

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the Iran-Iraq War from which we attempt to derive useful lessons for military professionals. The war was a complex affair, with peculiar features that are essential to understand. For example, geopolitics played an extremely important role. The Persian Gulf—the war's arena—is one of the world's most strategic locations and both superpowers claim it as their sphere of influence.¹ Hence they regarded it as their right to interfere in the war whenever they felt that their interests were threatened.²

Iran, a revolutionary state, rejected such interference; Iraq sought to cooperate, even exploit, outside interest. Baghdad found this expedient since its aims and those of the superpowers were similar—the United States, the Soviet Union and Iraq all wanted a negotiated end to the fighting. (Iran wanted to destroy Iraq and set up an Islamic republic in its place.)

For reasons explained in this report, Iraq's objectives changed. It no longer had an incentive to cooperate with the superpowers. In secret, it planned a military solution that defied both Washington and Moscow. This decision by the leadership brought Iraq the victory it craved, but it has subsequently unleashed a storm of difficulties which led directly to the invasion of Kuwait.

Another factor that heavily influenced the war was demography. The Iranians vastly outnumbered the Iraqis (45 million Iranians, 16 million Iraqis), and a significant proportion of Iran's forces were religiously crazed zealots. Against these odds Iraq could do little but husband the relatively meager human resources it had.

At the same time it had to fight. However, as its forces were relatively inexperienced in modern warfare techniques, they had to be trained. Iraq was fortunate to have an excellent General Staff (shaped by the traditions of the Prussian military), which by the war's end had developed the army into a first class fighting institution.³ The synergy between the generals and Iraq's civilian leadership made victory possible. This concentration of efforts occurred in 1986, when the Iraqis decided to switch strategies and seek a unilateral end to the conflict.

Finally the reader should be aware of the views of Iran's clerics about warfighting—they opposed modern armies, which they viewed as corrupt institutions. Just before the start of the war with Iraq they had purged the army that the Shah had left them and, as a result, they had only fragments with which to oppose the Iraqis when the invasion came.⁴

However, the clerics were fortunate in that Iran's people arose spontaneously to the nation's defense. The clerics exploited this outpouring of support and organized it into newly mobilized forces under the command of youthful revolutionaries who had helped to overthrow the Shah. The revolutionaries formed light armed infantry units, calling themselves the Pasdaran. Like other institutions of this type, the results were mixed. On the plus side, the Pasdaran was full of zeal—its courage was phenomenal. However, few of its members had any military training, and a great many had no formal education at all.

Indeed, the Pasdaran and the Iraqi Army were the antitheses of one another. The Pasdaran, the product of revolution, comprised antiseccular, religious zealots. The Iraqis were committed to modernization and all its trappings, including the most modern military capabilities that the regime could buy. Its officers strove to learn and apply the principles of modern warfare.

The Iranians rejected the concept of military professionalism.⁵ They deemphasized training, depending

instead on spontaneity. Their idea of a battle was a headlong charge. They believed that ultimately by piling on more and more troops they could smother Iraqi resistance and score a decisive breakthrough.

In a struggle that pitted zealots against a smaller, but modernized army, discipline and modern arms prevailed. However, Iraq's success was not painless. To achieve victory it had first to radically transform its society. The changes that were made strained not only the fabric of the Iraqi state but ultimately the entire state system in the Persian Gulf.

A major theme we shall try to develop is one of change, and of the cost of change to a society like Iraq's. We believe that the current crisis over Kuwait has grown out of the Iran-Iraq War and, specifically, from Baghdad's decision to impose a costly military solution on its enemy.

Organization. The report is divided into four chapters and an epilogue. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides a narrative overview, describing the major events of the war, concentrating on the circumstances under which the various battles were fought. This is a sparse treatment, with very little commentary, for a professional audience which needs only sufficient background material to make independent judgments about our assessments and conclusions.⁶ (A detailed assessment of the war can be found in *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East*, the SSI study of the Iraqi Army in the last 8 months of the war.)

Chapter 3, devoted to strategies and operations, attempts to identify the political background from which the strategies were formulated. It also includes details about the economy and society of the two countries, without which many events and decisions would be confusing, if not impossible, to assimilate.

Chapter 4 concerns tactics. On the Iraqi side, tactics were shaped by technology, and ultimately—as the report documents—technology changed the form of Iraq's Army.

This structural transformation is very important. In the end it is the best evidence we have that the Iraqi military matured during the 8 years of fighting.

The Epilogue examines lessons from this war in relation to what is presently occurring in the Gulf. We offer some cautionary advice, and some practical observations which ^{be} ~~should~~ be useful, if the current confrontation develops into a more serious conflict.

The report contains six appendices. The first, the Battle of Karbala V, takes the reader step-by-step through the battle, which we consider the decisive engagement of the war; the second concerns the crucial topic of chemical warfare; the third creates an imaginary scenario of how an Iraqi attack might unfold; the fourth discusses the air war; the fifth focuses on the elements of a successful attack against Iraq; and the final appendix deals with the problem of estimating casualties.

The authors were not able to discuss this study with any Iraqi or Iranian officers who fought in the war, which is extremely unfortunate, since neither side has made any systematic effort to describe the war or record its history in detail.⁷ Indeed, Iraq and Iran are probably two of the world's most closed societies. As a consequence, a lack of information in essential areas continues to plague the efforts of those who are attempting to assess the conduct of both sides during this long and remarkable conflict.

To offset this methodological difficulty, we relied on extensive research, mainly into raw intelligence, as well as open source materials. In addition, we interviewed individuals here and in the Middle East who were intimately associated with the day-to-day operations of the conflict. In this regard, a number of intelligence specialists who had monitored all or portions of the war were gathered together for a two-day roundtable discussion. Many of the ideas contained in the report evolved from that conference. However, the final product expresses the opinions of the authors only.

One final point—in this report we concentrate more on the Iraqis than on the Iranians because the Iraqis won, and because we believe the maturation of Iraq's army over the course of the war is a significant event. Moreover, given Iraq's subsequent activities in the region, it is important for readers to understand how Iraq's behavior enabled it to emerge the victor.