



Armies of the Iran–Iraq War 1980–88



CHRIS McNAB

ILLUSTRATED BY STEPHEN WALSH

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FRONT COVER, ABOVE: Iranian Revolutionary Guards rejoice atop their BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicle, following their victory over Iraqi troops on 24 January 1987 on Boverian Island, located near the port of Basra, Iraq, during the *Karbala 5* offensive. Items of civilian clothing are worn alongside military dress. (ERIC FEFERBERG/AFP via Getty Images)

FRONT COVER, BELOW: Iraqi soldiers engage in a firefight with Iranian troops along the Iran–Iraq border in July 1984. The Iraqis are wearing standard khaki combat dress with M80 helmets and a variety of local and foreign-made load-bearing equipment. (Jacques Pavlovsky/Syigma via Getty Images)

TITLE-PAGE PHOTOGRAPH: Iranian Basij personnel of all ages, wearing bandannas reading 'Karbala Pilgrims', assemble in the Azadi Stadium in Tehran on 7 February 1986, before departing for the front. One of the Iranian slogans during the eight-year war was 'We will be in Karbala! This Iraqi city, some 100km south-west of Baghdad, is a holy city for Shi'ite Muslims. (Kaveh Kazemi/Getty Images)

Artist's note

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ARMIES OF THE IRAN–IRAQ WAR 1980–88

INTRODUCTION

Somewhat overshadowed by the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the ending of the Vietnam War in 1975 and Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 – not to mention the concurrent Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–89) – the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) has been rather marginalized in modern military history. On every level, however, this is intellectually unwarranted, for it was arguably the largest and longest purely conventional war since 1945. Indeed, some authorities plausibly contend that it was the last conventional war, in the sense of one fought and decided via the head-on clash of mass infantry and armoured formations. Fought over a grinding eight years, it inflicted anywhere between 1 million and 2 million casualties, including possibly 500,000 dead soldiers. It also generated 2.5 million refugees and reshaped the balance of power in the Middle East. Few other conflicts in the post-1945 era rival the Iran–Iraq War for its prolonged human and social impact.

The triggers for this seismic conflict were predictably complex: a mixture of long-standing territorial and border disputes between Iraq and neighbouring Iran, accentuated by deep ethnic and religious tensions and galvanized by the characters of the two countries' leaders, Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini (known to the West as the Ayatollah Khomeini). The key elements that fuelled the outbreak of hostilities included Iraq's ambition to take control of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, located on the Iranian side of Iraq's south-eastern border, plus its equal desire to control both banks of the Shatt al-Arab (River of the Arabs) that separated the two countries, and which provided Iraq with its principal access point to the Persian Gulf. Iraq also felt threatened by pre-revolutionary Iran's huge military and economic expansion, made all the more tangible by Iranian encouragement of Kurdish separatist revolts in Iraq in 1974–75. Thus Saddam spotted opportunity in the disruptions and military weakening in Iran caused by the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and in September 1980 he ordered his forces to invade Khuzestan province, with the aim of capturing the important Iranian city of Khorramshahr. Saddam was not interested in a war of conquest – rather he stopped his forces a short distance inside Iran and hoped to achieve his goals politically. Iran went on the counter-offensive, pushing the Iraqis back across the border and continuing the war into Iraq itself.

So began eight years of bloodshed. Much of it was a dreadful and static border conflict, punctuated by periodic offensives involving human-wave



assaults and pounding artillery exchanges. Both sides launched air and missile attacks on opposing industrial facilities and rival-flagged oil tankers, and Iraq even resorted to the open use of chemical and biological warfare. For much of the conflict, Iran appeared to hold the advantage, even capturing Iraq's vital al-Faw Peninsula in February 1986; but while Iraq garnered the international support of the West, the Arab world *and* the Soviet Union, Iran became a virtual pariah state, its armed forces steadily withering through underinvestment and casualties. In 1988, Iraq returned to the offensive, retaking the al-Faw Peninsula in April and re-entering Iranian territory in mid-July. This led to Iran accepting UN Resolution 598 on 17 July 1988 (Iraq followed suit the next day), bringing about a ceasefire which came into effect on 8 August, and subsequent peace talks resulted in the conflict finally ending on 20 August.

In this book, we focus not on the history of the conflict, but the land armies that shouldered the brunt of the fighting and the losses. Studying these armies also aids our understanding of why the Iran–Iraq War was both so long and so costly. The armies of Iran and Iraq had their growth and development shaped by many influences – external powers, revolutions, internal strife, international wars, Cold War ideology, religion, ethnicity and economics – but an overarching consideration is that both armies had a deeply *political* relationship to their supreme leaders and the ruling parties. Both Saddam Hussein and the Ayatollah Khomeini, despite being worlds apart in ideology, shared a rather binary attitude to national military forces, viewing them as means of keeping and projecting power while at the same time being suspicious of future rebellion emerging from their ranks. This is one reason why both Iran and Iraq created alternative land forces to the regular army, as loyal counterweights.

ABOVE LEFT

7 February 1986: a member of Iran's Basij paramilitary organization attends a rally in the Azadi (Freedom) Stadium in Tehran before his departure for the front. (Kaveh Kazemi/Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT

Iraqi troops smile for the camera, 1 May 1988. Here we see the basic khaki combat dress of the Iraqi soldier, with a fly-fronted shirt with two breast pockets (concealed buttons) and trousers with large thigh pockets. (Thomas Hartwell/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images/Getty Images)

IRAN-IRAQ WAR CHRONOLOGY

1980

- 23 Sep Iraqi forces invade Iran, beginning the Iran-Iraq War
- 22-24 Oct Iraqi forces besiege Abadan and capture Khorramshahr

1981

- 5-11 Jan Iranian counter-offensive around Susangerd fails
- 27-29 Sep Operation *Thamin al-Aimma*: Iran breaks siege of Abadan
- 29 Nov-7 Dec Operation *Jerusalem Way*: Iran captures Bostan

1982

- 22-30 Mar Operation *Undeniable Victory*: Iranian offensive pushes Iraqi forces back in Dezful-Shush area
- 24 Apr-25 May Operation *Jerusalem*: Iran occupies most of Khuzestan province and liberates Khorramshahr
- 13 Jul-2 Aug Operation *Ramadan*: five failed Iranian offensives to capture Basra
- 1-10 Oct Operation *Muharram*: four Iranian offensives in Amara area, for small gains

1983

- 6-16 Feb Operation *Before Dawn*: failed Iranian offensive in the southern sector in the Musian area
- 10-17 Apr Operation *Dawn*: failed Iranian offensive near Amara
- 22-30 Jul Operation *Dawn 2*: Iranian offensive in Kurdistan advances 14.5km inside Iraq
- 30 Jul-9 Aug Operation *Dawn 3*: failed Iranian offensive in the region of Mehran
- 20 Oct-21 Nov Operation *Dawn 4*: Iranian offensive in the northern sector penetrates a few kilometres into Iraq

1984

- 7-22 Feb First 'war of the cities'
- 15-24 Feb Operations *Dawn 5* and *Dawn 6*: massive Iranian offensive along a 240km front between Mehran and Bostan
- 24 Feb-19 Mar Operation *Khaibar*: Iranian offensive towards Basra; failed, but captured Majnoon Island
- 18-25 Oct Operation *Dawn 7*: limited Iranian offensive on the central front

1985

- 28 Jan-early Feb Failed Iraqi offensive on the central front around Mehran
- 11-23 Mar Operation *Badr*: failed Iranian offensive towards Basra
- 22 Mar-8 Apr Second 'war of the cities'
- Jul Iranian operations in Kurdistan

1986

- 6-10 Jan Iraqi attack on Majnoon Island
- 9-25 Feb Operation *Dawn 8*: Iranian offensive on southern front; al-Faw Peninsula captured
- 14 Feb-3 Mar Operation *Dawn 3*: indecisive Iranian offensive in Kurdistan
- 30 Jun-9 Jul Operation *Karbala 1*: Iran recaptures Mehran

- 31 Aug Operation *Karbala 2*: Iranian offensive in Kurdistan
- 1-23 Sep Operation *Karbala 3*: Iranian offensive around al-Faw Peninsula and Majnoon Island
- 24-26 Dec Operation *Karbala 4*: Iranian offensive towards Basra

1987

- 9 Jan-25 Feb Operation *Karbala 5*: failed major Iranian offensive towards Basra
- 14-18 Jan Operation *Karbala 6*: Iranian offensive in the Sumar area
- 17-25 Jan Third 'war of the cities'
- Feb-Apr Fourth 'war of the cities'
- 12 Feb Operation *Fatah 4*: Iranian operation in Kurdistan
- 7 Mar Operation *Karbala 7*: Iranian offensive, Haji Omran area, Kurdistan
- 6-9 Apr Operation *Karbala 8*: Iranian offensive towards Basra
- 9 Apr Operation *Karbala 9*: Iranian offensive in the Qasr-e Shirin area
- 8-22 Oct Increasing clashes between Iran and United States in the Persian Gulf

1988

- 29 Feb-30 Apr Fifth 'war of the cities'
- 15-16 Mar Iraqi forces kill thousands of Kurdish civilians with chemical weapons in the town of Halabja
- 19 Mar Iranian forces attack Bubiyan Island
- 18 Apr Iraqi forces recapture al-Faw Peninsula
- 25 Apr Iraqi forces recapture territory around Shalamcheh
- 25 Jun Iraqi forces recapture Majnoon Island
- 13-17 Jul Iraqi forces enter Iranian territory, before withdrawing and making a peace offer
- 20 Aug Ceasefire and subsequent peace talks bring Iran-Iraq War to an end



A painfully young Iranian soldier of the Basij, wearing a bandanna and a helmet cover with Koranic verses emblazoned upon them. Imbued with revolutionary fervour and confidence in a paradisiacal afterlife, the Basij incorporated soldiers below the age of 18 in its ranks, although they contributed little other than being targets for Iraqi guns and mines. (Mohammad Hossein Heydari/GFDL/Creative Commons)