

*Review Essay*

# What the Iran-Iraq War Can Teach U.S. Officials

by Ali Alfoneh

Relations with Iran have challenged every U.S. administration since the 1979 revolution, and all U.S. presidents since Jimmy Carter have had to address the regime's attempts to export its Islamist revolution abroad, its fierce opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and its dogged nuclear quest. As President Barack Obama begins a second term in office, it would serve the president and those advising him well to truly understand the mindset of the revolutionary regime in order to avoid repeating past mistakes.

The task of untangling that history, facilitated by such books as Kenneth Pollack's *The Persian Puzzle*<sup>1</sup> and Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin's *Eternal Iran*,<sup>2</sup> has now received a major boost with David Crist's excellent new title *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran*.<sup>3</sup> Based on twenty years of archival research and four hundred interviews, it is a serious contribution to our understanding of the turbulent relations between Washington and Tehran during the past three decades. Crist highlights both the immaturity of the revolutionary regime in Tehran and errors in judgment by Washington that have led to numerous missed opportunities to normalize relations over the years.

The book's most important shortcoming, however, is its lack of primary source material in the Persian language. In most cases, this material would have reinforced Crist's arguments, yet in a few important instances, this deficiency leads to questionable conclusions. In particular, his judgments about the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)—the formative experience shaping the minds of the current crop of Iranian decision makers—would have greatly benefited from the use of such sources. Its proper understanding offers insights into the Islamic Republic's strategy today that might help avert looming catastrophes.

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**Ali Alfoneh** is a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.

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1 Random House, 2005.

2 Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

3 New York, Penguin, 2012.



*While official Iranian historiography contends that the war with Iraq began with Saddam Hussein's surprise invasion, information from both Western and Persian sources indicates that Ayatollah Khomeini had been informed of an imminent attack but chose to ignore it.*

## THE IRAQI INVASION

According to official Islamic Republic historiography, the war with Iraq began on August 22, 1980, when Iraqi forces conducted a surprise invasion of Iranian territory.<sup>4</sup> Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini himself made a point of stressing the element of surprise when addressing ambassadors of Islamic countries in October 1980: "The usurping government of Saddam attacked Iran from the sea, air, and on the ground without any excuse acceptable to the governments of the world and without prior information or warning of conquest."<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding Khomeini's public pronouncement, he had been warned of an imminent Iraqi invasion well in advance. Crist perceptively cites a meeting on October 1979 be-

tween CIA officer George Cave and then-foreign minister Ebrahim Yazdi, in which such a warning was given.<sup>6</sup> Cave also instructed Yazdi to reactivate a signals intelligence collection station in Ilam to "find out what Iraq is up to," but Yazdi dismissed the advice saying: "They wouldn't dare!"<sup>7</sup>

Persian language primary source material reveals other early warnings ignored by the supreme leader. In a September 22, 1991 interview with the weekly *Payam-e Enghelab*, Ahmad Khomeini, son of the grand ayatollah, disclosed that Shapour Bakhtiar, the last prime minister of the shah, had reached out to

Grand Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris through his chief of staff. When denied an audience with Khomeini, Bakhtiar's chief of staff met with Ahmad and warned him of suspicious movements by the Iraqi forces detected by Iran's military intelligence.<sup>8</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini dismissed Bakhtiar's warnings as a scare tactic.

On June 15, 1980, Iran's first post-revolutionary president, Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, sent a letter to Khomeini warning of suspicious movements of Iraqi forces.<sup>9</sup> A September 19, 1980 letter from the president is even more revealing:

6 "Toward an International History of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988: A Critical Oral History Workshop," Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., July 19, 2004; David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 87.

7 Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 87.

8 Moassesseh-ye Tanzim Va Nashr-e Asar-e Emam Khomeini, *Majmou-eh-ye Asar-e Yadegar-e Emam—Hojjat al-Eslam va Al-Moslemiin Hajj Seyyed Ahmad Khomeini* (N.P., 1996), p. 715.

9 Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, *Nameh-ha Az Agha-ye Bani-Sadr Be Agha-ye Khomeini va Digaran* (Frankfurt Am Main: Enghelab-e Eslami Zeitung, 2006), p. 55.

4 "Aghaz-e Jang-e Tahmili-ye Eragh Alayh-e Iran Va Haftah-ye Defa'-e Moghaddas," Markaz-e Asnad-e Enghelab-e Eslami website, Tehran, accessed Sept. 13, 2010.

5 Moassesseh-ye Tanzim Va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini*, CD-ROM, Tehran, vol. 13, p. 276.

**The invasion gave the  
Islamist regime an excuse for  
suppressing political freedoms.**

I don't know what happened at your residence last night and what the army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC] discussed with you. But I find it necessary to report this: ... One month ago I sent you the exact same commanders who passed you information about today's conspiracy. Afterward you told me that you didn't believe in such intelligence. Today the intelligence has been proven right, and there is a strong possibility of an extensive battle from the Turkish border to Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

Why did Yazdi dismiss the CIA's alert? Why did Khomeini ignore Bakhtiar's, Bani-Sadr's, and the army commanders' reports on developments on the Iraqi side of the border? And why did the grand ayatollah isolate Iran diplomatically by continually threatening its neighbors with "export of the revolution" at a time when he was perfectly aware of the Iraqi threat?<sup>11</sup>

Crist correctly concludes that the Iraqi invasion provided Khomeini with an opportunity to consolidate his rule.<sup>12</sup> This is further confirmed by a 2008 interview in Persian between political scientist Sadeq Zibakalam and former Iranian president Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. In the course of the conversation, Zibakalam told Rafsanjani: "My conclusion is that deep down, the imam [Khomeini] was happy about the war. He never said so directly, but deep down he thought that it was not us who wanted to attack the Baath regime of Iraq, but now that they have attacked us, we will pursue it [the war] to the very end." To which Rafsanjani responded: "I agree with your view. But it is not true that it was deep in his [Khomeini's] heart. He would also say that aloud. He did not hide it. ... The war gave us a path to solve the regional problems and build

our nation. We all said this, and the imam too was of this belief."<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to the Iraqi invasion of Iran, Khomeini was able to rally a fragmented nation around the revolutionary leadership and hoped to use the war to overthrow the Baath regime in Baghdad. The revolutionary leadership also used the war instrumentally, to keep the remnants of the shah's army busy at the front and effectively out of politics. Finally, the invasion gave the Islamist regime the necessary excuse for suppressing popular demands for political freedoms by imposing a state of emergency. The war, indeed, proved a "divine blessing" for the regime—one actively sought and called for by Khomeini.<sup>14</sup>

**WHY THE WAR  
CONTINUED AFTER 1982**

On April 3, 1982, Saddam Hussein offered a cease-fire, which was dismissed by Tehran. Not long thereafter, on May 24, Iranian forces liberated the border city of Khorramshahr, ending Iraqi occupation of Iranian territory. Why then did the war continue?

According to Crist, a "divided Iranian leadership" debated its next steps in the war, but "[n]o one advocated accepting the cease-fire." He claims that Ahmad Khomeini pressed for continuing the war on Iraqi soil, but then-president Ali Khamene'i, foreign minister Ali-Akbar Velayati, and Rafsanjani (then parliamentary speaker) were "less sanguine about invading Iraq proper." Most importantly, he suggests that to some degree, Khomeini himself opposed an invasion of Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

Access to Persian language documents corroborates this. In his September 22, 1991 interview with *Payam-e Enghelab*, Ahmad Khomeini revealed,

10 Ibid., p. 156.

11 See Khomeini's Dec. 17, 1979 interview quoted in Moassesseh-ye Tanzim Va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini*, vol. 11, p. 290; idem, Dec. 19, 1979 interview quoted in *Sahifeh-ye Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini*, vol. 11, p. 336; idem, Jan. 5, 1980 interview with *Time* quoted in *Sahifeh-ye Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini*, vol. 12, p. 37; idem, Mar. 21, 1980 new year address quoted in *Sahifeh-ye Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini*, vol. 12, p. 202.

12 Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 89.

13 Sadeq Zibakalam and Fereshteh Sadat Etefaghfar, *Hashemi Bedoun-e Routoush* (Tehran: Rowzaneh, 2008), p. 277.

14 Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami, *Gozari Bar Do Sal Jang* (N.P.: Daftar-e Siasi-ye Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami, n.d.), p. 21.

15 Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 94.



*The Iraqi invasion provided Khomeini (center) with a golden opportunity to consolidate his rule, a claim borne out by former Iranian president Rafsanjani (left) who has stated: "The war gave us a path to solve the regional problems and build our nation. We all said this, and the imam too was of this belief."*

The imam believed that it was better to end the war, but those responsible for the war said that we had to move toward Shatt al-Arab so that we could demand war reparations from Iraq. The imam did not agree with this line at all and used to say that if... one didn't prevail in the war now, this war couldn't be ended at all. We must continue this war to a certain point. Now that Khorramshahr had been liberated, it was the best time to end the war.<sup>16</sup>

Rafsanjani's memoirs also stress Khomeini's opposition, conveyed through his son on March 26, 1982, and at a meeting with military commanders on June 10, 1982.<sup>17</sup> According to Rafsanjani, three days after the liberation of Khorramshahr, the grand ayatollah argued against invasion before the Supreme Defense Council, stating that

(1) After invading Iraq, the Arab countries will

16 Khomeini, *Majmou-eh-ye Asar-e Yadegar-e Emam*, pp. 716-17. The same claim was also made in the memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2001), p. 330.

17 Fatemeh Hashemi, ed., *Pas Az Bohran. Karnameh va Khaterat-e Hashemi Rafsanjani Sal-e 61*, (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Ma'aref-e Enghelab, 2000), pp. 40, 137.

support Baghdad more overtly and will display Arab extremism.

(2) The people of Iraq have not supported Saddam until now because he was on our soil. But should we invade Iraq, they will support him; we should strive not to drive the Iraqi people to oppose us.

(3) Should we invade Iraq, the Iraqi people will be harmed. Thus far, those Iraqis who have not fought have not been harmed.

(4) The world will present us as invaders and will subject us to propaganda pressure.<sup>18</sup>

If Grand Ayatollah Khomeini was so adamantly opposed to an invasion of Iraq, how and why did the war drag on for another six years? Who were the supporters of the con-

tinuation of the war?

Persian language primary source material shows that it was the Revolutionary Guards' leaders who managed to persuade an unwilling grand ayatollah to continue the war. And in contrast to Crist's view, they were supported in this position by Rafsanjani himself.

In his April 18, 1982 diary entry, Ayatollah Rafsanjani writes:

The country's warlike atmosphere and the high expectations of the people, especially the combatants, are such that they ridicule such propositions [of peace negotiations] and do not consider immediate but conditional withdrawal enough and criticize those responsible for the war effort ... [as to] why they don't immediately enter Iraqi soil.<sup>19</sup>

Further, Khomeini withdrew his opposition since the "armed forces made solid military and technical arguments, and the imam, in a limited

18 Zibakalam and Etefaghfar, *Hashemi Bedoun-e Routoush*, pp. 285-6.

19 Hashemi, *Pas Az Bohran. Karnameh*, pp. 68-9.

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and conditional way, capitulated to their view.”<sup>20</sup>

In his memoirs and interviews, Rafsanjani has deftly avoided clarifying his own position concerning the continuation of the war after Khorramshahr, but Mohsen Rezaei, then-commander of the Revolutionary Guards, shed light on this in his own war memoirs:

Following the liberation of Khorramshahr, the imam said: “You stay at the border and fight here” ... [but] Rafsanjani said that we should move beyond the international borders. Should we desire to end the war, we need to have something we can use in the [cease-fire] negotiations.<sup>21</sup>

Rezaei also claimed that Rafsanjani had urged the military to occupy Basra, to be used as a bargaining chip.<sup>22</sup>

Different proponents of continuing the war had their own motives for doing so, but the Revolutionary Guards had the strongest. When Rezaei was appointed commander on August 24, 1981, there were only “20 to 30,000 members of the Guards and the Basij [its closely allied paramilitary force].”<sup>23</sup> That number increased to a quarter of a million members by 1988 with the lion’s share of Iran’s military budget allocated to it. This development would not have been possible had it not been for the continuation of the war. The IRGC essentially sacrificed Iran’s national interest and hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives for the sake of its corporate and organizational expansion.

Apart from this, Khomeini’s acquiescence in the IRGC’s demands for continuing the war after Khorramshahr’s liberation illustrates the

clerics’ dependence on the IRGC to suppress domestic opposition. Beyond its historical relevance, this mechanism may also in part explain Supreme Leader Ali Khamene’i’s position on the nuclear crisis today.

**WHY THE WAR ENDED**

In *The Twilight War*, Crist echoes the widely held belief that the accidental and tragic July 3, 1988 downing of Iran Air flight 655 by the USS *Vincennes* convinced the Iranian leadership to end the war with Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Yet while Khomeini’s July 20, 1988 acceptance of the cease-fire agreement happened in the immediate wake of the civilian airliner tragedy,<sup>25</sup> Persian primary source material reveals that the decision had been maturing for quite some time prior to the incident.

On June 3, 1988, Rafsanjani was appointed commander-in-chief. In his account, Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Mousavi Ardebili, the judiciary’s chief, President Khamene’i, Ahmad Khomeini, and Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi had all concluded by June 1988 that “they [the West in general and the United States in particular] will not allow us to win in the war.”<sup>26</sup> A number of Revolutionary Guards commanders endorsed this view, and on June 10, 1988, Ali Shamkhani, then-Revolutionary Guards ground forces commander, urged Rafsanjani to end the war.<sup>27</sup>

On June 16, Rafsanjani met with Khamene’i, Mousavi, and Ahmad Khomeini and concluded that Iran would either have to mobilize all the resources of the state for the war effort or end the conflict. Despite their passing this on to the grand ayatollah, Khomeini still opted for total war. How-

20 Zibakalam and Sadat Etefaghfar, *Hashemi Bedoun-e Routoush*, p. 286.

21 Mohsen Rezaei Mir-Qaed, *Jang Be Revayat-e Farmandeh*, Pezhman Pourjabbari, ed. (Tehran: Bonyad-e Hefz-e Asar va Nashr-e Arzesh-ha-ye Defae-e Moqaddas, 2012), pp. 140-1.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 42.

24 Crist, *The Twilight War*, pp. 370-1.

25 Moassessh-ye Tanzim Va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Hazrat-e Emam Khomeini*, vol. 21, p. 95.

26 Rezaei, *Jang Be Revayat-e Farmandeh*, p. 289.

27 Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Payan-e Defae—Aghaz-e Bazsazi*, Ali-Reza Hashemi, ed. (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2012), p. 163.

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ever, barely a month later, on July 14—eleven days after the downing of the Iranian airliner—Khomeini decided to end the war.<sup>28</sup> Yet rather than being impelled by the civilian disaster, this decision was based on a letter Khomeini had received from Rezaei in which the Revolutionary Guards commander confessed there would be no victory in the next five years unless almost unlimited resources were to be directed to the IRGC and the military and unless Tehran developed a nuclear bomb and managed to force the United States to leave the Persian Gulf.<sup>29</sup> Since none of these options seemed realistic, Khomeini chose to drink from the poisoned chalice and end the war with Iraq. Thus, the IRGC had the final say in both continuation of the war after 1982 and its end in 1988.

## CONCLUSIONS

Iranian archives remain closed to scholars, and few individuals involved in the shaping or execution of Tehran's policies are willing to risk their lives giving interviews. Outside of Western intelligence experts with access to classified documents, there is little that academics or nongovernment analysts can rely on for accurate information. In spite of the lack of Persian source material, Crist's *Twilight War* is among the best works we have.

What is most sobering is that twenty-four years after the end of the war with Iraq, the leadership of the Islamic Republic faces many of the same challenges seen during that conflict. The regime in Tehran combines an incredible degree of unpreparedness for conflict with the great-

est degree of provocation against regional countries and great powers alike. Threats to annihilate Israel, rivalry with Sunni Arab

states, systematic provocations against the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with its clandestine nuclear program, have left Tehran largely isolated and friendless in a dangerous world. The regime hopes to rally a fragmented nation around the flag by maintaining Iran in a permanent state of crisis, just as it did during the Iran-Iraq war. Yet in the midst of the crisis, political factions, in particular the Revolutionary Guards, sacrifice the welfare of the Iranian nation on the altar of their own narrow interests, following the exact path as in the 1980s.

In the meantime, the Iranian regime's occasional offers of rapprochement, such as the much debated May 4, 2003 fax to the U.S. State Department,<sup>30</sup> carry little weight in reality. Civilian leaders may have sounded out Washington at a time when the U.S. military surrounded Iran, but were the officers of the Revolutionary Guards on the same page? Even if they were, would Tehran have honored its obligations once the vulnerabilities of the U.S. positions in Afghanistan and Iraq had become apparent? On the whole, one cannot help but think that the fundamental obstacle between the two states is the nature of the regime in Tehran. Absent external enemies, how else can Iranian leaders legitimize their repression of internal opposition?

The balance between bellicosity and faux rapprochement is delicate. One day Tehran will cross the red lines of Washington and its allies thereby igniting a disastrous war, which is likely to prove another poisoned chalice waiting for Iranian leaders to drink.



28 Ibid., pp. 171-2, 210.

29 Hossein-Ali Montazeri, *Khatarat-e Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri*, pp. 571-2.

30 Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 476.