


BOOK REVIEW

The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards

Annie Tracy Samuel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Pp. 320. £75.00 hardback. ISBN: 9781108478427

Reviewed by Maryam Alemzadeh , School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK (maryam.alemzadeh@area.ox.ac.uk)

The history of the Iran-Iraq War is an unfinished project, Annie Tracy Samuel tells us, because it is present in the constantly developing identity of Iran's military elite, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* is a book about the significance of writing the past in the service of the present. It delves deep into tens of thousands of pages of untapped material, namely, the IRGC's publications in Farsi, to present an alternative reading of the longest war of the twentieth century and one of its main agents, Iran's IRGC. It is a valuable monograph not only for students of the contemporary Middle East, Iran, and the IRGC, but for anyone with an interest in historiography, narrative construction, and military history, at large.

The IRGC has become the most powerful and most controversial organization in Iran's postrevolutionary history. It was formed shortly after the 1979 revolution with the mission of protecting the revolutionary creed. The IRGC immediately became the hub for leaders and volunteers with the utmost dedication to Ayatollah Khomeini and his Shi'i-Islamist vision. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, a cadre of Revolutionary Guards and volunteers lived up to the prevalent image of dedicated soldiers of Islam by presenting as selfless troops who embraced falling in action as martyrdom: they confronted the Iraqi army's firepower with their faith. This is how the IRGC's war performance is commonly portrayed, both in many of the state's ideological outlets and in existing scholarship. Often, the dominant domestic narrative emphasizes the power of Shi'i faith, while scholarship produced outside of Iran portrays volunteers as fanatics who were deployed in waves resulting in significant losses of life. Tracy Samuel's book challenges this narrative through a meticulous study of the IRGC's war historiography.

Tracy Samuel invites us to peruse the IRGC's prolific historiography of the Iran-Iraq War to learn more about their self-understanding and to see how they perceive their existence as a revolutionary army and their role in the most definitive stretch of the Islamic Republic's history. Most importantly, she invites us to think about how the IRGC takes seriously the task of writing history, and its awareness of what history means for consolidating the organization's position within the Iranian state. The IRGC is in possession of the largest and richest war archive in Iran, and its multiple offices have been prolific in publishing analyses based on documents held at this archive, even publishing many of the original documents themselves. Tracy Samuel offers a thorough reading of a great number of such IRGC publications, particularly those published by IRGC's main research and publication office, the "Holy Defense Research and Document Center" (HDRDC). The resulting book is the first comprehensive English-language study of a set of the IRGC's voluminous publications. Many assume that state-sponsored publications in Iran are highly ideological and therefore

unreliable, and this assumption is justified to a certain extent. However, if one asks the right questions from these sources, as Tracy Samuel does, one can still find rich and reliable pieces of data within them.

Relying mostly on the HDRDC's "Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War" series, *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War* introduces the organization and its historiography project (Chapters 1 and 2), and proceeds to depict the IRGC's understanding of the war's outbreak (Chapter 3) and its various phases (Chapters 5–8). The remaining chapters (9–12) offer a comprehensive analysis of the IRGC's treatment of the war history and how they matter for both the IRGC's current status and for understanding any political entity based on its historical self-representation. Tracy Samuel insightfully considers the possibility that the IRGC's attempt at providing a well-documented, solid-looking, and somewhat self-critical history of the war is an attempt to enter the scholarly conversation about war history and to be taken seriously beyond ideological propaganda. Whether or not this attempt was successful, of course, is a matter of debate. But considering this intention alone lets us contemplate the organizational image that the IRGC would like to project: an organization relying not just on the power of faith and commitment, but also on cool-headed planning for the provision of firepower. The "faith over firepower" discourse might have been prevalent during the war to boost motivation and morale, but the retrospective picture painted by IRGC members maintains that technical military proficiency has been an equally strong part of the organization's identity. The IRGC's historiographical work and its ambition for presenting serious scholarship, therefore, must be seen as an attempt to present this particular self-image.

During and after the war, the IRGC received many accusations of unprofessional conduct, especially from Iran's regular army commanders and its political patrons. In reaction, IRGC commanders have been trying to mediate the war narrative to retrospectively present the organization as a rational and professional one. This narrative, although highlighted in the Iranian state's public outreach on a national level, had not made its way into English-language scholarship before Tracy Samuel's book. In addition to being a major contribution, however, introducing this image of the IRGC, that is, one not just about faith but also about professional warfare, is also a potential slippery slope for the book's argument. Occasionally, the line between the self-image and the reality of the IRGC's performance becomes blurry. IRGC historians' claim about finding a balance between motivation and professionalism, for instance, is sometimes taken at face value by the author, culminating in the argument that "Iranian leaders prosecuted the war by relying on all the tools at their disposal, which included both faith ... and firepower" (p. 191). Although I do not necessarily disagree with this conclusion, I believe other sources need to be consulted as well for it to have sufficient support.

This is my main qualm with an otherwise praiseworthy book. For the book to provide not just an analysis of the IRGC's historiography but also, as stated early on, a factual report of "[its] roles in the Iran-Iraq War and that conflict as a whole" (p. 5), an analysis of the IRGC's highly ideological self-productions is a great first step, yet insufficient. Other IRGC productions that have not been used in this volume, for instance, include many documents that scholars can use independently of the producers' interpretations. Iran's regular army has also been prolific in publishing and making available original documents as well as military analyses that complement and sometimes correct the IRGC's selective representation of battlefield realities. Consulting such complementary sources would help us better assess the IRGC's retrospective self-image as a passionate yet professionally minded military by, for instance, revealing how they sometimes actively avoided professionalism and insisted on the alleged revolutionary way of fighting, or how they sometimes downplay the Iranian army's role in providing the required professional planning, equipment, and backup while the IRGC lacked it. Regardless, Tracy Samuel's book will be an undeniable resource for future research in this direction, as the source it meticulously explores is still one of the major published historiographies in Farsi.

In addition to laying the grounds for an engaged study of sources produced in Iran, *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War* offers an important analytical path forward, as well. Tracey Samuel demonstrates in great detail that in the Revolutionary Guards' self-perception, religious ideological motivation and material concerns about the conduct of war are complementary assets. Faith fuels motivation and provides meaning, while firepower propels the actual battle. Using other sources to document the actuality of this balance could also reveal how it worked in practice, addressing the age-old contradiction between revolutionary passion and professionalism, between loyalty and competence. Did the IRGC differ from other revolutionary militias in how it combined faith and firepower? Were the Revolutionary Guards able to reach a balanced fusion, one that propelled them to the heights of power in Iran's political system? Or did they follow the historically tested path of taming revolutionary passion—tied to Shi'i faith, in this case—in the service of professionalization? I believe that the IRGC is a rich case for studying this dilemma, and Tracy Samuel's book provides invaluable material for anyone thinking about it.