

**Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods. *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 397pp. ISBN 978-1-107-06229-0 (Hardback). £55.00. ISBN 978-1-107-67392-2 (Paperback). Price £20.00.**

The Iran-Iraq War was one of the bloodiest conflicts fought after the Second World War and its effects, like a stone cast into a pond, created ripples which can still be seen today, the most notable of these being the rise of the Islamic State.

Professor Murray is well known to the academic community and has, with Dr Woods, of the Institute for Defense Analyses, long been researching the war. They have interviewed many senior Iraqi officers and have also had access to a hoard of captured Iraqi documents. A few of these have been published on the Conflict Record Research Center (CRRC) website and range from high-level meetings through to after-action and intelligence reports, operational manuals and even ammunition expenditure returns.

Some 210 of the documents are referenced in the bibliography and form the foundation of this long overdue military history of the conflict. In broad brushstrokes, the authors paint a picture of the conflict with the first half providing the background to the Iraqi invasion and its execution. Next they consider the battles that eventually led to Iran's spectacular victory in Khuzestan in 1982 followed by the failure a few months later of Iran's first offensive on Iraqi soil. The second half of the book examines the long war of attrition from 1983 to 1987 and how Saddam's regime slowly and painfully learned the military lessons that were then exploited in a series of spectacular Iraqi successes that drove the Iranians back across the border.

The book's primary focus is on the strategic history of the war and Saddam's thinking throughout the conflict, not only with military operations, but also Iraq's relationships with other states within and outside the Middle East. This book provides a rich seam of material for anyone studying the period or subsequent Middle Eastern history and it provides valuable insights into Saddam's attitudes; his enthusiasm for chemical weapons makes for particularly chilling reading.

In general this book is less of a work for those interested in the details of individual battles. However, when the authors do dive down into tactics or a particular operation they frequently provide fascinating insights. Thus for example, Iraqi corps commanders 'talked up' Iranian strength and casualties so that by 1982 the last Iraqi division in Khuzestan had to control 15 Iranian brigades. Similarly, in their observation that missiles launched from Fast Attack Craft hit some ships during the

Oil Tanker War, Murray and Woods also correct my own co-authored work where I claimed there had been extensive use of air-launched anti-ship weapons.

Murray and Woods's take time to show how the keys to Iraqi success were underpinned not only by overwhelming military strength but also by good intelligence. More than this, the book demonstrates how Cold War tensions played out through Iraq's relationship with the Superpowers and offers perspectives on how Iraqi intelligence viewed the utility of Soviet and American capabilities. In this respect, *The Iran-Iraq War* shows how Iraqi Intelligence made good use of technical assistance provided by the Soviet Union to enhance communications intelligence. By way of contrast, the Iraqis did not value American help in quite the same way and were particularly unhappy with the poor quality of US satellite imagery. Surprisingly, the authors make little reference to their earlier work describing Iraq's difficulties in tracking Iranian Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran) concentrations.

Given the structure of the archives and source material it would have been easy for the authors to view the Iranians purely through Iraqi eyes, in the manner that the Allied post-war interrogation of German generals provided a biased view of the Red Army. The authors have not fallen into this trap but a major weakness in their work is their inability to access material that has appeared in Iran since the end of the war. Compensation is provided for this weakness in the authors' use of captured Iranian accounts and an excellent use of secondary sources. This allows the authors to make some shrewd comments, especially on the impact of Iranian casualties and the interplay between the battlefield and the Iranian regime's campaign against opposition terrorism. Even so there is little material on the mechanics of Iranian decision-making to allow a comparison with that of Saddam, although in fairness the Iranians themselves have said little.

Apart from this shortcoming, of which I am sure the authors are well aware, this is one of the most important studies to date on the strategic history and military aspects of the Iran-Iraq War. This book will appeal not only to those interested in the conflict itself but it should be essential reading for those studying its aftermath.

E. R. HOOTON