

[Lob on Chubin and Tripp, 'Iran and Iraq at War'](#)

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Shahram Chubin, Charles Tripp. *Iran and Iraq at War*. Milton: Routledge, 2020. 336 pp. \$39.96 (paper), ISBN 978-0-367-15305-2.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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As revealed in the title, this book examines the causes and consequences of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)—the longest conventional conflict of the twentieth century. By “bringing the state back in,”[1] the book explores the internal factors related to Iranian and Iraqi state and society that explain the origins and longevity of the war. Without explicitly doing so, the authors analyze the conflict through the theoretical framework of complex realism, which combines realism and constructivism.[2] In the process, the authors comprehensively consider state and societal interests, national ideologies, and threat perceptions, and how they influenced the war’s emergence and evolution.

Throughout the book, the authors highlight the parallels and contrasts between Iran and Iraq that contributed to the eruption and extension of the war. The authors argue that Iran contained a structural and strategic advantage in terms of size, geography, depth, population, demography, revolution, mobilization, and faith. The authors also assert that Iraq compensated for these deficiencies through alliance-making, internationalization, technology, and firepower—even if it had initially invaded Iran in 1980, before Iran went on the offensive two years later. As a consequence, neither side could defeat the other and both became bogged down in a protracted and costly war of attrition that relied on trench warfare reminiscent of World War I and claimed over half a million lives and injured countless more.[3]

Apart from these asymmetries and according to the authors, domestic politics and state-society relations and narratives prolonged the war. After mobilizing a segment of the population and relinquishing autonomy to the military, Iraqi elites became increasingly concerned that the end of the war or the possibility of peace would spell their own demise. By portraying and perceiving the conflict as a moral crusade, Iranian elites exposed themselves to the maximalist expectations and demands of revolutionary and religious activists and volunteers, who were intent on pursuing a total victory. At the same time and contrary to popular belief, the book shows the restraint and pragmatism both sides exhibited with respect to striking selective targets and maintaining diplomatic and commercial relations as regional neighbors and OPEC members—even before the rise of Iran’s fourth president, the pragmatic Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97).

In a holistic and balanced fashion, the book explores why Iran provoked and Iraq initiated the war, dispelling their defensive mythologies, and how the conflict transformed each country, with alternating chapters written by Iran specialist Shahram Chubin and Iraq expert Charles Tripp. Since the authors researched, wrote, and published the book during the war, their analysis is not aided or

distorted by teleological thinking. In other words, the authors present insightful observations and plausible predictions about the conflict as it unfolds, without the so-called luxury or methodological advantages and pitfalls of hindsight. A book published in 2021 on the role of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in prosecuting and documenting the war complicates and challenges the binary or dichotomy presented by Chubin and Tripp regarding its emphasis on faith over firepower and its embrace of and insensitivity to high casualties during the conflict.[4]

Broadening the lens beyond Iran and Iraq, the book raises the theoretically parsimonious question of whether the Iran-Iraq War contained the specificities of war- and state-making in the Third World and Middle East versus western Europe, with their distinct history and legacy of empire and colonialism, communalism and tribalism, and religion and authoritarianism. While the question may be compelling, its utility diminishes when one considers that the region and other parts of the Global South have increasingly transitioned from interstate to intrastate and proxy conflict following the Cold War.[5] Although the authors could not have predicted this pattern or trend, they acknowledge its existence in light of past civil wars in countries like Lebanon and Yemen during the 1970s and 1980s. Despite its idiosyncrasies, the Iran-Iraq War was not sui generis or exceptional to both countries, the wider region, or the Third World. In fact, the war bore some striking similarities to US-led conflicts in these same areas of the world during and after the Cold War, as underscored by the following passage on the miscalculations and misperceptions of Baghdad's centralized and personalistic regime leading up to its invasion of Iran: "The Iraqi attitude was very different. It was a compound of ambition and opportunism, with the critical addition of an excessive faith in the efficacy and resort to force.... The Iraqi leadership's belief that the incursion into Iran would be a walkover, leading to a speedy victory, stemmed not only from faulty military intelligence, as well as a profound ignorance of history and the nature of the foe, but also from an inflated sense of Iraqi capabilities" (p. 7).

In short, this book is required reading for specialists and students of the Iran-Iraq War and conflict more generally in the Middle East, Third World, and elsewhere. The book astutely analyzes the ideational and internal factors, more than the material and external ones, that triggered and prolonged the conflict. Moreover, the book sheds valuable light on the war's impact on Iranian and Iraqi state and society, and how each influenced the other to continue losing blood and treasure, among other suboptimal outcomes, until Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini reluctantly drank from the poisoned chalice that ended the conflict.

Notes

[1]. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[2]. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism," in *International Relations of the Middle East, 3rd edition*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 225-31.

[3]. Charles Kurzman, "Death Tolls of the Iran-Iraq War," October 31, 2013, <https://kurzman.unc.edu/death-tolls-of-the-iran-iraq-war/>.

[4]. Annie Tracy Samuel, *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[5]. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90.

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