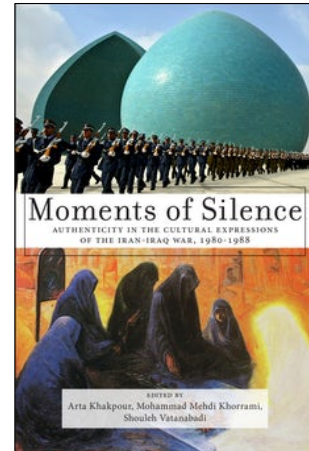


Arta Khakpour, Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, and Shouleh Vatanabadi (Eds.), **Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran–Iraq War, 1980–1988**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, 290 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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In the second year of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), I was born in a small town north of Iran. My hometown was located far from the battlefield, still I remember my childhood memories back to age 5 or 6, late years of the war. Pieces of memory of red alerts; running into the basement during the day; turning off all lights at night; and filling plastic money boxes, in the shape of battle green tanks, to support soldiers exist like islands in the sea of my mind. After the war, I learned about it more. In Iran, I learned about it from news, books, and films. After leaving Iran, I developed my knowledge about the war through documentaries, academic studies, and more books. My knowledge of the war, formerly, was shaped by narrations, dominated by the Iranian government. Not just Iranian but the Iraqi government also shaped the mainstream narratives of the war to shape the understanding of the people. Neither government wanted to admit that they failed in the war. The war had no winners. The war left more than a million Iraqi and Iranian soldiers and civilians dead (Diehl, 2004, p. 12; Lieber, 2016, p. 54), while many people became permanently displaced and disabled. The Iranian and Iraqi state media did not focus on the human-destroying character of the conflict, but the Holy/Sacred Defense (Iranian discourse) and Saddam’s *Qadisiyyah* (referring to a 17th century battle, in which Arabs overcame the Sasanian Empire, located in current Iran). Stories of the life experiences of religious minorities, refugees, displaced and exiled population, prisoners, children, women, and the diverse ethnicities of both Iran and Iraq, during the war, were ignored and neglected in the official histories. The book of **Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran–Iraq War, 1980–1988** is an attempt to reflect parts of that untold story.



The book consists of 12 chapters, some of them presented at a conference under the same title, organized by the New York University in Abu Dhabi in 2011. The editors, Arta Khakpour, Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, and Shouleh Vatanabadi categorized the content into four parts, namely: (I) Transnational Contexts: Interconnected Histories, Geographies, and Languages; (II) Theorizing Cultural Expressions of War; (III) War Through Visual Representations; and (IV) Literary Narratives of War.

The book brings together articles from various fields such as studies of films, novels, short stories, and visual arts as well as reports and biographies of war prisoners. The materials that are analyzed were in English, Farsi, Hebrew, Arabic, and Kurdish languages. The book deals with different issues of the war; however, except for in a few chapters, it does not collect related analysis and bring proofs for the promised topics.

Three neglected stories of the Iran–Iraq war that are effectively deliberated in the book are (a) concepts of border and the Iranian/Iraqi nation; (b) the lives of the war prisoners during and after captivity; (c) the lives of ethnic minorities, Kurds, impacted by the war.

Shouleh Vatanabadi in chapter 1 argues that the war challenged the notions of “border” and “nation.” *Sacred Defense* refers to an action to protect the Iranian nation and *Qadisiyyah* refers to protect the Arab (Iraqi) nation. Ironically, the population of neither Iran nor Iraq is homogeneous. There are Kurds, Arabs, and Fars on both sides of the border, who share the same language, race, and ethnicity. To demonstrate the diversity of geographies of identity involved in the experience of the war, Vatanabadi analyzes two films, both produced in Iran, each representing the experience of the war. The first film is titled *Bashu: Gharibeh-ye Kuchak* [Bashu: The Little Stranger]. The story happens in a village in the north of Iran, a place far from the home front, where the nature is green, weather is mostly rainy, and people have light skin and mostly speak Guilaki. A small boy, Bashu, who has just fled from his hometown occupied by Iraqis, in the south of Iran, arrives in the village and hides himself in a rice field. He has dark skin and speaks Arabic, a language that nobody in the village understands. A young mother with her two children helps Bashu to start a new life; however, people of the village and even the father of the family, after his return from the war, have difficulties accepting Bashu as an insider. As Vatanabadi argues, the film challenges the dominant official discourse of “nation” and illustrates that “Bashu’s traverse within the national boundaries lands him in an indefinite zone of cultural, linguistic and racial difference” (p. 15).

The second film is titled *Otobus-e Shab* [The Night Bus] (produced in 2007). Two Iranian soldiers with a civilian driver transport 38 blindfolded Iraqi prisoners to a garrison inside Iran. Passengers of the bus are divided into Iranians and Iraqis. But, they have a lot in common: for example, language and culture. When they finally arrive at the destination, the dividing line between them is almost gone. For instance, an Iranian Kurd and an Iraqi Kurd come to a warm conversation. An Iraqi soldier, son of an Iranian mother and Iraqi father, plays the role of a translator and narrates how his mother has a wish of building a bridge across the Persian Gulf to connect the people of both countries. The bus driver reminds a juvenile Iranian soldier that each of the Iraqi prisoners is as close as a Kurd, a Turk, and an Arab of Iran to him: “they are not each other’s enemies(.) Of course, the story is different when it comes to fanatic officials and party leaders” (p. 19). Comparing these two films illustrates how complicated the identity in the two geographies could be. During the war, people within the borders of Iran behaved like strangers to each other (*Bashu: The Little Stranger*), while soldiers of the two hostile states found more in common culturally (*The Night Bus*).

More than a hundred thousand soldiers were captured by Iran and Iraq during the war; of these, 70,000 were Iraqis (p. 103). Their destinies are reflected in a few studies (Brown 1990; National Intelligence Council et al., 2011); nevertheless, they were never focused on. The narration of Iraqi prisoners of the war is considered in chapter 5 by Dina Rizk Khoury (2013), who published a more detailed book on the issue. According to Khoury, Iraqi prisoners in Iran were subjected to a policy of conversion. The aim of the Iranian authorities was to “transform the prisoners into believers by forcing them to repent their beliefs in Ba’thism, and to rehabilitate them by recruiting them into the military wing of the Iraqi Islamist parties fighting alongside Iran” (p. 104). The prisoners were forced to suspend their identity, and to do so they had to preach, pressure, and sometimes torture other prisoners to survive. This process created a prison culture and a hierarchy of degrees of collaboration. The experiences of the prisoners were so complicated that they do not fit into simple

descriptions, because often an Iraqi prisoner was both resister and collaborator, torturer and savior. After the repatriation of these prisoners in the 1990s, their reintegration and rehabilitation became a burden on the shoulders of the Iraqi government. Security was one of the main concerns because the prisoners who had a history of collaborating with Iranian authorities could have connections with opposition parties active in Iraq and create problems for the Iraqi government. The writer analyzes the secondhand (depositions of Ba'th party) and firsthand (testimonies of prisoners) materials as well as interviews that she personally conducted with some Iraqi prisoners during the 1990s (p. 104). The analysis is interesting and original.

The Iran–Iraq war impacted the Kurdish struggle for independence as well. This issue has been neglected in literature and studies too. Mardin Aminpour focuses on this issue through the analysis of Kurdish fictions, in chapter 10. After a review of early literature in Kurdish—for instance, the romance of *Mam u Zin*, a 17th-century mystical poem (pp. 194–195)—Aminpour argues about how modern literature reflected the losses of nationalist parties during the Iran–Iraq war. An example in his argument is the short story of *Amro Zamawand Agerin* [Their Wedding Is Today], written in 1985. The story is about two Arab lovers who during the war fled to the so-called liberated Kurdistan to fight on the side of the Kurds. On the day they planned to marry, they were murdered along with hundreds of other Kurdish civilians in an internal conflict between Kurds (by a Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). The story highlights the internal conflict between Kurds. Another fiction is a novel, *Black Wind from the Kurdish Hills* (Dostan, 2005), first published in 2005 in Sweden. It narrates the story of Kurds who grow up together as boys and live in the aftermath of the disasters of the war, becoming *peshmerga* (a member of the armed forces in the autonomous Kurdish controlled region of Iraq). Aminpour states that they live a destiny that they cannot change; they live in conflicts that are with them by their birth. The story reflects another impact of the war: that Kurds are left with no choice but to become Peshmerga: “they do not volunteer to save the homeland, rather they join the *peshmerga* forces either because the war seems like the only option before them or they are simply forced to enlist or face the dire consequences” (p. 200).

The book has much to offer; however, it has some weaknesses. One of them is, as Mehdi Semati (2018) mentioned in a book review, the title of the book. Framing “authenticity” in the subtitle of the book is not convincing (p. 447). The essays of the book do not project a questioning of the authenticity of the narrations but represent those dimensions of the Iran–Iraq War that have been underreported in the Iranian and Iraqi state’s propaganda. Moreover, the editors’ proofreading and content editing of the book could have been better. None of the chapters, except 5 and 11, benefit from a conclusion. The editors use one style to cite studies and materials in all chapters, except chapter 11. Some information is repeated over and over in the book: for example, framing the war as *Sacred Defense* in Iran and *Qadisiyyah* in Iraq (chapters 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, and 12). Besides that, the term that refers to Iraqi discourse of the war sometimes is written “Qadessia” (p. 14) and sometimes “Qadisiyya” (p. 126) in the book. And, finally some chapters failed to present precise information. For instance, in chapter 9, “Ministry of Islamic Propagation” is mentioned as an Iranian organization to deal with cultural issues during the war. Such an organization has never existed nor exists in Iran. The author probably means “Organization of Islamic Propagation,” which she mentions once on page 183. The next mistake is about the filmography of Ebrahim Hatamikia. The author claims that “all his films deal with the war” (p. 184). However, the TV series of *Halqhe-ye Sabz* [Green Ring] (2007) and film of *Davat* [Invitation] (2008), both directed by Hatamikia, do not deal with the war.

Despite the gaps mentioned above, the book offers some essays that are a substantive contribution to the literature of the war and the Middle East. Those who wish to broadly understand different aspects of the Iran–Iraq war will benefit from reading it.

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