

REVIEW ESSAY

**Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran by Saskia Gieling,
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The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988): An Iranian Perspective

S.A.M. Pasha*

**Dr. S.A.M. Pasha, teaches Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia, Jamianagar, New Delhi, India. He is an avid observer of Islamic Politics in the Middle East, Central Asia and other regions.*

Since the dawn of Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has been attracting an unceasing world-wide academic and political attention. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Iran has found itself engaged (in terms of exchange of aggressive rhetoric) with its Persian Gulf neighbours on the one hand and United States of America on the other. Immediately after the revolution, Islamic fought a war with Iraq, which lasted eight years. The Iran-Iraq war began on 22 September 1980 and ended on 17 July 1988. This war is perceived in Iran as an imposed war (*jang-i-tahmilit*), i.e., imposed by Iraq, on Iran and the two sides fought against each other tooth and nail.

The ethos of the revolution has come in handy for Iran to describe the war in ecclesiastical terms as if it were a sacred duty of every Iranian to pursue the war and ensure its culmination in what is projected as a "Clear Victory" (*fath mubin*). The freshness of revolutionary fervour bordering on zealotry, is also extended to the war. A massive effort towards mobilisation of the entire Iranian nation has been undertaken by the clerical political leadership, using Islamic ideology dexterously. To a large extent, the leadership has had a positive result in this direction. The mobilisation task has been constructed upon religious belief, symbols, images, historical analogies of personages and events, scriptural references, et al. Among the latter, besides the Quran and the Hadith, Caliph 'Ali's *Nahj al-Balagha (The Path of Eloquence: The Collected writings and sayings of Caliph Ali)* occupy a prominent place in the Iranian rhetoric pertaining to the sacralisation of war. As the author says: "Iranian leaders sacralised the war, by identification with historical figures who are venerated or, in contrast, despised much in Shii belief, but also by association with historical Islamic events in order to make clear that the war with Iraq had strong resemblances to these events." (p.130).

Saskia Gieling's *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran* vividly brings the aforesaid into sharp focus by "a closely argued and extensively documented study of the rationalisation of Iran's war in Islamic theological terms." Copious references to primary sources in Arabic, Persian, German and French have fortified the study. Relying upon these original sources, the author has produced the

book marked by a sound analysis which seems, to the present reviewer, to have brought, in bold relief, the clever use of Islamic political thought for the cause of Iranian statecraft.

The study is an interdisciplinary enterprise covering such diverse academic fields as Islamic Studies, Military Science, Political Science, and International Relations, in an organic fashion. Six excellent chapters, besides the Introduction, bear testimony to the author's academic credentials. Proficient in the four disciplines cited above, the author is better placed than others to write a book on the subject. The author's writing style is simple, precise, focussed and absorbing. However, this study demands a slow, patient reading from those who are particularly unfamiliar with and uninitiated into Islamic political thought. One may feel that the author's intent to "contribute to a better understanding of the way Islam is used for political action in Islam" (p.1) is fulfilled, if one does a meticulous reading of the book.

To borrow the author's words: "It (the book) is written from an Islamological perspective and ...given more emphasis to the theological and doctrinal issues;... it concentrates not on the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic (1977-1980) but on the long war with Iraq" (pp.2-3). However, the fact remains that the war campaign has not remained immune from the ethos of the revolution. A careful perusal of the book bears testimony to this. It is very difficult to separate the revolution from its impact on the war.

Chapter I is a chronological overview of the war between Iran and Iraq. In an uncomplicated and straightforward manner, the author, basing his treatment of the war on secondary sources, has provided an overview of the strategic and military aspects of the war; historical outlines and studies of Iranian and Iraqi political decision-making during the war (p.8). All the aspects have been treated by the author in a compact and crispy style, compressing the chapter in 27 pages, without causing any damage to detail.

The book, as organised by the author, can be understood under three separate but interrelated discourses: the theological-doctrinal discourse, the historical exemplary discourse, and the Islamic solidarity and religious nationalism discourse. A careful study of these thematic issues will reveal that the volume has had a clear methodological construct, a central idea and a major thrust.

Chapter II is concerned with Islamic theological and doctrinal bases germane to the conduct of war and it describes how the Iranian leaders have made use of the Quranic notions of war in their application against Iraq. They have made a frequent use of jihad. Jihad may be conceived of particularly in two forms: collective duty (*fard Kifaya*) and individual duty (*fard ayn*). The former is akin to an offensive jihad, and the latter to a defensive one. In their statements, the Iranian leaders have declared the war against Iraq as a fight for the cause of God (*Jihad fi sabil Allah*) and, therefore, they represent the truth (*Haqq*). Khomeini has described it as a jihad for the cause of conviction/faith (*jihad dar rah-i aqida*). Besides Khomeini, other Iranian leaders have also coined related phrases to describe the war: holy defence (*difa-i-muqaddas*), *jang-i-muqaddas*, and, *jihad-i- muqaddas*. According to Khomeini's, "participation in jihad has its origin in religion (*din*), fear of God (*taqwa-i khuda*), and obedience to God's command (*ita a*) (p.45).

Of the other Qur'anic injunctions that the Iranian leaders have cleverly deployed for the cause of war, "commanding the good and forbidding the evil" (*al-amr bi-al-ma ruf wa-nahy-an-al-munkar*)

occupies an elevated position. According to Khumayni, it is an Islamic duty of the Iranians to rise against oppression (*Zulm*) and violence (*jawr*), symbolised by Saddam Husayn, and the Ba'thist regime over which he presides.

Further, the other Qur'anic notions that have attracted the Iranian leaders in their war rhetoric pertained to the spreading of Islamic idea implicit in the revolution: "Iraq is the gate to the worldwide conquests (*futuh*) of Islam' (p.53); 'our struggle with the superpowers and the branches of colonialism and arrogance will continue until the region is subjected to our vision'(p.53). Such visionary utterances are intended to ensure that the Iranians engaged in the military campaign do not waver from their battlefield commitment.

Martyrdom (*shahada*) is eulogised by the leaders in their statements on war. Relevant Quranic verses were cited by them in this connection. Khumayni has frequently referred to al-Baqara 11: 157: "Who when misfortune falls upon them say: "Verily We are Allah's, and to Him do we return' (*Innana lillahi wa innana ilayhi Raj un*), and Al-Imran III: 169: '...alive with their Lord, provided for', explaining that this world is the lowest form of all worlds and only temporal; everything in this world is transient, in contrast with life in the Hereafter where martyrs will have God's mercy, and fear or sorrow therefore is not necessary and even out of place (p.56). Other martyrdom traditions are cited in the sermons, which pertained to God's reward for the martyrs.

As if the above Qur'anic repertoire were not suffice, the Iranian leaders have further referred to *fitna*, variously described as 'disturbance', 'revolt' or 'civil war', et al., and have felt that they are the victims of *fitna* as a result of the Iraqi aggrandisement. The Qur'anic phrase 'fight them until there is no dissension [and the religion is entirely Allah's] (*wa qatiluhum hatta la takuna fitna*) as used in al-Baqara II: 193 and al-Anfal VIII: 39, is used as a slogan for the yearly war remembrance week by the Iranian leaders (p.58).

Chapter III is an extension of its predecessor chapter bringing into its orbit such Qur'anic and Islamic theological notions as *Iman*, *Islam*, *kufir*, *haqq*, *batil*, *mustad afun* and *mustakbirun*. This chapter also seeks to view these themes from a Shii perspective. Each one of these Qur'anic notions is explained in detail by the author and each one of them is deployed by the Iranian leaders in the service of war.

Keeping in mind the state of war, the Iranian leaders have ideologised the notion of Islam in a specific, political and religious sense (p.76). They have confined Islam to the Iranian state and have excluded the rest of the Islamic world from its purview. Iraq is depicted as a representative of *Kufir*. Khumayni has sacralised the war by saying that the Iraqi attack is attack on Islam, on the Quran, and the Prophet of God (p.76). Khamini'i has cited Al-Imran III: 13: 'one fighting in the way of Allah, another unbelieving...Allah supporteth with His help whom He willeth'; and al-Nisa IV: 76: 'those who have believed are fighting in the way of Allah, and those who have disbelieved are fighting in the way of *Taghut*' as a metaphor for the position of the Islamic Republic and that of Iraq. Besides, Al-Kafirun CIX is frequently quoted: '(1) Say: O Ye unbeliever, (2) I serve not what ye serve, (3) And ye are not servers of what I serve, (4) I am not a server of what ye have served, (5) Nor are ye servers of what I serve, (6) Ye have your religion, and I have mine'. Exhorting the population to internalise firm *Iman*, Iranian leaders have used it as an instrument for mobilising the nation for the war effort (p.77). By emphasising *Iman*, the leaders have held people responsible for

the outcome of the war, thus establishing a relationship between *Iman* and victory. They have considered the *Iman* of the Iranian people to be of a very high order. *Iman* is depicted as a real and powerful weapon which can resist all kinds of attacks by the enemy (p.78). A quote from al-Saff LXI: 13: ‘... help from Allah and a near victory’ (*nasr min allah wa-fath qarib*) has found almost universal use as a slogan during the war (p.79).

Besides the notion of *Iman*, the leaders have also made use of other Qur’anic concepts such as righteousness/pious virtue (*taqwa*) and patience (*sabr*). Both (*taqwa*) and *sabr* are interpreted in such a way as to imply active participation in struggle and defence (pp. 79-80), thus negativising the implied passivity of these concepts as interpreted by other theologians.

Besides *Iman* and *Islam*, the notion of unbelief (*kufir*) is also one of the key concepts employed by the Iranian leaders in the war discourse. *Kufir* is contradicted to *Iman* and *Islam*. Like in the cases of *Iman* and *Islam*, *Kufir* is also used in a specific sense and for a specific purpose. It is used to denounce the enemies of the Islamic Republic, in particular the Iraqi regime and the United States of America (p.80). *Kufir* is also interpreted to mean arrogance (*istikbar*) and imperialism, of which the United States, the Soviet Union and their allies are accused, and, in the case of Israel, of Zionism (pp. 81-82). The frequent use of *Kufir* is meant to serve a particular objective: to justify the war, to mobilise the people, and to give them moral support (p.82). One may notice here that *Kufir* is made to perform the same function as *Iman* (p.82). The leaders have equated opposition to the Islamic Republic with *Kufir*. It is exhorted that the war has to be fought to protect *Islam* and the Islamic Republic, whose existence is said to have been threatened by the attacks of the unbelievers (*Kuffar*).

The Iranian leaders have personified *Kufir* in the person of Saddam Husayn and other foes of the Islamic Republic. *Kufir* is applied for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Saddam Husayn is stigmatised as Saddam-i-Kafir (Saddam, the unbeliever). *Kufir* is pictured as a ‘dirty world of bullying, money, immorality, and debauchery’ (p.82). Wrong doer (*Zalim*), sinner (*fasiq*), polytheist (*mushrik*), deviator (*mulhid*), hypocrite (*munafiq*), and rebel (*taghut*) are some of the choicest epithets reserved for Saddam Husayn by the Iranian leaders.

Oppressors and the oppressed (*mustakbirun* and *mustad’afun*)

Iranian leaders have asserted that *Islam* is the champion of the oppressed (*mazlumun*), the disinherited (*mustadafun*), while the *kafirun* are likened to the oppressors (*zalimun*) and the arrogant (*mustakbirun*). They have equated *Istikbar* with *Kufir*. Keeping in view the USA, they have interpreted *Istikbar* to also mean colonialism and imperialism. In the war rhetoric, the *mustakbirun* are contradicted to the Islamic revolution because it has endangered their interests (p.89). As Iran has been fighting an imposed war, Saddam Husayn is presented as the agent of worldwide arrogance. *Mustadafun* and *mustakbirun* are the two terms, which are in antagonistic relationship to each other. During the course of the revolution, Khomeini has revolutionised *mustadafun* and has seen in it a potential to usher in a radical change in society. In this connection, Khomeini seems to have been inspired by Ali Shariati’s translation of Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. In fact, he has credited the *mustad’afun* with bringing about the revolution in Iran. In the war rhetoric, *mustad’afun* is used to describe the victims of war, those

who have lost their husbands, war refugees and those who have fallen victim to the Iraqi bombardments (p.92.)

Truth and Falsehood (*Haqq and Batil*)

In the war discourse, *haqq* and *batil* are used in a very specific sense, similar to the uses to which the other concepts are consigned. The leaders have said that they are defending, and fighting, for *haqq* and *Islam* against *batil* and *Kufr*. In the words of Khumayni, the war is a jihad for the protection of Islam and for *haqq*, a jihad for the sake of truth (*ajihad dar rah-i-haqq*)(p.93). In the war discourse, *haqq* has symbolised the struggle by the Islamic Republic for the liberation of oppressed people from their oppressors, symbolised by *batil* (p.94). *Haqq* is presented as a certainty, a goal worth striving for. This is in contrast to *batil*, which has nothing to offer and which has led people to nothing (p. 94). With the way *haqq* has been presented, combining fighting for the Islamic Republic and fighting for *haqq*, Iranian leaders have once again emphasised the rightfulness of the Islamic revolution and the Iranian participation in and continuation of the war (p. 94).

The Iranian leaders, one may aver, have crafted a clever, flexible interpretational effort of the Quranic terms germane to war in a desired direction. Their foe is constantly demonised and darkened in every feasible manner. Their response to the war situation, once imposed on them, has been to pursue it, justify it from the theological perspective, and to protect the interests of the Iranian statecraft shaped by the revolution.

In Chapter IV, “Historical Exemplary Discourse”, reference has been made by the author to some parts of Islamic history and figures in order to prove how the Iranian regime has tried to buttress its position against Iraq. Selective use of figures of Islamic history and events is meant to reinforce their viewpoint regarding the war. Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him, PBUH), Caliph ‘Ali, and Husayn, and the wars that they have fought against their enemies are mentioned in the war discourse. The battle of Qadisiya (635/7)—the battle in which the Arab/Muslim army defeated the forces of Persia—found a favourable reception in the war discourse. Khumayni has interpreted this battle as the triumph of Islam over the unbelievers (p. 108). He has felt that it has liberated the deprived people of Iran from the tyrannical Sassanian regime, and has guided them to Islam (p. 108). He has explained the battle of the Trench in great detail and likened it to the Iranian determination ‘to ward off the destruction of Islam and the Islamic community’ (p.108).

The battle of Badr is also cited in one of the Friday sermons. In this battle, the Muslims are in an offensive mood (p. 109). The message of Badr is that the truth (*haqq*) has triumphed over the forces of falsehood (*batil*), satanic (*shaytani*) and idolatrous (*taghuti*) powers. The Iraqis—the Iranian leaders have implied—have acted as the modern counterparts of the Meccans.

Caliph ‘Ali: His Central Position in Shi’i Worldview

In the world of Shi’ism, no social or political organisation of life is feasible without the figure of Caliph ‘Ali occupying a central place. He has always had a profound influence on Iranians (p. 112). Manochehr Doerraj has said of him: ‘Ali is the popular hero in Iran par excellence. Not only does he play an important role in rituals and popular social beliefs but his words and political and

military deeds are used as a source for Shii legal procedure, at the same time legitimising these procedures". In Iran, 'Ali is seen both as a pious and unworldly man, representing Islam, goodness and virtue, and as a man of action fighting for social justice. Shiis consider the *Nahj-al-Balagha* (Path of Eloquence as an authentic work of 'Ali'. For them, this work is second in importance after Qur'an and has a position of immense authority (p. 112).

The Karbala Paradigm

With the image of Caliph 'Ali', the Karbala paradigm is inextricably attached. The martyrdom and sacrifice of Husayn, his family and supporters has shaped war rhetoric in fundamental ways (p.113).

Saddam Husayn is equated with Yazid; in sermons, he is contemptuously dubbed as 'Saddam-i-Yazid'. Besides, he is bracketed with Abu Jahl, one of the fiercest enemies of the Prophet (PBUCH). The Iranian leaders has extolled the Karbala model and exhorted the Iranian men and women, the young and elderly to follow suit. The war is also described as the re-enactment of Karbala. Husayn's martyrdom is the example par excellence to mobilise people for the war (p.118). Iranian leaders have highlighted Husayn's voluntary acceptance of martyrdom and sacrifice for the preservation of Islam, and have spoken about the willingness of so many Iranians to follow Husayn's example (p.118).

The Role of the Twelfth Imam

In the war rhetoric, the Iranian leaders have attached a significant importance to the twelfth Imam, Muhammad Ibn Hasan. In the Shi'i *weltanschauung*, the doctrine of Imamism occupies a key place. A central theme in this doctrine is that 'God has bestowed upon the Holy Community the gift of an infallible guide at all times a guide who is to govern all affairs in the temporal realm and, therefore, safeguards its welfare' (p.121).

To sacralise his role in the war rhetoric, honorific titles are bestowed on the twelfth Imam: 'Lord of the Age' (*Sahib al-Zaman*), 'the guided one' (*mahdi*), and, 'he who will rise and rule' (*al-Qa'im*). Besides, the Iranian leaders have ascribed to their country messianic titles. For example, Khamini'i has described Iran as 'the state of the Lord of the Age' (*mamlakat-i Imam-i Zaman*). Others have called Iran 'the land of the Remnant of God' (*Kishwar-i baqiyat-i Allah*), 'the nation of the Lord of the Age' (*millat-i Imam-i Zaman*), 'the land of the Lord of the Age' (*kishwar-i Sahib-i Zaman*) (p.121). Soldiers at the battlefield are revered as 'the soldiers of the Lord of the Age' (*sarbazan-i hadrat-i wali-yi asr*) (p.121).

Chapter V, "Islamic Solidarity and Religious Nationalism", establishes a close nexus between the nature of Islamic Republic and the outbreak of the war (p.139). It also argues that the superpowers have not taken kindly to the Islamic revolution because of its potential to spread its message far and wide. Hence, the rationale for the imposition of war on Iran by its foes. This chapter also brings into fore the self-perceived role of the Islamic Republic in the Muslim world as triggered by the twin elements of revolution and war. Such a role is examined within the context of the ideas of Islamic solidarity and religious nationalism. The idea of Muslim solidarity is further tested in relation to three cases: the Iraqi people, Palestine and Lebanon. Besides, the idea of nationalism

(including its religious dimension) is also thoroughly probed from the viewpoint of its relationship with the Islamic Republic and its statecraft.

Justifying Peace: The Acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 598

War is normally followed by peace, even though the latter is not always guided by justice. Peace unaccompanied by justice may remain unstable. In the Iranian perception, the war has not ended with justice. The cessation of war is grudgingly accepted by them. The Islamic Republic has finally agreed to the ceasefire Resolution 598 adopted by the UN Security Council. The Iranian leaders have described the formal cessation of hostilities as a victory for the Iranians on the grounds similar to the ones preferred by them in the conduct of war. The pursuit of war is justified on the ground of spreading the message of the revolution besides other objectives. The ending of war is justified (by them) on the ground that it has enabled the Iranian nation to safeguard its revolution and the Islamic Republic. Implicit in this argument is the veiled acceptance that the war aims are not achieved. However, the Iranian leaders have asserted that the very survival of the Islamic Republic, confronted as it is by the superpowers and their allies, has been projected as a victory of sorts. In the acceptance of the cease-fire Resolution too, the Islamic doctrine is pressed into service by citing Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) conclusion of a treaty with the Meccan Kafirun at Hudabiya.

Conclusion

The Iran-Iraq War has witnessed a through, full-scale use of Quranic terminology particularly by the Iranian leadership. With the resurgence of Political Islam on the international political horizon, Muslim countries have started inducting this element into their foreign policy decision-making processes. The Islamic Republic is definitely not an alien to this trend. In fact, Iran is one of the pioneering states in this direction especially in the immediate post-revolution years. The war has provided an opportunity for the Islamic leadership to mobilise the entire populace on a vast scale, so much so that it has created a state-society symbiosis. The mobilisation effort has been hooked to Islam as interpreted by the Iranian leaders. The war has also seen a unique blend of tradition and modernity in the realm of war. In fact, the Islamic leadership of Iran has pressed tradition into the service of modernity. A modern Iranian state, albeit Islamic, has to be defended from its foes. Being nurtured over a period of time in the seminaries, the Iranian clerics have been equipped with a huge Islamic ideological arsenal to beat their enemy with. Acquisition of the knowledge of Islam and its application to space-time situations have been their life time obsession. They have skillfully made use of this human resource for the cause of the Islamic Republic and its statecraft. A judicious mix of ideology and realpolitik can be discerned in their war statements.

Clausewitz has, long ago, talked of war as 'the continuation of politics by other means'. This adage very much vindicates the Iranian war rhetoric. The war has enabled them to test their genre of politics, which is infused with Islamic language.

In their war rhetoric, the Iranian leaders have assigned to the Iranian national all the positive traits, which the Qur'an ascribes to a faith community. The negative images are, however, reserved for its *bete noire*, the Iraqi political leadership. In other words, all that is good from the Qur'anic perspective is said to reside in the Iranian people, and the bad, in the Iraqi regime. Roles are

described in very unambiguous either-or, black-white terms. Syncretism is not given any place in their ecclesiastical characterisation of war.

The Iran-Iraq War may be dubbed as a war of attrition. Iran has fought this war with a great enthusiasm reinforced by religious zeal. Iran has deployed all its ideological repertoire at its disposal using Islamic ideology with finesse. It has fought the war with a certainty that victory will be Iran's in the Herein and the Hereafter. By establishing an Islamic Republic in 1979, and by fighting an Iraqi imposed war for eight years, has proved its Islamic revolutionary credentials beyond any doubt.

The war caused huge economic destruction in terms of infrastructure. In their statements, the Iranian leaders do not seem to have paid sufficient attention to the economic dimensions of the war. Economics is Khomeini's weak link in his war strategy. Scholars quote him to have said that 'revolution is not about the price of watermelons'. However, the war-inflicted economic collapse has impelled the Iranian leaders, Rafsanjani in particular, to realise the importance of economic health for any revolution to succeed. During the tenure of Rafsanjani, this aspect of the Iranian life has assumed its rightful place. For purposes of reconstruction and development, Iran is in need of massive investment and technology, which only the Western economies can provide. Hence the need for a rapprochement with the West.

Iran's power as a revolutionary Islamic state peaked in the mid 1980s. Among the Arab States, only Syria and Libya have extended their political support to Iran. Iranian leaders, by deploying a high-voltage Islamic verbiage, have unwittingly contributed to an intellectual enrichment of Islamic politics. Islamic revolution is a concretisation of authenticity and the war that has followed the revolution has been made to reflect it.