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The First Gulf War and the Army's Future

Brian J. Dunn

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and the Army's Future**

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ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY**

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The First Gulf War and the Army's Future

by Brian J. Dunn

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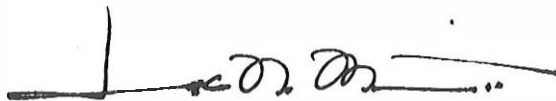
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Foreword

The size of the Iraqi force at the outset of the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 approximates in size the United States Army commitment currently judged necessary to decisively win a limited conventional war. The Iraqi defeat — despite all indications that Iraq should win decisively — should be a cautionary tale for those committed to further reducing the capabilities of an already small ten-division Army.

Five Iraqi divisions were thought sufficient to smash an Iran wracked by the chaos of the Islamic revolution. Outnumbering their foes on the invasion front by 6:1 odds, the Iraqis failed miserably. Iraqi deficiencies in training, intelligence, and equipment plus fear of casualties hobbled the Iraqi invasion. Ultimately, the Iraqi invasion campaign of 1980 teaches us the danger of calculating minimums required to beat an enemy.

The tale of the Iran-Iraq War reminds us of the continuing need for the U.S. Army to train, and ultimately fight, as a joint force. This involves using its own combined-arms fighting capabilities in concert with the unique capabilities of the other services to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. N. Merritt', with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

JACK N. MERRITT
General, U.S. Army Retired
President

October 1997

Map of the War Zone



The Gulf War and the Army's Future

Introduction

The United States military's current role, pursuant to the Bottom-Up Review (BUR), is to fight two major regional conflicts (MRCs), nearly simultaneously, in concert with our allies. North Korea and an Iraq weakened by Desert Storm are the most likely opponents today, and the idealized MRC is the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. Should the United States be confronted with a "Gulf War equivalent," about five Army divisions, one or two Marine Expeditionary Forces, ten Air Force wings and other forces are deemed sufficient to defeat an opponent in a limited-objective war in a brief conventional campaign.¹

Victory in the Cold War has led some to question the importance of the United States Army, already reduced from 18 active divisions (just prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall) to its current size of 10 active divisions. Critics incorrectly charge that refusal to reduce the Army even more is a refusal to recognize that the West won the Cold War and that the new security environment favors air and naval power. Their precise assumptions of how many wars the United States should be prepared to fight and how much force is needed to win a war look reasonable on paper but are woefully inadequate to meet the demands of war against a proficient (or simply lucky) enemy.

The National Defense Panel (NDP), which will report to Congress by December 1997, must understand that the Army remains the key to fighting and winning our nation's wars. If our Army is weakened further, the United States faces the prospect of entering a war with insufficient resources to win decisively should an enemy disrupt our plans or defy our assumptions, as Iran did to Iraq in 1980. A small army, no matter how powerful, is a fragile instrument to wield. To meet the standard of decisive, quick and nearly bloodless victory in less than cataclysmic wars, we must maintain an Army second to none.

The NDP is one of two reviews mandated by the 104th Congress that seek to guide the military through the next decade as the Army evolves toward Army Vision 2010² and the Army After Next.³ The first, the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), issued its report in May 1997, and concluded that further significant cuts in the size of the Army are ill-advised. The QDR called for the ability to fight two major theater wars (the former MRCs are called MTWs, which is the term that will be used for consistency) nearly simultaneously, and recommended a four-corps active Army composed of six heavy divisions, four light divisions and two armored cavalry regiments. Although the QDR does not call for reductions in the divisions the Army can deploy, it does recommend cuts of 15,000 from the active force; 45,000 from the reserve components (Army Reserve and Army National Guard); and 33,700 from the civilian work force. The QDR endorses the role of the Army National Guard's enhanced separate brigades but does not see a need for the Guard's divisions in MTWs. These divisions, which would take

time to reach active force proficiency, would be earmarked for back-up duties, rotation base functions and replacements for combat losses. In addition, the QDR rejects the idea of tiered readiness for Army units. The relatively small amount of money that could be saved would be more than offset by the drastic reductions in capabilities and flexibility.⁴

Although it is believed that five divisions are enough to win a major regional conflict, there were similar expectations in 1980 that five Iraqi divisions would humble Iran in a limited war. Those five Iraqi divisions failed miserably to win quickly, and the war dragged on for eight stalemated years, escalating in its scope and scale as time passed. Iraq's failure in 1980 is a warning that we should not count on our apparent superiority to beat any opponent without paying a price. We may appear invincible for the foreseeable future, but in 1980, Iraq seemed unbeatable when arrayed against the crumbled remains of the Shah's Iranian army. Iraq's disastrous invasion of Iran is a sobering lesson for the NDP to consider when it judges the future of the Army.

The First Gulf War Equivalent

As Americans debate the future roles and missions of the United States Army, it would be wise to remember that although wars may be initiated with the expectation of victory, the outcomes are not predetermined. Most Americans are familiar with our own Gulf War — Operation Desert Storm. Far fewer realize that during the 1980s, another Gulf War raged for eight years. This war, rather than being an example to emulate, is one that exists only in our worst-case scenarios and one that few would accept as a possibility for the United States Army honed during the 1980s and showcased in the deserts of Iraq in 1991. The First Gulf War of 1980-88 between Iraq and Iran, a sobering reminder of how a seemingly superior force can fail to win, demonstrates that our planning should not be based on assessments of the minimum needed to win. Too many variables — too much friction, as Clausewitz described it⁵ — affect the outcome of a war to risk our soldiers' lives and our nation's future on projections that falsely convey precision of their predictive power.

Having just enough force to overcome an enemy in battle is not good enough. In the absence of a major enemy, Americans will accept neither heavy casualties nor the mere probability of victory in limited wars against medium or small opponents. Imagine what would have happened after Desert Storm if the Iraqi army had been pushed out of Kuwait intact but at a high cost in American lives. Could Third Army have come home so quickly with a beaten but still effective Iraqi army facing it along the Iraq-Kuwait border? Third Army would still be in place, with perhaps horrible repercussions for us and the stability of our allies. Even our minimal presence today has caused complications.

In fact, there is no need to speculate about what would have happened. The First Gulf War between Iraq and Iran *shows* us what can happen when a five-division force tries to carry out a limited-objective war and fails to smash its foe. The war that we view in retrospect as a disastrous and costly stalemated war was conceived by Saddam Hussein as a limited and low-casualty conflict. Saddam Hussein hoped that smashing Iran would squelch any chance that the Ayatollah Khomeini might inspire Iraq's Shiites to revolt

against Baghdad and at the same time redress the humiliating border settlement of 1975 with Iran. In addition, Saddam Hussein hoped that a victory over Iran would signal the emergence of Iraq as a leader of the Gulf, of the Arab world and possibly (only two years before hosting a major nonaligned-nations conference) of the nonaligned movement.⁶ Saddam Hussein's plan did not work for the simple reason that when struck by Iraq, Iran did not carry out its designated role of victim. Instead, Iran fought Iraq in the longest conventional war of the 20th century. Understanding the failure of Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran can help us appreciate the importance of planning for setbacks.

From Certain Victory to Stalemate

Iraq, in the fall of 1980, believed its armed forces were sufficient to both defend Iraq from external and internal threats and to humble Iran in a limited war. The Iraqis of 1980 had more reason than the Americans of 1991 to believe that their army would crush an enemy. While the Iraqi army of 1991 was decimated and demoralized by around-the-clock coalition bombardment, Iran's army of 1980 had been similarly decimated and demoralized by desertions, purges and disorganization following the fall of the Shah's regime. Iraq and the rest of the world expected a blitzkrieg by the Iraqi army in 1980. Indeed, even as Iraq stumbled in the invasion, some still assumed eventual Iraqi victory over Iran and speculated that Iraq would escalate her demands to be commensurate with the increased sacrifice caused by spirited Iranian resistance.⁷

With high hopes, Iraqi armor forces crossed the border into Iran expecting to carry all before them and liberate the ethnic Arabs of oil-rich Khuzestan (or Arabistan, as the Iraqis called the region). Instead of achieving glorious victory, the five-division strike force ground to a halt and soon proved inadequate to hold the front. The divisions not committed to the invasion later found themselves holding a new front in the north. By the end of the war, nearly eight years later, the army once deemed sufficient to control the Kurds, deter the Syrians and simultaneously defeat Iran had increased in size five-fold in order to achieve only stalemate — at a horrible cost in lives and treasure.

Iraq's invasion is a stunning reminder of how a quick, cheap and victorious blitzkrieg against an obviously outmanned and outgunned enemy can degenerate into a grueling war of attrition. On paper the Iraqi army was a mechanized juggernaut, but the real army in 1980 was poorly trained, armed with second-rate equipment, and led by officers more concerned with survival in the system than with effectiveness. It was ordered into action by a government that failed to formulate a realistic plan to win and reluctant to expose it to casualties.

Iran and Iraq

As America's chosen instrument to maintain stability in the Gulf in the 1970s, Iran had amassed an impressive arsenal of advanced Western weapons. Iraq, with only a third of Iran's population and armed with poorer-quality Soviet-designed weapons, was clearly militarily inferior to Iran.

The Iranian revolution changed everything. Iran's military was crippled by purges, desertions and lack of professional leadership. The army lost perhaps 60 percent of its lower-ranking soldiers.⁸ The other services lost fewer but still significant numbers.⁹ Much of the equipment became inoperable due to lack of maintenance, including up to a third of the tanks and half of the air force's aircraft (nearly all of Iran's F-14s could not fly). The departure of American advisors (who reportedly erased computer data indicating the location of spare parts throughout Iran) further hurt Iran's armed forces.¹⁰

The Balance of Power on the Eve of the First Gulf War

	Iraq	Iran
Main Battle Tanks	2,650	1,735
Active Army	200,000	150,000
Popular Army	75,000	—
Pasdarān (Revolutionary Guards)	—	30,000
Combat Aircraft	332	180
Air Force Personnel	38,000	65,000
Naval Personnel	4,250	22,000
Value of Imports	\$ 13.878 billion	\$ 12.815 billion
Oil Production	2.645 mbd	1.485 mbd
Oil & NGL Exports	119.5 mmt/y	37.48 mmt/y
Oil Revenue	\$ 26.5 billion	\$ 11.6 billion
Population	13.1 million	38.3 million
Military Spending	\$ 12.306 billion	\$ 16.108 billion

Notes: Figures from *The Military Balance 1980-1981*; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War*; Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*; *Military Expenditure: The Political Economy of International Security*; *Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1987*; *Energy Statistics and Balances of Non-OECD Countries 1988-1989*; and *Middle East and North Africa 1981-82*.

NGL = Natural Gas Liquids.

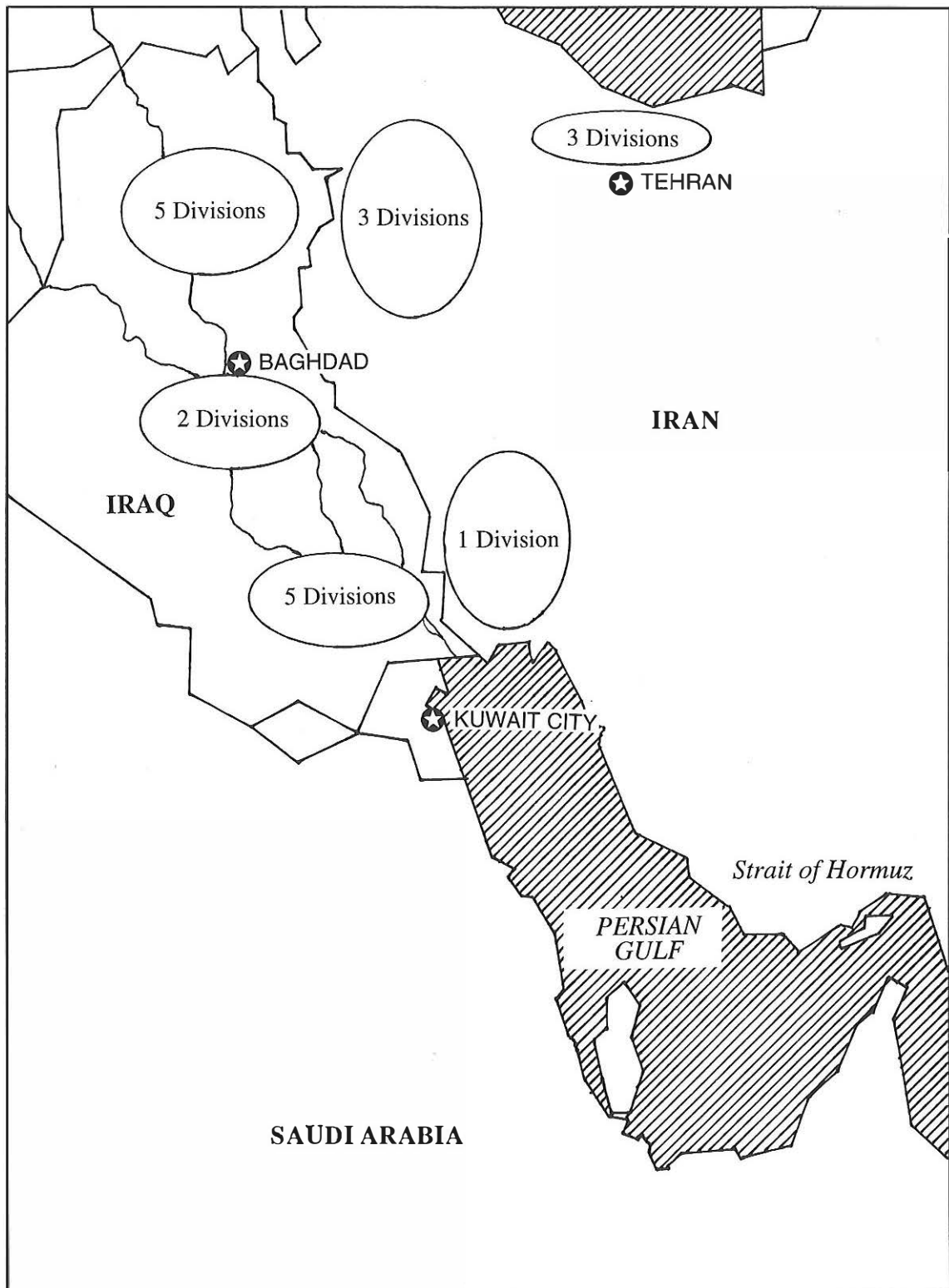
mbd = millions of barrels per day.

mmt/y = millions of metric tons per year.

But Iraq's war machine was flawed, too. First, 75 percent of the Iraqi army was Shiite, while the government was Sunni. Thus, the primary instrument with which Iraq hoped to blunt the appeal of Iran's brand of Shiite Islam was itself vulnerable to that very appeal. Saddam Hussein could not know if the army's lower ranks would endure even moderate casualties in a fight between secular Iraq and the revolutionary Shiite Iranians.

Other factors that weakened Iraq were the abysmal state of the tiny Iraqi navy and the poor training level of the air force. Iraqi bomber squadrons were not even allowed to practice lest they become proficient enough to drop a bomb on Saddam Hussein himself.¹¹

Iraqi Deployment on Eve of 1980 War with Iran



Like Khomeini in Iran, the Iraqi government had purged its officer corps; the purge of 1978 was particularly severe.¹² In this environment, officers wisely cultivated loyalty rather than effectiveness as the key to survival.¹³ Finally, rather than being earmarked for offensive action, the best equipment was deployed around Baghdad to protect Saddam Hussein.¹⁴ Saddam Hussein saw only the paper status, however, and to him it appeared that Iran was incapable of resisting a determined Iraqi attack. When the war began, a number of Western analysts expected the Iraqi offensive to end quickly.¹⁵ At worst, it was assumed that both sides would soon run out of ammunition and end the war regardless of what the combatants wanted.¹⁶

Saddam Hussein, while unaware of his own shortcomings, had to realize that the revolution's devastating effects on Iran were only temporary. Given time to recover, Iran could rebuild her armed forces and exert the power that had traditionally allowed Iran to dominate the Gulf. Saddam Hussein must have concluded that Iraq would never again be in as good a position vis-à-vis Iran as in September 1980.

The Iraqis had a sizable military with which to invade Iran. Iraq's 200,000 soldiers and 2,650 tanks were organized into 12 divisions plus smaller units, including a brigade of Republican Guards. The Iraqi air force possessed 332 combat aircraft, and the navy had 4,250 personnel with negligible assets.¹⁷ With this force, Iraq had to seize an objective in Iran that would compel the leaders in Tehran to capitulate.

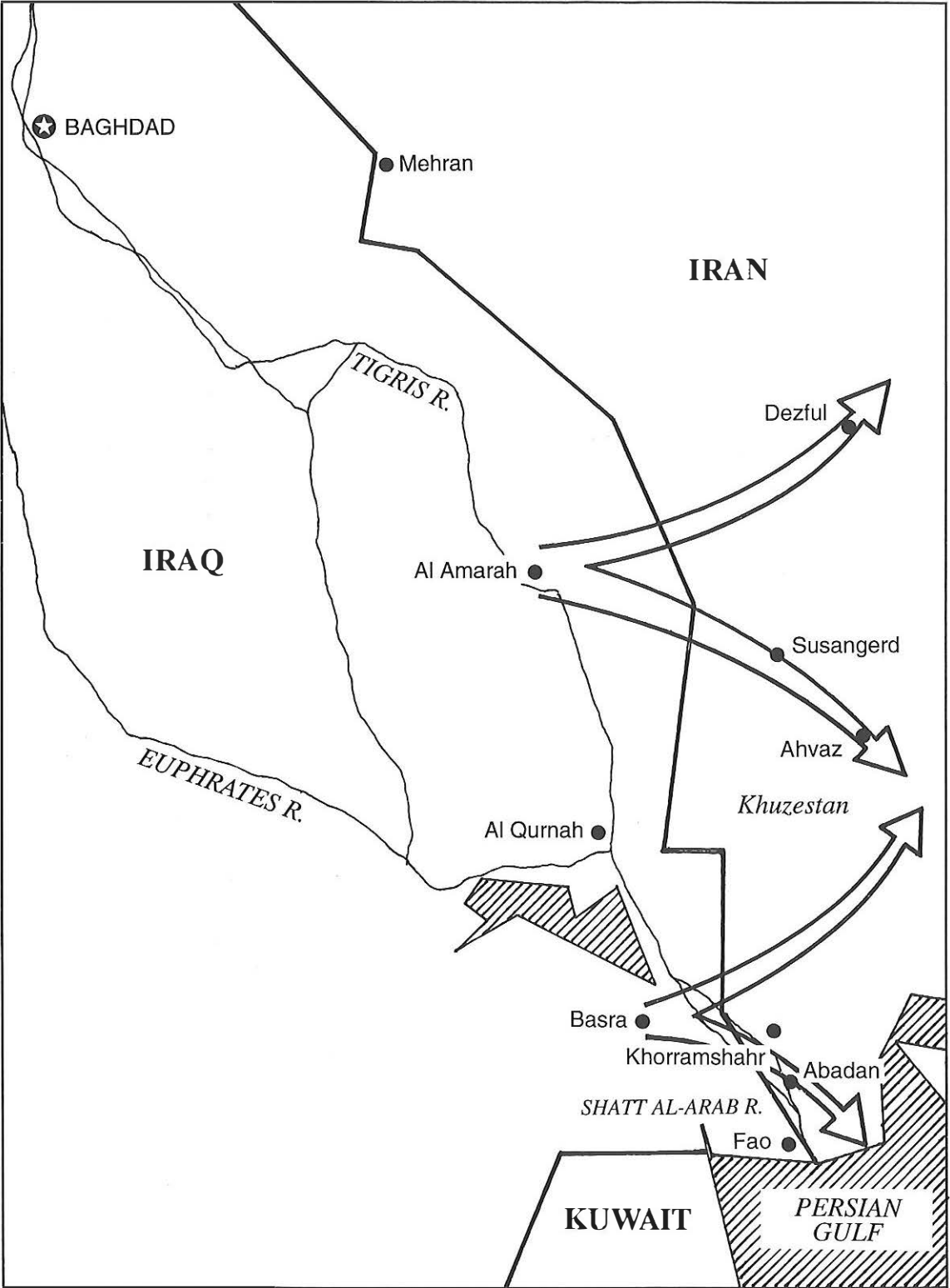
The army, which would carry the heaviest burden in a war with Iran, had many tasks besides invasion. First, Baghdad and the government needed to be guarded. Second, the oil fields in the north needed to be protected from both the rival Syrians from the west and the Kurds who live in the region but oppose Iraqi rule. For the invasion of Iran, keeping defensive needs in mind, five armor-heavy divisions were deployed in the south, across the border from Khuzestan.

Iran's armed forces, even aside from the impact of the revolution, were poorly disposed to meet an attack on Khuzestan. Scattered throughout the region were only a single understrength division and the paramilitary Pasdaran (the Pasdaran, also known as Revolutionary Guards, would eventually grow to match the army in size, but remained small in September 1980). The bulk of the Iranian regular army was massed around Tehran (which the Iranians feared was under threat from both the Soviet Union and the United States) and in Iran's northwest, fighting Iranian Kurds.

Qaddassiya Saddam — The Invasion of Iran

Iraq's five-division invasion force was tasked with capturing oil-rich Khuzestan and triggering a revolt by the area's ethnic Arab residents. No other military option was apparent given the impossibility of capturing either the capital, Tehran, deep within Iran beyond the Zagros Mountains, or dominating the distant Strait of Hormuz, a choke point through which Iranian oil exports flowed. According to the concept of the attack, Iraqi troops would use their six-to-one advantage over the few Iranians on the invasion front to seize the oil centers of Khorramshahr and Abadan in the south along the border, Ahvaz

Iraqi 1980 Invasion Plan



further north, and Dezful, at the northern end of Khuzestan. At this point, the Iraqis assumed, Iran would sue for peace in a modern version of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk rather than see the revolution threatened.

Subversion, border clashes and provocative statements heightened tension between Iran and Iraq throughout 1980. By August, artillery had been used in the border clashes and Iraq had massed 300 tanks at the border near Qasr-e-Shirin. On 10 September 1980, Iraq tested the waters by seizing border villages that Iran had refused to relinquish to Iraq in 1975. Iran inexplicably did not respond to this aggression; the incident seemed to confirm that Iran was engulfed in chaos and unable to resist Iraq's might.¹⁸ On 22 September 1980, Iraq ended the quasi-war by initiating *Qaddassiya Saddam* — the invasion of Iran. (Qaddassiya, south of Baghdad, was the site of an Arab victory over the Persians in 637 A.D. Saddam Hussein dredged up ancient hatreds to inspire his army and nation in 1980.)

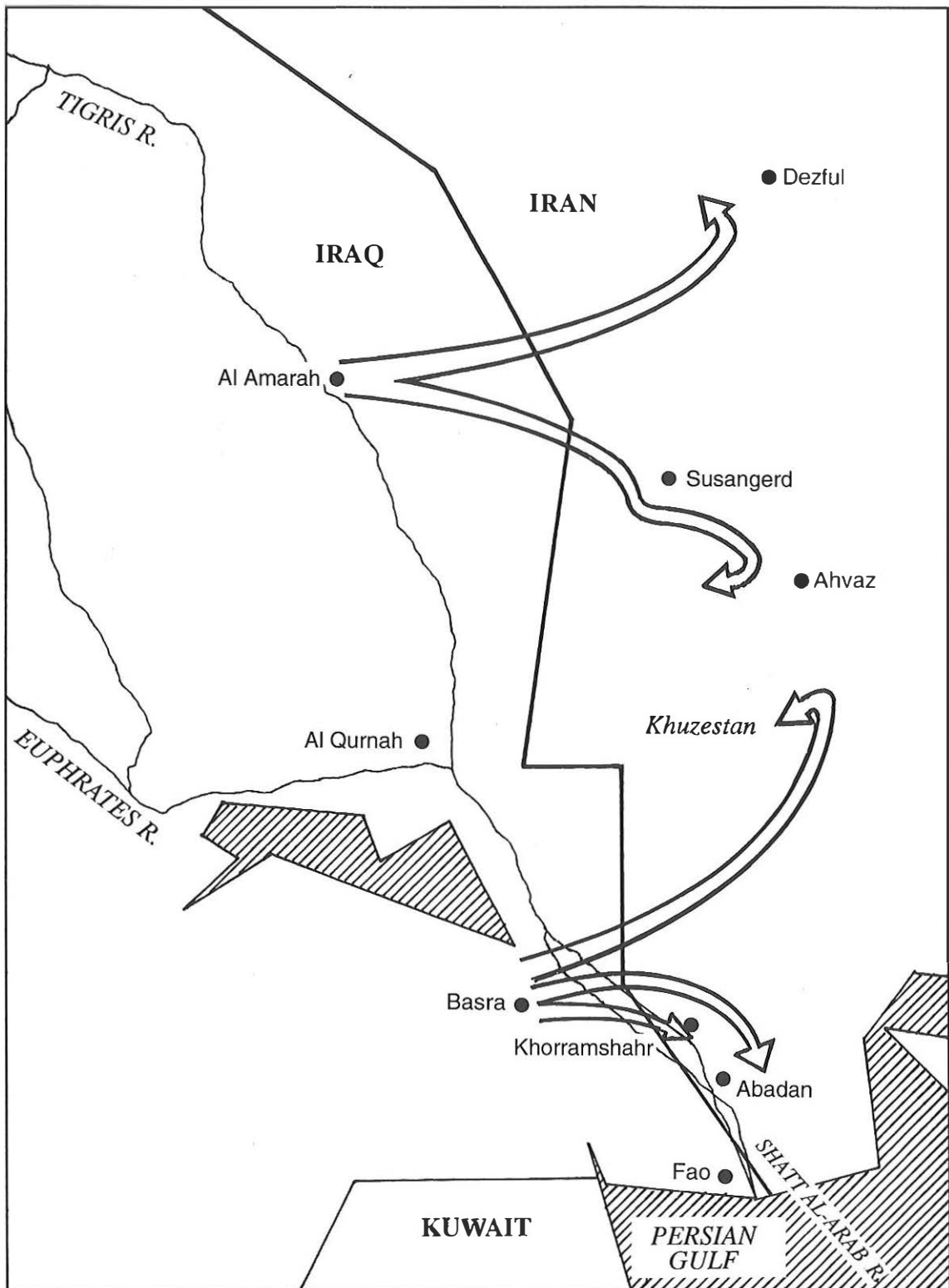
The start of the Iraqi offensive was signaled by the air force, which launched three days of attacks against ten Iranian airfields plus radar installations and supply depots. About half of the Iraqi air force took refuge in neighboring Arab states because of the vulnerability of Iraqi airfields (virtually everything of importance in Iraq is dangerously close to the Iranian border) to Iranian counterstrikes as the remainder sortied against Iran. Contrary to American expectations that the Iraqi air force would dominate the skies,¹⁹ the attacks failed to harm the Iranian air force despite achieving surprise. The Iraqi pilots ignored vulnerable targets such as support facilities and aircraft parked near the runways. Instead, they tried to crater the runways, a task they lacked the skill and weaponry to accomplish.²⁰

Iran, in turn, was able to make good a threat issued at the end of August that any air attack by Iraq on Iran would lead to “the destruction of Iraq's sensitive and strategic military positions.”²¹ Within twenty-four hours of Iraq's initial attack, the Iranians counterattacked with a hundred planes. The surprising Iranian air activity denied Iraq her limited war from the very beginning by striking Iraq's oil infrastructure and posing a threat to countries not involved in the fighting. After an Iranian air attack on a Kuwaiti border post, the Arab states hosting Iraqi planes that were avoiding Iranian counterstrikes expelled the Iraqis lest they draw Iranian fire. Saudi Arabia went so far as to request American Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) planes to guard against Iranian air attacks. The United States agreed to send four of the capable aircraft.²²

On the ground, the Iraqi main effort struck from Al Amarah and from Basra. Two divisions advanced from each city to seize their objectives: Dezful, site of an Iranian air force base and route from the north through which Iranian reinforcements could most easily reach Khuzestan; Ahvaz, base for the only Iranian regular army formation, a weak tank division, located in Khuzestan; and the oil infrastructure at Khorramshahr and Abadan on the Shatt al-Arab River, which itself was an objective if Iraq was to keep her Gulf export route open. A fifth Iraqi division remained in reserve in Basra.

Iraq's drive on Dezful, at the northern end of Khuzestan, failed to take the critical rail, road and oil center. The spearheads easily, albeit slowly, advanced into Iran, brushing

The Actual 1980 Iraqi Invasion of Iran



aside resistance; the stumbling block was Dezful itself. When the Iraqi armor reached the outskirts of the city, they shrank from entering built-up areas where Iranian infantry could ambush the tanks. The Iranians rallied and exploited the defensive benefits of the city to blunt the invasion. Instead of bypassing the defenses, the Iraqis contented themselves with shelling the city.²³ In Iranian hands, the city was able to function as a natural route for Iranian reinforcements to enter Khuzestan. During October, Iranian regulars began arriving in Khuzestan to fight the Iraqis.²⁴

To the south lay Ahvaz the objective of two Iraqi divisions advancing on converging lines from the south and the northwest. The home of an Iranian tank division, the city certainly deserved the attention; if Ahvaz were captured and the division defending it destroyed, Iran's grip on Khuzestan would be jeopardized. The Iraqi division that marched out of Basra drove to the Karun River, crossing it on 10 October. After establishing a defensive line along the river to cover the flank of the Iraqi division tasked with seizing the southern-most objectives, the division from Basra thrust north.²⁵

The division that pushed straight for Ahvaz out of Al Amarah was stripped of mechanized infantry and artillery in a misguided effort to speed the division toward its objective.²⁶ The three remaining tank regiments rolled forward and soon demonstrated the folly of abandoning a combined-arms approach. As the division reached Susangerd — a city that could be a thorn in Iraq's side if held by Iran — it bypassed the city rather than enter the narrow streets with its tanks unsupported. Had infantry been present, the Iraqis might have captured the city that Iran initially had not even garrisoned. Amazingly, the Iraqis reportedly captured and abandoned Susangerd twice during the month of October.²⁷ The Iraqi armored spearheads, after avoiding Susangerd, did indeed reach Ahvaz. Once there, the Iraqi armor faced the same problem that had foiled them at Susangerd: How do you take a city without infantry and artillery? Unlike Susangerd, Ahvaz was defended. Reduced to bombarding the city, the Iraqi tanks were stalled and without a secure line of supply due to the failure to capture Susangerd.

The thrusts against Dezful and Ahvaz demonstrated an incredible level of confusion on the part of the Iraqis. The Iraqis clearly expected Iran to concede defeat the moment the powerful Iraqi army crossed the border in a demonstration of its intent to punish Iran. Iran called Iraq's bluff simply by fighting, and the Iraqis approached their objectives without sufficient will to fight for them. This indecision about whether the Iraqis were in an actual war or a parade-ground exercise plagued Iraq well into the war.

The Iranians, on the other hand, knew they were at war and acted accordingly. Their commitment to total resistance was clearly demonstrated in November when the Iraqis ordered a major armored force out of Hamid, southwest of Ahvaz. As the Iraqis advanced, the Iranians opened floodgates on the Kharkheh River and unleashed a torrent of water, destroying 150 Iraqi armored vehicles.²⁸

Iraq did not give up and, following the Hamid disaster, launched attacks against Susangerd from the south, east and west. The Iranian defenders halted the Iraqi drives and held the salient astride Iraq's supply lines.²⁹ The defeat denied Iraq a success which Saddam Hussein desperately wanted for political reasons — to compensate for the failure

to crush Iran.³⁰ Another attempt to capture Ahvaz at the end of November failed in the face of spirited Iranian resistance.³¹ The city and critical army base remained in Iranian hands to receive reinforcements flowing through Dezful and to serve as a springboard for a counteroffensive to expel the Iraqis from Khuzestan.

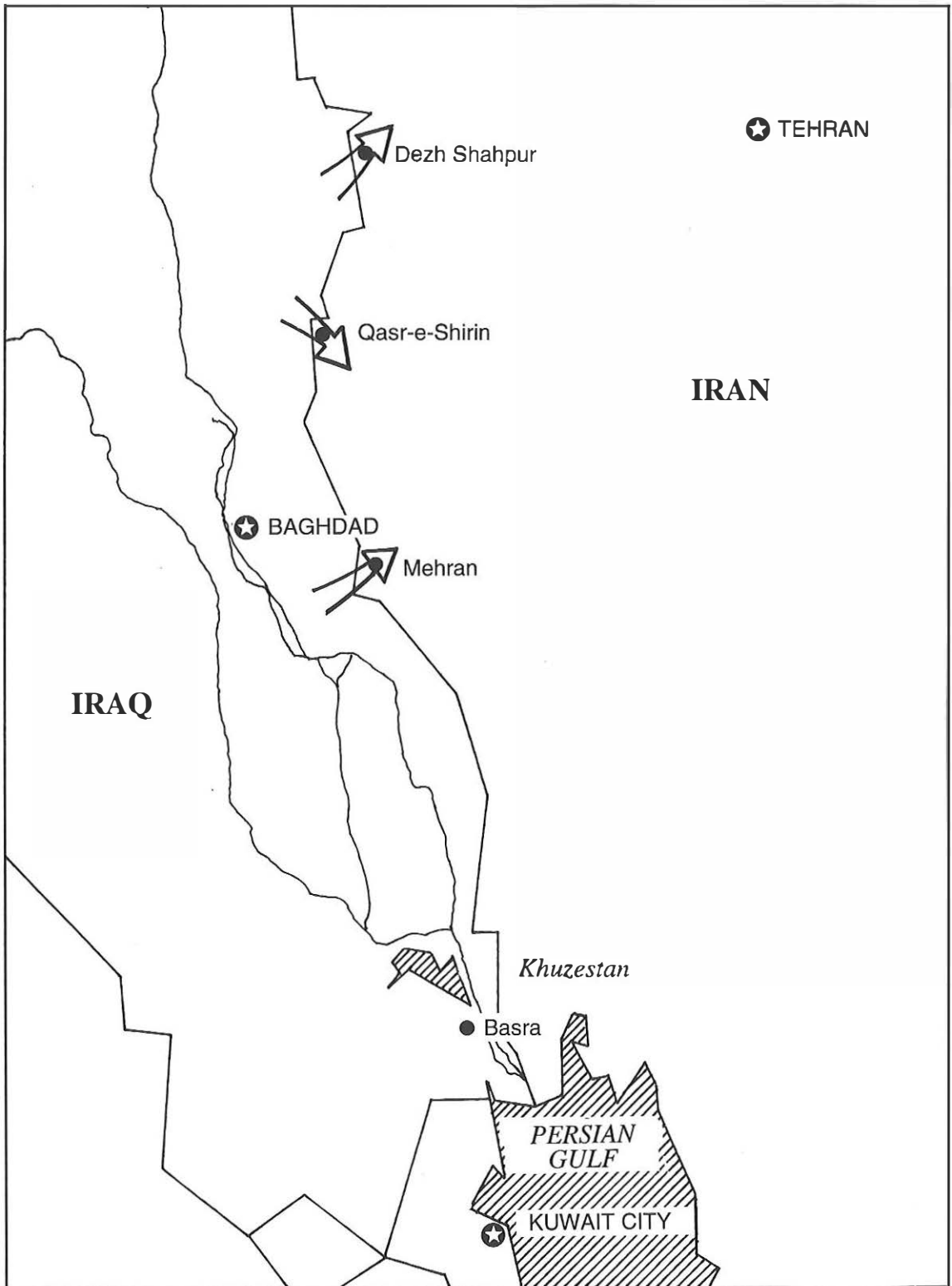
In the extreme south, Iraq's objectives of Khorramshahr and Abadan were enticingly close to the border. Here the Iraqis plunged in and tried to capture Khorramshahr first. In a lesson that probably dissuaded the Iraqis from trying the same approach at Dezful and Ahvaz, the Iraqi tanks stormed Khorramshahr. The city's defenders ambushed the ill-supported Iraqi armor and threw them back with heavy losses. Although they were willing in this instance to fight, the Iraqis' need to pull back and await reinforcements demonstrated their unpreparedness to carry out urban warfare. That the Iraqis could have thought their forces could capture the cities of the region without fighting in built-up areas is incredible. The initial victory over the Iraqis at the border gave Iran precious weeks to prepare while Iraqi commandos were given hasty training in urban fighting. Iraq attacked again with infantry to dig out the stubborn Iranian defenders and succeeded in taking the city on 25 October 1980. The Iraqi victory came at the shockingly high cost of five thousand casualties, which probably dissuaded the Iraqis from trying the same approach later at Dezful and Ahvaz.³²

The Iraqi effort against Abadan did not begin until late October, after the Iraqis established a foothold across the Karun River. As troops advanced north against Ahvaz, others drove south to block the primary road into Abadan from the east.³³ With the price of admission into Abadan likely to be at least as great as the Iranians had exacted at Khorramshahr, the Iraqis pinned their hopes on starving Abadan into submission. Abadan, never completely cut off by the Iraqi army, was held by a mixed force of Pasdaran and regular army soldiers. Iran's navy assisted in supplying the defenders despite the proximity to Iraq, whose navy and air force should have been able to help the Iraqi war effort by attacking the Iranian supply line.

When faced with a choice between taking objectives and avoiding casualties, Iraq chose to avoid casualties. This decision made it difficult to wage war — the course of action that Saddam Hussein had determined would preserve Iraqi security in the face of the Iranian religious threat. To outside observers, however, it still seemed that Iraq was capable of dictating the terms of the war. In fact, on 23 October 1980, the United States asserted to the United Nations Security Council that "the national integrity of Iran is today threatened by the Iraqi invasion."³⁴

Iraq also made a number of subsidiary attacks to the north of the main invasion front. As the Iraqis struggled ineffectually in Khuzestan, Iraqi troops advanced into Iran at Qasr-e-Shirin and at Mehran.³⁵ These moves put Iraqi troops in the more rugged terrain on the Iranian side of the border, where they could more easily block any Iranian counterattacks aimed at Baghdad. In December, Iraqi troops also carried out another defensive move even farther north, east of Penjwin. This operation improved Iraq's ability to defend the Kirkuk oil fields against Iranian attacks.³⁶ Iraq would need the benefits provided by these attacks, which led to the eventual extension of the front to both of these areas.

Iraqi Defensive Moves in the First Gulf War



Iraq was in an impossible situation. When Iran did not capitulate as expected, Saddam Hussein's option of withdrawal and peace was ruled out. Iraq's lack of strategic depth would make it difficult to carry out this option. An Iraqi withdrawal — a concession of military defeat — would only enhance Iran's religious appeal to Iraq's Shiites. Pressing the offensive was ruled out by Saddam Hussein's desire to limit Iraqi casualties. And if unwilling to attack Abadan, which was right on the border, could the Iraqis possibly push deeper into Iran? Instead of being directed by a coherent plan, the Iraqi war effort simply continued with no real objective and no real alternative to fighting on and hoping for the best.

On 7 December 1980, the Iraqis declared that they had taken all objectives and would adopt a defensive strategy.³⁷ Iraq had failed. Iraq had not, in fact, captured all of its objectives. The Iraqis failed even to control both banks of the Shatt al-Arab River, a failure that precluded Iraq from even trying to export oil out of the Gulf through Iran's naval gauntlet. This handicap depleted Iraq's foreign currency reserves and made it difficult to finance the war when it stretched on. The short, sharp and victorious war that Saddam Hussein had planned to catapult himself into a strong leadership position would instead become the 20th century's longest conventional war. The consequences of Saddam Hussein's defensive strategy also led directly to Iraq's defeat in 1991 after he used his expensive and large army to invade Kuwait in order to get out from under the mountain of debt incurred in the First Gulf War.

Defeat in a Limited War

A number of factors explain Iraq's failure to win the limited war that Saddam Hussein had envisioned. Although some critics point out that Iraq attacked with only a third of its army (four divisions plus another in reserve), Iraq faced an even smaller fraction of Iran's army since most Iranian troops were deployed near Tehran or in Iran's Kurdish region. The single understrength Iranian armored division at Ahvaz, in Khuzestan, was dispersed in no more than battalion-sized forces (the tanks were in company strength at best).³⁸ Given Iraq's numerical superiority on the Khuzestan front, Iran should have lost the region to Iraq's army.

Iraq frittered away her numerical advantage due to a number of factors:

- ❖ Saddam Hussein was overly optimistic in his assumptions that Iran was incapable of resisting a serious Iraqi attack.
- ❖ Saddam falsely believed that Iraq's military was a well-oiled fighting machine capable of blitzing Iran into submission; six-to-one odds may have seemed more than enough to win, but the poor quality of Iraq's troops and officer corps negated this advantage.
- ❖ Iraq failed to gain allied support; as battlefield success faded, so too did support from nations sympathetic to Iraq but not openly aligned.
- ❖ Saddam failed to accurately assess whether what was possible militarily would actually lead to victory in the war.

- ❖ The Iraqis failed to energetically pursue their invasion plan to seize their established objectives (e.g., Dezful, a major transportation hub and site of an air base).
- ❖ Poor command and control kept Iraq's army from coordinating more than one brigade at a time in battle, and from utilizing a combined-arms approach. Unsupported armor was either slaughtered, as at Khorramshahr, or deterred from entering cities such as Dezful and Ahvaz.
- ❖ Poor tactics and low training levels combined with excessive caution to keep the Iraqi advance painfully slow.
- ❖ Poor intelligence and reconnaissance failed to identify points of resistance and gaps in Iran's defenses.
- ❖ Unwillingness of the Iraqis to suffer casualties in pursuit of their own war aims made it easier for the Iranians to stop them by simply standing in their way.
- ❖ When spirited Iranian resistance dashed Iraq's initial assumptions and hopes, the Iraqis *escalated* the goals of the war to be commensurate with the price Iraq was paying in blood.
- ❖ By going over to the defensive after failing to win at a low cost (but while still holding a numerical advantage in Khuzestan), Iraq conceded the initiative and placed the decision to end the war in Iran's hands; Iran did not agree to end the war for nearly eight years.

Reflections of the First Gulf War: Implications for the United States Army

While Iraq's weaknesses in training and equipment are lessons for the long term, for the most part they are not harbingers of things to come for the United States Army. The second-rate equipment that Iraq possessed in 1980 is not a problem that currently plagues our Army. The abysmally poor navy and air force that failed to support Iraq's army are not paralleled by our own Army's sister services, which are capable of projecting, sustaining and supporting the Army anywhere in the world. Our officers are professional and well trained to coordinate and lead our troops into battle. They are not handicapped by political involvement, nor are they burdened thus far by excessive commitment to police-type operations such as the drug war, border protection, peace operations and internal security missions. The ill-trained Iraqi troops, ignorant of combined arms operations, are not reflected in our own professional volunteers who now prepare for Army 2010 and the Army After Next.

Iraq's failings highlight the advantages the United States Army derives from its modern equipment and realistic training. Although there appears to be a consensus among military strategists and policy-makers that the United States must maintain its technological edge, the troops must be trained and motivated to take advantage of that technology. The critical advantages provided by highly trained soldiers with good morale are not easily quantifiable in peacetime. The lack of quality becomes quantifiable, indirectly, when one counts the burned-out armored vehicles of an army whose troops did not know how to use their equipment and who lacked the will to fight on in adversity.

The importance of this invisible edge that the United States Army works hard to maintain cannot be overestimated. The disasters that can follow from incorrectly *believing* you have a trained army are appalling. Iraq's experience in 1980 — having its presumed blitzkrieg lead to a grinding eight-year war of attrition, heavy casualties and debt, and the long-term mistake of trying to reverse the losses of the 1980s by invading Kuwait in 1990 — should serve as a warning to us. And as demanding as it is to maintain well-trained, motivated and combat-ready troops, diverting soldiers from combat training to prepare for and execute peace operations poses additional risks. Given the narrow margins on which the U.S. Army is forced to operate, any degradation in quality could be the difference between victory and defeat — or at best, the difference between decisive victory and costly marginal victory.

Iraq's overriding desire in 1980 to minimize casualties is one weakness that we do share today. The U.S. Army's boldness in 1991 has shown that decisive victory is possible at a low cost in American lives. Although an important consideration, striving for zero casualties is unrealistic; believing that we cannot afford to suffer any casualties could paralyze the United States. As a RAND study shows, the current public aversion to casualties is a reflection of the reduced threat to our security and not a new standard that must be met regardless of the situation. Should a more serious threat emerge, Americans will support sacrifice to protect our national interests.³⁹ Our soldiers' lives are indeed valuable, and our country's insistence that we minimize risks to them is laudable (as well as being necessary due to the small size of the Army). *Undue concern*, however, is false compassion and, as was the case for Iraq in 1980, could result in even greater casualties in a prolonged war should we refuse — because of the prospect of battle deaths — to seize an opportunity for early victory.

The problems of national and battlefield intelligence also plagued Iraq and are subjects of vigorous American efforts today. To achieve effective intelligence requires timely acquisition of data as well as timely interpretation and appropriate dissemination of information. In 1980, Iraq's slow-moving offensive was ill-served by both national intelligence that portrayed a helpless Iran and battlefield intelligence that failed to pinpoint strongpoints and undefended zones (such as Susangerd). The small United States Army, tasked with fighting and winning outnumbered, must be able to exploit information-age technology and processes to allow our troops to fight with greater speed, agility and flexibility than any opposing force.

As we seek information dominance through satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles and the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS), which promise near real-time knowledge of troop dispositions, we must remember that they cannot look into an enemy's mind. Nor can they ensure that we will not misinterpret the data because of preconceived notions or that we will refuse to accept information that contradicts what everyone "knows" about enemy capabilities or intentions. Iraq could not predict Iran's reaction to invasion in 1980; this weakness applies to the United States today despite great technological strides being tested and demonstrated by the Army's Advanced Warfighting Experiment (AWE). In 1980, a six-to-one Iraqi numerical advantage proved insufficient to win the invasion campaign. Iraqi failure followed not from secret weapons or the unsuspected existence of enemy troops, but from the simple fact that the Iranians

fought when Iraq assumed they would not. That failure in large measure nullified Iraq's numerical advantage. Unfounded assumptions about potential threats to U.S. interests can throw off our calculations today. In 1991, the Iraqis fought as we projected they would fight. We cannot count on that again, even in a rematch with Saddam Hussein.

Losing and Winning a War

According to the Quadrennial Defense Review's recommendations, the Army must stay ready to fight two MTWs, nearly simultaneously. With budgetary pressures, the National Defense Panel's review could be an opportunity to simply say that the Army needs to be prepared for only a single MTW. Our Army suddenly would be transformed on paper from dangerously overcommitted to more than large enough to fight a war and disperse troops in operations other than war around the globe. Yet by the same reasoning that says we can currently fight two MTWs *nearly simultaneously*, we could just as easily assert an ability to fight 100 MTWs *nearly sequentially*. This reasoning is shortsighted. Our "two-MTW" Army really gives us the margin to win a single MTW. Like our Cold War standards of fighting "two and a half," "one and a half" or "one plus" wars, our two-MTW strategy is more a goal than a concrete reality. In addition, our assumption that five Army divisions are enough to win a single MTW is flawed. The flaw is the simple fact that winning a battle "isn't a victory unless it ends the war."⁴⁰ The example of Iraq in 1980 may seem irrelevant given the American success in 1991, but without an Army capable of seizing the initiative and pressing an enemy until victorious, our next war could more closely resemble the Gulf War of 1980 than that of 1991. Indeed, we may have already narrowly escaped repeating 1980.

America's Gulf War victory was so decisive that it is difficult to see how we could have failed to win; indeed, the very success seems to bolster the critics who argue that even a tiny Army can defeat any opponent. Yet had the United States struck in 1990 with only the XVIII Airborne Corps, then in the theater, we could very well have replicated the single-MTW concept that guides our thinking for war today. Winning a MTW includes a first phase in which an invasion would be halted by Army and Marine ground forces who would ideally enter the theater through friendly ports and airfields (but would resort to forcible entry if necessary). The second phase, after halting the enemy, would be a buildup of heavy forces to prepare for a counteroffensive. Phase III would be the counterattack, and the fourth phase, which assumes victory, would be planning for post-war stability.⁴¹

While Desert Storm (which utilized the equivalent of eight Army divisions plus nearly all the Marine Corps) is our model for success, the above outline, which calls for only five Army divisions to achieve similarly decisive results, clearly differs from Desert Storm in one other vital area. The difference is that during the Second Gulf War, Phase I consisted of Operation Desert Shield — American and allied forces pouring into Saudi Arabia *unhindered and without the need to halt an enemy*. The Army went right through Phase II with minimal contact with the Iraqis. By October 1990, the United States was ready for Phase III with two heavy divisions, an air assault division, an airborne division, an armored cavalry regiment and a Marine Expeditionary Force supported by divisions from France, Britain, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf states.

If the United States had initiated the ground war with those forces, the Coalition could have plowed its way to the Iraq-Kuwait border and liberated Kuwait, but it is unlikely that this force could have crushed the Iraqi army. Victory, yes, but at what price? And what then? A defeated but not beaten Iraqi army pulling north into Iraq and turning south to confront an exhausted XVIII Airborne Corps? Could we have pulled out as quickly as we did? American soldiers would still be in Kuwait in corps strength at a new dividing line. Only with the addition of VII Corps and the dispatch of nearly all of the Marine Corps was America able to gain the numbers needed to swing in from the desert and destroy the Iraqi occupation army. Those extra divisions were the difference between winning a battle and winning a war. The decisions that we must make today will determine if we have an Army capable of winning our next war. The Iraqi attack in September 1980 is a concrete demonstration of how we might have faltered in 1990 with too few troops to win decisively.

The First Gulf War and the NDP

The lessons for the United States to be found in Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran are warning lights that should caution us from reducing the capabilities of the United States Army. If heeded, they can build the foundation of victory ten or twenty years in the future. Some of the lessons of the First Gulf War that can help us prepare for victory:

- ❖ The need to maintain a combined-arms approach to battle was demonstrated time and again. In one of their drives on Ahvaz, the Iraqis used only tanks in the belief that infantry and artillery would slow the advance. If the Army does not field artillery and support vehicles capable of keeping up with our superb Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles, we will need to sacrifice the speed of the Abrams and Bradleys to allow the slower supporting vehicles to keep up or risk arriving at our objectives with only a fraction of our combat power. Combined arms extends to the other services as well, especially air power. The absolute failure of Iraq's air force to aid the Iraqi ground invasion highlights the waste of resources spent on this service. Our own Air Force, which is unchallenged in the air, must be capable of supporting the Army's ground operations.
- ❖ The demonstration that troops apparently hopelessly outclassed can make a good showing — even if they have to do nothing more complicated than die in place in their bunkers — is useful. Iran's ill-coordinated light infantry forces were stubborn obstacles to Iraq's ambitions when deployed in the cities of Khuzestan. Fighting a determined foe block by block and house by house as the Iraqis did in Khorramshahr would force our Army to play by our enemy's rules. Although it is possible that information dominance could extend our superiority in open warfare to urban areas, that breakthrough has not happened. We must not forget that urban conditions may limit our technological and training advantages, lest we experience our own Khorramshahr debacle one day.
- ❖ The importance of gaining information dominance is clear from the Iraqi army's experience of plodding to stalemate by advancing blindly with no situational awareness and ignorant of the location of its enemy. Iraq's chief advantage, its

numerical edge, was thrown away by its own inability to coordinate more than a brigade at once in battle. We must know when objectives are unguarded, such as at Susangerd in 1980, and when they are defended, such as at Khorramshahr, in order to generate a tempo of action that will paralyze the enemy. If we can harness the potential of information dominance, we will allow the Army to exploit its training and equipment advantages to create a fast and agile force whose flexibility and firepower stun an enemy by massing effort against weak points.

- ❖ Information dominance must also be achieved *before* we arrive on the battlefield. Our Army is a power-projection force that must be deployed largely from the continental United States. Our national intelligence apparatus must be able to tell the President and Congress when and where the Army is needed with enough certainty and warning time to get a significant force — not just a trip wire — on the ground and ready to fight. Iran's failure prior to the war to deploy in Khuzestan, where the real threat was located, prevented Iran from utilizing its still formidable strength to halt the invasion at the border. Iran was able to blunt the invasion, but then faced the task of expelling the Iraqis from the ground they held.
- ❖ Notwithstanding technological strides, well-trained troops with good morale are still important in the information age. In 1980, Iraq's equipment was decent if not first rate — it was certainly lethal enough to win if well handled. Yet the troops who manned that equipment could not smash an outnumbered, divided and dispersed enemy that had been taken by surprise. The U.S. Army, which will not enjoy the luxury of outnumbering a foe by the six-to-one ratio the Iraqis enjoyed in Khuzestan, must be orders of magnitude better than any enemy if it is to deliver decisive victory.
- ❖ We must not underestimate our potential foes as the Iraqis did in 1980. They will be clever just as we are. They will believe in the cause for which they are fighting. And they, too, will fight to win. We cannot assume that the sight of an American soldier will panic our enemy and induce retreat and surrender in the same manner that Iraq thought the Iranians would collapse when confronted with Iraq's overwhelming invasion force. That Iran fought even when the experts said they should give up is a lesson that must not be overlooked. We will need to fight, bleed and struggle for victory. To assume that any lesser effort will suffice is courting disaster in our hubris. Not far in the background, coexisting with our confidence in the quality of our military machine, is a contradictory fear of failure. Not wanting to repeat our experience in Vietnam, many speak of needing an "exit strategy" before committing troops. Such an approach seeks to minimize our losses under the assumption that we will at some point lose, so we had better know when to cut our losses and get out. It also assumes that the situation allows for an exit and that our enemy will allow it. The Iraqis desperately wanted out of the war they initiated in 1980 but were locked by Iran in a death grip that allowed for no easy exit. While planning for a tough, resilient enemy is prudent, we must never become paralyzed by concentrating on how that enemy can hurt us. We need to keep our focus on achieving victory.
- ❖ The need to establish a realistic war plan is also highlighted by Iraq's invasion campaign. In one sense, the Iraqis did establish achievable military objectives. They

did not aim for distant Tehran or the Strait of Hormuz but instead sought to capture adjacent Khuzestan — an objective within reach. Putting aside Iraq's failure to vigorously pursue the objectives established, one must step back and ask whether achievement of those objectives would have resulted in victory. Would the rapid seizure of Khuzestan have compelled Iran to sue for peace? It is possible; it would certainly have been better to vigorously pursue even an imperfect objective. We may not be able to answer this question for Iraq, but we must ask the question for ourselves before we embark on a military expedition. Setting a militarily achievable objective is not sufficient to bring victory. We must also reasonably expect that the attainment of that objective will lead to political victory by ending the war.

These lessons, although useful in isolation, teach us a larger lesson when taken together. Ending a war with victory should, of course, be the ultimate objective. Iraq's many failings and Iran's successful resistance teach us the need to overwhelm an enemy. If you give your foe the opportunity to resist, he may very well take it. If Iraq had been able to aggressively advance, reaching its objectives in days, Iran might have been shocked into submission. Iraq's invasion force lacked the force quality, despite its numerical edge, to overcome stumbling blocks at Khorramshahr, Abadan, Ahvaz and Dezful to defeat the Iranians. Our own estimates of what it will take to win a MTW may well overlook the need for a margin for error. Fortunately, the goal of fighting two MTWs nearly simultaneously in effect gives us this margin.

The NDP provides another legitimizing process for proponents of further reductions of our already small Army. It is also an opportunity for the Army's defenders to validate the QDR's sound reasoning for maintaining a high-quality Army and halt what could easily become an annual ritual of reducing the Army after claiming to see no threats to American interests on the horizon. America needs an Army with enough soldiers to overcome setbacks and still emerge victorious. The Army needs the equipment, numbers and training to *overwhelm* an enemy force with such speed and decisiveness that we will win the war and not just the battle. Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which has given America so much grief this decade, can teach the United States to avoid paying a high cost in its next war if we heed the lessons of the First Gulf War. His five-division invasion force was too small and too poorly trained and equipped to smash Iran; and by the end of the war, nearly eight years later, Iraq needed an army of nearly a million troops to hold the line.

Finally, American victory in war requires a joint approach, with all the services contributing their unique capabilities. The core of any war effort, however, must be the ground elements provided by the Army, which alone is capable of taking on the most sophisticated or determined enemy and delivering victory. Complete victory comes when your soldiers occupy the enemy's territory and impose your will — not achieved when you sail offshore or fly overhead with impunity. By any reasonable standard a well-equipped and superbly trained Army with global responsibilities is hardly too much for America's taxpayers to support in peacetime, given the public's expectations of decisive victory against even the toughest opponent.

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