Book Reviews

Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War

Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 224 pages.

With the noble aims of conflict resolution and peace building, Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick have compiled an excellent collection of essays on "the war without winners" (p. 2). This remarkable publication, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War,* adds to Potter and Sick's series of co-edited books on Middle Eastern issues, namely, *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion* (Palgrave Macmillan: 1997) and *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles, and the Search for Consensus* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2002). Potter and Sick are two prominent scholars of international affairs at Columbia University. During the Carter presidency, Sick served as the principal White House aide for Iran on the National Security Council. (Sick is well-known for his exposé *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* [Random House: 1985]).

This 224-page book was written in the cautiously hopeful belief that the time has come for reconciliation to begin. It contains nine chapters plus Potter and Sick's helpful introduction, which contextualizes the futile war that shook the world. The Iran-Iraq war was one of the longest and costliest conventional wars of the twentieth century. Although the number of casualties is still in dispute, an estimated 400,000 were killed and perhaps 700,000 were wounded on both sides (p. 2). *The Economist* commented that "this was a war that should never have been fought … neither side gained a thing, except the saving of its own regime. And neither regime was worth the sacrifice" (p. 2).

The first chapter begins with "The Troubled Relationship: Iran and Iraq, 1930-80" by Shaul Bakhash. He examines the history of rapport between the two countries, which has been a love/hate relationship marked by periods of alliance, cooperation, rivalry, friction, and war. Chapter 2, by geographer Richard Schofield, "Position, Function, and Symbol: The Shatt-al Arab Dispute in Perspective," chronicles the painful history of the *thalweg* dispute

between Iraq and Iran on the borderline of the Shatt-al Arab river. Other than the Rhine, perhaps no divided international river has received so much attention in the academic literature as the Shatt al-Arab (p. 30).

In "Between Iraq and a Hard Place: The Kurdish Predicament," M. R. Izady reveals the depth of the complexities of the Kurdish dilemma: "It has been said that the Kurds have only two problems: their enemies and their friends" (p. 96). Using an engaging writing style, Izady explains why this is tragically so. Farideh Farhi explores the contradictions imposed on the war generation in Iran in "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation." Feeling both victorious and defeated, this generation developed an embarrassed relationship with the war. As one field commander said: "We could not fully express what we felt because so many friends were lost at the front and criticizing the war felt like abandoning friends" (p. 119).

In "The War Generation in Iraq: A Case of Failed Etatist Nationalism," Faleh A. Jabar studies the generation for whom war became an obstacle to the normal development of careers at the beginning of an active life. He shows that as a result of the war, both nations became heavily militarized, with the Iraqi military emerging as the fourth largest army in the world (p. 125). Interestingly, table 5.4 shows the dramatic deterioration of the Iraqi economy during this time – the GDP per capita fell from $4,083 in 1980 to $485 by 1993 (p.139), which means that the average Iraqi became more than eight times poorer in about a decade. In chapter 6, "Iraqi Shi`i Politics," Laith Kubba discusses the political culture and future of Iraqi Shi`is and details some specific issues, such as Kurdish demands, the army, the state structure, and numerous foreign influences. Shi`is represent the majority of the Iraqi population; however, ethnicity (i.e., Arab versus non-Arab) is one of the dividing factors presently fuelling a climate of political antagonism.

In the chilling "Outsiders as Enablers: Consequences and Lessons from International Silence on Iraq's Use of Chemical Weapons during the Iran-Iraq War," Joost R. Hiltermann reveals that Iraq experimented with [poison] gas and faced no real opposition, as the international community ignored it and thereby silently condoned further chemical weapons-induced mass murder. How disturbing that, time and again, western states have chosen to turn a blind eye to such atrocities! Gerd Nonneman's "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War" examines the interests of the six Gulf States that backed Saddam Hussein's regime against Iran. The price tag of their support amounted to $40 billion by 1986 (p. 180). However, after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, they shifted toward a more cordial relationship with Iran.

The book ends with an illuminating essay that readers may enjoy for its novel analyses. In "The U.S. Role: Helpful or Harmful?" Rosemary Hollis examines the overt and covert American role in this region, pointing out that the countries are valued as oil-rich prizes for American business and the country's energy security. Over the past 50 years, the United States has treated Iran and Iraq as a pair, either playing one against the other or lumping both together, as per George W. Bush's "axis of evil" rhetoric.

One of this book's strengths is its revealing portrayal of how Islam has been abused for various political ends. For example, Iraq called the conflict "Saddam's Qadisiyya," a reference to the Arab defeat of the Persians in the seventh century. Thus, Iraq defined the war in terms of the religious battles that the early Muslims/Arabs of seventh-century Arabia fought against the "fire-worshipping Iranians." Likewise, in Iran, Khomeini told the Iranians: "You are fighting to protect Islam and he [Saddam] is fighting to destroy Islam…" (p. 23). Given the ideological importance of Islam in the book's discussions, it is therefore mildly disappointing that there is no entry for "Islam" in its index.

This book would appeal not only to academics and state policymakers, but also to any reader who is keen to acquire an informed understanding of Middle Eastern affairs. As the authors so persuasively argue, now is the time for dialogue to begin.

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