

Kitap İncelemesi/ Book Review

The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988

**Efraim KARSH, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002, pp. 95.
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Iran-Iraq War is one of the bloodiest, longest and, with respect to consequences, the most important battles which occurred in the Middle East in the 20th century. The confrontation of two regional powers lasted eight years and caused devastating effects on these two states and their people. Efraim Karsh's book offers an ideal explanation for those who want to get information about this war. It has chronological narration and it's basically composed of nine chapters. In this review, every chapter is studied separately and eventually a general examination is made.

In the introduction chapter; the main reason of the Iran-Iraq War is generally stated in the literature as the Arab-Persian struggle to dominate the Gulf and the Fertile Crescent; the rivalry between Achaemenid and Babylon Empires in the pre-Islamic period; Seventh century Arab-Muslim destruction of Sassanid Empire and subsequent conversion of Persians to Islam and the historic rivalry between Shia and Sunni Islam. But Efraim Karsh says that all these reasons are not enough to explain the war and to understand the war better, we have to focus on the nature of the leadership and political and ideological aims of two countries at that period. After the

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short introduction, the relationship between these two countries in the 20th century is briefly narrated and the pre-war process is examined. It is prominent that they had a good relationship until the 1970s. According to the author, deterioration of the relations in the early 1970s is the result of an array of events. These are the withdrawal of Britain from the east of Suez in 1968, the disappearance of Soviet threat with improving Iran-Soviet relations and the increase in petroleum revenues.

In the first chapter, the background of the war is told. According to the author, the Islamic Revolution in Iran deteriorated the status quo that had been established by 1975 Algeria Agreement. The main reason for this was that a new regime in Iran depended on a “militant” religious doctrine. Oppressed-oppressors, ummah and the belief that Iran is the only country that is governed by “God’s rule” which in Khomeini’s mind has constituted this doctrine’s three trivets. The new regime targeted Iraq for two reasons. Firstly, 60% of Iraq’s population was Shia and they had been discriminated by the Sunni minority for a long time. Secondly, Iraq was seen as the most serious obstacle, due to being the biggest and powerful Arab state in the Gulf, to Iran’s path of becoming a regional hegemon.

In the second chapter, the strengths and weaknesses of two states are evaluated in terms of geography, demography and military capacity. Firstly, the author mentioned the demographic structure of two states and put forward that Iraq was more disadvantaged compared to Iran. Iraq’s ethnic and religious division was severe and deeper than Iran. The existence of the non-Arab Kurdish people in the north of the country and the partition of the Arabs into Shia-Sunni has weakened Iraq. But Iran had a 95% Shia population and had less than half of Iraq’s Kurdish population. Additionally, the author has done a geopolitical assessment of two states. Iraq is an almost landlocked state and it has six neighbors including bigger and stronger states such as Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, both armies were weak with respect to combat experience, drill, command, and control. Both were commanded by politicized and tightly controlled leaderships and systems in which loyalty to the regime was a precondition for promotion rather than professionalism.

In the third chapter, the first phase of the war including the initial attack of Iraq, its strategy and process are told. Saddam hoped that a sudden, limited but decisive attack would finish off Iran’s mullah regime politics which

aimed at overthrowing him. So as to show this limited goal, he underlined at the beginning of the war that the invasion was for self-defense and Iraq was unwilling to total war. The limited nature of the decision of Saddam's invasion was reflected in his war strategy. Saddam's main objective was to capture Shatt al-Arab completely and to gain an area of the south of Khuzestan. Karsh claimed that these political and geographic concerns caused Saddam's failure. According to him, stopping the army in the first week of advance and tending to bargain rather than allowing the army, which gained momentum, to advance as far as possible changed the fate of the war.

The fourth chapter explains the process after the falling of Khorramshahr on 24 October 1980 and it is the longest chapter of the book. The war became limited when Saddam declared that his army changed its plan and formed a defensive position after gaining victory over Iran's army on 7 December 1980. In the spring of 1981, Iran's army was reorganized. Operating conventional war with the leadership of the army and coordination between Pasdaran, Basij and regular forces, Iran could repel Iraqi forces to its territories. In 1984 Iraq launched a missile attack to eleven provinces of Iran which soon retaliated, thus the first "war of the cities" started and it was repeated five times during the war. But this couldn't stop Iranian forces and they kept attacking. After Iran's success against Iraq in 1984, the fear of increasing its effectiveness throughout the Middle East with a possible victory of caused Iraq to receive international support. Therefore, the US, USSR, France, and Egypt supported Iraq militarily and technologically.

In 1984 to change the stalemate and gain leverage on the battlefield, Saddam started the Tanker War. With the tanker war, Iraq included other countries –particularly Western powers- in the war and hoped to take support from them at least for beginning peace talks. another purpose of Saddam was to take extraordinary measures against Iran such as closing the Strait of Hormuz by intensifying the attacks. In 1987-1988 Iraqi forces used chemical weapons –especially against Kurds-. Iran wanted to use these attacks for propaganda, but –for the author- Saddam was the only obstacle to the fundamentalism and was the favorite boy for West, hence the Western powers ignored these attacks. In July 1987 UNSC adopted resolution 598 for calling ceasefire to both sides. On 17 July 1988, the war was ended by Iran accepting a ceasefire.

In the fifth chapter, the boy soldiers who joined the Basij are examined. In the beginning, the author says that the dedication of the Basij volunteers and their desire of martyrdom had never been seen on any battlefield before. He asks some questions like “What is the source of this absolute devotion for sacrificing themselves? Were these boy soldiers brainwashed by the government? Did they fight by force?” and he answers by dialogues between a member of the Western aid agency who worked in Iraqi prison camp and two boys whose names are Ahmed and Samir.

In the sixth chapter, both countries’ political, economic and social situations are told. According to the author, the Baath regime and Saddam were the primary targets for the new Iranian regime and the animosity between these regimes was one of the main reasons of war. Iraq’s foreign currency reserve decreased from \$35 billion to \$3 billion at the end of 1983. Saddam claimed that the war against Iran was for all Arab world and asserted that if he failed the whole Gulf region would be affected by the Iranian Revolution. It worked, at the onset of war Kuwait and Saudi Arabia supported Iraq and during the war, the economic aid from these two countries reached \$50 billion.

Iran struggled against serious opponent movements during the war. The most important of these was the Mojahedin-e Khalq organization. The regime could restrain it in 1985. Besides, Iran had an economic downturn during the war. The currency reserve that was \$14.6 billion in 1979 decreased by \$1 billion at the end of 1981 and the petroleum revenues decreased from \$19 billion to \$6.6 billion in 1986.

The seventh chapter is about the Anfal Operation which was against Kurds. This brutal campaign narrated through a specific incident that happened in Koreme village. In order to draw attention to atrocity, author says that “this operation reached heights of brutality that were exceptional even by the merciless standards of Saddam’s Iraq”(s.76.). Iraqi army killed civilians, women and children indiscriminately. By the end of the campaign in the autumn of 1988, thousands of villages and towns demolished in Kurdistan region, approximately half a million Kurds were relocated and another 250.000 fled to Turkey and Iran.

The eighth chapter includes the ceasefire period. After Tehran accepted the ceasefire, Saddam made some demands in order to exploit Tehran’s

desperate situation. One of the most important and symbolic of these was the decision of the ceasefire published by Khomeini himself. The ceasefire process was problematic and mutual attacks continued. However, due to pressure on Saddam by the US, European and Gulf countries, peace talks were started under UN Secretary-General supervision on 24 August.

The last chapter includes a conclusion and assessments. According to Karsh, one of the obvious ironies was the intervention which was designated limited operation transformed the longest and bloodiest war that took place in the “Third World” since World War II. This war was the first battle in which toxic gas was used as a weapon after WWI and enhanced the arms race in the Middle East. Like the French and Bolshevik Revolution, war both gathered masses around the new regime and ensured national legitimacy. For the author, the acceptance of UNSC resolution 598 was a strategic move. The war protected the newborn regime.

Overall, the book has a flowing and simple style. The narration is enriched by pictures and images. It is an ideal book for those who want to learn general knowledge about the Iran-Iraq War. For those who want to further their readings about the war, there is additional and beneficial bibliography at the end of the book. In order to avoid the dullness of intense historical narrative, the author has included different stories, as in the fifth and seventh chapters. Finally, someone who is interested in this issue should read this book, it is a short book but has intense knowledge about the war.

