

TWENTIETH-CENTURY WARS



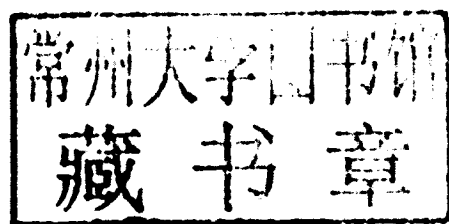
# THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

ROB JOHNSON



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## Preface

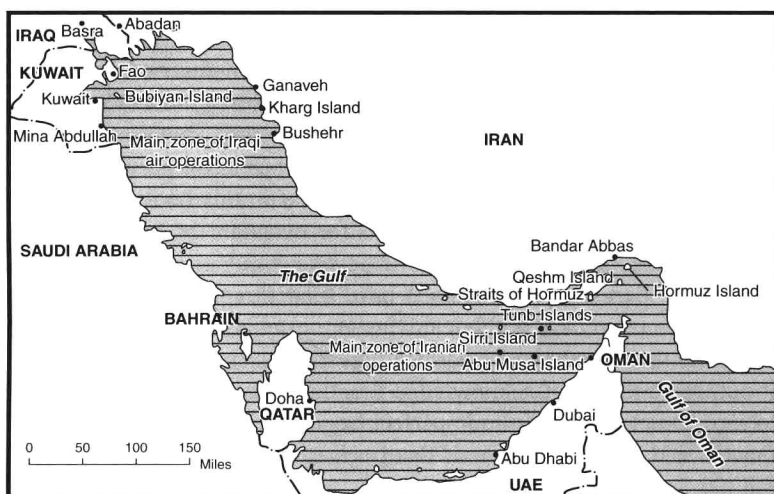
A number of people have assisted me in my research over the last few years and it would seem invidious to mention a few and miss out the many. Nevertheless, I am in debt particularly to some outstanding individuals whose dedication and original thinking have been for me an inspiration. Oxford has a particularly rich seam of scholarship and endeavour. The Department of Politics and International Relations, the Faculty of History, the Middle East Studies Centre and the Islamic Studies Centre have been especially helpful, and the library staff of the Middle East Centre Library of St Antony's College and the Social Sciences Library are excellent. I have been fortunate to work within the Oxford Changing Character of War (CCW) Programme over the last two years and the sheer quality of seminar speakers, of whom there are so many, has been profoundly helpful in the preparation of this work. Professor Hew Strachan provides outstanding leadership of the programme, and his insights on strategy always provoke serious thought. I have benefited from all my conversations with Professor Adam Roberts, Professor Henry Shue and Professor Anne Deighton, all of whom bring their own disciplinary expertise to bear on the programme. Professor Avi Shlaim has also inspired me and given me original insights into the Middle East with a depth of experience I think unmatched even in this prestigious institution. But I have profited from working with other experts on the *mentalités* of the Islamic world, including Gil-li Vardi and Alia Brahimi, two Research Fellows of the CCW, and the many officers of the British and American armed forces who have had recent operational experience in Iraq. They acted as conduits for so many enquiries and questions, and their opinions were valued deeply. As always, my students never fail to impress me with their creative ideas and critical questions. I am fortunate in that I enjoy teaching so much and the rewards from listening to my students, who are always sharp and discerning, are very great.

I must also mention thanks to Professor Roger Stern, at Princeton, with whom I spent a few intense days in Annapolis and learned so much,

and who continues to collaborate with me. Commander Jeff Macris, USN, and Professor Saul Kelly of Kings College, who made possible the Gulf and the Globe Conference of 2009, and who introduced me to so many useful contacts for this book, deserve not just thanks but also medals. Commander Tim Ash and the team at The Defence Academy of the United Kingdom have been extremely helpful and I am grateful for the opportunity to present work on naval operations in the Gulf at the Staff College. Shohei Sato, who works on the Gulf, has been a very stimulating scholar to work with at Oxford. Above all, I must thank Professor Jeremy Black, who not only inspires and challenges me, but who has remained a most warm and generous friend indeed. I have chosen not to list many of the contacts and interviewees from Iran and Iraq for a variety of reasons, but Mohammadjavad Ardalan deserves thanks for helping me in my first steps in learning Farsi although illness and work prevented me from completing my studies with him.

It is in the nature of academic study to be subjected to peer review and I must point out that any errors which appear in this book are entirely my own. I can only plead *mea culpa* for oversight or honest error. I am also conscious, however, that wars evoke strong emotions and often entrenched partisan judgements. I have tried to approach this conflict with an open mind and without any favour or prejudice. Yet, where I feel there was error, courage, cowardice, injustice or cruelty, I have pointed it out. Nevertheless, I acknowledge it is the historian's craft to attempt to reconstruct the past from imperfect fragments when we ourselves are flawed, and therefore I submit this book to you conscious of my own failings and with humility.

# Maps



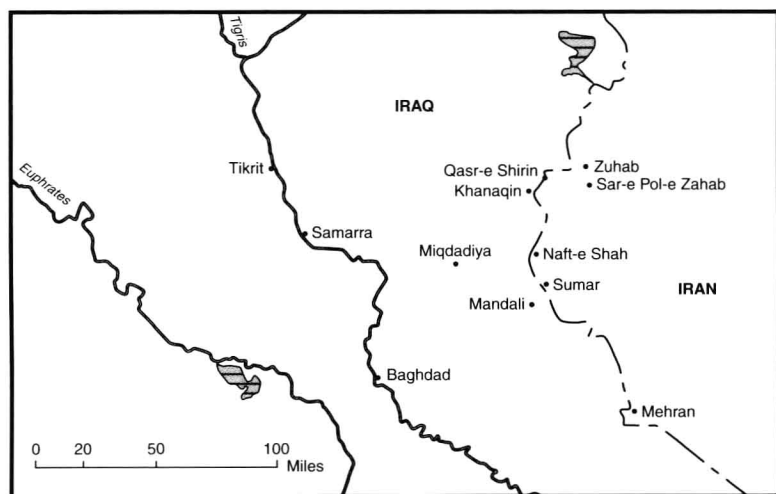
Map 1 *The Gulf*



Map 2 *The Southern Fronts*



Map 3 *The Northern Fronts*



Map 4    *Central Fronts*



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# **Part I**

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## **The Causes and Context of the Conflict**



## Introduction

The invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by the United States, was an illustration of the overwhelming conventional military power of the Western world. In just three weeks, Iraqi forces had been swept aside and the Coalition had occupied Baghdad. Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti, the Iraqi President, was a fugitive in his own country and there were scenes of celebration at his demise. Yet soon after the invasion, the Americans announced that Iraq was to be de-Ba'athised, ordering that all members of the Ba'ath Party, who were implicated in the crimes committed by Saddam, were to be removed from positions of power. In addition, it was declared that the Iraqi armed forces were to be dismantled, temporarily depriving thousands of their income. These announcements, coupled with a fear that the Americans might re-engineer the entire country contrary to the will of the Iraqi people, had the effect of generating resistance from Basra to Baghdad. Ba'ath Party loyalists believed they could never be reconciled to the occupation forces and chose to fight on.<sup>1</sup> Some Iraqis fought in the hope of forcing the Americans out of their country, while others hoped for material gain.<sup>2</sup> Fears that the Shia majority might take power and persecute the Sunnis led to sectarian violence. The fighting, by groups with different if sometimes overlapping agendas, escalated into an insurgency. There was a steady rise in the number of security incidents from sniping to suicide bombings against both Coalition forces and Iraqi civilians. Journalists spoke of an imminent civil war as death squads from Shia or Sunni communities sought out and killed their sectarian rivals. Kurds battled with Sunni Iraqis in the north. Iran, hoping to influence the outcome, sought to sponsor and arm Iraqi Shia militiamen, the Jaish-al-Mahdi, in the south. Amid the fighting, with the infrastructure in ruins, and despite the fact that mass graves were exhumed from the old regime's reign of terror, some Iraqis began to speak nostalgically about the stability and sense of national unity under Saddam.

It was surprising that, at the time and indeed afterwards, little reference was made to the conflict which had been so formative for Saddam Hussein, for the Iraqi people and for the region, namely the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88. It was perhaps understandable that Westerners thought back to the Gulf War of 1990–91 and the liberation of Kuwait, but many appeared to overlook the significance of the war of the 1980s. Yet, there were some unexpected and striking parallels between the invasion of 2003 and the Iran–Iraq War. At a time when even Ba’athists in the Iraqi regime were contemplating ousting Saddam in 1982, Ayatollah Khomeini had stated that his aim was to purge Iraq of the Ba’ath Party and reorganise the country. This had the unexpected effect of binding the Iraqis closer to the regime, and galvanised resistance. When the Americans announced in 2003 that they too intended to dismantle the Ba’ath and to reform the country, resistance broke out in many quarters. Similarly, irregular warfare, by Kurds and by Iranian-sponsored groups like Al Daawa, had flourished during the Iran–Iraq War as deep-seated lines of division in the country came to the surface. In 2004, the deposing of Saddam permitted these forms of resistance to reappear as rival groups tried to assert themselves.

In the light of subsequent conflicts, the purpose of the book is to re-examine the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s. Although overshadowed in Western minds by the conflict of 1990–91 and the occupation of 2003, it was the Iran–Iraq War that shaped the political landscape in the region. Far from neutralising the revolutionary rhetoric of Iran, the theocratic regime in Tehran used that war to consolidate its grip on power internally and exported its revolution by proxy methods. Saddam, far from showing signs of exhaustion, looked to escape Iraq’s financial problems and ensure his own political survival with a war against Kuwait, his former ally. Much of the existing literature, while comprehensive, was written before the events of 2003. Some official or semi-official items emanating from the United States tended to portray the revolutionary Iranians, and then, after 1990, the aggressive Iraqi regime, in ways that reflected their immediate concerns about Gulf security. Neutral analyses were rare. The chief exception, which still stands today as the most definitive work, was Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner’s *Lessons of Modern War, II, The Iran-Iraq War*.<sup>3</sup> Cordesman and Wagner believed, back in 1987 that projections of how the war would end were unclear and the course of the Iranian revolution was unknown.<sup>4</sup> They noted that most revolutions took twenty to thirty years to run their course. Such a projection would make an appraisal of the war today a timely one. Saddam’s regime has now gone and Iraqis are able to contemplate the Iran–Iraq War without fear

of official censure. Iranians, too, have begun to reconsider the war. In many ways we now have the advantage of the distance of time to reflect on the war more deeply, while the West, after the struggle to stabilise Iraq in the first decade of the twenty-first century, has also begun to reassess the period before the war of 2003.

This book attempts to give a history of the war, its strategies and its character. It is not a study of Iranian and Iraqi politics, which would require a volume of its own, nor is it a thesis of international relations. Readers familiar with international relations as an academic discipline will, I hope, find familiar patterns and issues, but space does not permit a full exposition of the theoretical and practical approaches. However, the book does attempt to give a brief explanation of decision-making in the region by international actors in order to contextualise the conflict and, specifically, how it was eventually brought to an end. The book also tries to offer some explanation of how the war shaped the region and set in motion the events that followed. For example, Iraq became more militarised as a result of the war, possessed the largest army of the region and was in significant debt. The relative military success in the war in 1987–88 and tacit American backing convinced Saddam that he could continue to act unilaterally, leading to the invasion of Kuwait. The war also explains some anomalies of the Middle East. Although Iran was the strongest regional power on the Gulf coast, it was not a member of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). This was because the GCC was formed as a counterpoise to Iran during the war of the 1980s, and the Gulf States even created a joint rapid deployment force to confront the Iranian threat.

The Iran–Iraq War was one of the longest conventional wars of the twentieth century, and it was a classic example of ‘limited war’ escalating into a ‘total’ war. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it has been likened to the First World War, with battles over trench lines, the use of poison gas, and the mass mobilisation of the belligerents’ populations.<sup>5</sup> While there are some parallels here, there were, of course, fundamental differences that made the war unique to the region and to the late twentieth century. Iraq was tacitly supported by the superpowers and by the powers of Western Europe, despite their official neutrality, but Iran attracted fewer foreign backers, its support being limited to Syria, Libya and South Yemen, and to some extent from China and North Korea. These sponsors offered funds, munitions or intelligence assistance. Nevertheless, Iran was ideologically isolated, with Gulf monarchies fearful of its revolutionary agenda and most of the Muslim world suspicious of



Shi'ite claims to doctrinal leadership. The conflict was therefore between 'developing countries', but with considerable support from outside.

International interference has, over the last few decades, been much criticised and has sometimes been blamed for prolonging the Iran–Iraq War. The United States supplied intelligence to Iraq, but was also involved in the damaging 'Irangate' or Iran–Contras scandal, supplying arms to Iran in order to conceal clandestine CIA activities in Central America. However, the aim of the United States, the USSR, the Europeans and the GCC states was to contain the conflict. The reason for foreign interests was understandable: 54 per cent of OPEC oil reserves, a quarter of the world's total, were located in the region, giving it distinct strategic value.<sup>6</sup> There was one major concern: the war could cause a sudden rise in global oil prices through a restriction of actual production or an interruption to the supply across the sea lanes. The combination of foreign interests confined the war successfully to the territories of Iran and Iraq, with limited air operations spilling over into the upper Gulf. The United Nations, which was also criticised for apparently favouring Iraq, nevertheless provided the framework to allow both countries to withdraw from the war. The fact is that neither belligerent was prepared to contemplate a peaceful resolution to the war while it still believed it possessed a strategic advantage. Although Iran was being steadily weakened by 1987, there was every prospect that the fighting would go on for several more years. For both sides, it was the intervention of the United States in 1988 that was decisive in bringing the war to an end.

This was a 'broken-back' war with alternating periods of stalemate and intensity. It was also distinctly asymmetrical. Iraq made use of advantages in its technology wherever possible, but Iran, lacking any tactical advantage, was compelled to make use of its manpower and use fighting spirit as a substitute. This war therefore resulted in very heavy casualties. About 1 million are thought to have perished. It was also a war of enormous financial cost, with a bill of about \$1,190 billion.<sup>7</sup>

Iraq's initial military objectives were apparently limited – it sought modest territorial acquisitions – while Iran was weak following the so-called Islamic Revolution. But Iraq's strategic aims were ambitious. What alarmed Baghdad was the possibility that the Iranian revolution might spread westwards, and the only way to neutralise that threat was to destroy the Iranian government while it was still struggling to gain control of the country. Saddam planned to seize Khuzestan province in south-west Iran and annex the largely Arab population. The capture of this oil-rich region would give Iraq more coastline to develop its oil industry, earn credit with the Arab League and, in turn, probably give