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The Iraqi Army's Defeat in Kuwait

JAMES W. PARDEW, JR.

Saddam Hussein's campaign to consume Kuwait was a military disaster of historic proportions for Iraq. It left the country in ruin and the Iraqi army a smoldering wreckage in the desert. Though the outcome of Desert Storm was never in doubt, the speed and scope of the Iraqi army's collapse were surprising. By worldwide standards, Iraq's army was formidable. Iraq was equipped with modern systems of Soviet and Western design and combat-experienced by eight years of war with Iran. Further, its senior military leaders had planned and executed corps-sized maneuvers in combat. The Iraqi army was large, possessed a professional officer corps, and had the potential to expand through national mobilization. Iraq held weapons of mass destruction and had used chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War to support combat maneuver.

Why did this force immediately crumble against the coalition? Most of the answers are found in the unity, determination, and superior quality of US and allied forces. However, Iraqi political and military failures at critical points in the conflict also contributed to the collapse of the Iraqi army in the Kuwait Theater of Operations (KTO). Throughout the confrontation, Saddam Hussein's personal actions were focused on political outcomes, lacked comprehension of military realities, and undermined the will of the very military forces that were critical to Iraqi strategy. Further, the Iraqi defense in the KTO presented visible weaknesses that were fully exploited in the coalition offensive.

With its invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, Saddam sought to devour quickly and cheaply Kuwait and its resources. This would enable him to dominate OPEC and the Persian Gulf region as the most powerful combined economic-military power in the area. The Iraqi population, accustomed to centralized direction from Saddam Hussein and broadly resentful of the wealth and position of the Kuwaiti population, largely supported the seizure of Kuwait. Facing increasing international reaction over the invasion, Saddam's policy

thereafter was designed more for deterrence and a negotiated settlement than warfighting. Saddam may never have intended to fight the coalition. Certainly when he invaded Kuwait he could not have believed that in a period of months he would be engaged in combat with US military forces.

As the United States responded to the Iraqi aggression and the coalition began to form, Saddam Hussein made two strategic miscalculations that directly contributed to Iraq's defeat on the battlefield. First, he underrated US resolve. Saddam's model for dealing with the United States apparently was the Vietnam War.¹ He seemed convinced that a small, determined, and well-armed country could wear down the US commitment by threatening or inflicting significant US combat casualties. Saddam boasted that his country was experienced in war and accustomed to casualties.² He believed the United States would become distracted from the conflict and that a large domestic anti-war movement would develop to challenge US national policy. He expected the US population to be unwilling to make significant sacrifices on behalf of Kuwait.

In the end, it was Iraq that lost its will. Although Saddam had early public support for the seizure of Kuwait, popular commitment deteriorated over time. As Iraq recognized its vulnerability to attack and the damage mounted from the air campaign, the Iraqi public lost enthusiasm for Saddam's Kuwait policy. The loss of national commitment spread to the military and drained the Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait of their will to fight. This loss of will ultimately was devastating to Iraqi defenses. As the air war continued, the commitment of the forces deteriorated further and Iraqi desertion rates climbed, leaving many units at low combat effectiveness because of serious personnel shortages.

Saddam's second miscalculation was the belief that the coalition was fragile. He did not recognize the depth of opposition in Syria and Egypt created by his invasion of Kuwait. He consistently played to a theme of Arab unity and attempted to define the conflict as an Arab-Israeli issue³ to split the coalition. In fact, the invasion of Kuwait had so upset the balance of power in the Middle East and OPEC that it constituted an unacceptable condition for the strongest nations in the region—Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. With external leadership to pull them together, the coalition proved to be far more resilient and determined to restore balance than Iraq envisioned.

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Saddam's Military Strategy

Iraq's military actions in the KTO can be broken into three phases—the invasion in August, the deterrence period from September 1990 to January 1991, and the defensive phase during Operation Desert Storm in January and February 1991.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, although it met limited resistance, was a relatively complex combined arms operation. It included ground, sea, and air forces operating on multiple axes and was conducted during night and day. Whether Iraq intended to continue operations into Saudi Arabia is arguable. Even if an attack on Saudi Arabia was not planned, however, Iraqi forces in Kuwait were positioned to intimidate Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms.

Once Iraq consolidated its hold on Kuwait, the deterrence phase—the longest phase of the conflict—began. Throughout the autumn and early winter, Iraq's general headquarters gradually created a theater defense in depth designed to deter a coalition ground operation by threatening the attacker with high casualties. Iraq probably never believed that it could achieve a classic military victory over coalition forces. Saddam Hussein's definition of victory was in all likelihood more modest, consisting of any outcome from a negotiated settlement with the coalition, gained either through deterrence of an attack or by achieving a stalemate on the battlefield. Therefore, the deterrence period was characterized by the gradual buildup of theater defenses in depth and was combined with Iraqi psychological operations emphasizing a determination to inflict high casualties through combat operations, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism.

The third phase—defense against the coalition offensive—was the least desirable situation from the Iraqi standpoint. War represented the failure of Saddam's political strategy of deterrence leading to a negotiated settlement. In this phase, Iraq's military strategy was simple: survive the air campaign with basic military capabilities intact, attempt to draw Israel into the war to split the coalition, inflict heavy casualties leading to a battlefield stalemate on the ground, and force the coalition to negotiate. Even if Iraq had to withdraw from Kuwait as a result of a negotiated settlement, Saddam could claim victory, probably maintain power in Iraq, and possibly assume leadership of the Arab world, one of his original objectives.

The heart of Saddam Hussein's deterrence strategy—and therefore the heart of Iraq's military strategy—was the Iraqi army in the KTO. The Iraqi air force, although well-equipped, was largely symbolic. The air force never seriously challenged coalition air power. In fact, the embarrassing defeat of two Iraqi F1 Mirage aircraft over the Persian Gulf on 24 January 1991 was the last significant combat operation by the Iraqi air force in the conflict. The primary mission of the Iraqi air force thereafter was survival, as the lack of combat operations and the exodus of aircraft to Iran suggest.

Iraqi Theater Defenses

The coalition air campaign launched on 16 January 1991 initiated the destruction of Iraqi defenses in the KTO. As projected by General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the campaign isolated the theater from Iraq.⁴ The air campaign also made other vital contributions to coalition ground operations in the KTO. The most significant was the psychological effect of air attacks on Iraqi forces. With public commitment already wavering, exposed Iraqi troops in the Kuwait Theater endured extensive aerial bombardment with no means to retaliate. The ensuing frustration and fear for their personal safety, concern for relatives in Iraq, and the disruption of basic support to troops combined to fracture the will of Saddam's army in the KTO. This was particularly true in the weaker forward units most critical to Iraqi defenses. Additionally, the air campaign denied Iraq critical operational intelligence available previously from aerial collection platforms. Iraqi commanders became subject to deception and unable to comprehend coalition actions. Finally, perhaps more important than destruction of equipment in the KTO, the air campaign fixed Iraqi forces in place in the theater, preventing them from reacting to coalition preparations for the ground offensive.

The Iraqi defense in the KTO would not have been incompetent against most other opponents. It reflected a refinement of lessons learned in the war with Iran and classic principles of war applied to a theater defense. While their defense met basic military standards and was reasonably resourceful, it was not capable of dealing with AirLand Battle as conducted by General Schwarzkopf's command. Further, the Iraqi army's defensive formation in the KTO had several critical flaws which made it vulnerable to coalition exploitation.

Iraq took the US objective to expel its forces from Kuwait literally. The Iraqi military plan concentrated on defending the territory of Kuwait. Consistent with the deterrent strategy, the defense was designed to force a war of attrition in Kuwait, to cause high casualties, and to allow Iraq to control the tempo of the battle. This self-imposed limitation of their defensive disposition to Kuwait was a fatal flaw that enabled the coalition later to bypass fixed forward defenses and strike with two US corps in the theater rear after only a few hours of the ground offensive.

The Iraqi defense in the KTO was largely linear, consisting of three primary layers: the forward obstacle-and-infantry belt, the corps operational reserve, and the Republican Guards theater reserve. The most critical component of this defense was the forward obstacle-and-infantry line. This defense featured a complex obstacle system along the Kuwaiti coast and the border with Saudi Arabia, extending a few kilometers west of Kuwait into Iraq. A continuous line of infantry divisions was behind the obstacle system. These divisions were reinforced on likely avenues of approach. Towed artillery in large quantities provided indirect fire coverage of the barrier system. The bulk

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of Iraqi forces and artillery in the KTO was devoted to this fixed forward disposition. The mission of this force was to cause a deliberate attack into the obstacle system, to slow and stall the attacker, and to allow time for increasingly larger armored counterattack forces to strike.

Each forward corps had at least one tank or mechanized division as the mobile operational reserve—the second layer of the defense. Finally, the Republican Guards heavy and light divisions, reinforced with heavy divisions from the regular army, made up the theater counterattack force.

Maneuver forces were augmented with extensive artillery and rocket forces, air defense, and other combat and combat support assets. The logistics system was robust, and engineer mobility and countermobility work in the theater was extensive. The Iraqi intelligence system, however, was very limited.

From a theater perspective, the defense was weighted heavily in the east, with the Iraqi leadership anticipating a coalition amphibious operation over the beach or a ground attack up the coastal highway from eastern Saudi Arabia.

Iraq had in reality two armies in the KTO—the regular army and the Republican Guards. The regular army, constituting the bulk of forces in the KTO, varied widely in combat capability. The best regular forces were in heavy divisions in the theater reserve and the corps that defended the southeastern section of Kuwait along the coast where Iraq believed the main attack would fall. The regular army's disposition in Kuwait supported their strategy, following sound military practices for a linear defense. However, the forces themselves were ill-trained and ill-prepared to execute this defense. Some regular army units and forward forces were infantry divisions formed when Saddam mobilized a number of veterans and civilians to flesh out his forces after the crisis began. Training and support for these forces was poor, particularly after the air war commenced. While the Iraqi defense in the KTO relied on infantry and artillery units to cover the forward barrier system, these units were of insufficient quality to fulfill this mission against a well-trained opponent.

The second army in the KTO was the Republican Guards. These were the best-equipped, best-trained, and best-supported forces in the Iraqi army, the symbol of Iraqi power and the foundation of Saddam Hussein's authority. The Republican Guards in the KTO were positioned to serve as a theater reserve to restore defenses in the forward corps. The positioning of Republican Guards

also allowed the Iraqi command authority to withdraw and preserve them, or to use them for defense of Iraq should the coalition operations proceed faster than expected. Iraq probably never intended to use the Republican Guards for military operations to reinforce a deteriorating situation forward in Kuwait.

Iraqi Defensive Failures

Although a ground war stalemate was the only hope for an acceptable outcome from Saddam's viewpoint once deterrence failed, the Iraqi forces in the KTO did not accomplish any of their operational or tactical missions. The forward obstacle system both failed to prevent quick penetration and was bypassed in the west. Tactical and operational counterattacks were uncoordinated and fragmented. Artillery was inflexible, and air defenses were no more effective against helicopters than against fixed-wing aircraft. As a result, Iraqi theater forces were defeated in 100 hours of ground combat.

Several weaknesses in the disposition and capability of forces in the KTO prevented an effective defense even if Iraq had maintained its will to fight. First, terrain in the KTO was cruel to the Iraqi planners. The desert environment lacked cover and concealment, making defenses clearly discernible and vulnerable to attack. Neither did it provide natural obstacles or key terrain to inhibit or channel coalition maneuver. On the contrary, terrain in the theater provided broad avenues of approach and facilitated high-speed armor operations by the attackers throughout the theater.

Iraqi defensive preparations in the KTO were visible, immobile, and therefore predictable, as General Schwarzkopf indicated in postwar interviews.⁵ The Iraqi forward defense was fixed, relying on an obstacle system to control the pace of battle. When this obstacle system failed to contain the coalition offensive, the attacker, not the defender, had the initiative. Iraq constructed its defense to best defend in the east but was prevented by the air situation, lack of intelligence, and speed of operations from adjusting forces to confront allied actions in the west.

Iraq's command, control, and intelligence were entirely inadequate for the type of war mounted against them. The intelligence battle in the KTO was as lopsided as the combat outcome. Further, Iraq's command and control were incapable of keeping up with the coalition tempo of battle. The Iraqi operation at Khafji at the end of January showed that Iraq was not able to operate at the coalition's speed. This inability to read the battlefield and react to coalition operations caused uncoordinated fire support, fragmented commitment of reserves, and sluggish reaction throughout the theater. Iraqi corps could not synchronize an adequate reaction to coalition actions even with the more capable Republican Guards.

At the tactical level, command and control were again insufficiently flexible, fire support could not be adjusted to rapid changes on the battlefield,

and commanders had no timely intelligence. However, the greatest tactical disadvantage on the part of Iraqi forces was the lack of training and the inadequate attention paid to morale issues.

The Iraqi forward defenses, which were critical to the success of their military strategy, were composed of the weakest units in the theater. Republican Guard infantry, which was much more capable, was held in reserve in Iraq, a mission for which these light forces were ill suited. The weak forward forces consisted largely of conscripts and mobilization veterans with marginal leaders. Yet they were asked to endure an extended air campaign and then defend their sector against well-trained, well-equipped, and well-led coalition forces. The resulting collapse is not surprising.

The war to liberate Kuwait does not lend itself to quantitative assessment. Iraq probably believed it had forces of sufficient numbers and quality for an adequate defense.⁶ However, the outcome of this war was determined not so much by technological advances or quantitative correlations as by coalition unity, US national resolve, overall quality of the coalition force, and superior knowledge of the Iraqi enemy. Iraq lost its commitment, and its forces could not cope with the tempo and violence of AirLand Battle.

Ultimately, Iraq's only hope for escaping a military defeat had been for Saddam's strategy of deterrence to work. Only a negotiated settlement, even one largely on coalition terms, would have avoided a war that destroyed Iraq as a dominant regional military power for years to come. Unable to prevent war, however, Iraq could not sustain the will of its forces in the theater. The air campaign shattered the resolve of much of the nation and its forces. Thereafter the ground war—the phase which had appeared to offer Iraq's best hope for success—collapsed into rout as the coalition used every advantage to exploit Iraqi vulnerabilities and to achieve a military victory of record speed and efficiency.

NOTES

1. Saddam Hussein, "Letter to America," 26 September 1990, released by Baghdad International News Agency in English, published in FBIS-NES-90-187, 26 September 1991. References to the Vietnam War were used in Iraqi public statements throughout the conflict.

2. Saddam Hussein, interview with Turkish newspaper, *Milyet*, translated by FBIS, 20 September 1990.

3. Saddam Hussein, "Message to the Iraqi People, Faithful Arabs, and Muslims Everywhere," Baghdad Domestic News Service, read by announcer, translated by FBIS, 6 September 1990. This call for a holy Jihad was a constant propaganda theme attempting to induce the Arabs to see the conflict in an Arab-Israeli context. Saddam never wavered from this theme throughout the conflict.

4. General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, News Briefing, The Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 23 January 1991.

5. General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander-in-Chief, US Central Command, Interview with Barbara Walters, "20/20," ABC Network, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 15 March 1991.

6. Saddam Hussein, "Saddam Calls Up 250,000 More Troops," Baghdad Domestic News Service, translated by FBIS, 19 November 1990. In this call-up, Saddam stated that the United States would need a numerical superiority of 3 to 1 to launch an attack.