

Implications of the Iran-Iraq War

Written by Ronen Zeidel

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RONEN ZEIDEL, OCT 7 2013

25 years after its end, the Iran-Iraq war, dominating Middle Eastern events in the 1980's, ushered the region into a new geopolitical situation. However, like the war itself, its contribution to shaping the contemporary Middle East is fading from memory.

Implications on Iraq and Iran

In the two belligerent countries, the war had a similar impact: it entrenched and stabilized the political systems while deteriorating the economy and pushing the two countries into a deep crisis that would continue long after the war's end.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein used war and emergency rules as pretext to establish an unprecedented totalitarian dictatorship. Saddam crushed and uprooted the organized Shiite opposition shortly before the war, thus denying the majority group in Iraq's population a tool for expressing their indignation. This allowed Saddam to rely on an army with a Shiite majority among the rank and file soldiers, to fight Shiite Iran. Influenced by Stalin, Saddam presented the war as the Iraqi equivalent of the "Great Patriotic War" (World War II in Soviet parlance) producing some patriotic zeal, even among Shiite warriors. The Iraqi Communist Party, previously a real challenge to the Baath, did not survive the purge in 1977 and ceased to be a real threat to the Saddam regime in the 1980s. For the Kurds, on the other hand, war was an opportunity to renew their rebellion. The Kurdish rebels established a new leadership and restarted the rebellion in the north. Exploiting the Iraqi army's engagement along the front, Kurdish rebels took control of some areas and in the northern front closely cooperated with the Iranians. However, the war ended with the worst catastrophe for the Iraqi Kurds: in March 1988 the Iraqi army bombarded the town of Halabja using chemical weapons and, later in that year, the Iraqi regime carried out a genocidal campaign against the Kurdish population killing approximately 189,000 individuals.

Economically, the rising Iraqi economy of the 1970's, benefitting from the nationalization of oil in 1972 and reaching a record oil production of 3.3 million BPD (barrels per day) by early 1980, plummeted within a year to 0.8 million BPD as a direct result of the war. Only in 2012 Iraq reached its pre war production levels. War costs weighed heavily on the Iraqi economy, now unable to pay for imports. At the end of the war, Iraq accumulated an external debt of over 100 billion dollar. War strained Iraq's manpower: in addition to the estimated 180,000 casualties, 340,000 wounded and 50,000 POWs, at the end of the war the Iraqi army comprised of 1.2 million soldiers of a population of 18 millions.

Before starting the war, Iraq, under the influence of Saddam Hussein, reoriented its foreign policy from a focus on Arab-Israeli conflict to a focus on the Gulf. The war, along with economic dependence, brought Iraq closer to the conservative, pro-Western states in the Arab world: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and even Egypt. In the international stage, Iraq conducted a classic Third World policy: It received huge amounts of arms from the USSR and its proxies and from China, but also renewed relations with the US in 1984.

In Iran, a more unique political system took shape. Following a brief period of instability, the world's first Islamic Republic came into being, headed by a "Spiritual Leader" and governed by an elected president and parliament. The elderly Ayatollah Khomeini, who survived the war and died in 1989, certainly contributed to the emergence of a

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political system from the mayhem of revolution and war. But so did the war and its continuation. Between 1980-1982, Iraqi forces were on Iranian territory and driving them out was a patriotic mission. When this was achieved in June 1982, victorious Iran was eager to push the fighting into Iraqi territory and not ready to settle for a ceasefire. Only by 1987, after five years of constant futile attempts to achieve significant territorial gains, did the Iranian population show signs of war fatigue.

Iran also suffered economically. Its oil sector, mostly located in the war areas of Southwestern Iran, was constantly hit by the Iraqis. Unlike the Iraqis, who transferred oil export from the war torn Gulf to other directions, the Iranians continued to rely on exports through the Gulf region. The nuclear project, which started under the Shah, was put aside.

In addition, Iran also suffered from international isolation. The declared policy of “neither east nor west” coupled with a strong anti-American rhetoric and Soviet apprehensions from having a revolutionary Islamic theocracy at their borders did not endear Iran to the superpowers. Its Shiism and revolutionary zeal alienated most Arab countries from Iran. The only exception was the alliance with Syria and the increasing involvement in Lebanon. This isolation had a serious impact on Iran’s war capabilities as the Islamic Republic was unable to procure arms and much needed spare parts.

Military Implications of the War

The Iran Iraq war was not only the longest war in the twentieth century, it was the last conventional war in history. Most of the war routine was made of armored and infantry battles, artillery and air strikes.

However, in two aspects this war signaled a new era. Iraq first used its home produced chemical weapons against the Iranian army with very limited impact. In March 1988 the Iraqi air force bombarded the Kurdish town of Halabja, killing 3000-5000 people, which has been the biggest chemical attack on civilian target in Middle Eastern history so far. With world inactivity, it gave the Iraqi regime a strategic advantage over the Kurds and encouraged the development of more non-conventional capabilities.

In late 1987, Iraq modified the Soviet Scud B missile to prolong its range. The two countries made use of long-range aircraft and ballistic attacks on cities and economic infrastructure throughout the war. However, the active use of long-range missiles by Iraq in February 1988, contributed significantly to the Iranian surrender and ushered the Middle East into a ballistic era, affecting not only the Gulf but also the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Economic Implications of the War

The war dwindled the global and regional production of oil. Iran and Iraq, major producing countries and members of OPEC, were not able to reach prewar production levels. Oil prices rose significantly. Though Saudi Arabia was the uncontested largest producer of oil, its oil industry, situated very close to the war front and export lines were affected by the continuation of the war. In fact, the war affected the oil production all over the Gulf area. Since 1987, the “tanker war” expanded to include tankers exporting oil from other Gulf countries. This was an Iranian Initiative intended to stop Gulf support to Iraq. Instead it led to the first massive American military deployment in the area to protect Gulf tankers from Iranian attacks.

The Iran-Iraq war was the first major regional conflict in the Gulf turning into a real war. It showed how sensitive and vulnerable Gulf oil is and how dangerous overreliance on it could be. In this sense, the war contributed to efforts to diversify sources of oil production worldwide

War profits, especially by arms suppliers to the two belligerents, were not much of a benefit. Iran and Iraq accumulated foreign debts, which they were unable to pay once war ended. This had a devastating influence for major suppliers such as the USSR and its proxies. This may partially account for these countries post-war economic and political collapse. Other countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, providing economic and financial support, lost billions of dollars on loans to Iraq, which have never been reimbursed.

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Regional Implications of the War

The war shifted the world's attention in the Middle East from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Gulf region. It took Iraq out of any possible organization of an "Eastern Front" in a war against Israel. In fact, with the signing of peace between Egypt and Israel, the planning of an "Eastern Front" against Israel became practically impossible. Thus, the Iran-Iraq war contributed indirectly to Israel's security. The war dismantled the axis of radical Arab countries that included Iraq, Libya, Syria and south Yemen. During the war Iraq shifted out of the radical camp to align with Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf countries, while Syria remained Iran's sole Arab ally.

In the Gulf region, war reiterated the extreme vulnerability of all the Arab Gulf countries. Therefore, the war hastened a process of increasing interstate cooperation, mostly within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Under the direct threat from Iran and the potential future threat from Saddam's Iraq, the Gulf countries relied more heavily on American military might, which consequently increased dramatically toward the war's end.

Further north, the war helped Turkey attain regional supremacy. Stable after years of domestic strife and economically prosperous, Turkey made use of its geopolitical location during the war. By allowing Iraq to lay a major pipeline on its territory, Turkey provided an alternative to the Gulf route and became Iraq's main economic gateway. Turkey showed that oil and gas could be exported from the Gulf through its territory without using tankers.

The Implications for the US, USSR and China

For the Soviets, mainly bothered by being bogged down in Afghanistan and economic troubles at home, the Iran-Iraq war was primarily an economic affair. The USSR supplied arms to both sides that paid with oil on a barter basis. The USSR supplied much more arms, of all varieties, to Iraq, both directly and indirectly through its satellite states in Eastern Europe. This could have been motivated by political reasons, but it is more likely that the Iranian market was more limited since the regular army needed Western weapons and the Revolutionary Guards were also purchasing Chinese arms. Nevertheless, the Iraqi arm debts would weigh heavily on Soviet economy after the war. In the last stages of the war, the USSR, now also suffering from leadership problems, failed to prevent an American military incursion into the Gulf.

For China the war was the first opportunity to sell the products of its arms industry in exchange for Iraqi and Iranian oil to fuel its economic leap. For the first time, China became a major provider of arms in a Middle Eastern armed conflict, selling almost equal amounts to Iran and Iraq. It is probably during the war that China became dependent on the Gulf, and especially Iranian, oil. Having access to free oil allowed China to complete its economic and political transformation successfully.

With the fall of the Shah, the US lost a major ally and client in the region. At the beginning of the war, none of the belligerents was an American ally and the only allies the US had in the region were the Gulf countries. Therefore, American interests in the area were primarily the protection of oil exports by the Gulf countries and addressing those countries security concerns. However, they were also considering, for the first time, the potential destabilizing dangers of political Islam in the region, with its anti American rhetoric, and thus tended to prefer Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a "lesser evil". Iraqi-American rapprochement was limited in time and scope and was certainly more beneficial to the Iraqis. Since 1987, the process leading to the American deployment in the Gulf played for the Iraqis and contributed to their confidence. Though the Americans were in a process of pulling out by early 1990, their first Gulf adventure would lay the ground for a more massive and permanent presence as a consequence of the Gulf war.

In a sense, the Iran-Iraq war marked both the end of the old age and the beginning of the new one. Militarily, it was an old style war based heavily on infantry, artillery, armor and air force. In continuation with the Cold War, the two superpowers still played an active and significant role throughout the war, but only an active American intervention in the Gulf would provide the tiebreaker. Nevertheless, my analysis of the implications points that the war was more an agent of change than a continuation of the old order. This change still is a characteristic of contemporary reality in the Middle East.

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