Woods has become the master of Iraq’s war documents, a collection assembled after the 2003 war. Their collaboration has yielded a clearly argued treatment of the Iran-Iraq war.

The Iran-Iraq War is in fact, as its subtitle promises, both a military and a strategic history. In their introduction, the authors state that during the protracted struggle “neither side proved competent in applying the most rudimentary ends-ways-means test to the war” (1). Their book does tell the story of the principal military engagements of that long war, “which forced both Iraq and Iran to adapt and learn” (3), but it falls short as a strategic history because it lacks geostrategic context and gives only cursory attention to strategic factors other than military. It is more precisely a study of the military actions of the Iraqis during the war, from the Iraqi perspective, barely touching on the corresponding Iranian actions.

The book’s ten chapters, including an introduction (chapter 1) and a conclusion (chapter 10) address each year of the war in turn. Four handy appendices provide a timeline and list key individuals, place names, and the order of battle for the belligerents. Setting the scene of the conflict and its initial moves, chapter 2, “A Context of ‘Bitterness and Anger,’” reveals deep-seated animosities and the lack of understanding on both sides. Chapter 3, “The Opponents,” offers a rudimentary sketch of the two sides’ strategic worldviews. It also sketches the international and historical background of the conflict, with a perceptive overview of the Pasdaran, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. In the fourth chapter, “1980: The Iraqi Invasion Begins,” Murray and Woods explain that Iraq’s initial moves of the war were vitiated by late and poor planning, Saddam Hussein’s consistent rejection of bad news, and his wildly inaccurate assumptions about the conduct of the war.

Chapter 5, “1981–1982: Stalemate,” focuses on the devolution of the conflict into a standoff after the failure of strategic assumptions on both sides. The Iranians showed some innovation, but the Iraqis decimated their own NCO corps and failed to grasp the nature of the war they were waging. Logistics and supply problems plagued both sides; Iraqis’ response to these, the authors write, only exacerbated the situation. Saddam’s forces neither built on any successes nor developed operational or strategic concepts needed to escape a costly and unproductive tactical quagmire.

Nations are truly tested by defeat. In chapter 6, “Defeat and Recovery,” Murray and Woods argue that the Iran-Iraq war exemplifies just how hard it is for any country at war to accept that its plans are failing, assess what has gone wrong, and make changes accordingly. Despite his many faults, Saddam Hussein did at least realize he needed to adjust his war aims and alter his military doctrine and command structure. Murray and Woods analyze four main subsequent campaigns of the war in the next three chapters: ongoing seasonal land battles, missile exchanges including both threats of and actual use of chemical weapons, the Arabian Gulf harassment sorties, and the international recriminations about causes and possible resolutions of the war.

Chapter 7, “1983–1984: A War of Attrition,” is particularly instructive. After its initial failures, Iraq changed its strategy and began building defensive positions and enlarging its military from 200,000 at the start to nearly 500,000 by 1984. Despite these measures, a lack of ammunition and spare parts undercut Saddam’s war effort. The Iranians were less successful in their mobilization efforts, because their regular army distrusted the new national leadership, but eventually its larger population allowed an expansion pri-

marily of their militia forces. While the Iraqis developed armor and artillery forces, and added a new combat development directorate, the Iranians continued to rely primarily on infantry (including militiamen). This had serious tactical consequences and caused huge Iranian casualties during the remainder of the fighting.

The essential problem was geography: once the Iranians broke into Iraqi territory, the river valleys of Iraq gave Saddam interior transport lines to quickly shift forces and blunt the slow-moving Iranian attacks. Ayatollah Khomeini's forces had the initiative, but little operational reach, while Saddam enjoyed superior mobility and firepower. Iranian human-wave assaults were repulsed time after time. Still, the Iranian leaders denied their problems and grew ever more resolute through four consecutive major operations. On the other side, Saddam's extensive mobilization of his country's smaller population, forced Iraq "to import more than a million Egyptian guest workers" (233) and authorize the use of chemical weapons. Conditions had become so dire that the Iraqis shifted their missile targets from Iran's military bases to its population centers. Meantime, the tanker war in the Gulf intensified, jeopardizing international oil transportation in 1984.

Chapter 8, "1985-1986: Dog Days of a Long War," assesses the factor of sheer endurance: "By early 1985, the opposing sides were beginning to resemble punch-drunk fighters" (241). Iraq's deployment of chemical weapons only strengthened Iran's resentment and Khomeini's resolve. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf states had loaned Saddam millions and he had expanded and professionalized his Republican Guard. Iran mounted another poorly executed attack in March 1985 and suffered massive casualties after only a week. Khomeini continued to believe that Iraq was on the brink of collapse and cared little about the innumerable soldiers' corpses stacked up after his fruitless attacks. Major offensives ceased but low-grade skirmishing persisted, draining the blood of both sides. Spring 1985 saw another return to maritime efforts in the Gulf and escalating missile strikes against cities on both sides.

In 1986, Iran launched a 150,000-man attack, mostly by the Pasdaran, with North Korean logistical help (264), against the Al Fao peninsula in southern Iraq. It began with a successful feint north of Basra on 11 February; the Iranians quickly destroyed the Iraqi Twenty-Sixth Division and eventually occupied the strategically important peninsula, where Iraqi weapons superiority counted for little. Saddam counterattacked in the north, retaking some territory and pushing the Iranians back out of Iraq farther north, but the capture of the Fao led the Iranians to imagine they could win. Saddam, for his part, became ever more determined to continue the fight, believing an international conspiracy (evidenced by President Ronald Reagan's Iran-Contra Affair) was behind the shocking Iranian victory at Fao.

Chapter 9, "1987-1988: An End in Sight?" mirrors the anticlimax of the war itself. Saddam used all his major forces to push the Iranians back from their positions won earlier in the middle campaign area south-east of Baghdad and to retake the Fao. The tremendous casualties sustained by the Iranian forces together with missile strikes against major cities, including Tehran, and the very real threat of Iraqi poison gas caused the Khomeini government to pull back. The Iraqis penetrated Iranian territory in July and offered a ceasefire, which the UN accepted on the 17 July 1988. Iran agreed to the negotiated settlement and the long painful war finally just stopped.

Throughout the conflict, Khomeini and his hard line advisors believed that religious enthusiasm, engendered by their revolution, could replace military expertise, weapons systems and technology. While this "way of war" may have affected a few tactical engagements, it was a recipe for disaster as a strategy.... Had Iraq won? Saddam had survived, but Iraq had hardly triumphed. The nation was bankrupt. It had lost huge quantities of manpower and equipment. It owed vast sums to the Gulf states which had supported its war effort. Its oil infrastructure had suffered considerably. However the corrupt and murderous Ba'ath regime remained in power, while its leaders had learned little, or perhaps worse, the wrong lessons from their careless and ill-thought-through decision to invade Iran in 1980. (338)

Structurally, the book dances around chronologically and the authors have a penchant for superfluous quotations, but the Iraqi evidence they adduce is fascinating and irrefutable, and they are fully conversant with the relevant secondary sources. The short shrift given Iran's decision-making and the actions of other involved nations is by design, as the authors acknowledge in their "note to reader" and preface.

The Iran-Iraq War is now the best of several books¹ on its subject, featuring the most discerning and sober analysis of the events directed by Saddam and executed by his armed forces. Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods hoped to “contribute to the education of the next generation of military leaders [and] provide an unvarnished look at senior military decision making inside a totalitarian regime” (xi). They have achieved both goals in spades.

1. E.g., Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990); Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (NY: Routledge, 1991); Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980–1988* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002); and John R. Ballard, *From Storm to Freedom: America's Long War with Iraq* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2010).