Intelligence in Public Literature

The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History

Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 343 pp., with maps, tables, appendices, index.

Reviewed by Jason U. Manosevitz

In October 1980, the CIA briefed then presidential candidate Ronald Reagan on the impact of the Iran-Iraq War in the Middle East.[a] It is doubtful at the time that anyone realized the one-month old conflict would become one of the longest, bloodiest wars of the 20th century (September 1980–August 1988) or a key national security issue for the Reagan administration.

Several excellent works have examined aspects of the Iran-Iraq War, including the US's Iran-Contra affair.[b] Most highlight Saddam Hussein's ruthlessness as a dictator and the horrific combat of the war. *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History* goes far beyond these themes, taking a unique look at Saddam's decisionmaking throughout the war. The authors used a treasure trove of original, Iraqi documents (some 600,000) captured during Operation Iraqi Freedom and thousands of hours of interviews with former Iraqi military officials kept at the National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center.

The coauthors are accomplished military scholars. Murray is an adjunct professor at the US Marine Corps University, a senior fellow at the Potomac Institute, and a professor emeritus at Ohio State University. Woods is a historian and researcher at the Institute for Defense Analyses, where he served as the project manager for the Iraqi Perspectives Project, the US military-sponsored research project aimed at exploiting the captured records, with immediate exploitation conducted of documents pertaining to Iraq's putative involvement in global terrorism—the first report, *Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents* was classified

but a declassified version was released nine months after the classified version was delivered in January 2007.

The Iran-Iraq War's front matter explains that it is the last of three formally published works to appear as a result of this project,[c] although the Iraqi documents remain available for further research. These papers have already formed the basis of other revealing work on pre-2003 Iraq, including an examination published in this journal of the Saddam regime's understanding of the Iranian nuclear program.[d]

I have no hesitation in saying that today's intelligence analysts will want to add this work of Murray and Woods to their collection of case studies on conflict. In particular, they will benefit from reading the book because it offers insights on extended, multi-year conflicts, the importance of strategic objectives, and intelligence collection.

Murray and Woods start with a rich overview of the modern political and military development of each state leading up to the Iran-Iraq war. They thoroughly review the rise of Iraq's Saddam and Iran's Khomeini, the sweeping changes in Baghdad and Teheran's military institutions that followed, the shifting military balance between the two, and the respective orders of battle on the eve of the war. Successive chapters cover the conflict's major developments—Iraq's initial invasion of Iran, the stalemate that followed, Iran's counter invasion of Iraq, the grinding war of attrition, use of chemical weapons, missile attacks on each other's cities, the tanker war in the Gulf, lumbering moves to find an end to the war, and

a. John L. Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefing of Presidential Candidates, 1952–2004,* Second Edition (CIA, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2014), 112.
b. Two of the best examples are: Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (Grafton, 1989) and Anthony Cordesman, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Westview Press, 1990).

c. The other two in the trilogy are Woods et al., *The Iraqi Perspectives Report A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (US Joint Forces Command, 2006). and Kevin Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (US Naval Institute Press, 2008).
d. "Iraqi Human Intelligence Collection on Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program, 1980–2003—A Case Study of Intelligence in a Dictatorship" in *Studies in Intelligence* 57, No. 4 (December 2013).

eventually the cessation of hostilities. Key battles and tactics are reviewed, including Iran's use of human wave attacks.

Along the way, Murray and Woods also unravel a lingering mystery surrounding Iraq's inadvertent attack on the USS *Stark* in 1987. Despite generally cooperating with the US investigation into the incident, the Iraqis oddly refused to allow US officials to interview the pilot responsible for the attack. The Iraqis, it turns out, had modified some of their aircraft to increase their range to permit them to fly longer, safer attack routes into Iran over the Gulf and they feared Iran would learn how they were able to carry out such attacks if they revealed their secret to the United States. (306–307)

The Iran-Iraq War is a good example of long-arc analysis, applicable to this era's circumstances as so many of today's crises are shaping up to be multi-year conflicts. Murray and Woods expertly show how the pace of battle ebbed and flowed, how the momentum shifted, and how both innovated on the battlefield. The authors also review the efforts of both sides to obtain international aid and take note of how prospects for peace came and went.

The book will help analysts think about how best to focus analytic narratives that provide context on the nature of warfare, give warning about dangers, and point out opportunities for policymakers. These questions revolve around what motivates soldiers to fight, military leadership, command and control, operational planning, the use of regular and irregular forces, and of course force generation, training, military procurement, technology, and foreign support. These are, of course, all enduring questions about conflict, but the book's great strength is that it addresses them from a non-western point of view.

Although the authors are quick to point out that the "conflict may have little to offer in the way of strategic lessons or battlefield accomplishments" (7) they gives us a rare glimpse into the principle leaders' views on one side about their strategic objectives and wartime intelligence, which analysts would do well to consider for their own work.

Saddam's strategic objective was to become the Arab world's leader. He judged that Egypt had abdicated its traditional regional role by making peace with Israel and that Saudi Arabia lacked the character needed to lead the Arab world. In Saddam's view, this left Iraq as the sole

Arab state qualified to lead the region, particularly since ties with Syria had frayed (28–30). Saddam believed war would unify the Arab world behind Iraq and believed Iran would crumble after a few quick blows. (48–49, 87) The problems were that the military professionals who survived Saddam's political purges before the conflict struggled to translate Saddam's aim to lead the Arab world into operational military plans and Saddam did not understand his own military capabilities.

Indeed, almost as quickly as Saddam started the war, he looked to end it. As Murray and Woods show, Saddam consistently overestimated his military's ability to deliver as poor planning and a lack of training dogged the Iraqis from day one. For example, Iraq had to make last minute changes to its opening offensive, which interestingly was an air strike modeled on Israel's stunning preemptive air attack against Egypt during the 1967 Six Day War. When base commanders learned the details of the operation just 24 hours before it was to start, they quickly saw that Baghdad's planners miscalculated the mission requirements and that without a reduction in bomb loads, Iraq's bombers would not have enough fuel to complete the mission and return to base. (100–102) Needless to say, the air strike did not deliver the punch Saddam had hoped for. In another example, the authors shockingly point out that three years into the war, as the Iraqis cycled troops off the front lines for retraining, Iraqi soldiers were tutored in the most basic military principles, such as following commands, holding fire until targets could be identified, and to not run when the enemy attacked. (216)

Iraq's intelligence collection, capabilities, and analysis certainly fed into Saddam's worldview for achieving his strategic goal but it was poorly aligned to achieve his aims. At the start of the war, Iraq's General Military Intelligence Division (GMID) had only three officers gathering military intelligence on Iran, leaving the Iraqis knowing "almost nothing about Iran's military potential outside of the fact that it had a large population and was equipped with western weapons." (70) Moreover, what human intelligence the GMID and Iraq's other services had came mostly from disgruntled Iranian officers fleeing the new Islamic Republic and spinning stories of a rapidly weakening Iranian military. The shoddy analytic tradecraft explains why in 1980 the GMID reported Iran's army, air force, and navy were quickly declining in the wake of the Islamic revolution, a 180-degree shift from

their 1979 assessment that Iran's military was steadily improving. (75–77)

Murray and Woods show that for most of the war the Iraqis had robust tactical signals intelligence on Iran, in stark contrast to HUMINT sources and much more than previously thought. This proved to be a doubled-edged sword, however. In 1982 during the Ahvaz Battle, Iraqi signals intelligence provided "detailed advanced warning of the time and location" of Iranian attacks that allowed Iraqi units to successfully defend their positions. (180–182). But biases set in and by 1985 the Iraqis judged Iran was incapable of conducting a deception campaign and believed they would attack Basra as they had done during the previous three years, dismissing reports indicating Iran was preparing to attack the Fao Peninsula. This miscalculation led to a great victory for Tehran. So firm was the Iraqi bias that Saddam refused to believe that Fao was the Iranians' main point of attack, even as one of his divisions there was collapsing. (266–68) A key problem for Iraq's intelligence was that Saddam saw himself as his own chief intelligence officer, telling his ministers that "my job is to absorb, collect intelligence, and make conclusions, and relay it to others to analyze and predict, then examine the details gathered from everybody and extract a historic cognitive conclusion for the correct direction." (24)

Even though Baghdad and Tehran are now cooperating to fight Sunni Islamic extremists, and many of today's conflicts elsewhere center around insurgencies or some hybrid of counterinsurgency warfare, Murray and Woods' work can help Intelligence Community analysts think about stages of analysis during the course of long conflicts and the connection between strategic objectives and the ability of actors to achieve them. The lesson of analytic biases and reliance on single streams of reporting should resonate too.

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