



Causes and Consequences of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-88

This is a transcript of the [Causes and Consequences of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-88](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

When the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, declared war on Iran in September 1980 he dubbed it the 'Whirlwind War' in which he expected Iran to be defeated relatively swiftly. However the war persisted for nearly 8 long and bloody years, with an estimated half a million soldiers killed – and an equivalent number of civilians. This podcast will focus on three key issues: firstly the different causes of the war, then the nature of how it was fought, and finally consequences of the war for each nation.

Having secured the Presidency of Iraq in 1979, Saddam Hussein was keen to consolidate the power of his minority Sunni Muslim Ba'ath government. However, at almost exactly the same time, Ayatollah Khomeini came to power through the Iranian Revolution, installing a Shi'ite Muslim theocracy in Iraq's neighbour. For details of the rise of Saddam, and of the Iranian Revolution, you can listen to my previous podcasts in this series.

One of the key causes of the war was that, shortly after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini called for the overthrow of Saddam's Ba'athist regime in Iraq. Unsurprisingly, this was met with hostility in Iraq, especially after Shia militants assassinated 20 party officials in April 1980. This devastating attack built upon previous localised uprisings against the Ba'ath party, which the government believed had been supported and encouraged by Iran.

The war wasn't just an attempt to stop Iran's threatening behaviour, however. Both countries relied on oil exports to generate the vast majority of their national income, but Iran's extensive access to the Persian Gulf vastly outstripped Iraq's tiny coastline. A particularly sore point for Iraq was Iranian access to the Shatt Al-Arab waterway, which Iraq had reluctantly allowed Iran to use in the Algiers Agreement of 1975. A second cause of the war was therefore Iraq's need to push Iran back and take complete control of the waterway to secure their own oil exports. If the army was successful, they could even increase their oil reserves by capturing some of Iran's oil fields in the surrounding areas.

Saddam knew that achieving these aims through a short and decisive war against Iran would expand Iraq's influence, power and prestige in the Middle East. However, timing was critical. The third reason Saddam therefore began the war in September 1980 was because Iran was poorly prepared for war at the time. Its army had recently been purged of officers and soldiers loyal to the former Shah, and so was militarily weak and demoralised. Furthermore, the country's economy was in tatters as a result of western countries boycotting trade due to the ongoing hostage crisis at the American Embassy.

In order to answer the key questions on the exam, you need to be able to explain these three key reasons for the outbreak of the war. Whether you are looking at an 'explain why'



question about the causes of the war, or whether you are looking at an analytical question in which you assess how important a particular factor was, you must be able to give a range of reasons for the war. Remember the key points: Iran's threat to Saddam's regime, the opportunity to gain territory and oil, and timing. You need to provide evidence for each point, and explain why they contributed to the war. Point, Evidence, Explanation.

The Iran-Iraq war raged for an unprecedented 8 years, making it the longest Middle Eastern war in the 20th Century. Despite Saddam's expectations of a quick and easy victory, Iran mobilised its revolutionary population who voluntarily streamed to the front lines and pushed the Iraqis back to their own border. Additionally, Iran's superior navy deployed into the Persian Gulf and blockaded Iraq's ports – meaning that Iraq was unable to export any of its oil, or import badly-needed supplies.

Of the major foreign nations that were involved in the Iran-Iraq war, only Syria sided with Iran. The issue was more a case of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' because of Syria's rivalry with Iraq. Their most significant contribution to the Iranian war effort was shutting off Iraq's main oil pipeline that ran from the oil fields of Kirkuk to the Syrian port of Baniyas on the Mediterranean. The closure of the pipeline is estimated to have cost Iraq \$5 billion per month, which would have made the war impossible to continue if it wasn't for foreign support for Iraq.

The role of other foreign powers was therefore crucial to maintaining Iraq's war effort, with virtually the entire Arab world throwing its support behind Iraq. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates all contributed money and weapons to the Iraqi war effort. Jordan's land border with Iraq was also vitally important as it provided a route for imports and exports that avoided the blockaded Persian Gulf.

Beyond the Arab states, France and the USSR became the biggest suppliers of arms to Iraq. Amazingly, considering the ongoing Cold War and the fact the Soviet Union was already supporting Iraq, the USA also came in on the side of Saddam by providing intelligence information from their satellites. They also provided naval escorts through the blockaded Persian Gulf to get Iraqi imports and exports moving again.

The Iran-Iraq war finally came to an end on July 20th 1988, when a ceasefire known as UN Resolution 598 was universally approved. Ever since the earliest weeks of the war, attacks on civilians had been a major part of the tactics of both sides, known as the 'War of the Cities'. In the final months of the war these attacks became more and more brutal, with Iran fearing an all-out chemical attack against their cities when an estimated 2,000 civilians were killed after Iraqi planes dropped poison on the north-western town of Oshnavieh. When even more civilians died after cyanide and other poisonous gasses were dropped at the start of July, Ayatollah Khomeini reluctantly accepted the UN ceasefire.



The consequences of the war were, in many ways, similar for both Iran and Iraq. Primarily, neither country had succeeded in its primary aim of a military defeat of the other. Indeed, most historians and military analysts say that the entire 8-year conflict was a stalemate by returning the two countries to their pre-war position. The economies of both nations had also been destroyed as a result of damage to their oil infrastructure and the expense of the war. Each side had spent an estimated \$500 billion on the war, and the war had slowed their economic development to such an extent that recovery was significantly affected.

In an Iranian radio broadcast announcing the ceasefire, Ayatollah Khomeini expressed unhappiness at having “drunk the poison chalice” by approving the truce. However, his reputation survived intact, Iran maintained its Shi’ite theocracy, and his funeral a year later was attended by 12 million people.

In Iraq, meanwhile, support for the government declined. Despite the extensive systems of control and terror wielded by Saddam, riots and strikes occurred throughout the country. A key problem was that the army, who had previously been used to repress opposition, was itself upset at the outcome of the war. Some soldiers blamed Saddam himself for the failure to defeat Iran, and a number of suspected traitors were executed in the years that followed.

The effect on the civilian population was also significant. The cost of the war had used up funds previously allocated to social welfare, education and healthcare, resulting in an increase in infant mortality and reduction in life expectancy. Despite promises to improve the situation after the war and Iraq’s eye-watering debts of over \$130 billion, Saddam continued to invest heavily in weapons that he later used in his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. You can find out more about this in the next podcast.

The overall impact of the war on both countries was catastrophic. If you are asked about the consequences of the conflict, you could say that in many ways both Iran and Iraq experienced the same devastating economic and social effects, and give specific examples relating to each country. However, whereas the Iranian government managed to maintain its popular support, the people of Iraq had begun to question their leadership.