

**Pierre Razoux.** *The Iran-Iraq War*. Translated by Nicholas Elliott. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2015. Illustrations. xviii + 640 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-08863-4.



**Reviewed by** Robert Asaadi (University of Minnesota)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Pierre Razoux's *The Iran-Iraq War* ambitiously sets out to address what the author frames as the unanswered questions of the Iran-Iraq War. These can be classified into two primary categories: cause and duration. First, the book is concerned with understanding the cause of the war. Causal analysis of war is perhaps the oldest and most robust field of inquiry in International Relations, with scholars taking Thucydides's analysis of the causes of the Peloponnesian War as one of the discipline's foundational texts. While the book does an excellent job highlighting the motives and interests of the belligerent states, particularly in the Iraqi case, it would have benefited from a more sustained treatment of the remote causes, or structural factors, that gave rise to the particular domestic political actors that occupy a position of prominence as the movers of history in Razoux's analysis.

This prioritization of immediate causes over remote causes mirrors the tendency among some social scientists who embrace either a strictly rationalist epistemological approach or a thin constructivist approach which prioritizes agency over structure. War, as is the case with other forms of collective violence, necessarily involves both the strategic calculus of influential actors and the constraining and enabling effects of the already existing

social and political structures in which these actors are situated. A shortcoming in Razoux's analysis is that he overestimates the degree to which these actors, as either opportunists, power-maximizers, or revolutionary ideologists, were the makers of their own history, and he underestimates or ignores the deeper structural conditions that functioned as the conditions of possibility for the emergence of these actors in the first instance. For example, the book's third chapter "How Did It Come to This?" sets out to show that "the Iran-Iraq War resulted first and foremost from the desire for confrontation of two men with conflicting ambitions, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini." These leaders, according to Razoux, were then able to mobilize Iraqi and Iranian society to war because of their societies' latent ancient hatreds and, as he puts it, their "ancestral rivalry" (p. 45). In a mere twenty-two pages in this chapter, Razoux somewhat clumsily reconstructs the history of the region from the early sixteenth century to the onset of the Iran-Iraq War. This partial analysis is ultimately unpersuasive as an appraisal of the structural factors that instead needed to be considered in greater depth when asking what caused the Iran-Iraq War. Furthermore, the repetition of the Orientalist trope of primordialism as a causal motivation for war seems misplaced in his other-

wise well-measured analysis.

The book's second question aims to explain the war's duration. Why did this bloody and costly war last eight years, making it the longest war of the twentieth century? In contrast to the somewhat banal observation that the war was caused by leaders who wanted it, the book's explanation for the war's duration is given much more sustained analysis and cuts across the three images of analysis of international politics (individual, state, and international). Razoux effectively outlines how the logic of Cold War balancing and the simple profit motive of arms manufacturers alongside regional balance of power dynamics and the domestic political peculiarities of Iran and Iraq coalesced to perpetuate the hostilities. Appendix F, "Foreign Military Assistance," is particularly instructive in this regard, as it catalogues the specific forms and amounts of military assistance both Iran and Iraq received throughout the course of the war, which helped sustain the conflict.

Overall, the book is a significant contribution to the existing scholarly literature on its subject for several reasons. First, Razoux's meticulous archival research gathers and organizes a copious amount of primary source data. For example, the book provides a systematic accounting of Iranian and Iraqi military personnel and as-

sets. Particularly in its incorporation of audio transcripts of meetings between Iraqi officials (the "Saddam audio-tapes"), Razoux's work is successful in correcting the bias toward analysis of the American perspective in existing accounts of the Iran-Iraq War.

Second, the text usefully unpacks the phases of the war, providing greater depth of analysis than many of the existing accounts. The conventional story narrates that Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, and that Iraqi forces experienced early successes until Iran reversed the tide in 1982-83, when Iran put Iraqi forces on the back foot as the front shifted westward back across the border into Iraqi territory for the remainder of the war. While this account is not inaccurate, neither is it fully complete. Razoux addresses this aporia by providing a more comprehensive and contextualized appraisal of the events of the war.

Lastly, Razoux is largely successful in the yeoman's task of making connections between the military events of the war and the broader political context in which it took place. This is perhaps the book's most significant achievement. Military historians, political scientists, and those interested in the contemporary political dynamics of Iran, Iraq, and the broader Middle East would benefit from a close reading of this work.

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