

IRAN

The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards, by Annie Tracy Samuel. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 302 pages. \$99.99.

Reviewed by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh

Any book that attempts to historicize the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) is a welcome addition to the scarce collection of material about the conflict that defines the Islamic Republic of Iran. Similarly, any study that critically examines the origins, evolution, and prospects of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), an important military organization with a transnational reach, is just as valuable. In 13 chapters, Annie Tracy Samuel discusses a variety of related subjects including the history of the IRGC, its role as the conflict's main historiographer, how it views the war, Iran's reaction to Iraq's invasion, the fall and liberation of the city of Khorramshahr, the war inside Iraqi territory, the last two years of the conflict, an assessment of how the war formed Iran's national security doctrine, and the Holy Defense Research and Documentation Center (HDRDC) and how it has been turned into a producer of war propaganda by the IRGC.

From one perspective, the book is highly valuable as it introduces the wealth of primary sources created by the IRGC over the decades, which are seldom examined in historical studies. In addition to a few documents from the Iranian legislative branch, seven from the United States, five from the United Nations, and several articles from nine Iranian websites that are closely aligned with or supported by the IRGC and the *Journal of Defense Policy*, the great majority of the primary sources that are in Persian and mentioned in this volume are from the HDRDC, altogether making them more than sufficient in offering fresh insights. The book's objective is to discuss the IRGC's historiography of the war by describing the "course and outcome" of the conflict while stressing a combination of facts that leads one to view the organization

as a rational body that used "faith and firepower" equally to conduct the war (p. 17). However, despite these sources' potential to provide a fresh perspective on the history of the war and the IRGC (p. 36), they are not juxtaposed with sources that disagree with the organization's narrative. This is why at times the book reads like a long policy paper, trying to convince governments to give the IRGC a chance as a rational player in regional affairs.

The following brief observations may be useful to consider: Throughout the book, Samuel suggests that, by critically examining the IRGC's own self-published historical studies, one will appreciate how astute and methodical the organization is. It would have been helpful if the author had also presented the opposing views of such a claim. In its current state, one is expected to accept that the sources speak for themselves and that the IRGC is telling us the whole story, which is doubtful. It would have been beneficial if the author had expanded her effective but incomplete arguments presented at the end of each chapter about how we should consider the IRGC's intellectual approach to war and historiography and its connection with the revolution and with the current regime in Tehran. The short chapter endings make it apparent that the author can provide sound analysis, but for some reason she holds back, whereas a detailed and self-critical discussion would have been illuminating.

An example of an IRGC claim the author leaves unexamined is that Iran would have fought a better war had its regular army (*Artesh*) been trained sufficiently to match the quality of the arsenal it possessed (p. 95). Members of the army have repeatedly debunked the assertion, but here it is reported as fact. Perhaps the book could have mentioned how the summary executions of the imperial army's highly trained leaders in the aftermath of the revolution played a role in Iran's army descended into chaos, despite its being on the region's most advanced, resulting in failed strategies at the onset of the war. Another reason was that, since the revolutionary government needed to fill these vacant positions, the rank and file who

were promoted for their ideological proximity to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini did not have the knowledge and experience of commanding a conventional war. Furthermore, the diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions caused by Iranians taking Americans hostage and holding them ten months before and four months into the war meant serious military obstacles, leaving the nation in dire straits as most of Iran's weapons were manufactured in the United States. Such facts, if mentioned, would have offered a more balanced understanding of the subject.

Agreeably, the author claims that previous publications have mostly aimed to encourage "policymakers in the United States to recognize and counter the threat" of the IRGC (p. 15), which apparently was successful as the organization is now categorized as a terrorist organization, although it is part of the Iranian defense force. As a counterargument, Samuel describes the IRGC's tenure by examining its publications on the Iran-Iraq War and its continuous effort to connect its actions with the health and longevity of the Islamic Republic. Hence, based on such an argument, we can also reason that this book aims to explicitly consider the IRGC, and by extension the Islamic Republic, as rational entities that the world, when prudent, could establish a "normal" relationship with. That approach by itself does not pose an issue, as there is some truth to it; however, the lack of a broader analysis of why we should view the IRGC as the rational establishment that the author portrays it to be other than its own reasoning gives one pause.

The author's argument assumes that the sources she has chosen represent the whole story behind the IRGC's origins, evolution, and performance during and after the war, but they do not. That is why buttressing IRGC sources with secondary analyses could have given the book's claim more value. The IRGC's history is incomplete in this volume since it does not discuss the many other roles the institution plays in domestic security, transnational military operations, and Iranian economic monopolies, which all have international consequences and will more than likely shape its future.

Samuel's assertion that the 1979 revolution and the eight-year conflict with Iraq are inherently related (p. 3), which translates into how in both cases firepower and faith were equally used to reach desirable objectives, is partially agreeable. She misses the fact that the one revolutionary group that eventually established the Islamic Republic did not depend on serious firepower during the uprisings. The nascent Islamic Republic depended on firepower after the war, when it began to violently counter political dissidents and separatist movements in different parts of Iran, and during the war, as faith without firepower (as she indicates in the subtitle) was not enough.

During the revolution, the same group that eventually would establish the theocratic political system almost entirely depended on faith, on the power of God, to allow for the impossible goal of overthrowing the monarchy. The faith in the divine, energized by a complex body of ideological understandings of contemporary Iranian challenges and drawing inspiration from the history of Shi'ism dating back to the martyrdom of Imam Husayn bin 'Ali at the Battle of Karbala in 680, is what led to the success of the would-be managers of the Islamic Republic, not firepower. We remember that fact when we recall how Ayatollah Khomeini made constant references to Imam Husayn and his death at Karbala, likening the instigators of that seventh-century event to the shah and his supporters. Part of Khomeini's charisma derived from such a convincing argument that impressionable revolutionaries took it to heart. Ironically, it was the monarchy that used firepower when it ordered its military along with its public police force and its secret police — the SAVAK (a Persian acronym for *Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, i.e., the National Intelligence and Security Organization) — to fight the revolutionaries with tanks and guns, albeit unsuccessfully. What the Islamic Republic realized during the war was that faith alone could not deliver military victory in a conventional war and that is when firepower combined with faith became the essential factors in fighting the enemy, which the author rightly asserts. So, the connection between the revolution and

the war should not be misconstrued as both using the military the same way. The revolution and the war are related because the latter solidified the former, not because they equally used firepower.

Although there is room for more analytical revision by including opposing views countering the IRGC sources and one's own convictions, a strong point of Samuel's work is that it takes into consideration and brings to the fore the discussion of sources that many avoid or simply neglect. For a variety of reasons, researchers have dismissed many government-sponsored publications of the Islamic Republic, leaving a noticeable void in Iranian historiography. This is where this book uniquely contributes.

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