



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# The Kurds and the Iran-Iraq War: Have the Lessons Been Learned?

by Prof. Ofra Bengio

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,836, December 2, 2020

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** September marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War, the longest Middle Eastern war of the twentieth century. It took the lives of more than a million people, wrought huge destruction in both countries, and severely harmed their populations and their economic and social resources. Forty years later, it needs to be asked what really caused this war to break out and what lessons have or have not been learned from it.

The prevailing opinion among both scholars and the general public is that Saddam Hussein went to war with Iran in September 1980 out of fear that a Shiite Islamic revolution might occur in Iraq like the one that had taken place the year before in Iran. This framing of the war has led some to view the Iraqi invasion of Iran as a defensive act.

My claim is the opposite: the Shiite threat was not a main factor at that time. The war was not defensive but was aimed at territorial expansion that was nipped in the bud.

Moreover, Saddam saw the Islamic Revolution not as a threat but as an opportunity. It gave him an opening to seize power, and he indeed carried out a coup d'état several months after Khomeini's accession. The war was also an opportunity for Saddam to regain control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway and to seize Iran's oil-rich, mostly Arab populated Khuzestan (what he called Arabistan) province. Saddam managed to accomplish that in the first months of the war before getting stuck in the Iranian quagmire.

In my view, the root of the problem lies not in the 1979 Islamic Revolution but in the 1975 Algiers Agreement. According to that agreement, Saddam, who

was then the power behind the throne in Iraq, had to cede the Shatt al-Arab to Tehran in return for the suspension of Iranian aid to the Kurds, thus putting an end to the Kurdish revolt. This concession meant losing a strategic asset of the first order and severely restricted Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf.

Saddam himself and his propaganda outlets said the Iran-Iraq War was a result of this agreement. In a speech a few days before invading Iran, Saddam explained that he had had to give up the waterway because of Iraq's weakness at the time, and hinted that he was already thinking about how to regain it. He also presented Iran's violation of the 1975 agreement as a *casus belli*. His biographer, Fouad Mattar, wrote that "the decision [to go to war] was taken from the first day of signing the Algiers Agreement on March 6, 1975." Indeed, in October 1979 Iraq had already sent an ultimatum to Iran on restoring its control of the Shatt al-Arab. Hence it can be asserted that there is a direct line from that agreement to the war in 1980.

When the war began, Saddam was confident that he would defeat Iran in a blitzkrieg. He mistakenly thought the Iranian army had been depleted by the new regime and would be no match for him. He was so sure of his victory that he called the war "Saddam's Qadisiyya," referring to the Arab/Muslim defeat of the Persian Empire in 636 CE.

At the time, Saddam did not view the Shiite problem as an existential danger because he believed he had removed the problem by eliminating the al-Dawa Party. Only in the later stages of the war did he begin to play the Shiite danger as a propaganda card both domestically and abroad—despite the fact that, unlike the Kurds, the Shiites remained loyal to the state and were the mainstay of the serving army.

There is also a paradox in the fact that the Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran did not try to recruit (or at least did not succeed in recruiting) the Iraqi Shiites to its cause in the war yet did so successfully with the Iraqi Kurds, who saw the war as an opportunity to avenge their downfall in 1975 and gain true autonomy. There were even those who spoke of independence.

As soon as Khomeini rose to power, the Kurdish leadership began to cooperate with him against the central government in Baghdad, and it did so all the more during the eight years of the war. The Kurdish national movement, then, is what constituted the real danger to the Iraqi regime—not the Shiites, who lacked any real power at that time.

Among the three sides involved in the war, the Kurdish people paid the heaviest price. Alongside the struggle against Iran, Saddam waged a bloody campaign against the Kurdish population in general, which was perceived to

be collaborating with the enemy. In 1983, his forces abducted and killed 8,000 members of the Barzani tribe. In April 1987, Saddam began to use chemical weapons against Kurdish villages. From February to September 1988, he waged the Anfal Campaign (named after a Qur'anic *sura* that means "spoils of war"), which had eight stages and killed about 180,000 Kurds, mostly civilians. The war laid waste to thousands of Kurdish villages and communities as well as the social, economic, and ecological infrastructure of the whole region.

Just as the Kurdish problem was the catalyst for starting the war, it was instrumental in ending it. The Iraqi army's gassing of Halabja in March 1988 terrified Iran, which had no defensive weapons against such a threat. It was the fear that Iraq would use such weapons against Iran's civilian population that convinced Khomeini to drink what he called "the poisoned chalice" and agree to a ceasefire that he had staunchly opposed for eight years.

The Kurdish leadership acted and continues to act on the basis that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"—without internalizing that in the Kurdish case, the more accurate maxim is "the enemy of my enemy is also my enemy." The Gordian Knot the Kurds tied with Iran proved over and over again to exact a huge cost for the Kurds as Tehran used them as a pawn in its power struggle with Baghdad. It happened during the Kurdish revolt of 1974-75, when the Kurds forged an alliance with the Shah only to be betrayed at the critical juncture, and it happened with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War as well. The Kurdish leadership joined forces with the Islamic regime despite their prior bitter experience with Tehran, despite the severe oppression of their brethren in Iran, and despite the heavy risk that they would be seen as traitors to their Iraqi homeland in the midst of a fierce war. And like the Shah, Khomeini abandoned the Kurds at the war's end for the sake of an agreement with Iraq. The same blunder was made yet again in September 2017 when, during a referendum on independence for Kurdistan, the Talabani faction forged an unwritten alliance with Iran while fighting the rival Barzani faction. Just as it had years before, Iran betrayed the Kurds.

Clearly, then, the various Kurdish leaders, in both Iraq and Syria, failed to learn any lessons from their prior experiences with Iran. Again and again they collaborated with regional states and with world powers only to be abandoned at the moment of truth—at exorbitant cost to their people.

This recurrent error stems primarily from the geostrategic dilemmas and constraints that drive the Kurds into alliances the tragic outcomes of which are largely foreseeable. To that should be added the internecine feuds that lead one faction to join forces with outside actors as part of the intra-Kurdish struggle; the lack of levers of influence or ability to enlist genuine support in

the international arena; and the economic, political, and military dependence that has developed between this non-state actor and surrounding states.

All this leads to the following points:

- With the benefit of 40-year hindsight, it is arguable that Saddam Hussein defeated the Kurds in a battle in 1988 but lost the war in 2003.
- Despite the fact that the Kurdish elite in Iraq has not fully learned its lesson, it has somewhat succeeded in breaching the closed Iraqi circle since 1991 (typically taking two steps forward and one step back).
- The regional wars led to the vanquishing of the Kurds but also to their recovery and empowerment. Thus, while the Iran-Iraq War was a great calamity for them, the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 international invasion of Iraq laid the groundwork for the emergence of autonomy in the Iraqi Kurdish region.
- The involvement of external powers plays a decisive role in the status of the Kurds. Their abandonment by the US in 1975 and the Western cold shoulder in 1988 and 2017 proved disastrous for their cause, while American patronage in 1991 and 2003 upgraded their status.

*Prof. Ofra Bengio is a senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center of Tel Aviv University and a lecturer at the Shalem Academic Center. She has published many studies on the Kurdish issue, the most recent of which is the forthcoming Kurdistan's Moment in the Middle East. Email: [bengio@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:bengio@post.tau.ac.il)*