

OPINION

Thirty years ago, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war was to permanently alter the geopolitical landscape in the Gulf. On 22 September 1980 Saddam Hussein launched a surprise attack on Iran to secure territorial gains that would enable him to redefine to his advantage the contested borderline between Iran and Iraq.

Above all, he wanted to weaken Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic regime, regarded as an existential threat to Ba'ath power in Iraq.

What was intended as a lightning offensive became mired in an interminable trench war that dragged on for eight years. The carnage, in which nearly 800,000 died, ended on 20 August 1988 after Iran agreed to a ceasefire under the terms of which Khomeini implicitly conceded defeat, while Iraq emerged unscathed from the conflict.

The consequences of this war, the longest in the 20th century and the most brutal and devastating in Middle Eastern history, still have powerful repercussions today.

- **The isolation of Iraq:** the Iraqi 'victory' rapidly turned into a defeat that ousted the country, until then a main player, from the regional stage. Barely two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait to overthrow the Kuwaiti ruling family, who persisted in keeping oil prices very low and refused to cancel the financial debt contracted by Iraq with Kuwait during its war against Iran. This blatant attack on the emirate's financial and oil reserves was also intended to allow Saddam to pay his troops and keep his oversized army employed. The consequences are all too familiar: Kuwait was liberated by international coalition forces; Iraq was isolated, then liberated, then occupied by an ad hoc coalition, which handed on a silver platter to Iran the success that eight years of waging brutal war had failed to achieve. Iraq's isolation strengthened Iran and put the Gulf oil monarchies on the front line against the Islamic Republic, but this did not help them to boost the credibility of the Gulf Co-operation Council they had founded in 1981, during the war, in an attempt to co-ordinate their defensive efforts.

- **Radicalisation of the Iranian regime:** instead of undermining the regime born of the Islamic revolution, the Iran-Iraq war served only to strengthen it. Iraq's invasion of Iran while the revolution was at its peak rapidly united the people behind their new leaders. By keeping the secular elite of Iran on the front, the war allowed the Shia clergy to seize power and exile the secular revolutionaries who did not share their theological vision of society and the world. All the figures who have made front-page news in Iran recently (Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Mohammad

Revisiting the lessons from the Iran-Iraq war



Pierre Razoux: 1401496

Lessons from the Iran-Iraq war and its consequences should be scrutinised by those responsible for withdrawing US troops from Iraq and those who have to manage the Iranian nuclear crisis, argues Pierre Razoux

Khatami, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi) held important responsibilities during the war. All of them, at some time or other during their careers, have espoused the radical views propounded by the regime.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the only exception to the rule because he was too young at the time. He nonetheless rapidly came to play a leading role as the spokesman of the veterans, who were eager to take revenge on a clergy they saw as corrupt and profiteering. To strengthen their hold even further, the newly created veterans' lobby adopted a tough radical discourse imbued with vindictive populist rhetoric.

- **Relaunch of the Iranian nuclear programme:** on assuming power, Khomeini cancelled the nuclear programme initiated by the Shah with US and French help. He believed at that time that the Islamic revolution, still in its early stages, could not afford such a costly initiative. The protracted war with Iraq convinced him, however, of the need to relaunch the programme so that Iran would one day have its own nuclear weapon to deter potential aggressors and prevent further bloodbaths. The Iranian leadership was convinced that if

the Israeli Air Force had not destroyed the Osirak nuclear power station in June 1981, sooner or later Saddam Hussein would have acquired the atomic bomb and would not have hesitated to use it against Iran to end the hostilities. Since then, the need to have a nuclear posture has been one of the very few issues on which Iranian political leaders agree.

- **Strengthening of the Western military presence in the Gulf:** by intervening militarily in the Gulf in 1987 to stop Iranian attacks on Western oil tankers, France, the UK and the US were to internationalise a crisis that until then had been confined to Iran and Iraq and their immediate neighbours. The escalation led to a number of incidents, such as the stand-off between US naval ships and Iranian boats and the downing of an Iranian Airbus by the guided-missile cruiser USS *Vincennes*. Disturbed by these events, the Gulf monarchies, who were incapable of defending themselves on their own, negotiated staggering arms deals with London, Paris and Washington in exchange for an increased military presence and a guarantee of protection against the double threat from Iraq and Iran. History would quickly prove them right, as the war gave France, the UK and the US the opportunity to build up stronger, lasting influence in the region.

The lessons of this war and its consequences unquestionably deserve to be given serious consideration by those responsible for withdrawing US troops from Iraq and those who have to manage the sensitive Iranian nuclear crisis.

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