

Pierre RAZOUX: *The Iran-Iraq War*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2015, 688 pp., ISBN: 978-0674088634

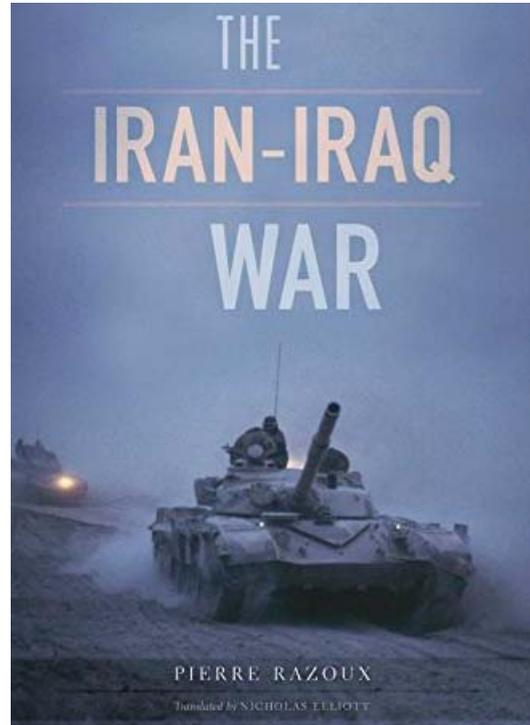
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The French View of the Iran-Iraq War

Pierre Razoux, a French defense analyst, has authored what may become the standard account of the Iran-Iraq War. His book, "*The Iran-Iraq War*" is a detailed examination of this, one of the longest wars in history and certainly the longest in the Middle East. Although there are a few books that deal with individual aspects or theaters in this war, the book adds substantially to the fairly limited historiography on this subject as a whole and does so by addressing many of the areas that previous authors have only touched on in passing.

Razoux does not approach the war from a particular thesis and there was no discernable effort to put one forth and develop it through the history. Whereas some of the other older books on this topic have taken stances on the war or covered the Iranians or Iraqis with lesser or greater nuance and detail, it appears that Razoux has managed to combine the two in a dispassionate narrative. This holds at least until it comes to one of the last chapters in the book which is discussed in detail below. Apart from this single instance Razoux successfully avoids becoming either an apologist or campaigner which enables the reader, either professional historian or enthusiast, to gain a deeper more holistic view of the conflict.

Razoux presents his findings by combing an episodic and broad time line approach that aids the critical reader in contextualizing the events and the patterns of the conflict. He presents the events in narrative on the basis of the time line of the conflict after laying a more than adequate foundation at the beginning. He occasionally breaks from broader perspective chapters to more narrowly focused chapters to cover particular events or people in detail. Among others, he covers the events of the Vincennes shoot down, the presence of Iranian teen boys on the battlefield, and the attack on Halabja in chapters mostly devoted to those subjects alone. These help bring perspective to events that he may have already covered or will. In other instances these events have played an outsized role in the overall historical record. Those events just mentioned have become significant in themselves to such a degree that to not look at them microscopically would actually undermine the value



of the text. It also helps those who may be interested in researching the topics further so that there is room for investigation and using it as a primer on the topics.

I was impressed with the level of detail and knowledge that has gone into the work and how he has been able to shape a work that will give any specialist or developing specialist the ability to grasp the movement and contours. The battles are treated in a comprehensive manner but are not discussed in a manner that is tedious or will overwhelm the non-military person who is interested some of the broader issues. Razoux succeeds in giving enough detail to help the reader understand the scale of the violence and the impact it had without analyzing each movement and decision. There are some tactical and strategic considerations covered but in some other works this can bog down the narrative and usurp the meaning behind covering the battle. Additionally this helps the book avoid duplicating work already done by such authors as Kenneth Pollack.¹ It appears that Razoux's objective is to induce the reader to recognize the human toll and the devastation that the war was bringing to both sides rather than offer detailed criticism or comment on Saddam's or Rasfanjani's military accumen.

The second major theme of the book is the diplomatic work that was being conducted by both sides as well as the work that was being pushed for in the international community. In agreement with other books on the topic these chapters are often the shortest, as the international community at the time was engaged in fueling the conflict by supplying all the arms both sides required. Razoux, being a French military and defence analyst, naturally sheds light on the French diplomatic and arms efforts in a very thorough manner. It was interesting to read more about what the French experienced during the war and as a result of their support and work with the Iranians and Iraqis. Previous literature had only touched on this theme briefly and mainly in connection with other European powers or not at all. This book adds depth to the French motives and politics that surrounded their involvement and may be of use in understanding their continued investment in Iraq after this war and into the next two that followed. I found it especially interesting that, by covering the bombings that took place in France during the Iran-Iraq War, it helped to demonstrate how a war in the Middle East could spill over into areas that are thought to be disconnected from those events.

As mentioned previously there was only one instance in which Razoux broke away and substantially deviated from almost all other sources on the event, the shoot down of Iran Air Flight 655. While the accounts do vary and have slightly different time lines and precision of detail, Razoux's narrative is completely different. Razoux crafts and shapes the events through terms and inflections in such a manner that his perspective on the captain and crew of the Vincennes is clearly negative and in some manner perhaps hostile. The single largest omission and change in the narrative is that he fails to mention that the Vincennes was dispatched by METF to the Pakistani ship that was being attacked by Iranian Boghammers. From Razoux's narrative it appears that the captain simply sped his ship off in the direction of a fight without any regard to his duties escorting a group of ships through the Gulf. By presenting the situation in this manner it creates the impression that the captain wrecklessly engaged in an unnecessary fight. Another large and inexplicable deviation

¹ Kenneth POLLACK: *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

from the standard accounts, even from those such as Dilip Hiro who is not a fan of American power, is that there was a lull of about forty minutes between engagement with the Iranian speed boats and the encounter with IA 655.² Again, sources are clear that the two incidents occurred at the same time and this has been attributed as one of the main causes of the incident. There are other minor inconsistencies with the historiography of the incident. Razoux's discussion of the Vincennes episode is certainly written from a negative point of view and the thesis advanced in the chapter is clearly visible.

It is not clear why Razoux chose to go with this scenario in the view that the historiography is fairly stable and supported in archival sources. If this variation has come from documented sources it would have been useful in detailing these new sources within the chapter itself. Some of the explanation is reserved for the notes section in the back of the book, however, most readers will not take the time or effort to check into the notes unless super curious. Razoux offers no explanation for many of the other deviations even in the notes. This is the only major concern since some hobbyist or non-professional readers may be strongly misled by this single chapter and in an instance so fraught with years of misinformation already added on. With the foregoing, it is still a work that is well presented, well researched, and ought to be read by historians engaging in this part of the world.

At the end of the book we are given one last treat, the appendices. Most authors treat the appendices as a minor, mostly afterthought portion. Razoux offers eighty-five pages of detailed information on the conflict; military forces, costs, arms suppliers, numbers of and by whom jets were shot down, and the naval compliments of the various nations that had placed ships in the Gulf during the conflict. The list is long and the information is well worth the investment in time. This is one of the few appendices that actually brings not only value to the work as a whole but could be its own effective stand alone research presentation.

Razoux's work succeeds on all of the levels which a manuscript on this subject needs to. It succeeds as a narrative history that clearly lays out the events and the time line, it succeeds as an introduction to the weapons that were used and how they were used, and as a means for introducing and even delving into the diplomatic affairs surrounding it. I felt that I came away with a deeper knowledge and interest in the subject and an ability to work with the subject in a more detailed manner when able to do so. It should be noted that the book is academically oriented and would serve as strong textbook and it is my feeling that the audience it is intended is not the average enthusiast. The vocabulary is on a higher level though not jargonistic and inaccessible. Razoux gives details on the weapons and purchases that reflects his professional approach but does not bog down the account in *useless* technical specifications. Therefore, I would suggest that its best use is for senior grade students in college and then graduate studies.

² Dilip HIRO: *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, New York, Routledge, 1991.