

In September 1980, Iraq invades Iran .
Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein is convinced
that now is the time to strike, since Iran
is still **shaken** by its Islamic Revolution,
and he expects victory within weeks.

Instead, the conflict will last 8 years,
cost hundreds of thousands of
lives , threaten world oil markets,
and **draw** the US into the Persian Gulf for good.
It's the last total war of the 20th century.

In 1979, the Iranian revolution hits the Middle
East with a political **earthquake**. Under the Shah,
Iran was a US ally, but his repressive
rule leads to his **overthrow**.

Iran is now controlled by Islamist forces **fiercely**
opposed to the US . This change of regime
also **spikes** tensions with neighboring Iraq.
Iraq is ruled by 42-year-old dictator Saddam
Hussein and the secular nationalist Baathist
Party.

He has recently **displaced** the previous
leader, and purged the party to make it more
loyal to him. Most of Iraq's 13 and a half million
people are Arabic speakers belonging to the
Shiite branch of Islam, though the minority
Sunni Muslims control the regime.

There's a large Kurdish minority in the north. In recent years,
Saddam has **cracked down** on Iraqi Kurds and
Shia insurgents who resent secular Sunni rule.
Iran is much larger, with more than 38 million
people, **most of whom** are Farsi-speaking Persian
Shia.

The country is led by spiritual guide
Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the
revolution that brought radical Shia Islamists
to power.

Iran also has **independence-minded** minorities, like the Azeris, Baluchis, Iranian Kurds, and Arabs of the Khuzestan region.

Saddam sees the Iranian revolution as an historic opportunity to gain an advantage over a suddenly-weakened regional rival: "It is more useful to hit [the Iranians] now because they are weak. If we leave them until they become strong, they will overrun us." (Liu) Under the Shah, Iran was the Middle East's leading power, but now it is divided.

Many Iranians, including much of the army's officer corps, oppose the new regime, and even within the government, hardliners argue with moderates. Iranian Kurds have risen up, and Iranian exiles in Iraq tell Saddam of the weakened state of their country's once-mighty military following revolutionary purges of high-ranking officers.

Some officers even try an anti-revolutionary coup in July 1980, which fails. The country's oil-based economy, usually much larger than Iraq's oil-based economy, is also suffering.

Iraq fears that the revolution might spread to the Iraqi Shia majority. Iraqi authorities attribute several terrorist bombings to Iranian and Iraqi Shia extremists, while Revolutionary leaders in Iran compare the Baathist Party to Nazism, Marxism, and fascism, and accuse Saddam of being a stooge of Israel and the US. Iranian militants also attack Arab institutions in Khuzestan. After Saddam executes a Shia cleric and expels tens of thousands of Iranians from Iraq in early 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini does not hold back: "The Baath Party regime [is] monstrous and perverted, a veritable Little Satan that has put itself at the service of the Great Satan [the United States]. [...] We want to create an Islamic state that reunites the Arab, the

Persian, the Turk and the other nationalities under the banner of Islam.” (Razoux 21)

Saddam is also an Arab nationalist and hopes to take on the role of unofficial pan-Arab leader if he can end the radical Shia threat from Iran and potentially conquer Khuzestan, which is also the home of Iran’s oil industry . Both sides continue to support regional rebellions on the other’s territory – Iran helps Iraqi Kurdish rebels , while Iraq supports Arabs in Khuzestan. Throughout 1980, there are border clashes on land and in the air. The focal point is a waterway known as Shatt al-Arab in Arabic and Arvand Rud in Farsi, which allows access to the sea and forms part of the border .

The two countries agree to share the river in 1975, but in September 1980, Saddam declares it has been Iraqi and Arab throughout history and cancels the agreement . He has decided to gamble on a quick victory. Years later, there are rumors that the United States encourages Iraq to start the war to punish Iran for its revolution and ongoing US hostage crisis in Tehran, but this is unlikely as there is no conclusive evidence for this theory. The Iraqi plan is for a short campaign, since they know a long war favors the larger neighbor. Saddam calls it a second Qadesiya, a reference to the 7th-century victory of Arab Muslim forces over the Persian Sassanid Empire . Iran will call it the Imposed War or Holy Defense. Baghdad is confident its modern Soviet weapons, and the anticipated uprising of fellow Arabs in Khuzestan will bring an easy victory. Head of Iraqi Intelligence Ali Hassan al-Majid warns Saddam of the risks, but Saddam counters: “Ali, why do you always bring me bad news, rather than good news?” (Razoux 34)

Iraq has about 250,000 soldiers, 1700 tanks, 1300 guns, 2300 other armored vehicles, and 295 combat aircraft. Iran has about 290,000 troops, 1700 tanks, 1100 guns, 1900 other armored vehicles, and 420 combat aircraft. Their navy is also much larger than Iraq’s. (Razoux 39-40)

In terms of quality, Iraq's Republican Guard is Saddam's elite formation, but the rest of the army is relatively poorly trained, led by officers appointed based on loyalty, and inexperienced in mechanized warfare. After Iran's revolution, many of its troops are also poorly trained and led by officers appointed based on loyalty. The new Revolutionary Guard will play a key role, though there is tension with the pre-war officer corps. The war will mostly pit Iraqi Soviet against Iranian Western weapons. Iraq fields some modern Soviet designs, like T-72 tanks or MiG-23 jets, but most are older. Iran does have modern western equipment like F-14 jets, M-60 and Chieftain tanks. But they will struggle to keep its US weapons in the field without American maintenance, training, and spare parts. Saddam overrules his generals on air strikes in the hopes of repeating Israel's similar success in the 1967 Six-Day War. On September 22, the Iraqi Air Force hits Iranian airfields, even though they lack specialized munitions to take out reinforced hangars and radar sites. The army advances on several fronts, where they have built up numerical superiority of 2 or even 4 to 1. They push the Iranians back in Iranian Kurdistan, capture Qasr e-Shirin to secure the road to Baghdad, and move into Khuzestan towards Ahvaz. The main targets though, are Abadan and Khorramshahr, the heart of the Iranian oil industry and an important port. But these two cities are surrounded by waterways, and access is limited to two bridges – and the Iranians fight back fiercely. Iranian jets and Cobra helicopters strike at Iraqi spearheads, slowing them down – Iran even hits targets inside Iraq. One of them is the French-built Osirak nuclear reactor, which Iran fears Iraq is using to develop nuclear weapons – though it's not destroyed. Iraqi command mistakes also hinder their progress. The Iranians are disorganized but still stop the Iraqis short of Ahvaz. It takes the Iraqis five weeks of heavy artillery bombardments and

bloody street fighting to capture Khorramshahr, which falls in November. Stranded cargo ship crews in Khorramshahr are involuntary witnesses: [ORIGINAL AUDIO – YUGOSLAV SHIP CAPTAIN 01:50]

“Every day and every night we stay onboard awaiting that bombs will kill us.”

The Iraqis cannot drive the Iranians out of Abadan, and 200 of their vehicles get bogged down in the surrounding marshes, so they besiege it instead. The local Arab population does not welcome the Iraqis as liberators, partly because of the destruction their invasion has caused. So, Iraq risked an invasion of revolutionary Iran, but despite its military advantages, its forces do not get far and Iranian Arabs do not rise up.

The United Nations Security Council adopts a resolution urging both sides to talk peace, but neither side agrees. Iran has weathered the initial storm and is ready to strike back. The external threat rallies many Iranians to the cause, even some opponents of Khomeini or Christian minorities, though divisions and opposition remain. Khomeini creates a Supreme Defense Council to coordinate the war effort – but it is deadlocked with infighting between President Abolhassan Banisadr and religious members until Banisadr is later ousted. Iran mobilizes all available forces: the regular army, the police, the Revolutionary Guards, and volunteer units known as Basiji. Clerics visit school to recruit volunteers, and Tehran even releases scores of pilots imprisoned for supporting the Shah – some of whom it executes after they help stop the Iraqi offensive. Iran goes over to the offensive in January 1981, with mixed results. Iranian units push back the Iraqis near Susangerd, but an Iraqi counterattack surrounds and defeats them. They try again in the fall, attacking several times – they recapture some ground and lift the siege of Abadan, but there is no great victory.

Iran launches its biggest operations yet in 1982. Many of its new troops are Basij volunteers, including ex-soldiers but also boys, some as young as 12 — some motivated by religious fervor and loyalty to Khomeini, others by national pride, while some are naïve and consider the war a game. Men are also coerced to join the war by other means : [ORIGINAL AUDIO MOHESEN RASHEDI]: “I didn’t want to join the army at first. But they forced me to come to the battlefield. Because I wanted to continue my education and come out of Iran. They said you got to go to the battlefield for six months. If you are back alive, you can go out.” Basiji wear a piece of white cloth on their uniforms to symbolize their own death shroud, the traditional Muslim covering for the deceased, so each one would be carrying his own death with him. Each also carries a plastic key from Khomeini, to guarantee his entry into paradise. Basij units received rudimentary training from the Revolutionary Guards and are poorly armed, so the shock of combat hits them hard. 13-year-old Zahed Haftlang recalls his baptism of fire: “When I saw [the] first corpse [...] I was shocked. I was so afraid. Kids my age who lost their hands, their legs, and whose stomachs were torn open, or who were shot in the face...all I could do was hold their hands, cry and pray for them until they died.” (Shin) But they are critical on the battlefield, in Iran’s mix of new and traditional tactics: Basij units charge the enemy, often in mass formation and through minefields, to clear the way for better trained and armed Revolutionary Guard or regular army units . In some cases, they throw themselves onto barbed-wire obstacles so others can climb over them. This results in very high casualties, but is often effective given Iran’s advantage in numbers. In March 1982, 120,000 Iranian troops assault Iraqi positions near Shush, and the Iraqis pull back to the pre-war border. More Iranian offensives follow, which culminate in

the recapture of Khorramshahr in May.

Iraqi Najah Aboud is in a bunker in the town when he is badly wounded:

“Around us everywhere [there were] big bombs[s], big fire[s]. I tried to go out from the bunker, but I can't. [...] I thought it was] the end of my life. [...] Lot[s] of shrapnel hit my body, my head [was] bleeding badly. [later] I hear weapon[s] very close to me. It means they start to kill all who [were] alive. I started to shake.” (Shin)

Iranian Basij Zahed Haftlang enters the bunker, and comes across Aboud:

“I was afraid, oh my god. I found one Iraqi soldier. He was full of blood. He [was] cry[ing] and begging me. [...] I didn't know what he says. [...] And he show[ed] me his family picture. [...] His wife she was so beautiful woman with a nice kid. [...] That photo change[d] my mind. I ma[de] a decision to save that family.” (Shin)

Aboud remains a prisoner in Iran for 17 years. After his release he flees to Canada, where he randomly meets Haftlang in a counselling center, though he never finds his wife Alia and son Amjed after the war.

The Basij units also get international attention when Iranian officer Hamid Zirak-Bash defects to the west:

[Original Audio Hamid Zirak-Bash]: “12 years old until 17 or 16. Because over that age what's going on and they don't go to much for Khomeini. I can just tell you that about 15.000 got killed and thousands of them got injured and captured by Iraq.”

So, by 1 982 Iran has turned the tables and starts to push Iraqi forces back, though at great cost.

In June, Saddam says he is willing to consider a ceasefire and withdrawal . But Tehran knows it has the upper hand, and demands the end of the Baathist regime, the return of Iraqi Shia exiles, and reparations. Baghdad refuses, which opens the way for a new phase of the war.

Iran's leadership agree that Iraq must be punished for its invasion, but disagree about what to do next. Revolutionary Guard leaders want to invade

Iraq, and think that Iraqi Shia will rise up and greet them as liberators. New President Sayyed Ali Khamenei, some religious leaders, and many regular army generals are more cautious. They argue that Iraq has enlarged its army and still holds a firepower advantage. The hardliners prevail, and in July 1982 Iranian forces cross the border into southern Iraq. Their goal is Basra, the major hub for Iraqi oil. But in two weeks of fighting, they don't get far. Iranian forces lack artillery and air support, while Iraqi troops are motivated to defend their home soil, and put their heavy weapons to good use. The Iraqis also use chemical weapons, which they will use multiple times during the conflict. Iraqi Shia do not rise up against their Sunni government though. Historians still debate why – some say their Arab identity was stronger than their religious one, or that Saddam had already suppressed any potential leadership for an uprising. Most Iraqi Shia soldiers remain loyal and fight hard. Iran tries again in October and November 1982, but these operations also fail. 1983 sees more of the same, with several Iranian offensives gaining little ground. Iraq tries to cripple Iran's oil refineries by bombing them, but although this does damage Iran's exports, it does not damage Tehran's resolve. Iran now holds the initiative, so Iraq adjusts its approach to the war. Saddam and his generals realize they cannot achieve their initial goals, so now they accept a more static war and mostly go over to the defensive on the ground, hoping Iranian forces will exhaust themselves. Trench warfare becomes a common feature of the war, as do artillery duels, and human wave attacks. These methods coexist with complex mechanized maneuvers and modern air warfare technology alongside small-scale ambushes in the 20th century's last total war. Months pass without any major ground operations from either side, setting the tone for the next several years. Iran has more manpower, but it

has terrible logistics problems with its mix of existing US and newly imported Soviet-designed equipment. It also suffers from renewed purges of its officers by the regime. The Iraqis do launch many smaller counterattacks, and they benefit from superiority in the air – but their army's morale suffers under constant pressure and from cruel discipline and officer corruption.

Both sides also launch popular fundraising campaigns for the war effort and intensified propaganda to shore up the home front. Iran mixed religious fervor with nationalist messages to resist the historical Arab invader. Children like Negin Shiraghaei are not spared:

"My childhood friends would say 'the war is great' and how brave the people are. They would have family members who had been to the war, and they were proudly [...] saying what they did and how many Iraqi soldiers they killed. On television we would watch a lot of propaganda, like 'we are the best country in the world.'" (BBC)

In October 1984, Iran pushes into the mountains east of Baghdad, and gains some ground. In the context of the stalemate, this is a significant advance, and puts pressure on the smaller Iraqi army, but the Iraqis are far from defeated.

In March 1985 the Iranians attack towards Basra but make little progress. In February 1986, they capture the Faw peninsula, which threatens Iraq's access to the sea.

This is perhaps their biggest success since the recapture of Khorramshahr back in 1982, but follow-up attacks produce limited gains.

Despite the exhaustion of both sides, neither side is ready to give in. In

August 1986 Ayatollah Khomeini is still confident:

"We should neither submit to imposed peace, nor to imposed arbitration [...] We should continue the war until victory – and it is near." (Kennington 34)

After the failure of the Iranian invasion of Iraq, the conflict slips into stalemate.

While positional warfare and occasional local Iranian offensives dominate the fighting on the front lines, both sides look for a way out by

opening new fronts and internationalizing the war. After Iraq's initial offensive fails and Iran hits back, Iraqi leadership is facing some tough choices. Their smaller population means they can't raise as many troops as Iran, and they fear they'll be ground down if they stay on the defensive for too long. As many Iraqi units as could be spared leave the front lines for training, and Saddam expands his elite Republican Guard for future counterattacks. Iraq also declares the Persian Gulf (also known as the Gulf of Arabia) a war zone in late 1983, starting the so-called Tanker War. The Gulf is the lifeline of the world's oil supply, and Baghdad wants to force the United States and the Soviet Union to pressure Iran into ending the war. Iraqi forces blockade Iran's Kharg Island port to prevent oil exports, but they also attack neutral tankers transporting Iranian oil. Iran wants to stop international support for Iraq, so it threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz, cutting off the global oil trade, stops neutral shipping to inspect for arms shipments to Iraq, and places Chinese Silkworm missile batteries on its coast. The Soviet Union, the United States, and European countries are worried about another oil crisis like the one that damaged the world economy after the Yom Kippur War in 1973. So, the US and several NATO members send warships to the Persian Gulf. The Soviet navy also sends ships to escort tankers. Iran never does close the Strait, but they board ships, attack merchantmen, and lay sea mines, which prompts several NATO countries to send minesweepers. In January 1987 an Iranian ship fires at a British tanker Isomeria:

[ORIGINAL AUDIO Captain Neil Ranking (HMS Andromeda)]:

"One thing we do expect from the Iranians is the unexpected. It was earlier on this year that after an innocuous exchange that the Iranian frigate wished the Isomeria a nice day, pulled back and then fired missiles at them."

Oil-rich Kuwait is so worried that it asks for its tankers to sail under the US flag for

protection . At first, Washington hesitates, but when Moscow considers helping the Kuwaitis, the US agrees.

The Tanker War also brings diplomatic friction between the United States and France, since France provides Iraq with Mirage F1 and Super Étendard aircraft with AM-39 Exocet anti-ship missiles, which the Iraqi air force uses to sink commercial ships . On May 17, 1987 an Iraqi Mirage fires on American warship USS Stark, killing 37 crew – Baghdad apologizes and says the pilot mistook the frigate for an Iranian oil tanker. The next year, guided missile cruiser USS Vincennes shoots down an Iranian passenger plane while in Iranian territorial waters, killing all 290 people on board. The US claims the ship mistook the plane for an Iranian F-14, and later pays compensation. In September 1987 an Iranian vessel is caught laying sea mines off Qatar. After a US frigate hits one of those mines in April 1988, the US Navy launches Operation Praying Mantis, its largest surface fleet operation since World War Two. Three US Navy surface action groups including aircraft from the USS Enterprise and US Marines in helicopters attack two Iranian oil platforms which also house military equipment and personnel. Iranian navy vessels and fighter jets respond to the attack, and US forces sink or damage several. In retaliation Iran fires Silkworm missiles, but the Americans shoot them down and both sides disengage.

Until the end of the war, Iran and Iraq attack hundreds of vessels. Iraq sinks 54 cargo ships to Iran's 18, while many more are damaged. The Tanker War increases international involvement and tensions, but does not lead to a 1973-style global oil crisis.

Like the ground war, the Tanker War ends up in more-or-less stalemated.

At the same time as tankers became targets though, Iraq is also trying to force Iran to negotiate by striking at the home front, in what becomes known as the War of Cities.

In 1984, Iraq decides to extend the war to Iran's

major urban centers. Iran does not have enough air defenses to protect its cities against attacks by Iraqi aircraft and ballistic missiles, and the Iraqis hope that by terrorizing the population and showing the impotence of the revolutionary government, Iran will have no choice but to end the war. Iraq sends Scud-B and Frog-7 missiles, as well as air-to-surface munitions, into Western Iran, including Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz. Iran responds, though it has fewer missiles and aircraft available, and hits Baghdad, Basra, and Kirkuk. Iraq even uses mustard gas and other chemicals in its attack on the Iranian Kurdish town of Sardasht in 1987 – killing over 100, wounding several thousand, and condemning further thousands to years of health complications. The UN and US have already confirmed the use of such weapons several times earlier in the war, but a UN report fails to name Iraq as the user, in part due to US diplomatic pressure to not damage Iraq's position. A US official later reveals why: "[T]he use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern... We were desperate to make sure that Iraq did not lose." (Liu)

The international community remains largely silent about Iraqi chemical weapons use during the war. There are accusations that Iran also produces and uses chemical weapons during the war, but they remain unproven. Early in the War of Cities, UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar negotiates a stop to the attacks, but this agreement doesn't last long. The attacks take place in bursts of several weeks in 1984, 85, 87, and 88, usually initiated by Iraq. The recurring War of Cities devastates infrastructure in both countries, kills and injures tens of thousands of civilians, and lowers civilian morale – Iranian author Marjane Satrapi will later write about the civilian experience in her graphic novel *Persepolis*. So the land war is still bogged down, and the war

in the Gulf and against civilians are now features for the rest of the conflict. It is these new fronts that make the most international headlines, but other powers have been indirectly involved in the war since the start.

The Soviet Union has been Iraq's biggest weapons supplier before the war going back to the 1960s, and opposed the Iranian revolution. But in 1980, it stops most arms deliveries to Iraq as it disapproves of the invasion. Once Iran seems to gain the upper hand though, the USSR resumes supplying Iraq, but plays a muted role in the war overall.

Officially the US is also neutral. It opposes both the Iranian Revolution and Iraq's ties to terrorist groups and Palestinian militants, and its longstanding relationship with the Soviet Union. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger allegedly sums up the US' ambiguous position:

"It's a pity they both can't lose." (Wawro)

The US though, sees Iraq as the lesser evil.

It provides financial aid, intelligence, allows sales of US weapons to Iraq via other countries, and sends some dual-use materials that can be used by Iraq's military.

Revelations that Iraq uses US loans to buy weapons later lead to the Iraqgate scandal.

Another scandal erupts when the public learns of the Iran CONTRA affair, where the US illegally sells arms to Iran.

President Ronald Reagan hopes this would get Tehran to pressure Hezbollah into releasing the Western hostages it was holding in Lebanon, and improve future relations with Iran. Following the suggestion of US officer Oliver North, the money from the sale is then used to illegally buy other weapons for anti-communist guerillas in Nicaragua, bypassing the US Congress and the President. Reagan makes a humiliating public admission in 1987:

[ORIGINAL AUDIO Ronald Reagan]: "Secretary Shultz and Secretary Weinberger both predicted that the American people would immediately assume this whole plan was an arms-for-hostages

deal and nothing more. Well, unfortunately, their predictions were right. As I said to you in March, I let my preoccupation with the hostages intrude into areas where it didn't belong. The image — the reality — of Americans in chains, deprived of their freedom and families so far from home, burdened my thoughts. And this was a mistake. My fellow Americans, I've thought long and often about how to explain to you what I intended to accomplish, but I respect you too much to make excuses. The fact of the matter is that there's nothing I can say that will make the situation right. I was stubborn in my pursuit of a policy that went astray."

Jordan and Saudi Arabia support Iraq, since they fear Iran. Syria and Libya support Iran since they fear an aggressive Saddam if Iraq wins. So does Israel, which had been allied to the Shah's Iran, and now sees the Islamic Republic as the lesser evil but hopes the war will weaken both sides. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin famously wishes both sides much success, and in 1981 Israeli jets even destroy Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, which Iran had previously damaged. Tehran considers Israel a "Little Satan", but accepts Israeli military aid and expertise and allows Iranian Jews to emigrate to Israel. On the other hand, Iran supports Hezbollah after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The arms trade booms despite the official embargos. China, the US, the USSR, Yugoslavia, Italy and others sell weapons to both sides. China is Iran's biggest supplier, followed by North Korea, Libya, and Israel. Iraq, which receives three times as many weapons, mainly buys from the USSR, France, China, Italy, Egypt, and Brazil. It also receives financial loans from the US, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. There are numerous efforts at peace negotiations, but all fail. After the UN resolution early in the war, US-Soviet talks in 1985 also lead nowhere. In July 1987, the UN Security Council adopts resolution 598, proposing a ceasefire, withdrawal of forces, prisoner exchange, and a

commission to determine responsibility for the war . Iraq agrees, but Iran demands that Iraq be declared the aggressor as a precondition. As the conflict drags on into 1987, international involvement in the Gulf heats up. At the same time, the ground war also intensifies. In 1987, the stalemate at the front continued, but so did the fighting and the frantic efforts by each side to win the war. Iran launches yet more offensives, including Operation Great Harvest, perhaps the largest operation of the war. Hundreds of thousands of troops clash around Basra, which the Iranians besiege for several months. An Iraqi officer describes fighting the Basiji: "They chant 'Allahu Akbar' and they keep coming, and we keep shooting, sweeping our [...] machine guns around like sickles. My men are eighteen, nineteen, just a few years older than these kids. I've seen them crying, and at times the officers have had to kick them back to their guns. Once we had Iranian kids on bikes cycling towards us, and my men all started laughing, and then these kids started lobbing their hand grenades and we stopped laughing and started shooting." (Karsh 62) The outnumbered Iraqis throw everything they have into counterattacks, especially their superior airpower, which destroys hundreds of Iranian armored vehicles. The Iraqis try to allow the enemy to penetrate in a certain part of the front, and then hit them with artillery and armor, and tactic inspired by US practice. Improved Iranian air defenses though, bring down dozens of Iraqi jets. Tens of thousands are killed and wounded, with losses 5 to 1 in favour of Iraq. The result is yet another stalemate. Meanwhile Iraq continues its genocidal campaign against Kurds and other minorities in the north. By 1988, both sides are exhausted. Both economies are struggling, and Iran wrestles with 50% inflation . But they've also built up their forces: Iraq now has 800,000 men, 3,400 tanks, 4,500 other armored vehicles, 2,300 guns, 360

combat aircraft and 140 attack helicopters.

This Iraqi army is much stronger than the one that started the war 8 years before: it has more Western equipment, better logistics, better training, and its officer corps is much better.

Iran has 850,000 men, 1,100 tanks, 1,400 armored vehicles, 900 guns, 60 active combat aircraft, 40 attack helicopters. (Razoux 820) Iran's renewed mobilization brings more troops, but desertion rates increase and it is lacking heavy weapons.

Nearly half of the Iranian ground forces belong to the Revolutionary Guards and Basiji volunteers.

Iran reignites the War of Cities using North Korean missiles, and about half of the attacks against urban centers in the entire war take place in 1988 alone.

Iraq unveils its new al-Husayn missile, a modified Soviet Scud-B with enough range to hit Tehran, and thousands of Iranians flee to the countryside in fear of chemical attacks.

Iran also launches an offensive in Iraqi Kurdistan, which soon gains ground. In response, on March 16, Iraq commits one of the most heinous crimes of the war. It attacks the Iranian-occupied Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabjah with a mixture of chemicals including the nerve agent sarin, killing up to 5000 civilians.

Resident Kherwan recalls the attack:

"I saw people lying on the ground, vomiting a green-colored liquid, while others became hysterical and began laughing loudly before falling motionless onto the ground.

Later, I smelled an aroma that reminded me of apples and I lost consciousness. When I awoke, there were hundreds of bodies scattered around me [...] Birds began falling from their nests, then other animals, then humans. It was total annihilation." (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

This region of Kurdistan was home to part of the independence movement that Saddam ruthlessly put down in the mid-1970s, and which Iran supports during the war. Baghdad blames Iran even though Saddam ordered Hassan al-Majid, known after as Chemical Ali, to carry it out as part of a

wider campaign of genocide and “Arabization.”

The attack though does stop the Iranian offensive.

It's clear that the war cannot continue for long, so in April Iraq launches a final offensive to gain a better position in any negotiations. Their forces recapture the Faw peninsula, inflicting heavy losses on the Iranians and taking out a Silkworm battery. The leftist Iranian resistance group known as MEK and fighting alongside Iraq, launches two small offensives, but its initial gains around Mehran are soon crushed. Iraq has nearly exhausted its available manpower, so Saddam claims the Faw peninsula victory justifies accepting a ceasefire. Iran blames its losses on a lack of heavy weapons, aircraft, and anti-aircraft defenses – problems for which it has no answer given its international isolation. Tehran is worried about its economic problems, potential Iraqi chemical weapons attacks on Tehran, and US pressure in the Gulf. Finally, both sides agree to the UN ceasefire conditions, which Khomeini compares to “drinking poison.” The fighting stops on August 20, 1988, and the Iran-Iraq War, the last total war of the 20th century, is over.

According to conservative estimates, Iraq loses about 180,000 killed, 520,000 wounded, and 70,000 taken prisoner. Iranian losses are much larger with 500,000 dead, 1.3 million wounded, and 45,000 prisoners – though some estimates of the total dead are as high as 2 million.

Millions of survivors are traumatized for life, like Iraqi army medic Ahmed Al-Mushatad:

“I dream about it until now. Those nightmares that there's somebody I try to help and I can't and last minute I lose him. And sometimes I dream I've been killed.

I still smell the smoke of the battle [...] You can't forget, it stays with you forever.” (BBC)

Overall, the war is estimated to have cost more than 1.1 trillion US dollars (1988), including infrastructure damage, weapons purchases, and lost oil revenue. Iraq alone suffers 230 billion USD in damage – a sum that would take more than two

decades to raise even if the country's entire oil wealth were dedicated to reconstruction. (Karsh 89) Even after the 1988 ceasefire, the war continues to cost both sides billions, as they stay mobilized during numerous rounds of failed peace treaty negotiations. Iraqi troops finally withdraw from Iranian territory in 1990. Saddam builds a victory monument in Baghdad, and announces that the victory will be remembered for a thousand years – but who really won the Iran-Iraq War? Iraq started the war with visions of a limited strike that would bring it oil wealth and regional power – but by the end, it was deeply in debt, had gained no territory or oil resources, and had become more unstable. Opposition to Saddam's regime had increased, even though he was still in control. He did though, stop the potential export of Iran's brand of political Islam for now. Iran had suffered more, but arguably gained more from the war in spite of its failure to fully defeat a smaller enemy. It had preserved the Islamic Republic, and consolidated the revolution against its foreign and internal opponents, despite Khomeini's death in 1989. Long-term, Iran arguably came out of the war in a better strategic position than Iraq, but the region is far from stable. Western naval forces are in the Gulf for good, and Saudi Arabia has emerged as an unfriendly regional power. A fearful Iran sees itself isolated and on the defensive, which convinces some leaders it should accelerate work on its nuclear program and support Shia movements in Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen. Many Iranians believe Iraq acted on behalf of the West and the Soviet Union, contributing to animosity and suspicion. A weakened but overconfident Saddam still has a massive military, and now turns against the Iraqi Kurds in another campaign of genocidal repression. He also turns to a wealthy and vulnerable neighbor to make up for his failed gamble, restore his prestige, and settle his massive war debts – the Emirate of Kuwait. He accuses the Kuwaitis of slant drilling for oil underneath the Iraqi

border, and there are rumors of a meeting with the US ambassador. Soon, the Baathist regime's army will be on the march again – for the last time.