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# THE IRAQI-IRANIAN WAR:

## THE FIRST ROUND

by

EDGAR O'BALLANCE

**I**t is too early to make an assessment in depth of the Gulf War, but sufficient information is available to consider factors affecting it and to make a few comments and deductions. Iran has not yet permitted any Western journalists to visit the battle areas, and Iraq has granted only selective facilities to the foreign press, so that some questions remain tantalizingly unanswered for the time being. The Gulf War between Iraq and Iran began on 22 September 1980, but momentum quickly ran down, and a stalemate ensued when the rains (and snows) came in November. During the winter months military movement of any magnitude is most difficult. As both sides are likely to use this period to prepare for a spring offensive, the fighting so far can be regarded as the First Round, perhaps the first of several.

In this war, which has revived age-old ethnic hostility between Arab and Persian, there are some intriguing contrasts and similarities between the two combatants. For example, regular Iraqi armed forces are fighting Iranian revolutionaries; Iraqi armed forces have over 15 years of battle experience fighting the Kurds in the mountains, and have briefly clashed with the Israelis in 1973, while the Iranians have no prior combat experience at all; the forces committed to battle on both sides are comparatively small, as are the casualties; both countries are in similar stages of economic development and have to import weaponry; both are major oil producers and are potentially wealthy; limited damage has

been done to oil installations on both sides, and oil has continued to be exported, but at a lower volume.<sup>1</sup>

### COURSE OF THE WAR

In brief outline, Iraqi forces attacked Iran on three axes, the main one being in the south across the disputed Shatt-al-Arab waterway toward Khorramshahr and Abadan. These cities are located in Iran's Khuzistan province, inhabited by 3.2 million people, about two thirds of whom are Arabs. Arabs refer to this province as Arabistan. The cities of Khorramshahr and Abadan, with their oil complexes and docks, stand on what are virtual "islands," being cut off from the mainland by rivers over which there are only two main bridges. Surprising resistance was met, and by November, despite earlier Iraqi claims to having occupied the whole of Khorramshahr, they admitted that parts of Abadan were still in Iranian hands. Such is still the case. Certainly the "island" was not effectively sealed off, and small Iranian rivercraft were used at night to supply the defenders.

The Iraqi armored thrusts into Khuzistan initially bypassed towns, stopping just short of Ahwaz, the provincial capital. Later Iraqi attempts to reduce the towns of Dizful and Susangird were unsuccessful. There are an Iranian air force base, hardened aircraft shelters, and underground command facilities at Dizful, which is within range of Iranian artillery and shielded from the west

by a river. Ayatollah Khomeini has urged all these cities and towns to become "Stalingrads."

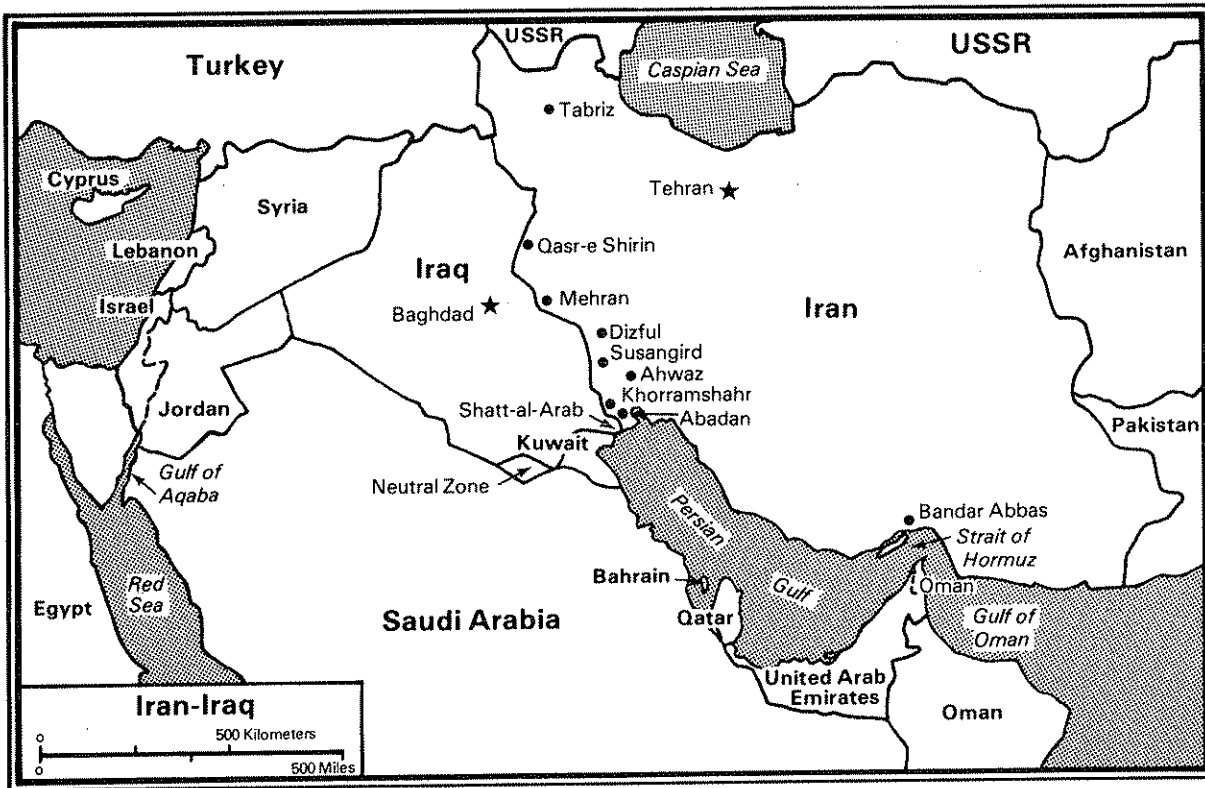
Further north, a second thrust was made in the area of Mehran, some 15 miles across flat desert from the border. After seizing this town, the Iraqis moved some five miles east to the base of the mountains. The importance of Mehran is its position on the frontier road that runs north-south on the Iranian side of the border. There is no similar frontier road on the Iraqi side.

In their third thrust, farther north still, the Iraqis attacked in the area of the Iranian border town of Qasr-e Shirin, which is on a junction of the frontier road and the main east-west road linking Tehran and Baghdad. Qasr-e Shirin was taken by an Iraqi mountain division in a night flanking movement to the south, following which the Iraqis pushed on eastward another 20 miles to the base of the mountains. Throughout much of its length the Iranian frontier road is only a few miles from the mountains to its east, while to the west are many miles of flat Iraqi desert. Both

Mehran and Qasr-e Shirin were taken and held to prevent any Iranian counterattack from getting onto the Iraqi road system. Baghdad is only a little more than 100 miles from the Iranian frontier, meaning that Iraq generally lacks strategic depth.

### IRAQI WAR AIMS

President Saddam Hussein of Iraq launched his attack on Iran to assert his full sovereignty over the Shatt-al-Arab and the three small islands in the Strait of Hormuz, and to regain some 240 square miles of disputed "border territory." He also wanted to prevent Khomeini's Islamic Shiite Revolution from spilling over into his own eastern Shiite provinces, where the inhabitants have expressed discontent with his Baath-Sunni minority government. Figures vary, and are disputed, but there are probably over 5 million Shiites in Iraq (total population about 12 million), and less than 3 million Sunnis. Khomeini is a Shiite, as are over 80 percent of Iranians.



President Hussein sees himself as the potential leader of the world's unaligned nations, whose heads of state or their representatives are due to meet in Baghdad under his chairmanship in 1982. He wants to take on Tito's cloak and to upstage Castro. To be able to speak from a position of strength, President Hussein wants the center of power in the gulf area to be in Baghdad, an ambition contested by Khomeini who would see that role rather reserved for Tehran. A personal vendetta has developed between Hussein and Khomeini, with Hussein wanting to topple Khomeini from power in Iran and also to gain an economic stranglehold on that country.

Despite the virulent propaganda war between Iraq and Iran, the counter-accusations, the border incidents, and the armed clashes along the common frontier during the months preceding the attack, the Iranians were taken completely by surprise. So were the Americans and Soviets. It was felt by intelligence sources that President Hussein would not risk open war, as he had formidable internal opposition from his Kurds and Shiites as well as from smaller factions. Martial law had been imposed on some Shiite provinces. At least half his army of about 12 divisions was in the north as a bulwark against any resumption of the Kurdish insurrection,<sup>2</sup> and he was almost at the shooting stage in his quarrel with next-door Syria. In 1978, the Soviet Union had agreed to completely re-equip his armed forces with modern weapons. Deliveries had slowly begun, but it would be a considerable time before all were received and absorbed. It is often said that modern means of surveillance are able to prevent an enemy from achieving complete initial surprise in war. But this is not so. The attackers achieved surprise in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and again in the Gulf War.

### A SHORT WAR?

President Hussein almost certainly planned for a short war of perhaps seven to 14 days, but when at the end of this period he had made so few gains he was forced to

continue. There is little evidence that the Iraqis had a comprehensive master plan to allow for the alternative of a long-term war. Another disappointment was that the noisy Iraqi tanks and artillery did not have the expected awe-inspiring effect, so that the Iranian defenses, unlike the Walls of Jericho, refrained from tumbling down. Yet another disappointment was that the Arab population of Khuzistan, despite impassioned exhortation, remained passive and failed to greet the Iraqi forces as deliverers from Iranian tyranny.

The main Iraqi miscalculation was the unexpectedly stiff Iranian resistance encountered. President Hussein had noted the ravages the Islamic Revolution had wrought on the Iranian armed forces: the beheading, imprisonment, dismissal, or disappearance of practically all general officers and many field grade officers too; and the cowering of the remaining soldiery in barracks under Soldiers' Committees. He also noted that the Iranian armed forces had been equipped mainly with American and Western weaponry, and calculated that, owing to the rift with the United States over the hostage situation, no further weapons, replacements, spares, or ammunition would be sent to Tehran. He saw the rapid departure of about 40,000 foreign military advisers and technicians, and observed also the generally poor showing of the Pasdars (Revolutionary Guards) in their skirmishes with the Kurds in the mountains. Additionally, he underesti-

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mated the value of nationalism in uniting a country under attack.

The initial resistance by the Iranians in the Khorramshahr and Abadan areas was mustered by an unprepared conglomeration of Pasdars, police, paramilitary groups, and volunteers. During the Islamic Revolution, armories had been broken into and ransacked, so that there were plenty of weapons in many hands. The Iraqis repeated the mistake of the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War on the Suez Canal front by relying on tank units instead of combined arms teams. Tanks were vulnerable and at a distinct disadvantage in the streets of the suburbs and dock areas. In the first six weeks, the Iraqis are reckoned to have lost over 200 tanks. They appeared to have only small infantry elements in action, and seemed intent on avoiding infantry casualties. A two-week pause had to be taken while the Iraqi Special Forces Regiment, paratroop units, and part of the elite Presidential Guard underwent training in street and house-to-house fighting preliminary to joining the action.

This pause gave the Iranians needed time to get their defenses organized and to rush in reinforcements. Army units were brought out from barracks and put into the front line, doing most of the subsequent fighting. Artillery units also appeared, as did helicopter gunships. The less well-trained and disciplined Pasdars were generally positioned in rear of the soldiers to ensure that the soldiers did not withdraw or desert. As put by President Bani-Sadr, Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian armed forces, "The people are at the front, so troops cannot withdraw."<sup>3</sup> This statement probably aggravated the existing bad feeling between the armed forces and the Pasdars.

### THE AIR AND NAVAL WARS

Neither air force has been truly effective, limited as it has been largely to spasmodic strategic bombing. There have been no large bombing raids, few dogfights, little reconnaissance activity, and no cooperation with ground forces. Both sides have the acute problem of aircraft replacements and spares.

Midtown Tehran and Baghdad have not been hit, but a few bombs have been dropped on the outskirts. Both capitals have in place a competent civil defense system. Some oil installations have been selectively bombed, but precision seems lacking. There seems to be an unwritten and unspoken mutual agreement not to cause more than token damage to each other's capitals, main cities, and oil installations.

The Iraqi air force had about 332 combat aircraft, principally Soviet models,<sup>4</sup> at the outbreak of the war. About half were dispersed to airfields in Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia for safety. Many have since returned to Iraqi bases, but not all. Since the Iraqis had possessed Soviet aircraft for some years, it was expected that despite the withdrawal of active Soviet assistance the personnel would be able to fly and maintain them with adequate efficiency, but Iraqi pilots seem cautious and lacking in aggressiveness. This may be partly due to natural hesitancy after release from the Soviet leash, and partly because they have to conserve aircraft and are thus told not to take unnecessary risks. The performance of Iraqi pilots can be expected to improve as the war continues. It is estimated that the Iraqis have lost about 80 aircraft.

Iran had about 445 combat aircraft, mainly American, of which a sizable proportion were US-made Phantoms which had obviously suffered from neglect when the foreign technicians left. It was problematic how many could fly, but about 100 were quickly made airworthy and more later. The Iranians are ingeniously developing a talent for "vulturization," as they call it, not only of aircraft but of tanks, vehicles, and weapon systems. The US-supplied F-14A aircraft, of which Iran has 77, have not yet been seen in the air.

Iranian pilots, many trained in the United States, seem to be more skillful and daring than their Iraqi counterparts, and are good at dodging Soviet-built SAM missiles and at making low-level approaches under the Iraqi radar. To counter Iranian air raids, the Iraqis became adept at anticipatory firing of their Soviet ZSU-23-4 antiaircraft guns,

causing attacking aircraft to fly into a curtain of lead. The Iranians have lost some 100 aircraft. Many of the munitions dropped by Iranian aircraft on Iraqi targets did not explode because they had not been properly fused and primed.

Claims made by both sides of casualties inflicted and damage done on the enemy are greatly exaggerated for propaganda purposes, but close study indicates that losses admitted by the two sides are remarkably accurate. A consensus of estimates indicates that between 5000 and 6000 combat deaths occurred in the first three months of the Gulf War.

Naval activity during the war has been quite limited. Both sides have a number of small coastal naval craft, Iran about 38, exclusive of 14 hovercraft, and Iraq about 48. The Iraqis include in that number 12 Soviet-built fast attack craft, armed with the Styx missile, the type that in October 1967 sank an Israeli destroyer in the first naval action of its kind in history. Neither side seems keen to risk its ships in combat, on coastal raids, for interdiction, or even for patrol. They have largely remained tied up to their quays and docks, their only activity being to fire their guns and missiles at hostile aircraft whenever they appear overhead.

#### THE KURDS AND THE SOVIETS

Both countries have sizable Kurdish minorities (about 2.3 million Kurds in Iraq, and over 4 million in Iran), with histories of unrest and discontent. The Iraqi Kurds are hostile to the Baghdad government because it did not implement promised autonomy; since Ayatollah Khomeini rejected a similar Iranian Kurdish demand, they in turn have become actively hostile to the Tehran government. The Kurds are divided among themselves, however, and have confused and changing loyalties. There are several Kurdish political parties, some completely communist, and others containing communists or those educated in the Soviet Union who tend to look toward Moscow for guidance and support. The two Kurdish areas adjoin along a mountainous stretch of hinterland, forming a vulnerable northern flank for both Iraq and

Iran, one which could become fertile ground for infiltration and mischief-making. The Kurds, in their various factions, are fighting both for and against their national governments, and between themselves. If a leader could unite them, the Kurds would become a significant factor, but this eventuality seems doubtful at the moment.

The Soviets have a deep interest in the Gulf area, and would doubtless like to Balkanize it in some way to enable their influence to percolate more easily on the "divide and influence" principle. The Soviets would also like bases in the Gulf and on the Arabian sea, and to be able to control or block the outward flow of Middle East oil. At the outbreak of the Gulf War the Soviet Union declared its neutrality, withdrawing its military advisers and technicians from Iraq, and publicly announcing that it had ceased to supply weapons, spares, and equipment. Perhaps the Soviets will resume military supplies for a political price. There of course always remains the possibility that they will secretly arm some of the Kurdish factions or other discontented minorities in Iran. Fishing in troubled waters is an old Soviet pastime, and they can be expected to do so in the Gulf War whenever they calculate that such will further their long-term aims.

#### FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

With a population of about 35 million—three times the size of that of Iraq—the Iranians have two principal security problems. One is the struggle for power between President Bani-Sadr and his technocrats against the Mullahs and the Grand Islamic Coalition in the Majlis; the second is the ever-present danger of fragmentation as large dissident minorities insist on autonomy or even independence. Bani-Sadr heads the Supreme Defense Council, and as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces has spent much time in the battle areas with the troops, busily building a power base. The possibility of Bani-Sadr, or even as yet some unknown military officer, heading a military coup cannot be ruled out. So far, a mixture of regular forces, Pasdars, and volunteers has been fighting confused

defensive battles, and it is too early yet to determine what tactics will evolve, or to comment definitively on the prospects of the armed forces. There is no evidence that Iran's much ballyhooed "counterattacks" have truly threatened the Iraqi gains.

In Iraq, President Saddam Hussein is striving to remove ultimate political power from the armed forces, which have traditionally held it, and indeed which pushed him into office. Real power would reside instead in a political militia loyal to him personally. Cuban advisers are helping him to expand the Baathist national guard to about 325,000 men and women, who are to be distributed in small groups throughout the country to proselytize potential adherents and monitor any plots against the Baathist regime. The Gulf War gave this organization an unexpected boost. Renamed the People's Army, it has assumed the civil defense role and other paramilitary commitments. Uniformed and armed, members of the People's Army are given military training and political indoctrination: all must be members or supporters of the Baath Party. The People's Army has both a youth and a women's section. Garrisoning Qasr-e Shirin and some rear areas, it serves as a counterbalance to the regular forces. Entry into the Iraqi armed forces has traditionally been the avenue to political advancement, but now President Hussein is determined to make the forces professional and nonpolitical.

There are some good junior officers in the Iraqi army who need scope to exercise more initiative in battle, but there is a lack of sufficient competent medium-grade field commanders. The soldiers have fought at times with fanaticism and bravery. Iraqi forces will prove increasingly formidable to the extent that they produce more infantry and capitalize on combined arms teams. Their avenues of communication in the war zone can be expected to improve. On the southern front especially, the Iraqis have accumulated a huge array of road-building equipment and are working furiously to turn fair-weather tracks into all-weather roads. A huge dike is being constructed to cope with floodwaters, should any of the local dams be breached. The welter of Iraqi shelters, dug-

outs, and trenches is reminiscent of a scene in Flanders during World War I.

Since the Shatt-al-Arab is now in the front line, both countries are using alternate supply routes. The Iraqis are making use of the land routes through Jordan to the Gulf of Aqaba and through Turkey. They are exporting oil through pipelines across Turkey and Syria, while Iran has made Bandar Abbas in the Strait of Hormuz its main port.

#### A GLANCE AHEAD

Both sides are resolute in their determination to fight and win the Gulf War; both have limited military potential; both face supply handicaps; both need military victories to boost home morale and keep their governments in power; and both so far have carefully husbanded resources, committing only small proportions of their men and arms to battle. The deduction must be that the struggle between Iraq and Iran will be a long one, with periods of comparative stalemate interspersed with short bouts of fighting as the availability of weaponry and ammunition permit. Iraq, which has occupied about two-thirds of Khuzistan province but only one city, is trying to establish an "Arabistan government," which would then demand independence from Iran. The suspicion is that Iraq has no intention of returning any of the Iranian territory it manages to occupy, especially in Khuzistan, which contains over 80 percent of Iran's oil wells and petroleum installations. The Second Round of the Gulf War must be due to start in the spring of 1981.

#### NOTES

1. Many observers, mindful of the huge destruction at the Iranian refinery at Abadan, assume that Iranian crude oil production has been affected. The primary function of the Abadan refinery, however, was to produce refined petroleum products for Iranian domestic use. It now appears that crude oil exports by Iran are actually rising. See Robert D. Hershey Jr., "Oil-Export Rise by Iran Is Reported," *The New York Times*, 15 January 1981, pp. D1, D17.

2. Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt, 1961-72* (London: Faber, 1973).

3. Press conference, 12 October 1980.

4. *The Military Balance 1980-1981* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1980), pp. 42-43. All subsequent figures on military strengths are from this source.