



AUSA BACKGROUND BRIEF

IRAQ TODAY - A PERSPECTIVE



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The Country

Iraq is a virtually landlocked Middle East country bordered by Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Kuwait. It has a population of 17.8 million divided mostly between Arabs (75 percent) and Kurds (15 percent). The population is 95 percent Muslim and is fairly well educated (70 percent literacy rate). Iraq possesses about one-third of Middle East oil reserves, has ample water to meet minimum population needs, and has limited agricultural capability to meet some domestic food requirements (70 percent of food is imported). Because of the drain caused by the eight-year war with Iran and low oil prices, Iraq has accumulated about \$80 billion in foreign debts; inflation is running at about 40 percent. Iraq spends about 40 percent of its GNP on defense.

Its Leader

The so-called "Father-Leader" of Iraq is Saddam Hussein At-Takriti, a minority Sunni Muslim who has gained a reputation as an audacious, ruthless ruler who quickly suppresses any potential threats to his position. He took over the leadership of the governing Ba'ath Party in 1979. His first act was to arrange for the execution of 21 cabinet members, including one of his closest associates. In 1988, he used poison gas on the Kurdish town of Halabja, killing thousands of defenseless villagers. Saddam Hussein declared that "... they collaborated against their own country." He showed no hesitancy in using missiles against the cities of Iran during that long war. The record is replete with examples that authenticate his total disregard for human life.

Saddam Hussein was born in 1935 in Tilerit, a small village about 100 miles north of Baghdad. He did not attend school until age 9; when he applied for admission to the Baghdad Military Academy he was rejected for poor grades. When he came to power, Saddam Hussein promoted himself to full general. He reached his position of power through a combination of personal greed and ruthless suppression.

The Saddam Arts Center turns out several new paintings of Saddam Hussein every day for installation at street corners and on government buildings. His name appears on the bricks of rebuilt walls of Babylon; the main airport in Baghdad is Saddam International Airport; even the Kurdish town of Halabja has been reconstructed and named after him.

Iraqi Objectives

With its economy in total disrepair, Iraq needs cash flow badly. Because of low oil prices, Saddam Hussein has relentlessly pressured other OPEC members to raise prices and reduce production — each dollar increase is worth \$1 billion a year in additional revenue for Iraq. Iraqi oil must be transported by pipelines across Saudi Arabia to reach ports on the Red Sea and halfway across Turkey to reach the Mediterranean. Gaining control of a seaport was one of Iraq's reasons for starting the war with Iran and a principal reason for the invasion of Kuwait.

Saddam Hussein has attempted to project himself as the uncontested power center and leader of the Arab world. Undoubtedly, he saw the Kuwaiti action as a major step in his campaign. His success at exterminating competitors within Iraq and suppressing others who opposed him may have given him a false sense of his ability to do the same to his neighbors. There is wide evidence that he was confident other Arabs would support him against any intrusion by the West, particularly the United States. The quick imposition of the UN sanctions and the actions of Arab neighbors were probably not expected and may reflect his current play for time and lack of military action. The strength of the U.S. response similarly was not expected.

The Armed Forces

The Iraqi Armed Forces number about 550,000 regular troops and 480,000 reserves. Over the past 10 years, Iraq has amassed a military arsenal of mostly Soviet-made weapons, as well as equipment from Brazil, France, West Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Austria and China. Iraqi officers have received training in the Soviet Union; Soviet advisers are still in Iraq.

Among their long-range weapons is the Al Hussein (Soviet Scud B) surface-to-surface missile launcher with a range of more than 350 miles; the Al Abbas, a version of the Scud B still in development, with a range of 550 miles; and the Exocet, a proven French air-to-ground missile launched by fighter aircraft or attack helicopters, with a range of more than 450 miles. These are not all-purpose weapons but do have some limited utility in current circumstances; additionally, they reflect the sophistication of some Iraqi military capabilities.

Iraq's 500 combat aircraft — including some Soviet SU-24 long range fighter bombers and advanced MIG-29 interceptors — are a force to be dealt with. More than 4,000 antiaircraft guns and in excess of 300 surface-to-air missile launchers pose a real counter-air threat.

Iraq has about 5,500 tanks — including modern Soviet T-72s — and over 3,000 pieces of artillery; this constitutes a formidable ground force. They also have a surface-to-surface missile launcher — called the Arabil — which has a range of 60 miles. The destructive power of one Arabil missile can cover an area larger than that of a single salvo from a battery of 155mm howitzers.

The threat of greatest concern is Iraq's potential for totally ruthless use of chemical weapons. The principal agents possessed by the Iraqis are mustard (a blister agent) and tabun and sarin, which are nerve agents. These agents can be delivered by aircraft and artillery; a chemical warhead for missiles is under development. Only mustard gas has a prolonged persistence time (of about a week), while the other agents are useful only for minutes or hours.

To some degree, the Iraqi armed forces are seasoned and combat experienced from a protracted eight-year war with Iran. In that war, the Iraqi armed forces lost 250,000 war dead, 500,000 wounded and 70,000 prisoners of war.

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