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**TACTICAL EVOLUTION IN THE IRAQI ARMY:
THE ABADAN ISLAND AND FISH LAKE CAMPAIGNS
OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR**

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A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

TACTICAL EVOLUTION IN THE IRAQI ARMY: THE ABADAN ISLAND AND FISH LAKE CAMPAIGNS OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR by MAJ Michael E. Hoffpauir, USA, 153 pp.

Much has been written regarding Iraqi wartime activities at the strategic and operational levels during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), but few of these works address tactical operations. This thesis fills a small portion of that void by examining the evolution of selected combat tactics used by Iraq's ground forces in the battles of Abadan Island (1980) and Fish Lake (1987).

From its limited pre-war combat experiences, the Iraqi army developed tactics, techniques and procedures to fight in desert and mountainous environments. When the Iraqi army moved across the Iranian frontier in 1980, significant shortcomings surfaced in many aspects of its combat operations - command and control were poor, and commanders did not appear to understand the relationships between tactics, terrain, and mission. After its dismal showing, the army executed a static defense strategy for the next several years.

Then in early 1987, the army rebuffed Iran's most determined offensive of the war, showcasing an increasing flexibility to handle more complex tactical situations and setting the stage for the remarkable successes enjoyed in 1988 that brought the conflict to a close.

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This thesis has been a most illuminating experience for me, but I could not have completed my work without the assistance of many fine people.

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Next, I cannot say enough about the folks behind the counters in the Combined Arms Research Library (CARL) at Ft. Leavenworth, KS. They always move with a purpose and can find information about your topic(s) of interest in some of the darndest places!

Finally, I wish to extend my appreciation to the patient members of my committee, Dr. George W. Gawrych and LTC David J. Kuhl. Professor Gawrych's knowledge of Middle Eastern affairs, especially his familiarity with the region's complex military history, was instrumental in permitting me to put this product together in a semi-logical format. His instructions were always succinct, but contained sufficient leeway and guidance to permit me to adjust my findings and interpretations. LTC Kuhl's course in Middle Eastern Studies was one of the finest classes I have ever taken - and that includes my previous work in graduate school. The knowledge I gained during his class, as well as the opportunity to interact with Arab students, provided me with fresh insights that proved helpful during the latter stages of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

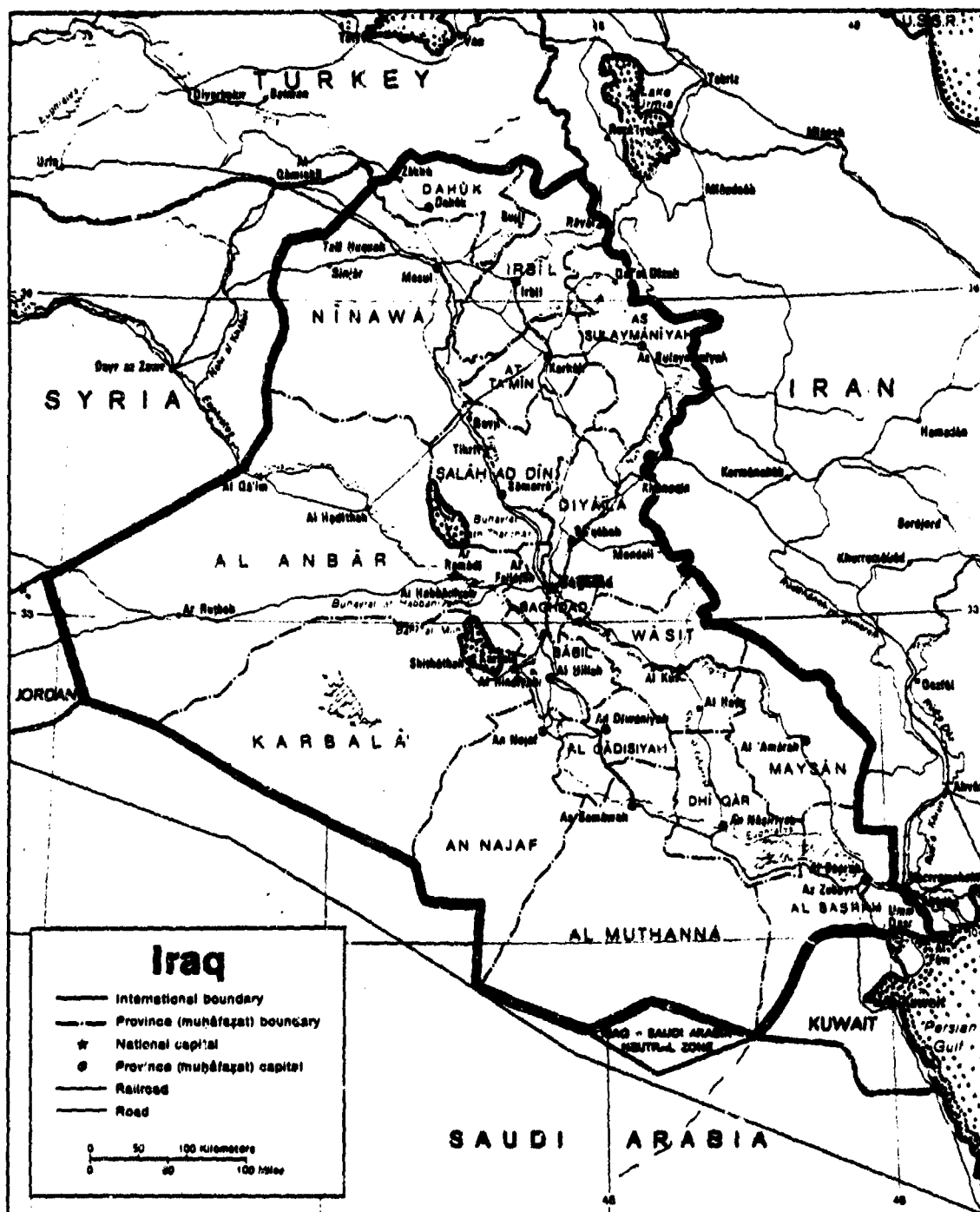
[The Iran-Iraq War] was a war of modern technology and ancient tactics. The weapons were World War III vintage, the tactics and operations were more akin to World War I.¹

Intent, Relevance, and Scope

This thesis follows the development of the Iraqi Army's combat tactics during the 1980-88 conflict with Iran as revealed through an examination of two of the war's most significant campaigns - Iraq's offensive to seize Abadan Island at the beginning of the conflagration and the Iraqi struggle to defend Basra in early 1987 (see Map 1).² The genesis and relevance of this study are inseparably linked to world events occurring between August 1990 and March 1991 when suddenly, and seemingly without provocation, the armed forces of Iraq seized and annexed Kuwait. The speed, audacity, and efficiency of the maneuver took the world by surprise. Yet, in the minds of the few military analysts familiar with the record of the Iran-Iraq War, the character of the attack and the reasons for it, were not that surprising.

¹ R. Jupa and J. Dingeman, "How Iran Lost/Iraq Won the Gulf War," Strategy & Tactics 133 (March-April 1990), 49.

² For all analyses in the thesis, the word "tactics" and the phrase "tactical level" refer to those military maneuvers conducted by "corps and smaller unit commanders." (As described in Field Manual 100-5: Operations, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1986, 10.) In the literature, such organizations may be referred to using by terms like divisions, brigades, groups, regiments, combat teams, task forces, battalions, companies, platoons, sections, squads, crews, or fire teams.



Map 1: Iraq. The two campaigns analyzed in this thesis occurred in southern Iraq, but are separated by a period of more than six years. Map modified from United States Central Intelligence Agency, "Iraq," March 1979.

International reaction to the seizure of Kuwait was swift, as the United Nations passed several resolutions condemning Iraq's transgression. Many Arab and non-Arab nations joined in unparalleled unity to protest Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's use of force. Other countries, however, decided to support Iraq's cause - Cuba, Libya, Yemen, and Jordan.

In the weeks after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the desert sands of Saudi Arabia became the stage for one of the greatest and most rapid military buildups in history. The United States, Great Britain, Egypt, Syria, and France deployed sizeable air, ground and naval forces into the region in a cooperative military effort with Saudi Arabia. Japan, Germany, and other nations whose governments or constitutions would not allow direct military assistance, promised to support the United Nations-approved effort with large financial contributions.

Faced with imminent war, military leaders from the coalition countries scrambled to gather as much information as possible on their potential Iraqi adversary. Like coaches scrutinizing the game films of an upcoming foe, analysts poured over the record of Iraq's most recent conflict - the eight year war with Iran. Much to their dismay, however, they quickly learned that the vast majority of analyses populating the unclassified literature were written for students of international relations, national security, or strategic studies - and not for soldiers preparing for battle.

At the time of this writing, many articles and books contain "thumbnail sketches" of numerous clashes between Iraq and Iran. Of these accounts, most are little more than disjointed transcriptions of

events as described in various newspapers. Rarely can one find a work focused on a thorough examination of "how Iraq fights" at the tactical level. Through an analysis of the *Abadan Island* and *Karbala-5* campaigns, this investigation begins filling that void.

Organization and Methodology

This thesis contains four chapters and employs a deductive methodology designed to develop a "mental image" of selected Iraqi war-fighting tactics. The body of related literature contained in various books, journals, and magazines is considerable, but not overwhelming. By comparison, however, the quantity of information contained in newspapers is an order of magnitude greater. (See Bibliography.)

After a thorough inspection of affiliated readings, the information was sorted into topics such as "the use of tanks" and "combat engineer activity." However, following discussions with the thesis committee, a consensus arose that the "evolution" of Iraqi combat tactics could be shown more clearly by simply identifying, describing, and analyzing the changes occurring over time.

Accordingly, Chapter One traces the development of Iraqi combat tactics before the war with Iran. To accomplish this goal, the discussion analyzes the historical response by the Iraqi military to external and internal "threats" to their country's national security. Topics include the lessons of war Iraq learned from their participation in the Arab conflicts with Israel, the relationship between political and military developments in Syria and Iran to the capabilities of the Iraqi military, and the methods by which Iraq's armed forces have periodically quelled internal disorders involving the Kurds.

In Chapter Two, the thesis turns to an examination of the combat associated with an Iraqi campaign this writer calls *The Battles of Abadan Island*. Here, the discussion seeks to answer the essential question: How good was the Iraqi army at the start of the war? The battles for control of Abadan Island, which occurred during September and October 1980, are significant because they represent the main effort in Iraq's four-pronged offensive opening the Iran-Iraq War. Most of the combat activity during these clashes happened within the city limits of Khorramshahr and Abadan, the island's two prominent urban centers. Because many armies characterize urbanized terrain as among the most difficult places in which to employ conventional military forces, Iraq's decision to send two heavy divisions into the cities provides a unique opportunity to scrutinize the strengths and weaknesses extant in the Iraqi army at the beginning of the conflict.³

Chapter Three probes the Iraqi army's effort to defend Basra from Iran's *Karbala-5* offensive of January and February 1987. During this campaign, the fighting features head-to-head action between Iranian and Iraqi light-infantry units as well as limited-objective counterattacks by Iraq's mobile mechanized and armored forces. Although the Iranians achieved tactical and strategic surprise in launching *Karbala-5*, the Iraqis, supported by a formidable defense system and the

³ U.S. Army tactical doctrine, for example, " . . . stresses that urban combat operations are conducted *only* when required and that built-up areas are *isolated* and *bypassed* rather than risking a costly, time-consuming operation in this difficult environment." (As written and italicized in Field Manual 90-10: Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT), Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1979, 1-1.) Soviet doctrine is believed to express similar concerns. (See Field Manual 100-2: The Soviet Army, Specialized Warfare and Rear Area Support, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1984, 10-1 and 10-3.)

timely arrival of reinforcements, won a major victory. Indeed, some analysts proclaim Iraq's defeat of the Iranian offensive as the turning point in the war.⁴

When one evaluates the performance of the Iraqi army by comparing the offensive battles for Abadan Island with the defensive fight near Basra, the results showcase a force that had undergone significant changes in the way it conducts warfare at the tactical level (for example, the use of massed armor and mechanized infantry in a counterattack role; or, the construction of elaborate, redundant defensive positions). These developments, in part a product of the new "freedom to act" that President Saddam Hussein granted the army general staff, comprise an Iraqi formula for success that presages the power their ground forces would display when they turned to the offensive in April 1988 and brought the eight year-long war to a stunning close.

As readers progress through the discussion, they should note that the two campaign narratives represent military operations set in diametrically opposing frameworks - one offensive, the other defensive. Yet, such differences do not hinder the course of the investigation, as both case studies are replete with examples of Iraqi offensive and defensive techniques, good and bad.

Chapter Four, the final section of the thesis, draws broader conclusions regarding the Iraqi army's military competence and war-fighting ability at the war. Also, in an effort to provide more

⁴ See, for example, the article by retired U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant General B.E. Trainor entitled: "Turning Point: Failed Attack on Basra." (New York Times, 19 July 1988, A9.)

conterporary relevance, the discussion briefly speculates how the Iraqi way of war manifested itself during the invasion of Kuwait.

CHAPTER 1

IRAQI ARMY TACTICS BEFORE THE WAR WITH IRAN

The Arabs have had 30 years of lessons . . . drilled into them by their experience against Israel. Some of these lessons filtered into Iraqi and Iranian thinking. While some lessons apply equally to both sides, it can be argued that the Arabs learned lessons that were, in some ways, different from those we learned. [Yet] for them, *their perception is their reality.* (Italics mine.)

MAJ R.E. Berquist, USAF¹

Iraq entered its eight-year war with Iran as the owner of a formidable land force, but the ability of the military leadership to orchestrate effective combat operations was, at best, amateurish. Yet by the conclusion of *The Battles of Fish Lake* in February 1987, Iraq's army demonstrated its ability to overcome substantial problems in tactics, techniques, and procedures (from now on, TTP); thus, the Iraqi army became one of the Middle East's most formidable fighting forces. To understand the significance of these changes, and their effect on the Iraqi army's combat capabilities, this thesis begins with a review of Iraq's combat experience since 1948.²

¹ R.E. Berquist, The Role of Airpower in the Iran-Iraq War, (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1988), 1.

² Readers interested in information concerning Iraq's military prior to the '48 war with Israel should consult W. Seth Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," in Defense Planning in Less-Industrialized States: The Middle East and South Asia, ed. Stephanie G. Neuman, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984), 30-31.

The Iraqi army's combat history derives from its role in protecting the country from two perceived sets of dangers - one regional and the other domestic. At the regional level, successive Iraqi regimes have been greatly concerned with the policies and actions of Israel - a situation that consistently placed Iraq "in the forefront of the Arab rejectionist movement" since 1949.³ In the 1960s, when Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi began expanding the size and regional influence of Iran's military, the Iraqis began observing Iranian politico-military moves with increased interest. Then, after the Baath returned to power in Iraq in 1968, developments in neighboring Syria (headed by a rival Baath faction) also came under greater scrutiny.⁴ (See Map 2).

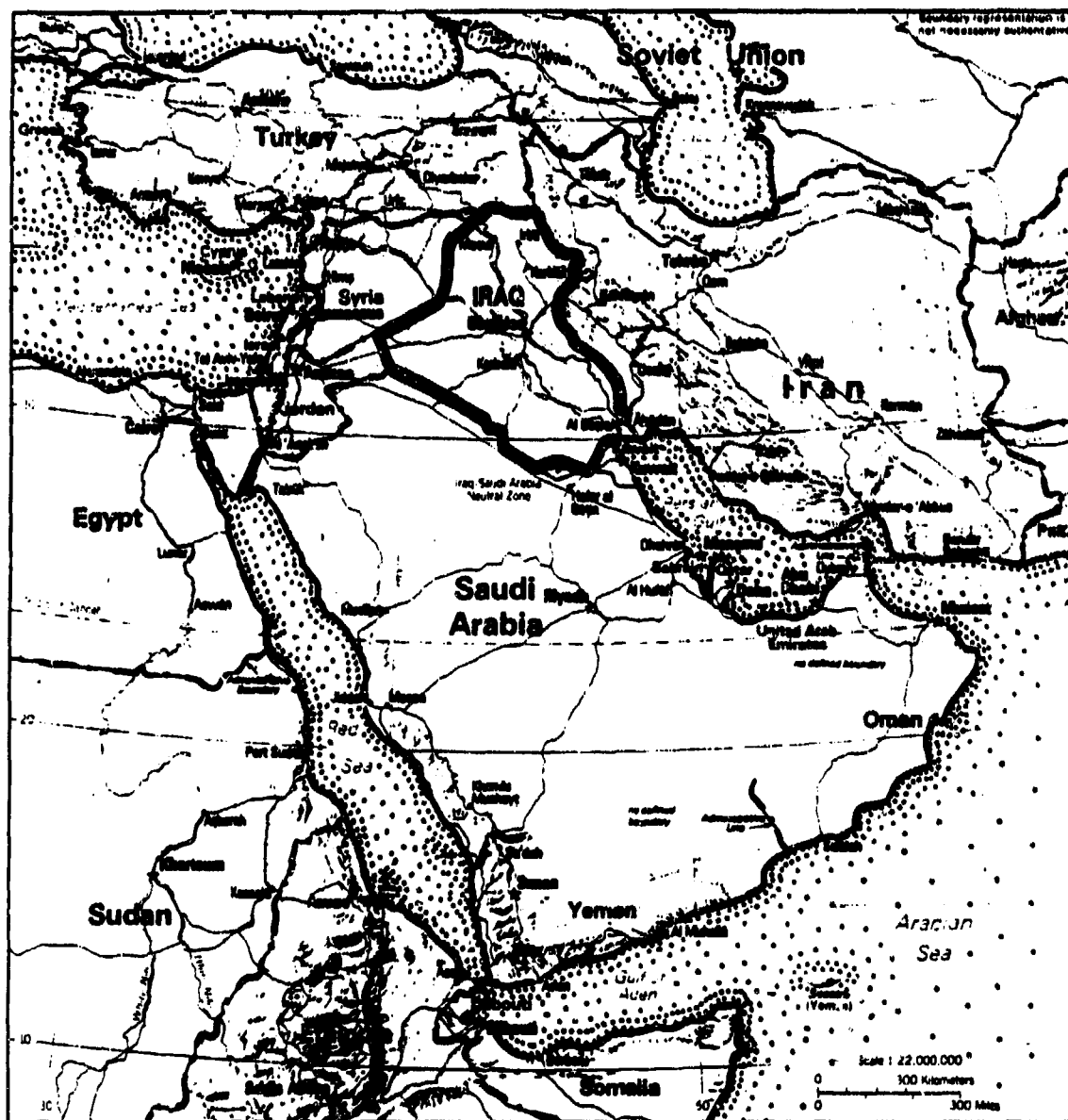
Beyond these external concerns, Iraq has also contended with recurrent internal disorder. Indeed, in the years prior to 1948, internal security was the Iraqi army's primary mission. "It appears that no thought had been given to foreign military ventures."⁵ The period between 1960 and 1975 is noteworthy for being a time during which the army had to quell several uprisings by the Kurds in the northern portions of Iraq.⁶

³ W.O. Staudenmaier, "Commentary: Defense Planning in Iraq, An Alternative Perspective," in Defense Planning in Less-Industrialized States: The Middle East and South Asia, ed. Stephanie G. Neuman, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984), 56.

⁴ Relative to Iran and Syria, Iraq's relations with its other neighboring countries, namely Jordan and Turkey, much less significant and are not discussed in the thesis. Also, see Staudenmaier, "Commentary: Defense Planning in Iraq, An Alternative Perspective," 56.

⁵ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 31.

⁶ Excluding events occurring since the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraqi leadership occasionally has ordered its army to act against the Shiites, who populate the southern part of the country. Further, during a period beginning in the late 1940s through the early 1950s, the army also conducted various "policing actions" against native Iraqi-Jews living



Map 2: Iraq and Environs. The Iraqi army's combat history derives from its role in protecting the country from two perceived sets of dangers - one regional, the other domestic. Map modified from United States Central Intelligence Agency, "Middle East," October 1990.

near Baghdad. Overall, military efforts against either parties pales in comparison to measures taken upon the Kurds; therefore, they are beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Iraq's responses to the previously mentioned perils have taught the military many significant lessons it subsequently put to use during the war with Iran. Unfortunately for Iraq, as often happens to many other countries, the lessons taken from one period of crisis are improperly applied or largely forgotten by the time of the next call to arms. Indeed, despite substantial qualitative and quantitative equipment improvements, a thorough review of the Iraqi army's combat record suggests a marked decline in readiness between 1948 and 1980.

Blame for this state of affairs cannot rest solely with the military, as the unpredictability of the Iraqi political environment usually has direct repercussions upon the armed forces. For instance, following the Baath coup in July 1968, officers of dubious reliability were purged from the ranks with little regard for their professional competence.⁷ Just as a well-prepared sports team is the product of excellent coaching and consistent management, a strong, capable army is often an outgrowth of good leadership and a stable government. From a military perspective, Iraq lacked in both.⁸

⁷ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 37.

⁸ Some readers may take issue with this conclusion by arguing that the Baath party has been in control since the 1968 coup and has brought a period of comparative stability to Iraq. This author would agree, but only to a certain extent. While many of the faces at the top of the party remain somewhat constant, the list of names at lower party echelons and top military positions have changed frequently. See, for example, Appendix I in Samir al-Khalil, Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1990), 292-296.

Combat Actions against Israel

In his landmark work Strategy, author B.H. Liddell-Hart notes "there are two forms of practical experience, direct and indirect - and that, of the two, indirect practical experience may be the more valuable because [it is] infinitely wider."⁹ Because internal events preempted the Iraqis from playing a role in all the Arab-Israeli conflicts before 1980, Liddell-Hart's observation becomes particularly significant to this study. Therefore, before the Iran-Iraq War, one should consider that the schooling of Iraq's army as a product of both their active and passive participation "in all main Arab wars with Israel."¹⁰ (Emphasis added.) Military analyst Anthony Cordesman's perspective of the lessons Iraq drew from the wars with Israel is particularly pertinent:

In the years that followed [these wars], Iraq enshrined many of the tactics and procedures involved into its training and planning without realizing the implications.¹¹

At the strategic level, most analysts judge Iraq's involvement in the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 as having "little military significance" to the outcome of these conflicts.¹² Nonetheless, the

⁹ B.H. Liddell-Hart, Strategy, 2d rev. ed., (New York, NY: New American Library, Signet Books, 1974), 3.

¹⁰ J. Alpher, "Israel and the Iran-Iraq War," In The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, ed. Efraim Karsh, 155-168, New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989, 155. Evidence of Iraq's deep-seated anti-Israel bias is seen in one of the fundamental tenets of the Iraqi Baath Party which holds that the creation of the Jewish nation came at the expense of an Arab peoples - the Palestinians. It was not until the war with Iran that Iraq gradually backed away from its long-held position that Israel was the principal obstacle blocking the way toward Arab Unity (a second tenet of the Baath).

¹¹ A.H. Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: The First Round," Armed Forces Journal International 119 (April 1982), 42.

¹² F.W. Axelgard, A New Iraq? The Gulf War and Implications for U.S. Policy, (New York, NY: Praeger, 1988), 9.

experiences that Iraq drew from these four wars are critical when one considers their direct and indirect influence upon Iraqi TTP as seen during the war with Iran.

The 1948 War with Israel

In May 1948, as Israel struggled for independence, Iraq sent a force of about "10,000 men - four infantry brigades, an armored battalion and supporting troops" to fight alongside other Arab countries against the Jews.¹³ Initially, only a portion of the Iraqi contingent, one brigade of infantry and the armored battalion, saw any combat action.¹⁴ After crossing the Jordan River into Israel near the community of Gesher (15 May 1948), the Iraqis entered their first battle (see Map 3). Following a short fight, the Israelis repulsed the Iraqis and they withdrew east into Transjordan. While regrouping after the engagement, the Iraqi force was joined before the end of May by an additional infantry brigade and at least one more armored battalion.¹⁵

The Iraqis fared better in their next series of engagements (25 May-9 June) when they surprised several Israeli units and drove them north of the town of Jenin. In fact, this victory placed the Iraqis within six miles of the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, instead of exploiting the apparent opportunity to "cut the State of Israel in two," the Iraqis

¹³ C. Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the War of Independence through Lebanon, (New York, NY: Random House, 1982), 23. While General Herzog uses the term "armor" in referring to some Iraqi units, readers must realize that only "... Egypt and Syria were equipped with tanks; Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq had armored-car contingents." (More information is contained on page 48 of Herzog's book.)

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 31.

decided to consolidate their gains - even when other Arab units were suffering severe reverses and desperately required assistance.¹⁶ Still, Israeli General Chaim Herzog lauded the Iraqi effort, pointing out how they used a combination of effective offensive and defensive TTP, especially excellent artillery fire and timely air support.¹⁷ Here, the significance of General Herzog's observation is that it may represent the last well-conducted battlefield maneuver by Iraqi land forces against a conventional opponent in the years before the Iran-Iraq War.

While the preceding examples suggest that the Iraqi army performed better after its shaky start, one cannot reach the same conclusion regarding Iraq's use of air forces. Indeed, the few references to combat missions completed by Iraqi aircraft usually are a part of more general discussions of Arab air power. According to one school of thought, it is "hard to detect . . . " from accounts of Arab air employment " . . . that [the Iraqis] derived any lessons about air power utilization" out of the broader Arab air experience in the war of 1948.¹⁸

Other writers disagree, noting that one lesson the Arabs discovered was defensive in nature. For instance, the Arabs:

. . . had learned there was a need to control the air over their troops in the somewhat coverless Middle Eastern topography. They could see that the army, the most important element of their military structure, could be demoralized, if not necessarily defeated by aerial bombardment. [They] did not seem to see the offensive potential in their air forces. They had yet to experience, however, the effects of unopposed bombardment on troops

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Herzog, 58.

¹⁸ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 31.

forced to retreat long distances over the desert. That lesson was yet to come.¹⁹

Regardless, in characterizing the overall accomplishments of the Iraqis during the 1948 conflict, most observers agree that their military "turned in a generally uninspired performance."²⁰ Another assessment is more direct in noting that "the unreadiness of the Iraqi military to engage in external wars was clearly revealed during the 1948 fighting in Palestine."²¹ However, this lackluster showing does not appear to be the result of negligence by military leaders. More than any other factor, "the poor conditions under which the [Iraqi military] fought - short rations, poor clothing, and a severe shortage of equipment" were battlefield manifestations of greater problems at home.²² Indeed, when the war broke with Israel, Iraq's main oil export pipeline (which ran through Israel) was closed, cutting the government's principal source of income and leading to depressed economic conditions throughout Iraq. The military had little hope of receiving new equipment, repair parts, or trained manpower. To summarize, one can easily argue that in the 1948 War "the Iraqi army fought a war it was incapable of fighting."²³

¹⁹ Berquist, 3.

²⁰ J.A. Wagner, "Iraq," in Fighting Armies: Antagonists in the Middle East, A Combat Assessment, ed. Richard A. Gabriel, 63-84, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983, 67.

²¹ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 31.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. See also Stephen Longrigg, Iraq: 1900-1950: A Political, social and Economic History, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 351-353.

The 1956 War with Israel

The middle and late 1950s, were a time in which Iraq was strapped with particularly unsettling political disorder. Therefore, Iraq played almost no role during the 1956 war in the Sinai.²⁴ Indeed, between 1954 and 1958, the government saw only two purposes for the Iraqi military - "to provide internal security and to act as a political symbol."²⁵ There was no evident need by the government to modernize the military and make it into a powerful fighting force because the ruling monarchy and the Army's officer corps were at odds over issues surrounding the rise of the Baathist movement in Iraq.²⁶

Any lessons of war Iraq's army may have drawn from the conflict in 1956 would come primarily from post-war studies of the experiences of other Arab nations. Based upon the types of problems seen in the Iraqi army at the start of the war with Iran, it is likely that the Iraqis did assess the battle histories of their Egyptian and Syrian brethren. For example:

Egypt's [military system] . . . put even more value on mass and weapons numbers. Egypt and Syria became steadily more separated from military reality. Their forces acquired "things" rather than effective forces and created a pyramid of illusions in which no bad news passed in any direction. The command system froze in a state of self-delusion reinforced by rigid structures of approval in operations, constant checks on independence of action, and compartmented support sections that divided such key functions as arms, maintenance, supply, and training within a grossly over-centralized force structure.²⁷

²⁴ Wagner, "Iraq", 67.

²⁵ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 32.

²⁶ Ibid.; G. Dyer, "Iraq," in World Armies, ed. John Keegan, 337-351, (New York, NY: Facts on File, 1979), 339.

²⁷ A.H. Cordesman, The Military Lessons of the Arab-Israeli Conflicts: Past and Future, (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1986), 11-12.

The 1967 War with Israel

Not long after the 1956 war ended came the first signs of stability in Iraq's political situation, an occurrence with the potential to favor efforts that would strengthen the military. Between 1958 and 1963, under the five-year leadership of President Abd al-Karim Qassem (himself a former infantry brigade commander), the inventory of the Iraqi military grew significantly. In addition, the Iraqis sent some of their officers and soldiers to train in the Soviet Union.²⁸

However, in 1963 Qassem was assassinated and a new period of political instability followed that lasted through the 1967 conflict. Indeed, several coup attempts and numerous conspiracies punctuate the years between 1963 and 1968. Many officers were purged from the military because of their suspected roles in the unsuccessful coups.²⁹ Thus, as had happened in 1956, the unstable political environment emanating from Baghdad would again be the cause of Iraq's ineffective participation in the 1967 war.

Indeed, when the crisis between Egypt and Israel erupted in May 1967, bickering among Iraqi officials forestalled a timely decision about how Iraq could best help other Arab countries. Some authorities advocated that the military send units to Egypt or Syria. Others opposed this course of action, noting that the ongoing internal war against the Kurds was a more immediate threat to Iraq's national

²⁸ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 32-35. Other than learning how to operate their new Soviet-supplied equipment, there is little information regarding what lessons the Iraqis derived from their training in the U.S.S.R.

²⁹ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 32-35.

security.³⁰ Nonetheless, the Iraqis did manage to dispatch the equivalent of a reinforced infantry division (three infantry brigades and an armored brigade) to Jordan's aid,

but the only brigade to cross into Jordan was so heavily attacked by the Israeli air force that only parts of it reached the Jordan River before the Jordanians agreed to a ceasefire. The rest of the division was sent into Jordan only after the fighting ended.³¹

Compared to their land forces, Iraq's air power had a much greater role in the 1967 conflict. Several days before the start of the fighting, the Iraqis repositioned some of their aircraft to forward airbases in western Iraq, near the border with Jordan. Israel detected this movement and decided to launch a preemptive strike against the Iraqis. On the afternoon of the first day of the war, the Israeli air force attacked the Iraqi airfield known as H-3 and destroyed at least nine aircraft on the ground. In retaliation, the Iraqis tried to mount a bombing mission, but only one plane got through to a target (and missed). When the Israelis tried to revisit the Iraqi airfield, the Iraqis were waiting for them and managed to down several aircraft with surface to air fires.³²

Despite a few isolated instances of success, Israel dominated the skies during the war - a situation that caused Iraq and other Arab countries to reevaluate their "commonly accepted role of airpower."³³ Importantly, their analyses failed to spawn the development of an air

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.; Herzog, 169; Wagner, "Iraq," 67.

³² The quote is from Wagner, "Iraq," 67; the remainder of the paragraph is paraphrased after Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 35.

³³ Berquist, 11.

force capable of countering an enemy in air-to-air combat. Instead, they envisioned air assets:

. . . as a strategic reserve to impose caution on the enemy, to step into possible breaches of the air defense system, or to exploit the situation after the air defense system weakened the enemy air force.³⁴

The prohibitive costs associated with maintaining and manning an effective air force were probably the dominant reasons that Iraq and other Arab countries decided to place more emphasis on building their air defenses instead of their air forces. This idea of air control hastened Arab interest in the acquisition of weaponry and the development of TTP that would "protect their armies under an air defense umbrella" of surface-to-air missiles (S.A.M.) and anti-aircraft artillery (A.A.A.) "fired in salvos in order to get as high a probability of kill" as possible.³⁵ In that Iraq had begun purchasing surface-to-air missiles before the 1967 War, the military leadership may have started thinking about this tactic before the conflict in 1967.³⁶

As previously mentioned, the years before the 1967 War saw Iraq buying new military equipment and devoting greater amounts of its gross national product to defense spending. Yet such acquisitions did not transform the military into an effective military force, they only backfired by further wrecking an already wavering economy. Thus, despite the arrival of new armaments for the armed forces, Iraq's

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁶ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 36.

internal chaos prevented the military from fielding its new equipment in a proper, orderly manner.³⁷

The 1973 War with Israel

Given their low level of involvement in the 1967 War, Iraq's role in the fighting of October 1973 marks their military's "first exposure to modern conventional warfare."³⁸ During the first week of the fighting, the Iraqi administration dispatched the 3rd Armored Division to the Golan front.³⁹ By 11 October, two brigades completed the arduous 1000 kilometer tactical road march across Iraq and Jordan - "an armor brigade with 130 tanks and a mechanized brigade with 50 tanks."⁴⁰ All remaining units of the division closed a few days later when a third brigade with 130 additional tanks arrived via the far less taxing method of heavy transport tractor-trailer.

On the afternoon of 12 October, elements from the 3rd Division's two lead brigades happened upon the right flank of an ongoing attack by the Israeli army (Kunitra, see Map 3). The sudden, but purely coincidental flank appearance of the Iraqis forced the Israeli commander

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dyer, "Iraq," 345; Wagner, "Iraq," 68.

³⁹ P. Allen, The Yom Kippur War, (New York, NY: Scribner's, 1982), 154; Herzog, 300. The 6th Armored Division (minus), a Special Forces Brigade, and 3 squadrons of aircraft are listed in addition to the 3rd Armored Division in the "Order of Battle" in Frank Aker, October 1973: The Arab Israeli War, (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1985), 165.

⁴⁰ Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: The First Round," 40.

to abandon his plan. Still, having obtained tactical surprise, the Iraqis failed to seize the moment - they did not attack in force.⁴¹

That night, in anticipation of an imminent Iraqi assault, the Israelis deployed four armored brigades in a box-shaped ambush.⁴² The Iraqis thrust came in the early morning hours of 13 October, but played directly into the teeth of the Israeli fire-sack. In the darkness, Israeli armor and artillery opened fire on the unsuspecting Iraqis at a distance of "200 yards" forcing them to withdraw "in disorder, leaving behind some 80 destroyed tanks."⁴³ In a matter of minutes the Israelis decimated the Iraqi 8th Mechanized Brigade. Three days later (16 October), a combined Iraqi-Jordanian attack had a similar ending, costing Iraq another "60 tanks burning on the battlefield."⁴⁴

Iraqi air force units operated on both the Suez and Golan fronts in the 1973 conflict and "Iraqi pilots received good marks for their performance."⁴⁵ For instance, Lt. General Saad el-Shazly, the Egyptian Chief of Staff, provides a favorable assessment of the performance of Iraqi Hunter pilots during the 1973 war:

I pay particular tribute to the Iraqi Hunter pilots for the daring and skill of their anti-tank strikes in the Sinai. They swiftly

⁴¹ This entire account is paraphrased from Trevor Dupuy, Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974, (Fairfax, VA: Hero Books, 1984), 467-468.

⁴² Here, the roughly 50 tanks in each of the four Israeli brigades represented an effective fighting strength equivalent to about a reinforced battalion. (Dupuy, 468.)

⁴³ Herzog, 301; Allen, 220-1; Dupuy, 468.

⁴⁴ Herzog, 301; Allen, 220-1.

⁴⁵ Berquist, 20.

gained such a reputation that our field commanders, calling for close air support, would frequently ask for [them].⁴⁶

Such instances of Iraqi aircraft employed in support of ground units, however, were rare as Arab leaders continued to look upon air power as an asset best suited for the role of strategic reserve. At the tactical and operational levels of war, this decision to keep combat aircraft away from the front was significant for two reasons. First, it had the effect of further cementing into Iraqi military practice the important (and previously discussed) conclusion derived from the 1967 war - that the best way to counterbalance an enemy air threat was by reliance upon a strong system of air defense.⁴⁷ Second, requirements for the Iraqi army and air forces to coordinate, develop, and practice cogent techniques of close air support were, therefore, unimportant.

Overall, General Herzog judges the performance of Iraqi air and land forces during the 1973 War to be unimpressive.⁴⁸ The following passage from his book The Arab-Israeli Wars vividly summarizes his point:

Inter-Arab coordination proved to be very faulty on the battlefield. Rarely did they succeed in coordinating and establishing a common language: on two occasions the Jordanians attacked while the Iraqis failed to join in; frequently Iraqi artillery support fell on the advancing or withdrawing Jordanians; and, on several occasions, Syrian aircraft attacked and shot down Iraqi aircraft. In general, the Iraqi forces moved slowly and cautiously, and were led without any imagination or flair. This

⁴⁶ S. el-Shazly, The Crossing of the Suez, (San Francisco, CA: American Mideast Research, 1980), 278.

⁴⁷ J.W. Amos, Arab-Israeli Military/Political Relations: Arab Perceptions and the Politics of Escalation, (New York, NY: Pergamon, 1979), 4; Berquist, 15.

⁴⁸ Herzog, 259.

hesitant behavior in battle was to be seen later when the Iraqi Army invaded Iran . . . in September 1980.⁴⁹

Tactical Lessons from the Arab-Israeli Wars

So, what were the most important tactical lessons the Iraqi military drew from their participation in and study of the Arab-Israeli conflicts since 1948? First, the military and political leadership became convinced that armor power is primal for combat in the open desert. The Israelis had it; the Egyptians, Syrians, Jordanians and Iranians had it; so should Iraq. Second, the leadership came to view mass and raw numbers of weapon systems (especially tanks and artillery pieces) as prerequisites to successful military operations. Third, to protect ground units, the Iraqis subscribed to the Arab idea that control of the air was dependent upon the development and possession of a robust air defense system. The numbers listed in Table 1 (end of chapter) under the column for tanks, artillery, and anti-air are testimony to all three lessons.

The Iraqi army also developed some practical techniques of combat service support from their experience at convoying vehicles over the distances between Baghdad and the Israeli frontier. Indeed, the wear and tear these journeys caused upon Iraq's valuable armor and mechanized vehicles forced the military leadership in 1973 to explore the option of using heavy equipment transporters. The trucking idea was so successful that it became standard procedure in the Iraqi army. During the war with Iran, the Iraqis would take the concept one step farther by integrating it into their tactical operations. The Iraqis

⁴⁹ Ibid., 303.

learned that by trucking entire units and their combat vehicles to crisis points on the battlefield, it could respond more rapidly to unforeseen changes in the tactical situation - literally permitting them to gain a tempo on the enemy. Such flexibility at brigade levels and below was new to the Iraqi army. Indeed, the procedure demanded commanders that could think ahead and act faster than their foes - a scarce commodity in the Iraqi military.⁵⁰

Tensions with Iran and Syria

Since the 1980-88 conflict between Iran and Iraq is the principal subject of this thesis, the present treatment of Iraq's relationships with Iran will be brief. For now, suffice it to say that Iran and Iraq have historically been wary neighbors. Indeed, the roots of these tensions date:

. . . back to the political struggles between the Ottoman and Persian empires manifested in clashes over borders until 1913, when Britain and Russia helped mediate a border agreement between the two states.⁵¹

More recently, the two countries have competed with one another on various fronts, with access to the world petroleum market, mutual border disputes, and Iranian hegemony throughout the Persian Gulf (from the perspective of Iraq and other Arab states) comprising the three principal areas of dispute. When the Baath returned to power in Iraq in 1968, Iranian-Iraqi relations "reached a new low" and became characterized by suspicion and mistrust.⁵² The Iranians believed that

⁵⁰ Richard Jupa and Jim Dingeman, "How Iran Lost/Iraq Won the Gulf War," Strategy & Tactics 133 (March-April 1990), 51.

⁵¹ Edmund Ghareeb, The Kurdish Question in Iraq, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 135.

⁵² Ibid., 136.

"Baathist aspirations ran directly counter to [their] goals in the Gulf," while Iraq vociferously advocated Arab unity and rejected Iran's ideas of a "Western-sponsored [Persian Gulf] security system."⁵³

Before the rise of Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini in 1979, Iran had a decidedly western outlook. Under the leadership of the Shah, Iran steadily amassed a tremendous arsenal of military hardware. The Shah also allowed many of his officers and non-commissioned officers to attend military schools throughout the western world. Iraq's response to Iran's proliferation of arms was a significant factor in the growth of Iraqi armed forces during the 1970s. (See Table 1 and Table 2, after this chapter.)

The Iraqis have also had a tenuous foreign relationship with the rival Baath regime in Syria. Although there occasionally have been intervals of friendship between the two governments, such as the one immediately after the 1973 war with Israel and another in October 1978 when Iraq and Syria both opposed Egypt's plans for a separate peace with Israel, the governments usually have been hostile toward one another.⁵⁴

During the war with Iran, Iraqi-Syrian ties deteriorated further when Syria criticized Iraq for diverting Arab attention from "the real enemy" (Israel) and for attacking Iran, a regime the Syrians believed supportive of the Arab cause. Thus in 1982, Syria closed its border with Iraq and cut the flow of Iraqi oil through the pipeline crossing the Syrian frontier to ports on the Mediterranean sea. Such

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ H.C. Metz, Iraq: A Country Study, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 209.

moves not only hurt Iraq economically, but also served as proof to Iraq's Baath leadership of a de facto alliance between Syria and Iran.⁵⁵

Combat Actions against the Kurds

The Kurds are an unfortunate minority in Iraq, comprising about twenty percent of the country's population. Living in the "foothills of the Zagros" mountains of northern Iraq and the adjoining areas of eastern Turkey and northwestern Iran, the Kurdish people have long sought autonomous rule - a dream that still eludes them.⁵⁶ Since the end of World War I, Kurdish uprisings have sporadically erupted in all three countries - either in direct response to government actions, or due to disagreement among rival Kurdish factions.

In Iraq, successive regimes have never decided how to deal with the Kurds, alternating between "big stick" and "small carrot" strategies. Between 1961 and 1975, Kurdish insurrection became a particular burden to the Iraqi administration. So, on almost an annual basis, the Iraqi government would order the military to launch a spring or summer "offensive" against the Kurds. Then, in the following autumn and winter, Kurdish forces would reply by counterattacking and retaking their lost lands.⁵⁷ These "instabilities caused by the Kurds . . . are notable for their influence on Iraqi military policy."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ P. Beaumont, G.H. Blake, and J.M. Wagstaff, eds., "Iraq - A Study of Man, Land and Water in an Alluvial Environment," in The Middle East: A Geographical Study, 329-347. (London: John Wiley, 1976), 329.

⁵⁷ Dyer, "Iraq," 344-5.

⁵⁸ Staudenmaier, "Commentary: Defense Planning in Iraq, An Alternative Perspective," 56.

Fighting in 1963

Since the 1960s, Iraq's policy toward the Kurds has kept army units stationed in the region as a deterrent to violence, while the government simultaneously courted support from "friendly" Kurdish tribes. In June 1963 tensions flared after Kurdish guerrillas kidnapped several government officials and attacked army outposts. The government reacted by moving "four Iraqi divisions" into northern parts of the country.⁵⁹ Several pitched battles followed, but Iraqi forces prevailed when they seized control of "a number of important towns and strategic positions previously held by the Kurds."⁶⁰

One of the main reasons for the Iraqi army's successes against the Kurds in 1963 was its ability "to move into areas where roads and communications allowed it to get logistical support."⁶¹ The criticality of uninterrupted logistics to Iraqi military operations was evident whenever Iraq's ground forces moved into the more remote mountainous areas. In such places the Kurds used their expertise in guerrilla warfare to block Iraqi advances and strike at the army's supply lines. Still, the Iraqis were able to gain the upper hand by employing their small, unopposed air forces.⁶² There is little doubt, however, that the Iraqi military's greatest strength against the Kurds was its superior firepower.

⁵⁹ One of the best accounts of the fighting during the early 1960s is contained in Mahmud Durra, Al-Qadiyya al-Kurdiyya, (Beirut: Dar al-Talia), 1966.

⁶⁰ Chareeb, 66.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Fighting in 1974 and 1975

In the spring of 1974 the situation in northern Iraq once again became testy following Kurdish attacks upon military garrisons and a breakdown in talks between Iraqi officials and Kurdish representatives over the issue of Kurdish autonomy. By early April, fighting erupted when the Kurds moved forces out of the highlands into Iraq's central plains. Within days, the Iraqi government selected a course of action to handle the problem. Their plan required the army to send its armored forces into Kurdish home areas, to position "about eleven battalions, or somewhere between 8,000 and 12,000 men," on key terrain in the mountains of northeastern Iraq, and to have the air force support the deployment of ground units with bombing and strafing runs against suspected and known Kurdish strongholds. As the plan unfolded, it caught Kurdish leaders by surprise because they did not expect an Iraqi push "before late April [after] the melting of the snow."⁶³

Yet the Kurds quickly recovered and initiated a war of attrition that lasted into June. Later that month, after more than two weeks of occasional confrontations, an Iraqi division (probably armor) smashed through Kurdish defenses and took up positions in several valleys dominating the Kurdish heartland. The army followed up by capturing several Kurdish cities in northern Iraq with its armored and mechanized forces. These defeats placed Iraqi units astride Kurdish lines of communication and effectively "took the wind out of" the Kurdish fight. Now, with their logistical support severely curtailed,

⁶³ Ibid., 163.

the Kurds had little recourse but to retreat into the mountains and hope to renew the fight another day.⁶⁴

There are several reasons why the Iraqis defeated the Kurdish revolt in 1974. First, the military's plan was well-conceived. It was a strategy that matched Iraqi strengths (firepower, freedom of maneuver, and consistent logistical support) against Kurdish weaknesses (logistics and mobility). Although front line Iraqi combat units absorbed high casualties (estimates of the number of killed and injured ran as high as 16,000 men), the military executed its leadership's strategy with uncharacteristic speed and success.⁶⁵

Second, the Iraqi army also developed innovative tactics for overcoming Kurdish defensive practices in the mountains. For example:

Iraqi engineers built new roads under difficult conditions, allowing tanks to bypass Kurdish fire bases on mountain tops. [Iraq's use of] pontoon bridges and other engineering devices allowed [their] forces to quickly overcome Kurdish mine squads and snipers trying to block Iraqi advances through nearly impassable hills.⁶⁶

In the spring of 1975 the level of hostilities between the Kurds and Iraqis diminished considerably after Iraq concluded the "Algiers Accord" with Iran.⁶⁷ With the signing of this agreement, Iran stopped supplying arms to Iraqi Kurds in exchange for concessions from

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., and 174.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 163-164.

⁶⁷ D. Pipes, "A Border Adrift: Origins of the Conflict," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, ed. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi, 3-25, (New York, NY: Praeger, 1983), 20; C.M. Helms, Iraq: Eastern Flank of the Arab World, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1984), 30; M. van Bruinessen, "The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq." Middle East Report, vol 16, no. 4 (July-August 1986): 14-16.

Iraq regarding the use of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway. (Iran had been the Kurdish insurgency's principal supplier of arms.)

Though the Kurds were relatively quiet during the last five years preceding the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi government always monitored activities in Kurdish areas and continued its policy of garrisoning several brigades from the army in northern Iraq to discourage renewed revolt.⁶⁸ Still, Iraq never managed to squelch Kurdish uprisings, a condition "which imposed an intolerable burden on [Iraq's] domestic system."⁶⁹

Tactical Lessons from the Kurdish Campaigns

In assessing Iraqi actions against the Kurds, readers should consider two factors that influenced the army's operations in northern Iraq. First, the closed terrain of the highland areas occupied by the Kurds markedly from the more unrestricted topography dominating places of former combat with Israel.⁷⁰ Therefore, when Iraqi forces attempted to apply against the Kurds the same TTP derived from the Arab-Israeli Wars, the army found its conventional armor tactics severely deficient against an enemy who eluded direct confrontation, ambushed armored formations at close range, and habitually employed guerrilla tactics.

The second factor to appreciate with respect to actions against the Kurds was the conflict in priorities between the military's

⁶⁸ Staudenmaier, "Commentary: Defense Planning in Iraq, An Alternative Perspective," 56.

⁶⁹ E. Karsh, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis, The International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Papers, no. 220., (Dorchester, Great Britain: Henry Ling, 1987), 9.

⁷⁰ Beaumont et al., "Iraq - A Study of Man, Land and Water in an Alluvial Environment," 329.

internal security mission and its need to field the volumes of newly arriving equipment. Between 1969 and 1974, for example, the Iraqi army received about 800 new tanks and at least 400 new artillery pieces (see Table 1, end of chapter). Concurrently, the army attempted to enact changes to its force structure such as the reorganization of several divisions, the activation of two special forces brigades (in order to give the army its own unconventional potential), and the enlistment of more than 200,000 men (see Table 2).

These moves, conducted simultaneously with the army's operations against the Kurds, precluded unit commanders from performing the important organizational and training tasks one would normally associate with the fielding of new equipment and units.⁷¹ Indeed, one can argue that the commotion and confusion caused by the amount of equipment arriving during the 1970s would seriously jeopardize the ability of most armies to attain or sustain acceptable levels of combat readiness. Apparently, Iraqi President Ahmad al-Bakr, and later Saddam Hussein, were aware of and troubled by this situation, but neither leader could afford to give their army the time to take appropriate corrective measures.⁷² One group of analysts sums the issue succinctly by noting: "It is extraordinarily difficult to change the basic organization and competence of military forces while they are engaged in combat."⁷³

⁷¹ Karsh 1987, 9.

⁷² J.M. Abdulghani, Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis, (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 156-7.

⁷³ A.H. Cordesman and A.R. Wagner, The Lessons of Modern War, 3 vols. Vol 2: The Iran-Iraq War, (London: Westview, 1990), 62.

Nonetheless, Iraq's experiences versus the Kurds were successful. One observer of Middle Eastern armies notes that "in counter-insurgency operations, only the Sudanese army in the Arab world can begin to approach the Iraqi army's experience."⁷⁴ Without doubt, the Iraqis became proficient in infantry combat techniques in mountainous terrain as a direct result of operations against the Kurds. Later, during the war with Iran, soldiers in Iraq's "mountain divisions" gave their commanders several important victories; however, these units never saw action in any terrain other than the mountains.⁷⁵

When Iraqi armored units tried to lend support to their infantry comrades (who were chasing Kurds through or into the highlands), commanders quickly learned that their conventional TTP, as developed on desert terrain against Israel, did not bring effective fires upon small Kurdish guerrilla units. To compensate, the Iraqis perfected "a very peculiar style of fighting."⁷⁶ A detailed account of the technique, which emphasized mass and firepower over maneuver and exploitation, reveals that the Iraqi tactic:

. . . involved massing against the objective, sealing it off, and then methodically using artillery fire and strafing to disorganize the defense. Armor and infantry would advance slowly, and be used in ways that essentially added to the bombardment. Tanks would be dug in where they proved vulnerable. If the strong point continued to resist, more artillery would be used and tanks would continue to be used as artillery. This worked well in advancing against a half-trained and poorly equipped force [the Kurds] that could not be resupplied effectively.⁷⁷ (*Italics mine.*)

⁷⁴ Dyer, "Iraq," 344.

⁷⁵ In urban terrain, for instance.

⁷⁶ Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: The First Round," 40.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 40-42; Cordesman and Wagner, 60.

Final Analysis

From the preceding discussion, some readers may surmise that the Iraqi army's strengths were sufficient to compensate for its weakness. After all, the army had won in its most recent series of battles (against the Kurds). However, there were additional variables acting to hamper the army's fighting potential. First, was the inconsistency with which the government directed military programs and policies. Of the multitude of regimes that held power in Baghdad since the 1940s, only the administrations of Abd al-Karim Qassem (1958 and 1963), Ahmad Hasas al-Bakr (1968-1978), and Saddam Hussein (1978-present) emphasized the importance of the military and authorized its build-up. That these men played significant roles in strengthening Iraq's military arsenal cannot be denied.⁷⁸

Yet, at the same time the military was building, the volatility of Iraqi politics meant that "Big Brother" (i.e., the government) was keeping notes on members of the officer corps showing the slightest signs of discomfort with the ruling party. It was common knowledge that execution, imprisonment, or exile awaited officers accused of conspiracy.⁷⁹ The fears created in men by such psychological pressures matriculated to the small unit level, where many officers were relieved for failing in battle. Many leaders developed "phobias" that caused them and their subordinates to purposely withhold or amend negative reports. Iraqi field commanders already had enough difficulty making good decisions under fire in instances where they had correct

⁷⁸ Carus, "Defense Planning in Iraq," 33.

⁷⁹ al-Khalil, 32-72 and 292-296.

information; thus, the wanton falsification of reports by subordinates created new opportunities for failure and "fueled the fires" of head-hunting officials looking for scapegoats upon which to hang poor performances.

This chapter provides readers with a glimpse of the evolution of Iraqi tactics in the years before the war with Iran. Five years after the end of the Kurdish campaigns, the war broke with Iran. The start of the Iran-Iraq war would reveal that Iraqi military leaders and soldiers blindly applied the many of the TTP described in this chapter with little consideration given to differences in either terrain or mission. The Iraqi army not only forgot how to employ its armor in the manner learned from battling the Israelis, but its leaders also seemed unaware of the important connection between terrain and mission in the conduct of combined arms warfare. Arguably, the army's Kurdish experience had driven the army's "tactical pendulum" 180 degrees in the wrong direction! For the Iraqi army, the campaigns against the Kurds were clearly "not the way to prepare for a very different kind of war with Iran, and [they were] not the way to develop a realistic understanding of the capability of Iraq's forces."⁸⁰

One final thought is in order. If the Arab-Israeli wars are seen as providing the Iraqi army with many important tactical lessons regarding conventional combat, then the Kurdish campaigns should be viewed as instructing the army in how to forget most of what it knew. Still open for discussion, however, are many lessons the Iraqis did not learn such as - the use of air forces in close air support; applications

⁸⁰ Cordesman, "Lessons of The Iran-Iraq War: The First Round," 42.

of combined arms warfare in different types of terrain; and, perhaps most importantly, the proper roles of commanders and their staffs in the planning, coordination, and synchronization of activities at all levels of command. These are the issues that come to the forefront of discussions through the next two chapters of this thesis.

TABLE 1: CHANGES IN THE EQUIPMENT OF THE IRAQI ARMY
SELECT YEARS BETWEEN 1969 AND 1989¹

Year	\$ Spent on Military ^a	\$ Spent (% of GNP)	Tanks	APCs	SP	Artillery Towed	MRL	Anti-air Gun	Miss	Helos Atk	Lift
1969	0.1 bn	4.4	575	?	0	?	0	?	?	0	20
1972	0.2 bn	6.5	945	410	0	300	0	?	18e	0	46
1974	0.5 bn	14.3	1390	1300	0	700	0	?	Y	46	55
1975	0.8 bn	8.9	1390	1300	90	700	0	800	Y	46	55
1976	1.2 bn	3.5	1390	1600	90	700	0	900	Y	46	93
1977	1.7 bn	10.1	1500	1800	30	700	Y	300	Y	54	81
1978	2.0 bn	3.8	1900	()	130	800	Y	1200	?	55	174
1979	2.7 bn	12.5	1900	()	130	800	Y	1200	Y	59	192
1980	3.0 bn	7.7	2950	2500	240	800	Y	1200	25+	95	171
1981	4.7 bn	14.9	2700	2600	()	()	Y	1200	25+	95	260
1982	9.0 bn	23.2	2400	3000	()	()	Y	1200	25-	134	267
1983	10.3 bn	33.7	2460	3000	()	()	Y	1200	25+	134	263
1984	13.8 bn	51.2	1920	3500	250e	2500e	Y	4000	100e	123	263
1985	12.9 bn	57.1	4000	4000	250e	2500e	Y	4000	300	144 ³	150+
1986	11.6 bn	65.5	6250	4000	400e	2500e	200	4000	330	150+	140
1987	14.0 bn	35.9	6250	4000	()	()	200	4000	330	272 ⁰	140
1988	12.9 bn	29.6	6310	()	()	3000	200	4000	330	272 ⁰	140
1989	?	?	5600	8100	500	3000	200	4000	330	159	215

Source: Adapted from various editions of The Military Balance (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies). See Bibliography.

Codes: e - Estimate by Author ? - Data not available
Y - Material on hand, but * - Somewhat greater
quantities are unknown () - Figures doubtful

Notes:

- 1 Figures after 1990 must be considered as containing the cumulative effects of combat losses and new acquisitions.
- 2 All figures are in billions (bn) of US dollar equivalents for the year shown.
- 3 In 1985, Iraqi helicopter aviation was reorganized and moved from the Air Force to the Army, where it could work more closely with ground forces. It also appears as though the Iraqis began converting some of their transport (lift) helicopters into attack aircraft.

**TABLE 2: CHANGES IN THE SIZE OF THE IRAQI ARMY
SELECT YEARS BETWEEN 1969 AND 1989**

Year	Size of Army	% of Total Armed Forces	Divisions	Corps	Separate Brigades	Other Brigades	Other Manpower
1969	70,000	89	1A,5M	0	0	0	10,000 ¹
1972	90,000	88	1A,1M,2L,1m	0	0	0 ²	18,300
1974	100,000	89	2A,3ML	0	1M	3SF	269,300 ³
1975	120,000	89	3A,4ML	0	1M	1SF	394,300
1976	140,000	89	3A,2M,4L	0	1M	1SF	304,900 ⁴
1977	160,000	85	4A,2M,4L	0	1A,3M	1SF	304,900
1978	180,000	85	4A,2M,4L	0	1A,2M	1SF	328,800
1979	190,000	85	4A,2M,4L	0	1A,1M	2SF	329,800
1980	200,000	83	4A,4M,4m	3	1A	3SF	329,800
1981	210,000	83	4A,4M,4m	3	1A	3SF	504,800
1982	300,000	88	6A,3M,4m	4	1A	3SF,9R,10PA	106,800 ⁵
1983	475,000	91	6A,4M,6m	4	2A	3SF,9R,15PA	540,300
1984	600,000	93	6A,5M,5L,4m	4	2A	3SF,9R,15PA	737,800
1985	475,000	91	6A,5M,5L,4m,1PG,2SF	4	2A	9R,15PA	729,800
1986	800,000	95	5A,3M,10L,1PG,2SF	7	0	9R,15PA	884,900
1987	955,000	95	5A,3M,30L,1PG	7	0	6SF	1,134,800
1988	955,000	95	7A,7M,39L,4PG	7	0	20SF+	1,134,800
1989	955,000	95	7A,7M,42L,6PG	7	0	20SF-	1,134,800

Source: Adapted from various editions of *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies). See Bibliography

Codes: A - Armor M - Mechanized/Motorized
L - Light m - Mountain
ML - Mech and Light mix SF - Special Forces
R - Reserve PA - Peoples Army
PG - Presidential Guards⁶ + - Somewhat greater

Notes:

- These figures include "National Guard", "Security Troops" and "others."
- In 1972, one Airborne battalion was added to each of the two light divisions.
- The substantial jump occurs because Iraq began reporting the Army reserve as part of its available manpower.
- Reflecting the creation of the "People's Army" in 1978.
- During 1982, much of the reserve and Peoples Army were put into the active units. Later figures also include up to 20,000 volunteers from other Arab nations.
- Also called the "Republican Guards."

CHAPTER 2

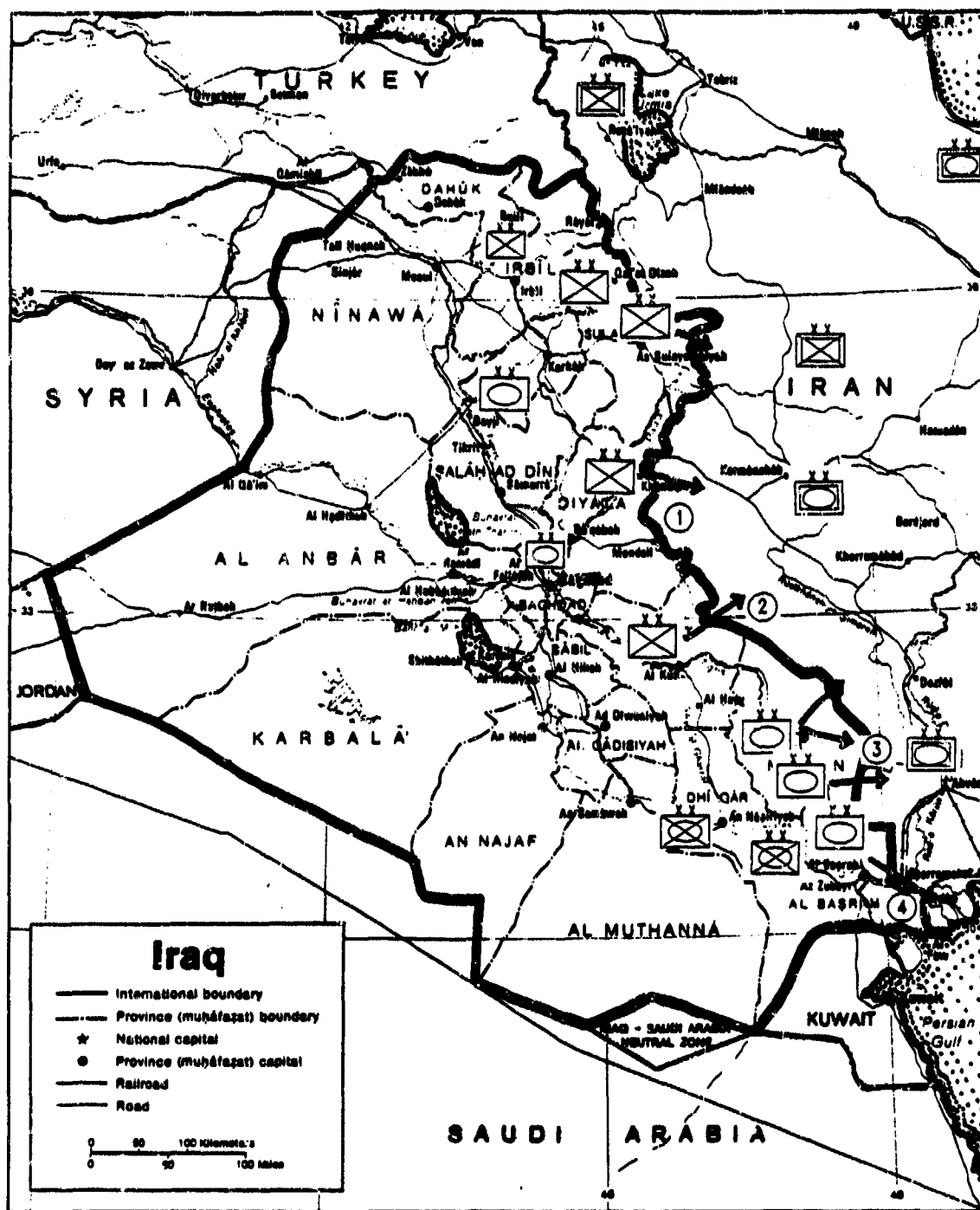
THE BATTLES OF ABADAN ISLAND

Following the sudden rise to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1979, the world became concerned over the ongoing events in the Middle East. Thus, the rekindling of tensions between Iraq and Iran, and the occasional border skirmishes erupting after April 1980, were a conceivable development. On 22 September 1980, however, the Iraqi army's sudden invasion across the Iranian frontier surprised many nations, including the United States and the Soviet Union.¹ Iraqi armored and mechanized units forged their way into Iran along four axes of advance forming a line of battle that extended for over 450 miles, from near Khorramshahr in the south to Qasr e-Shirin in the north (see Map 4).

This chapter analyzes the combat associated with the main effort of Iraq's opening offensive of the war, two engagements known in this work as *The Battles of Abadan Island*.² Yet, as dramatic the beginning of war was to Middle Eastern and the international communities, the close of the fight for Abadan Island would pass virtually unnoticed.

¹ E. O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, (London: Brassey's, 1988), 31.

² A.H. Cordesman and A.R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, 3 vols. Vol 2: *The Iran-Iraq War*, (London: Westview, 1990), 87.



Map 4: Iraq's Opening Campaign of the War. The Battles of Abadan Island were part of the operation labeled "4" on this map. Iraqi and Iranian unit information after O'Ballance, 32-34. Map modified from United States Central Intelligence Agency, "Iraq," March 1979.

The fight for Abadan Island actually contains two separate engagements that occurred in or near the two principal population centers in this region, Khorramshahr and Abadan. In the battle of Khorramshahr alone, history records that at least 8,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed or seriously injured, and that the Iraqi army lost more than 100 tanks.³ The fighting in Khorramshahr was so bloody that both Iraqi and Iranian soldiers renamed the city "Khunishahr" (city of blood).⁴ For both nations, the two and one-half months of tough fighting at the "Abadan front" were only the first exchanges of an eight-year conflict that severely tested the resolve of their people and the abilities of civilian and military leaders to direct and sustain the war effort.

However, of greater and more immediate concern to this thesis is the link represented by *The Battles of Abadan Island* in the evolution of Iraqi combat tactics. By the conclusion of the fighting in late December of 1980, the Iraqis had little to show for their effort. While they could legitimately claim victory in Khorramshahr, the ill-equipped and out-manned Iranians in Abadan were never defeated.

Geo-strategic Setting

Except for a small stretch of shallow deltaic coastline, Iraq is almost a completely landlocked country. Its principal maritime window to the world is a river known as the Shatt-al-Arab (translates as

³ John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequences, (London: Methuen, 1989), 101. None of the references used in this thesis provide figures for the fighting near Abadan.

⁴ Ibid.

"Waterway of the Arabs").⁵ The Shatt is a critical component of Iraq's economic vitality; therefore, control of and access to the waterway have been topics of controversy with the Iranians long before Iraq became an independent nation-state in 1932. Here, a terse review of the history of this dispute will help readers appreciate its ties to the Iran-Iraq War and *The Battles of Abadan Island*.

Since the 1600s through the mid-1800s there have been numerous treaties regarding ownership of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway and the mutual border between Persia and the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor state of Iraq in the region. All of the accords gave control of the Shatt to the Ottomans, but the border with Persia was rather loosely defined. In the critical area of the Shatt-al-Arab, the boundary between the two countries remained in dispute until clarified by the second Treaty of Erzurum in 1847. Because of this agreement, the Persians received the towns of Khorramshahr and Abadan as well as the entire east bank of the river. Furthermore,

the treaty was commonly interpreted to mean that the river would remain under Turkish Sovereignty, but Persian vessels shall have the right to navigate freely without let or hindrance on the Shatt-al-Arab from the mouth of the same to the point of contact of the frontiers of the two Parties.⁶

Disagreements over the Persian-Ottoman border continued into the twentieth century until the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 provided a new solution. All specifications pertaining to the Shatt and the

⁵ M.A. Al-Lihaibi, An Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War: Military Strategy and Political Objectives, (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air War College, 1989), 2.

⁶ International Boundary Study No. 164: Iran-Iraq, (Washington, DC: Office of the Geographer, 13 July 1978), 1-2. For a much more thorough discussion, refer to Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 in The Iran-Iraq War, ed. M.S. El-Azhary, (New York: St. Martin's, 1986).

border in that vicinity remained unchanged, including the provision that the Shatt was Ottoman property. Then in 1918, after the Ottomans fell from power, management of the region became the responsibility of the United Kingdom. This arrangement continued until 1932, when King Faisal secured Iraq's independence and simultaneously assumed responsibility for the river.⁷

Friction between the Iranians and the new Iraqi nation flared almost immediately, culminating in a complaint by Iran before the League of Nations in 1934. The Iranians challenged the terms of the Treaty of Erzurum and the Constantinople Protocol, arguing that the boundary with Iraq from west of Khorramshahr to the Persian Gulf should be changed to the thalweg of the Shatt (i.e., the imaginary line directly above the deepest portion of the river channel). Of course, the Iraqis disagreed, and the ensuing debates and negotiations terminated in 1937 with a new understanding between the two countries.⁸

This agreement recognized a significant portion of the Iranian position by declaring that the river will accommodate "free navigation for merchant vessels of all countries."⁹ Also, the thalweg was identified as the border between Iran and Iraq, but only near the Iranian port city of Abadan. Elsewhere, the boundary would remain as previously traced along the east bank of the river.

Initially, Iran was pleased with the outcome of the negotiations, but they soon realized that little had really changed - for the new treaty left the Iraqis in control of "pilottage, collection

⁷ International Boundary Study, 5-6.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid. 7.

of dues, and other administrative [matters]."¹⁰ In effect, Iraq maintained almost complete jurisdiction over the Shatt.

In following years, Iran looked upon the 1937 transaction with increasing displeasure and remained desirous of establishing the thalweg as the boundary in the Shatt-al-Arab. This dispute continued until the Algiers Agreement of March 1975 in which Iraq gave-in on the Shatt issue in exchange for Iran's promise to stop aiding the Kurdish insurrection in northern Iraq (as explained in Chapter One of the thesis).¹¹ By attacking Iran in 1980, Iraq abrogated the Algiers agreement exercised by force "its right" to control the entire waterway.

Nonetheless, one would be inaccurate to assume that arguments over the Shatt were the principal cause of the Iran-Iraq War. Indeed, the river was only a minor component in a complex formula for conflict that contained variables with greater polarity like ethnicity, religion, economics, politics, and military might. For example, when "The Islamic Revolution" consumed Iran in 1979, the Ayatollah dismantled what was once the Shah's proud and mighty army, replacing it "with what looked like a revolutionary rabble" and significantly changing (in Iraq's favor) what had been a relatively stable military balance between Iran and Iraq.¹² Yet Khomeini's ascent influenced much more; it destabilized

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Chaim Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," in The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, edited by Efraim Karsh, (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989), 257.

¹² Sharam Chubin, "Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire," in The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions, ed. Hanns W. Maull and Otto Pick, (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989), 5.

the political environment in the Middle East and produced fear in many Arabs with its proclamation to spread "true Islam."¹³

Indeed, the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran brought an abrupt end to the short period of relative friendship between Iraq and Iran. Saddam Hussein recognized that his country was the primary target for the export of the Ayatollah's revolution for at least two reasons - personal and geographical. First, there was the grudge that Khomeini held against Iraq's Baath regime "because of the latter's acquiescence in the Shah's request to expel him [Khomeini] from Iraq (October 1978)."¹⁴ Second, Shiites accounted for nearly sixty percent of Iraq's population and three of the holiest Shi'ite shrines were on Iraqi soil (Karbala, Najaf, and Kazimain). Therefore,

. . . the revolutionary regime in Teheran could, and certainly did, entertain hopes that this community, which had always viewed itself as a deprived group, would emulate the Iranian example and rise against their 'oppressors'.¹⁵

Beginning in June 1979, Iranian revolutionaries began publicly inciting Iraqi Shiites to rise up and overthrow the Baath. A few months later Iran escalated its anti-Baathist effort by renewing support for Iraqi Kurds. In addition, Iranian-sponsored terrorists began targeting prominent Iraqi officials, the most significant of which was "the failed attempt on the life of Iraqi Deputy Premier, Tariq Aziz, on 1 April

¹³ Johannes Reissner, "The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War," in The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions, ed. Hanns W. Maull and Otto Pick, (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989), 61. An excellent explanation of Iranian-Iraqi tensions is provided by Efraim Karsh, "The Islamic Republic and the Gulf," in The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, edited by Efraim Karsh, (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989), 27-41.

¹⁴ Karsh, 29.

¹⁵ Ibid.

1980."¹⁶ Thus, it was Iran's increasingly subversive activities, as opposed to the dispute over the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, which eventually "drove the Iraqi leadership to the conclusion that it had no alternative but to contain the Iranian threat" by resorting to armed conflict.¹⁷

Within six days after the start of the war, Iraq announced its strategic objectives. Baghdad's four demands were that Iran: (1) recognize Iraq's legitimate and sovereign rights over its land and water, particularly the Shatt-al-Arab; (2) refrain from interfering in Iraq's internal affairs; (3) adhere to the principle of good, neighborly relations; and, (4) return to the United Arab Emirates the three islands (in the Straic of Hormuz) seized in 1971.¹⁸

Iraq's decision by Iraq to focus their main attack against Iran's Khuzestan province directly addressed the first goal of their plan. However, it also hinged upon an important assumption - that the predominantly Arab population of that region would "rally to assist Iraq" and look upon the Iraqis as "liberators."

Within days after the start of the fighting, Iraqi forces began experiencing the consequences of this immense error in judgement. Instead of rolling over, the disorganized Iranian defenders united and fought tenaciously for their homeland, a situation that forced Iraq to change the end-state of its operational plan from "liberation" to "encirclement and isolation." In many respects the fight for Abadan Island assumed the characteristics of a seventeenth-century siege, with

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 30.

¹⁸ Al-Lihaibi, 4.

the exception being that the weaponry and organization of the attackers were probably an order of magnitude superior to that of the defenders.¹⁹

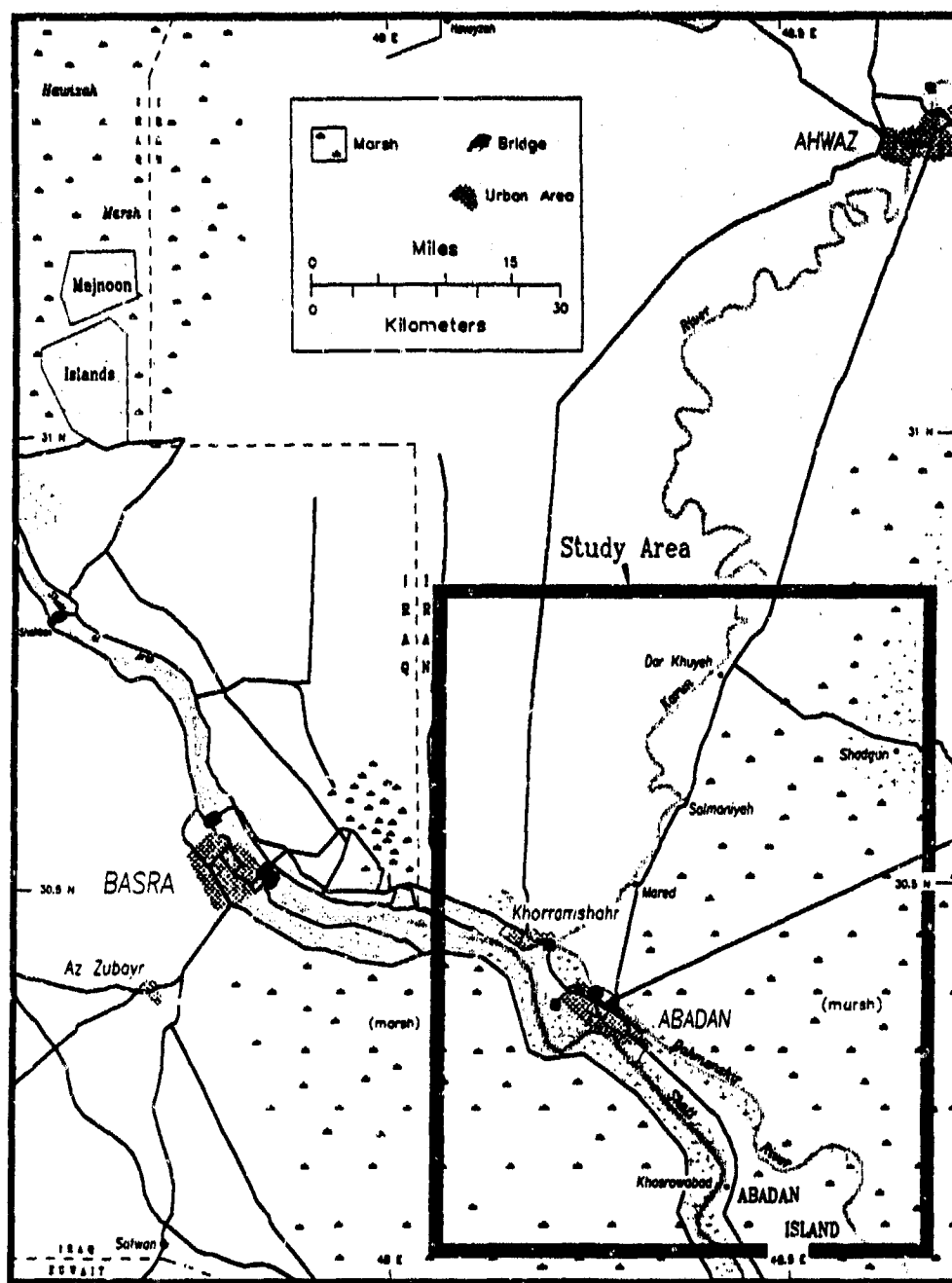
Military Aspects of the Battle Area Terrain

The region of the southern Tigris-Euphrates valley where Iraqi and Iranian forces fought. The Battles Abadan Island has a complex geography that poses special problems to military operations (see Map 5). Depending upon one's location, the area may be dominated by marsh, desert sand, a natural or man-made waterway, agriculture, or urban development.

Excluding the cities, the region is one that is unusually sensitive to the effects of changes in the weather, especially with regard to seasonal variations in rainfall. Climate typically alters battlefield conditions to the extent that an operation deemed "feasible" during one season may be branded "impossible" six months later. Indeed, what in January was observed as dry land can, by the following January, easily become the most formidable of natural obstacles.

Two sets of topographic features characterize the area of interest - the terrains of the Shatt-al-Arab drainage basin, and the urban centers of Khorramshahr and Abadan. The Shatt begins at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers near Al-Qurnah (Iraq) and flows into the Persian Gulf beside the Iraqi city of Al-Faw. The river meanders across a floodplain several miles in width. During spring, the low regions of the basin are often inundated by floodwaters originating from thawed winter snows in the Turkish source regions of the Tigris and Euphrates.

¹⁹ O'Ballance, 32-33.



Map 5: Geographic Setting for the Battles of Abadan Island. Combat vehicle trafficability is highly variable in this area. The rainy season restricts movement by landcraft to the road system because the areas of marsh are usually inundated. Map drawn by the author.

Baring the date groves, palm trees, and vineyards growing on the fertile soils adjacent to the river and smaller drainages, the floodplain is somewhat featureless topographically. The natural levee system cradling the Shatt provides the highest elevations (about 10 feet above sea level) and the best draining soils in the area. Hence, the levees are the principal topographic features upon which man has built his roadways and constructed his settlements.

Away from the levee system, the terrain slopes gently into the marshes or desert sands of the floodplain proper. Clay-rich soils dominate the marshy areas of the river basin, while fine-grained sand prevails in other places. The capability of these soils to support vehicular traffic is directly related to their moisture content. During the flood season that normally begins in January and ends by April, travel by landcraft within or across the floodplain marshlands is veritably inconceivable. Even after the waters recede, latent moisture can confine movement for several weeks to roads built on the higher levee crests. As the soils dry, intense insolation draws groundwater upwards resulting in the formation of hardened salt flats over which cross-country mobility is considerably less restrictive and is easily capable of supporting both wheeled and tracked combat vehicles. Still, a sudden rainshower can transform previously trafficable areas into quagmires at most any time of the year.²⁰

²⁰ This description is compiled largely from information contained in: A. Kearsey, A Study of the Strategy and Tactics of the Mesopotamia Campaign: 1914-1917, Aldershot, (Great Britain: Gale & Polden, 1920), 1-22, and C.V.F. Townshend, My Campaign in Mesopotamia, (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd), 1920, 33-44. Since the two works are authored by soldiers who fought in these areas, the words provide useful insight into the military aspects of the terrain.

Several lesser rivers and drainageways empty into the Shatt. The most noteworthy of these are the Karun and Bahmanshir rivers. The Karun River begins in central Iran and enters the Shatt-al-Arab beside the Iranian port city of Khorramshahr, while the Bahmanshir is a smaller tributary that diverges from the Karun River near Khorramshahr and runs sub-parallel to the Shatt enroute to the Persian Gulf. Along with the Shatt, these two rivers define the outline of Abadan Island.

The most important settlements in the battle area are the cities of Khorramshahr and Abadan. Located on the east bank of the Shatt-al-Arab, they are Iran's principal ports in this region. At the start of the Iran-Iraq War, Khorramshahr and Abadan supported populations of about 175,000 and 300,000 people respectively. However, during the fighting in September and October of 1980, the exodus of these people from the battlezone caused a significant traffic flow problem for the two armies. Most portions of Khorramshahr and Abadan, especially the port and petroleum facilities, were extensively damaged by the intense artillery and mortar fires associated with the siege.²¹

Abadan is the eighth largest city in Iran and occupies most of the northern center of Abadan Island. As home to one of the world's largest oil refineries and purely oil ports, Abadan's unique geographic location (on the island, between two rivers) offers the city a degree of natural protection from an army contemplating direct overland invasion.²²

²¹ H. Amirahmadi and M. Parvin, eds., Post-Revolutionary Iran, (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), 127; McLaurin, 21.-

²² Fisher, 300.

Khorramshahr lies about ten kilometers up-river from Abadan, nestled in the "V" formed at the confluence of the Shatt-al-Arab and the Karun River. Most people in the region know Khorramshahr by its former name, Muhammara - the one time capitol of Iran's Khuzestan Province. The southern quarter of the city actually embraces the northern tip of Abadan Island. Prior to the Iran-Iraq War, Khorramshahr served as a transloading point for general cargoes not necessarily related to Iran's oil industry. As one of southern Iran's port cities, Khorramshahr was also the location of a small Iranian naval base.²³

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, immediately after oil was discovered in the region, both Khorramshahr and Abadan experienced a period of rapid expansion. This time of growth is reflected in the geography of the two cities, especially their street patterns. The central, older portion of the cities have narrow, winding streets that restrict the movement of military forces to a single column. Here, the maximum effective ranges of most weapon systems become meaningless, as it is difficult for a combatant to see much farther than a block or two. However, as one progresses toward the city limits, the streets widen and provide for greater fields of fire.

Overview of the Tactical Situation

Iraqi tactical plans called for an armored division (designation unknown) to cross the Tigris River near Kharkiya on the

²³ R.D. McLaurin, Military Operations in the Gulf War: The Battle of Khorramshahr, U.S. Army Human Engineering Laboratory Technical Memorandum 13-82, (Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD: U.S. Army Human Engineering Laboratory, 1982), 21; W.B. Fisher, The Middle East: A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography, 6th ed., (London: Methuen, 1971), 300.

Basra-Baghdad road (see Map 6).²⁴ After negotiating the river, the unit would move south to seize Khorramshahr and Abadan, subsequently clearing remaining Iranian forces from Abadan Island. For the operation, the division was reinforced with additional armored units and elements of special forces, bringing its strength to roughly 20,000 soldiers and 500 to 600 tanks.²⁵

As the attack progressed, the division proved unable to complete its assigned mission forcing the Iraqis to modify their initial scheme of attack by committing an additional division to the fray. This second division (designation unknown) received instructions to bypass Khorramshahr to the northeast, cross the Karun River, lay siege to Abadan and isolate the city from outside assistance. Because the actions of the two units developed as independent maneuvers, the thesis addresses them with separate narratives.²⁶

Iranian opposition that the Iraqis would most likely encounter included local elements of an armored division headquartered in Ahwaz, a distance of some 100 kilometers to the northeast. Further, the strength of this division presumably was about forty percent of its authorized level - having about 4,500 soldiers and 200 tanks. While precise numbers vary regarding the number and types of units in the immediate Khorramshahr-Abadan area, it is doubtful that the Iranians had more than a brigade stationed there. In addition, some authors suggest the

²⁴ References to this town occur in several sources; however, this writer was unable to locate Kharkiya (also listed as Kharkiyeh) on any map, nor was the name it listed in the Gazetteer of Iraq. Here, the city is assumed to be located in the vicinity of Basra.

²⁵ Missions and strengths derived from McLaurin, 24.

²⁶ Ibid.

Iranians possessed operational-level reserves in the form of another armored division and an airborne division in locations farther to the east.²⁷

Iraqi Armor Attacks Khorramshahr

Iraqi artillery signaled the commencement of hostilities on 22 September 1980. Gunners pounded the area with the fires of 130mm guns, 160mm mortars and BM21 multiple rocket launchers from positions lining the Iraqi-controlled west bank of the Shatt-al-Arab (see Map 7).²⁸ Early on the morning of 23 September, the Iraqi armored division conducted an unopposed crossing of the Tigris (presumably near Basra) and began its southeastward run toward Khorramshahr.²⁹ In the face of this strong Iraqi force, Iranian units hastily withdrew from the intervening uninhabited lands, abandoning their caches of military supplies in the process.³⁰ Nonetheless, Iraqi forces advanced cautiously and did not reach the outskirts of the city until 25 September.³¹

As the division neared Khorramshahr, it paused for nearly three days while its artillery softened the city in preparation for the main assault.³² This steady rain of shells did little more than irritate the populace and create "barriers to the movement of Iraqi

²⁷ O'Ballance, 37; Cordesman and Wagner, 88; McLaurin, 24.

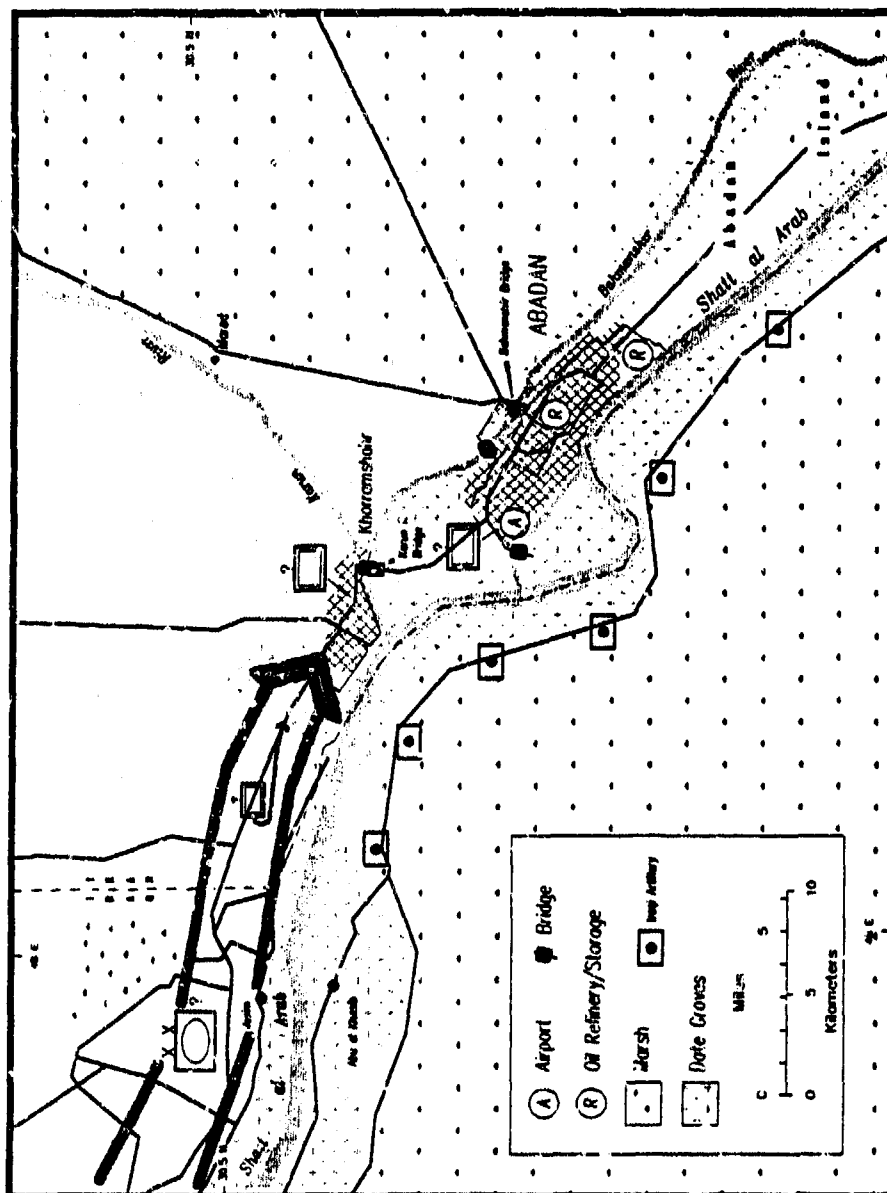
²⁸ McLaurin, 28.

²⁹ O'Ballance, 37.

³⁰ McLaurin, 27.

³¹ J. Kifner, "Baghdad Says Its Troops Capture Khorramshahr and Cut a Rail Line," New York Times, 26 September 1980, A1; Cordesman and Wagner, 93.

³² McLaurin, 27-8.



Map 7: Tactical Situation, 22 September 1980. Iraqi artillery virtually lined the west (Iraqi) bank of the Shatt-al-Arab. Iranian units northwest of Basra ran for their lives, abandoning their caches of military supplies in the process. Map drawn by the author.

forces" by rubbleing the streets.³³ Later, the extent of the debris produced by the artillery bombardment proved significant when it became the favorite hiding places and strong points of stubborn Iranian resistance. More significantly, however, the combined effect of the Iraqi division's sluggish advance and its untimely halt before the city gave the stunned Iranians time to organize a defense.

On 26 September Saddam Hussein announced the capture of Khorramshahr, a proclamation later proven premature by at least one month.³⁴ Meanwhile, the Iraqis consolidated their positions outside the city and prepared for future operations by marshalling "engineer, mobile communications, and medical support" equipment into the area.³⁵

The Iraqi division withheld its assault of Khorramshahr "until 28 September, when it moved forward on a broad front into the built-up suburbs [and ran] head-on into ambush after ambush."³⁶ Lacking the ability of infantry to force the enemy from his hideouts, the "Iraqi tanks in such surroundings were at a distinct disadvantage."³⁷ As the fighting moved through the periphery of the city, it quickly assumed the street-by-street, house-to-house nature characteristic of military operations in urban environs.³⁸ Indeed, wherever Iraqi armor advanced,

³³ Cordesman and Wagner, 93.

³⁴ H. Tanner, "Iraqis Intensifying Shelling of Abadan; Refinery in Flames," New York Times, 27 September 1980, A4.

³⁵ McLaurin, 28.

³⁶ O'Ballance, 37.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Field Manual 90-10: Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT), (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1979); Field Manual 100-5: Operations, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1986), 81-83.

Iranian "groups of Gendarmerie, marines, naval cadets, Revolutionary Committee militias and local police" surprised them with deadly accurate rocket launcher fire and Molotov cocktails.³⁹ According to one observer the Iraqis judged Iranian resistance to their attack as "stiffer . . . than they had expected."⁴⁰

In assaulting the city, Iraqi commanders repeatedly exhibited their lack of familiarity with urban warfare. They were reluctant "to commit small units to fighting in built-up areas," fearing that they "would not be able to exercise sufficient control" in an operation that so clearly demanded decentralized execution.⁴¹ In addition, commanders quickly discovered that they "could not send tanks unescorted into the city and that [they] had to send in infantry support."⁴² To compensate, Iraqi units tried organizing small armor-infantry assault teams. However, when these ad-hoc forces pushed deeper into the city, they consistently failed because none of the soldiers "had any real training in urban warfare."⁴³

By the end of the day on 28 September, the Iraqi assault of Khorramshahr stalled (see Map 8). Frustrated by their inability to flush Iranian forces out of the city, the Iraqi leadership decided to change their strategy.⁴⁴ Rather than continue their unsuccessful and

³⁹ Ibid.; Cordesman and Wagner, 93.

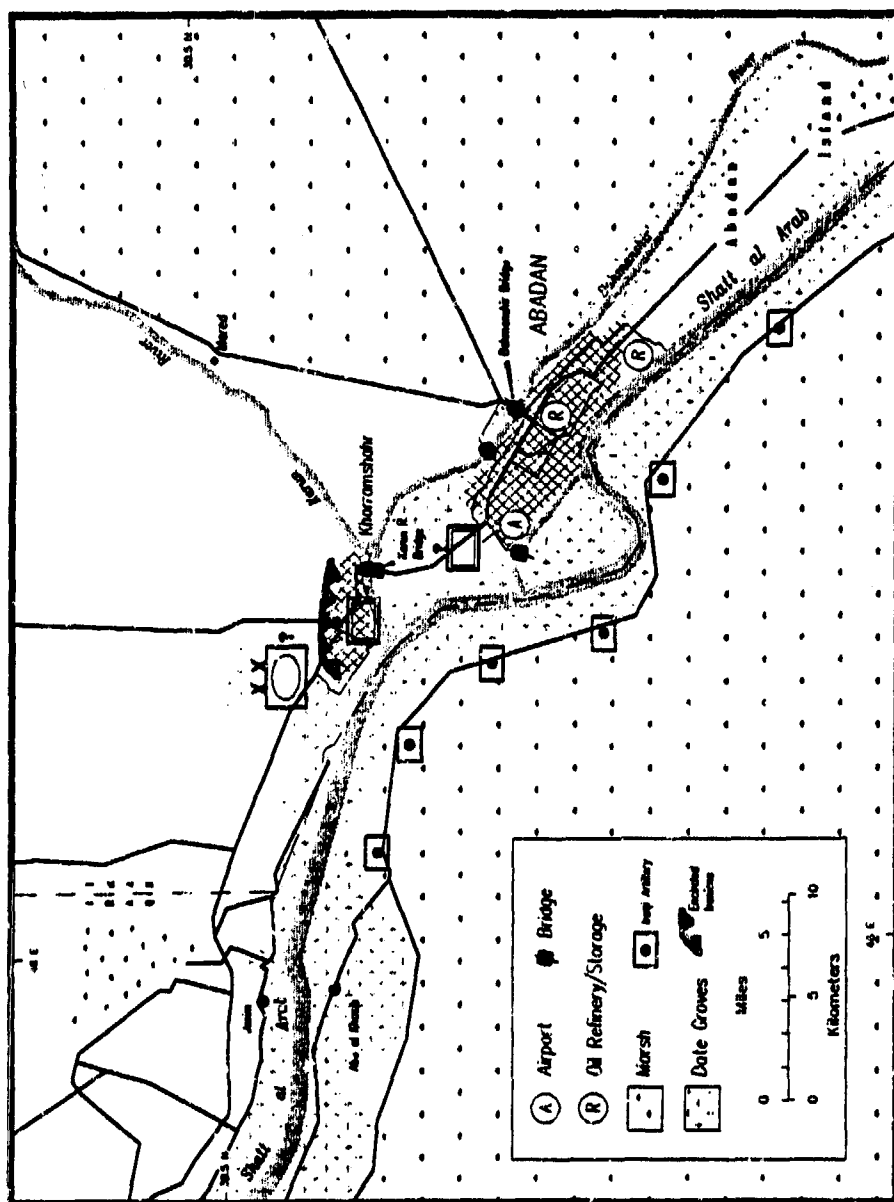
⁴⁰ Tanner, "Iraqis Intensifying Shelling of Abadan; Refinery in Flames," A4.

⁴¹ H. Tanner, "Iraq Steps Up War, Says Iran Ignores a Cease-fire Order," New York Times, 6 October 1980, A14.

⁴² Cordesman and Wagner, 93.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ J. Kifner, "Attacking Iraqi Troops in Iran Find the Foe Still Fights," New York Times, 1 October 1980, A1.



Map 8: Tactical Situation, 26 September - 7 October 1980. The Iraqi armored division stalled outside Khorramshahr. Repeated efforts to take the city were rebuffed by hastily organized bands of Iranian militia, police, and regular forces. In the close quarters of urban warfare, the Iraqis learned that their tanks were no match for dismounted infantry. Map drawn by the author.

costly thrusts into Khorramshahr, the Iraqis opted to "secure the perimeter of the city" with their armored forces "and then rush a special forces brigade and Republican Guard brigade through a quickly improvised course in urban warfare."⁴⁵

At dawn on 30 September, Iraqi commandos, accompanied by some of these "re-educated" forces attempted to take Khorramshahr by storm. Taking advantage of initial success, the commandos crossed the Karun River in small boats and advanced as far as the northwestern city limits of Abadan. By nightfall, however, strong resistance from Iranian paramilitary groups caused the Iraqis to fall back to the relative safety of the north side of the river. The aborted attack cost the Iraqis several tanks and armored personnel carriers.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Iraqi combat service support units used the road out of Basra to push supplies forward to the battlezone. The Iraqis formed their equipment parks and logistical areas northwest of Khorramshahr in the arid flatlands and lush plantations of date palm trees stretching ten miles along the Shatt. These concentrations of Iraqi vehicles and supplies soon became some of the favorite targets for Iranian artillerymen and aerial strikes.⁴⁷

On 1 October Iraqi armor forces endeavored to complete their encirclement of Khorramshahr, an action they estimated would isolate the Iranians "from all outside help" and give Iraq control of the important

⁴⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, 93.

⁴⁶ Kifner, "Attacking Iraqi Troops in Iran Find the Foe Still Fights," A1 and A4; McLaurin 1982, 29.

⁴⁷ H. Tanner, "Iran Says Iraq Uses Missiles to Attack Towns in War Zone," New York Times, 10 October 1980, A14; McLaurin, 28.

highway between Abadan and Ahwaz.⁴⁸ The Iranians, however, had other ideas as they dropped army paratroopers into the city to aid their besieged comrades.⁴⁹ As many as 2,000 soldiers may have been involved in this reinforcement effort.⁵⁰ With the arrival of assistance, the Iranian will to resist received a much needed "shot in the arm" and the defenders of Khorramshahr stepped-up their opposition.

By 3 October, "most buildings in Khorramshahr were, or had been, on fire" owing to the constant bombardment by Iraqi artillery from across the Shatt-al-Arab.⁵¹ More detachments of Iraqi soldiers, fresh from their hastily-organized training in urban warfare, "were fed into the [front lines] to reinforce" the armored division laying siege to Khorramshahr.⁵² In one six-hour skirmish, the Iranians used Chieftan tanks and rocket-propelled grenades to ambush an Iraqi armored column. They destroyed about five Iraqi tanks and more than ten APCs. Both sides launched several attacks and counterattacks during this clash which occurred primarily in the northern portions of the city. Artillery units exchanged volleys and sniping by both sides generated many casualties. That same day, F-4 fighter-jets of the Iranian Air Force strafed, rocketed and bombed the Iraqi lines of communication (LOC) and assembly areas northwest of Khorramshahr.⁵³

⁴⁸ H. Tanner, "Iraq Says Its Forces Achieve Main Goals, But Iran Sees a Ploy," New York Times, 3 October 1980, A10.

⁴⁹ McLaurin, 29.

⁵⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, 93.

⁵¹ O'Ballance, 37.

⁵² Ibid., 38.

⁵³ McLaurin, 29.

The war was two weeks old on 4 October, and Iraqi forces were a long way from securing control of Khorramshahr. Yet Iraqi officers informed reporters that their units were now masters of "the port area and eastern quarters of the city" as well as the main road between Abadan and Ahwaz.⁵⁴ Although this action severed the Iranian force's most direct means of resupply, the Iranians compensated the loss by getting support from Abadan and Khosrowabad, an Iranian naval facility on the Shatt-al-Arab about twelve miles below Abadan.⁵⁵

On 6 October, the Iraqi armored division mounted another attack. As usual, an intense artillery barrage preceded the effort that was spearheaded by both Iraqi tanks and special forces units. Iraqi Air Force MiGs also joined in, striking at concentrations of Iranian Pasdaran defenders. For a while the Iranians valiantly held their ground; however, they were eventually driven back, allowing Iraqi forces to expand their grip on Khorramshahr's waterfront port facilities.⁵⁶

Between 7 and 10 October most of the fighting moved into the center of the city where Iranian militia continued to hold out against Iraqi pressure. Although Iraqi progress was slow, the division steadily gained ground against the Iranians, who continued their tactic of staging hit-and-run raids out of their headquarters in Khorramshahr's central mosque. But, with each passing day the Iranian's supply of ammunition, food, and water rapidly dwindled.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ H. Tanner, "Iraq Steps Up War, Says Iran Ignores a Cease-fire Order," A14.

⁵⁵ Y. Ibrahim, "Iraqis Still Battle for Khorramshahr; Iranians Fight Back," New York Times, 5 October 1980, 20.

⁵⁶ McLaurin, 30.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

The next significant Iraqi move came on 12 October when tanks and special forces units combined for an assault upon the suspension bridge spanning the Karun River in the eastern part of Khorramshahr. The attack met considerable resistance, as the Iranians "were well-entrenched around the bridge . . . , with dug-in Chieftain tanks commanding the approaches."⁵⁸ To counter the Iranian tanks, Iraqi engineers constructed hull-defilade positions for their own armored vehicles. Firing from within these protected positions, the Iraqi tanks performed like pill-boxes and pounded away at Iranian positions across the Karun River in much the same way as Kurdish villages had been sieged in the early 1970s. The fighting near the bridge lasted almost four days until the Iranians finally succumbed and withdrew.

Now, instead of seizing the opportunity to pursue the opponent by mounting an immediate drive across the river toward Abadan, the Iraqi division decided to concentrate on removing pockets of Iranian forces hiding out on the north bank of the Karun west of the bridge into Khorramshahr. This clearing action, beginning on 16 October, marks the beginning of the final stage in the siege of Khorramshahr.⁵⁹

On 24 October, Baghdad announced that "the whole of Khorramshahr was finally in Iraqi hands."⁶⁰ Yet this announcement was errant again for two reasons. First, Iranian snipers operating from concealed positions in the city's port area continued to harass Iraqi soldiers for several more weeks. Second, when the Iraqi armored

⁵⁸ D. Middleton, "Persian Gulf War: Stalemate or a Lull?" New York Times, 11 October 1980, 4.

⁵⁹ P. Gupte, "Iraq Reports Fall of Khorramshahr," New York Times, 25 October, 1980, 1; McLaurin, 31.

⁶⁰ O'Ballance, 38.

division fixed itself upon clearing Khorramshahr, thereby postponing any major moves upon Abadan, the Iranians were able to reinfiltate to their former positions overwatching the Karun River bridge. Indeed, the remainder of October and most of November passed before Iraq finally wrestled the whole of Khorramshahr and the bridge to Abadan from the grip of its defenders.

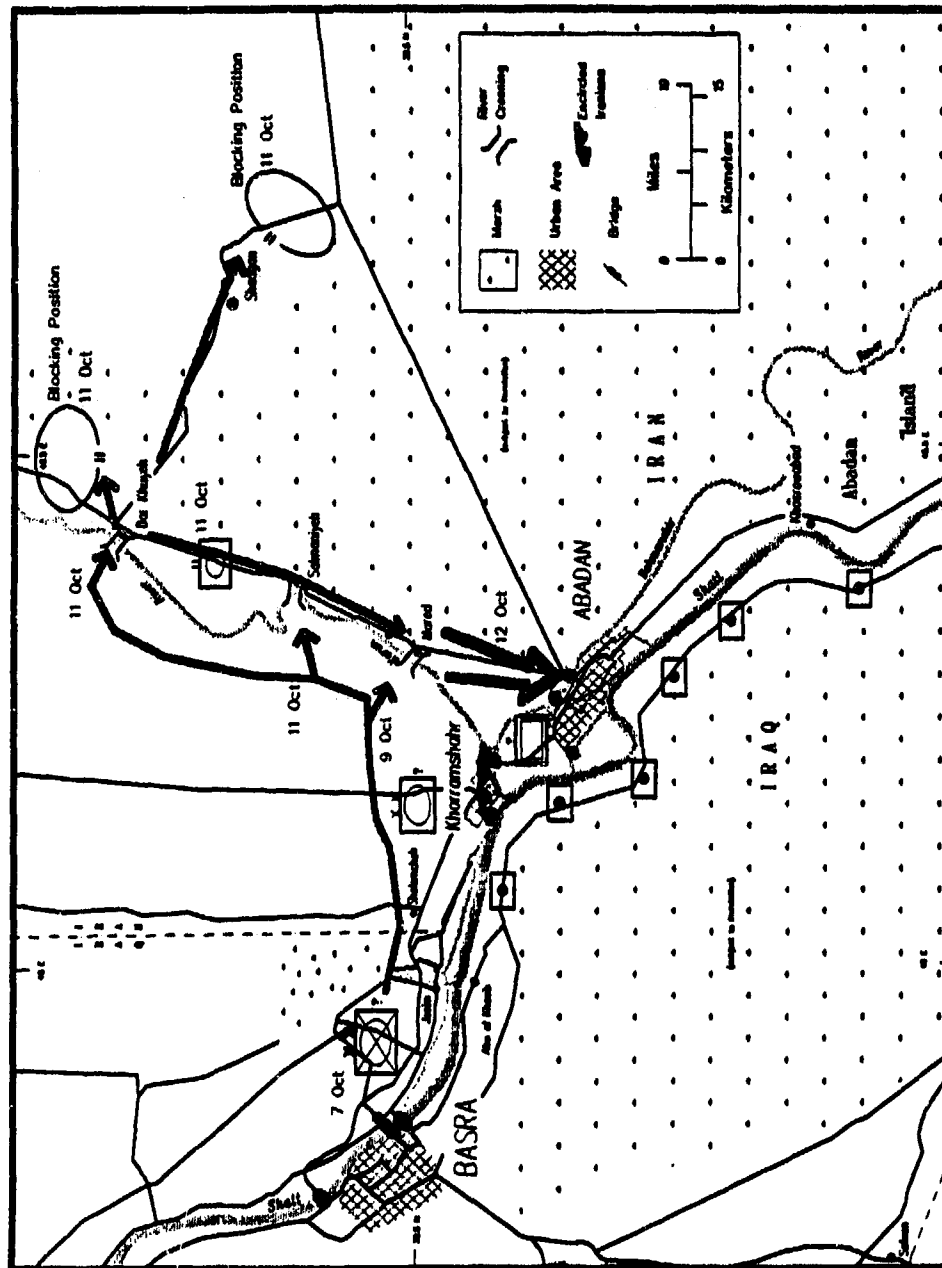
Iraq Lays Siege to Abadan

In early October, as operations by the Iraqi armored division bogged down in Khorramshahr, the Baghdad regime apparently made a major modification to the objective of the army's operation. Now, instead of taking "Abadan Island by force as originally planned," Iraq decided to "isolate and contain" the Iranian forces located there.⁶¹ Essentially, the change meant that the Iraqi army would make its bid for control of the Shatt-al-Arab by laying siege to Abadan Island.

This new plan called for the Iraqi armored division to continue the clearing of Khorramshahr (see Map 9). Simultaneously, a fresh division would receive orders to bypass Khorramshahr to the north and east, to cross the Karun River, to establish blocking positions and prevent Iranian reinforcements from reaching Abadan via Ahwaz. The division would subsequently initiate a frontal assault upon Abadan from the east, negotiate the Bahmanshir River, and seize control of the city.⁶² Presumably, the mission of this newly-committed division would be conducted independent of ongoing operations in nearby Khorramshahr.

⁶¹ Ibid., 39.

⁶² There is general disagreement among writers regarding the type of division committed to the new mission. Some authors say it was an armored division, while others simply claim the unit was "mechanized."



Map 9: Iraqi Plan for Commitment of a Second Division, 7-12 October 1980. The additional division became necessary when the armored division attacking Khorramshahr proved unable to complete the mission of seizing Abadan Island. The new division planned to by-pass the fighting in Khorramshahr, cross the Karun River at multiple locations, and attack Abadan from the north. Map drawn by the author.

As early as 7 October, the division began moving southeast along the road from Basra to Khorramshahr. To enhance the division's river crossing capabilities, its combat engineer units received "great amounts of mobile bridging equipment."⁶³ Since the Iraqis had reports that Iranian units occupied several positions on the far shore of the Karun, they anticipated that their operation would probably include "a difficult river crossing."⁶⁴

On 9 October, Iraqi artillery on the west side of the Shatt-al-Arab stepped-up its fires upon Abadan in preparation for the impending river crossing.⁶⁵ The mission began that evening as Iraqi infantry crossed "in small boats" under the cover of darkness to secure the east bank of the Karun. The site chosen for the river crossing operation was "about 10 miles [up river] of Khorramshahr," probably near the Iranian village of Mared.⁶⁶ By conducting its maneuver at night, Iraqi forces hoped to "achieve surprise . . . and minimize casualties."⁶⁷

Upon reaching the far bank of the Karun, the division's immediate mission was "to block land communications between Abadan Island and the east," especially along "the road to Bandar-e Mashahr."⁶⁸

⁶³ Y. Ibrahim, "Iran and Iraq Fill the Airwaves With Words," New York Times, 8 October 1980, A14; D. Middleton, "Air War's Emerging Role," New York Times, 9 October 1980, A16.

⁶⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, 94.

⁶⁵ Tanner, "Iran Says Iraq Uses Missiles to Attack Towns in War Zone," A14.

⁶⁶ O'Ballance, 39.

⁶⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, 94.

⁶⁸ O'Ballance, 39; Cordesman and Wagner, 94. Bandar-e Mashahr is located about 80 kilometers east of Abadan.

Iraqi infantrymen found the Iranian side of the Karun overwatched by a force approximately of company strength. Yet the Iraqis caught the defending Iranians unawares, dislodged them from their positions, and captured "at least ten Chieftain tanks and other vehicles" in short order.⁶⁹

During the evening of 10-11 October, Iraqi engineers completed the construction of at least two additional pontoon bridges over the Karun (at Salmaniyeh and Dar Khuyeh). Then, just before daybreak, a combat force of perhaps three battalions crossed the river near Dar Khuyeh, an Iranian settlement some 30 miles up the Karun from Khorramshahr and the site of the northernmost of the three pontoon bridges.⁷⁰ Two of these battalions pushed quickly to the east and seized Shadgan, thereby securing the eastern flank of the division's axis of advance toward Abadan. Simultaneously, the remaining battalion drove south to link-up with forces at the southern crossing site near Mared. The latter element encountered the only significant resistance the Iranians offered - some strafing by Cobra helicopters as well as direct and indirect fires from several artillery units hidden among the palm groves along the east bank of the Karun. As morning approached, Iraqi engineers feared an attack by Iranian aircraft; therefore, the engineers dismantled their bridges and concealed the equipment among the riverine vegetation of the Karun's west bank.⁷¹

⁶⁹ O'Ballance, 33.

⁷⁰ Many English sources list this town as "Darkhoven." Dar Khuyeh is the correct Iranian designation.

⁷¹ J. Kifner, "Iraqis Move Tanks Across a Key River to Drive on Abadan," New York Times, 12 October 1980, 1 and 18; J. Kifner, "Iraqis, On the Move, Place More Bridges on Way to Abadan," New York Times, 13

On 12 and 13 October, Iraqi units continued to cross the Karun, forming an assembly area immediately south of Mared between the Abadan-Ahwaz highway and the Karun River (see Map 10). From these positions within five miles of the Bahmanshir River and Abadan, Iraqi forces began preparing for the coming assault of the prized Iranian port city. The Iraqis were also seen transporting captured Iranian trucks back across the pontoon bridge near Mared, suggesting that the bridging site was clear of the threat of enemy direct fires.

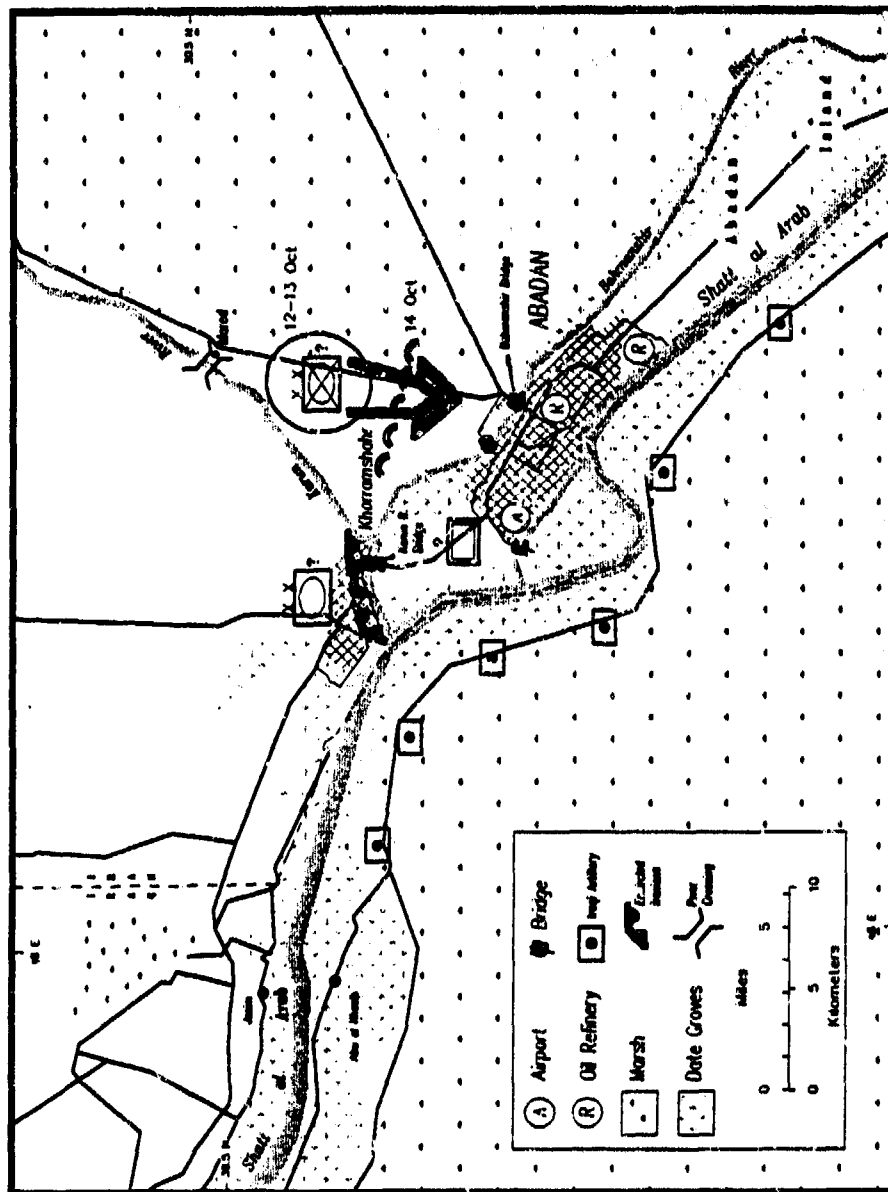
As the situation became more secure, Iraqi pontoon bridges stayed in position round-the-clock. To further quicken the pace of the river crossing, a photograph in the New York Times suggests that the Iraqis were sending some of their equipment over the Karun using rafts fashioned from extra sections of tactical float bridging (i.e., sections of bridge not needed by the pontoon operation).⁷² The Iranians offered little resistance to the Iraqi buildup, making their presence felt by either an occasional artillery bombardment or a raid by one or two Cobra attack helicopters.⁷³

Although the resolve of the Iranian defenses now seemed to waiver, the Iraqis still judged that they should proceed with extreme caution. Therefore, in a manner similar to the slow-paced operation conducted by the other division attacking Khorramshahr, the Iraqis reverted to their tactic of striking at the objective with the only way

October 1980, A1; J. Kifner, "Iraqis Reinforcing Men in Bridgehead; Advance On Abadan," New York Times, 15 October 1980, A1 and A14.

⁷² D. Middleton, "Iraq's Slowed Offensive: Terrain Seen as a Factor," New York Times, 14 October 1980, A12.

⁷³ J. Kifner, "Iraqis, Under Fire, Secure Bridgehead On Way to Abadan," New York Times, 14 October 1980, A1; Middleton, 14 Oct 1980, A12.



Map 10: Tactical Situation, 12-14 October 1980. By 13 October, the newly-committed Iraqi division had crossed the Karun and was massing its forces south of Mared. The division launched their assault of Abadan on 14 October. Map drawn by the author.

they could reach it - by massive artillery fire. Because of this shelling, by 14 October all 152 oil storage tanks in the tank farms of Abadan were ablaze.⁷⁴

On 15 October, the Iraqis forged their way to within one mile of Abadan and captured the city's radio-television station. In a separate engagement farther north, near the Iraqi blocking position near Dar Khuyeh, an Iraqi armor force ambushed "a large Iranian convoy, escorted by tanks coming from Ahwaz" (see Map 9). Apparently this Iranian force was attempting to carry supplies to the besieged defenders of Abadan by way of the Abadan-Ahwaz highway.⁷⁵ The short, but intense battle matched Iraqi-owned, Soviet T-55 tanks against Iran's British-made Chieftains. As the combatants attempted to maneuver upon one another, vehicles from both forces became mired in the thick muds near the river. This skirmish, which appears to have involved about a battalion's worth of combat vehicles from each side, was an Iraqi victory as "the Iranians abandoned at least 20 Chieftains and other armored vehicles, and decamped on foot."⁷⁶

Between 16 and 20 October, the Iraqi advance continued its unnecessarily slow progression - a rate of less than one mile per day - while their artillery hammered away at suspected Iranian locations on Abadan Island. Now, with many parts of Abadan bombarded into rubble, the tactical situation assumed many characteristics of a seventeenth-

⁷⁴ Middleton, "Iraq's Slowed Offensive: Terrain Seen as a Factor," A12; Kifner, "Iraqis Reinforcing Men in Bridgehead; Advance On Abadan," A14.

⁷⁵ O'Ballance, 39.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 39.

century "Vauban-ian" siege.⁷⁷ For the Iranians, the Iraqis were but half their problem as their stores of food and ammunition rapidly dwindled.

On 20 October, Iraqi forces entered the outskirts of Abadan and the fight commenced for control of the Bahmanshir Bridge leading into the heart of the city (see Map 11). Yet, the Iranians defending Abadan Island were by no means isolated as "the Iraqi force could not fully secure the island because the salt marsh at its southern end is untrafficable by military vehicles and can be reached only by boat."⁷⁸ This opening in the encirclement proved significant as it "enabled Iranian reinforcements and supplies to be taken to Abadan Island in small boats by night."⁷⁹

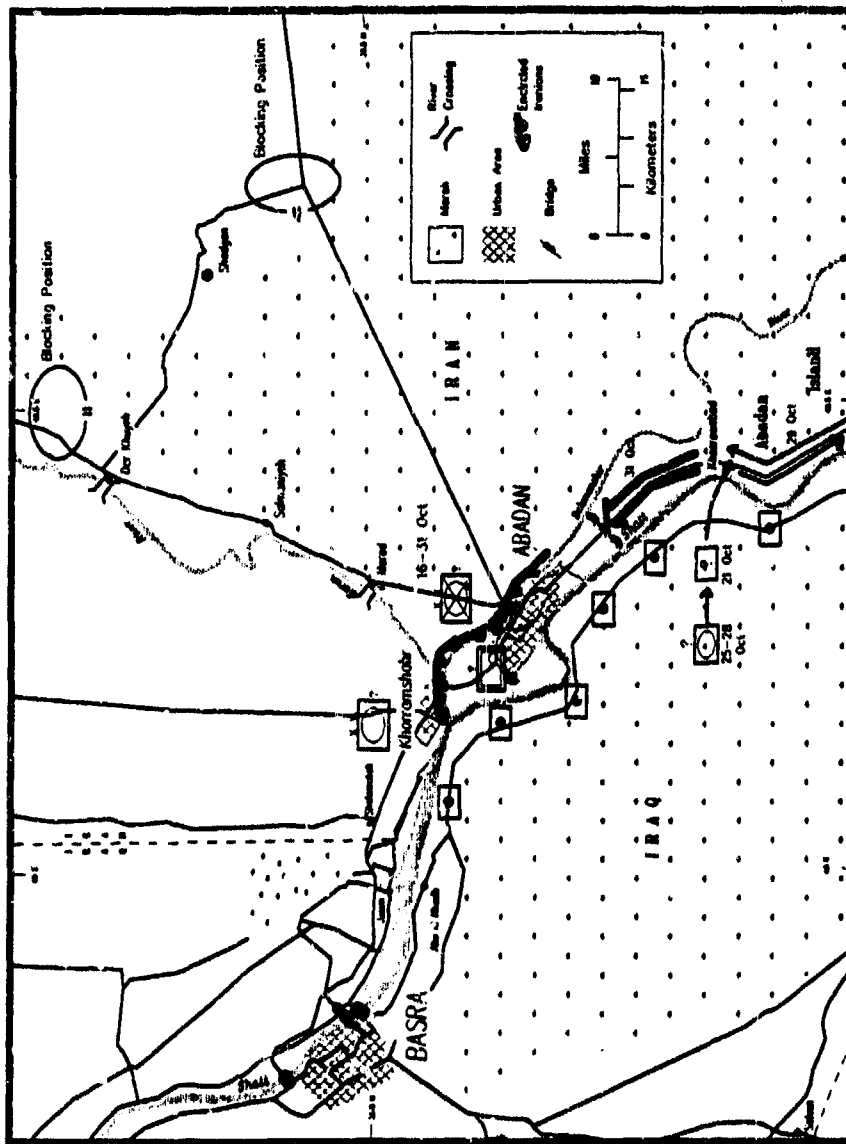
Actions on 20 and 21 October also saw Iraqi forces mount a minor attack against the Iranian naval facility at Khosrowabad (twelve miles southeast of Abadan on the Shatt-al-Arab) in an attempt to eliminate one of the Iranians few remaining caches of supplies (see Map 11). Accounts of the action make little mention of the types of forces conducting the assault, but the author suspects the Iraqis may have moved in elements of their special forces by seacraft.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban was a French military engineer whose most significant contributions to the art of war were made in the areas of siegecraft and the science of fortification. For a most illuminating discussion of Vauban see Henry Guerlac, "Vauban: The Impact of Science on War," in Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, edited by Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 64-90.

⁷⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, 95.

⁷⁹ O'Ballance, 39-40.

⁸⁰ "Iraqis at Key Bridge on Edge of Abadan," New York Times, 21 October 1980, A1; "Iraqi Aide Says Aim is to Seize Iran's Oil and Then Negotiate," New York Times, 22 October 1980, A14.



Map 11: Tactical Situation, 18-31 October 1980. The two Iraqi divisions continued laying siege to Khorramshahr and Abadan assisted by Iraqi artillery from the other side of the Shatt-al-Arab. An Iraqi force took Khosrowabad on 21 October. Then, sometime between 25 and 28 October, the Iraqis ferried armor across the river near Khosrowabad and struck at Abadan from the south. Still, Abadan never fell. Map drawn by the author.

During the remainder of October, as Iraqi units continued their effort to evict the Iranians near the Bahmanshir Bridge, several significant events occurred. First, the Iraqi armored division that had seized Khorramshahr on 24 October attacked into Abadan from the west in an attempt to link-up with their countrymen. Second, sometime between 25 and 28 October, Iraq ferried tanks across the Shatt to Khosrowabad and further isolated the Iranians on Abadan Island. The precise date of this action and the size of the force conducting the mission is unknown; however, by 29 October, the Iraqis had cleared the southern portion of Abadan Island down to the Persian Gulf. Finally, on 31 October, with their back secure, the forces in Khosrowabad began pushing northwest toward Abadan.⁸¹

After the 25th of October, details of major combat actions in the Khorramshahr-Abadan area are hard to distill from reports in western sources. Artillery exchanges were a daily occurrence, control of the bridges over the Karun and Bahmanshir rivers shifted between Iraqis and Iranians, and efforts to tighten the noose around Abadan Island continued. On several occasions before the end of October, Iraqi Information Ministry officials escorted western journalists into the area. During November and December, however, such trips decreased in number and the news media became more reliant on reports intercepted from Baghdad and Teheran radio. As one might expect in times of conflict, these reports were usually of contradictory nature and filled with phrases of self-aggrandizement. The author believes this situation

⁸¹ D. Middleton, "Iraq's Offensive: Wider Aims Predicted," New York Times, 23 October 1980, A14; P. Gupta, "Both Sides Report Heavy Fighting as Iraq Begins a Drive on Abadan," New York Times, 1 November, 1980, 4.

directly reflects the definite "siege nature" of the combat and that in reality neither side was enjoying much success.

Despite repeated attempts to isolate the Iranian forces holding out in Abadan, the second Iraqi division committed to the Abadan front was unable to completely secure all approaches to the city. By mid-November, Iranian helicopters were running nighttime resupply and medical evacuation missions to the defenders of Abadan.⁸²

Thus *The Battles of Abadan Island* had a rather undramatic ending; indeed, the conclusion was somewhat of a stalemate. As the winter rains approached, Iraqi forces in the region consolidated their gains, while the Iranians continued efforts to harass the Iraqis wherever possible. The Iraqi army could claim a victory in Khorramshahr, but it had not accomplished its assigned mission - Abadan Island was not encircled and, more importantly, Abadan City remained in Iranian hands.

Conclusions

In conducting military operations against Abadan Island, Iraq aimed to capitalize on its superiority in five areas - mobility, firepower, weapon systems, military engineering, and sustainment. However, instead of achieving the great successes they undoubtedly envisioned, Iraqi ground forces performed dismally, revealing major weaknesses in several aspects of their leadership and training.

Yet, was the problem solely the fault of the military, or were there overriding political pressures at work? Compared to other issues explored in this section, the answer to this question is somewhat

⁸² O'Ballance, 39-40.

simple. In the five years since the end of the Kurdish campaigns in 1975, little had changed in the relationship between Iraq's military and political leadership. As discussed in Chapter One, the military (and thus the Army) was first of all, the organization by which the government insured and protected its legitimacy. Further, a position of high command in the military was more than likely a reward for a soldier's avowed political support of the Baathist regime than it was an overt recognition of his demonstrated tactical and technical competence.

Indeed, the poor results of the campaign against Abadan Island serve as an excellent indicator of the incompetent leadership extant in the Iraqi army at the time the war began with Iran. But more important is that the aftermath of the battles appear to indicate the extent to which political control limited the ability of high-level commanders to influence the design of military operations during the planning phase. For example, one wonders how Iraq decided it was more advantageous to require the army confront Khorramshahr and Abadan directly, as opposed to taking the more indirect (and less costly) approach of encirclement and isolation.

There are several possible answers, both political and military, to this dilemma. First, given Iraq's professed goal to regain control of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, seizure of the principal Iranian cities overlooking the river seems a logical way to accomplish the mission. Yet, by assigning the tasks to armor-heavy forces strongly implies that the Iraqi military leadership had little concept of how to

conduct operations in urban warfare.⁸³ If the Iraqis ever conducted detailed studies of the Arab-Israeli Wars, then they seemed to have completely missed the lessons of the Battle of Suez City from the October 1973 conflict.⁸⁴

Indeed, in view of the resourcefulness and flexibility the Iraqi army displayed in overcoming problems associated with combatting Kurdish guerrillas, one might expect that the Iraqis could have foreseen the kinship between operations in urban and mountainous terrains. Some of the common characteristics of warfare in cities and mountains include: (1) the importance for centralized planning and decentralized execution; (2) the requirement for combined arms operations at the small unit level (i.e., company and below); (3) the indispensable role of light infantry; (4) the effects of the terrain on observation, fields of fire, and weapon ranges; (5) how to overcome the inherent advantages of the defender; (6) the need for timely and accurate battlefield intelligence; and (7) the part played by initiative at the lowest echelons of organization.⁸⁵

This writer can only speculate that military operations in urban terrain (MOUT) was not a priority topic on the syllabus within the Iraqi military education system. Recall, for example, the repeated failure met by Iraqi attacks into Khorramshahr. Not only did their tanks advance without the protection of infantry or the knowledge

⁸³ Here one wonders, for example, why the Iraqis did not employ some of their mountain forces who, by the very nature of the training, would have adapted far easier than did the heavy forces.

⁸⁴ Trevor Dupuy, Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974, (Fairfax, VA: Hero Books, 1984), 538-546.

⁸⁵ Field Manual 90-10; Field Manual 100-5: Operations, 81-83.

acquired beforehand by aggressive ground reconnaissance, but the Iraqis also did not employ aircraft in support of ground operations. At least Iraqi commanders quickly realized their errant ground tactics and set out to correct them by sending their units through a hastily-organized school in urban warfare. Yet, a few days of training would never compensate for Iraq's years of neglect in the study of urban warfare. In effect, Iraq abrogated its great advantage in maneuver when it decided to grapple with Iranian defenders in the "urban jungles" of Khorramshahr and Abadan. Clearly, it is safe to surmise that Iraq's military leadership, during the months or weeks preceding the invasion, did not direct its forces to prepare for the type of fight beckoned by the Iraqi attack plan.

At the political level, Iraq undoubtedly calculated that the capture of Khorramshahr and Abadan would strengthen its political bargaining hand with Iran -- a conclusion supported by Iraq's premature announcement of the capture of Khorramshahr on 26 September. In other words, Baghdad must have figured that it could deal a fatal blow to Iranian morale by winning in Khorramshahr and Abadan, thereby forcing the Khomeini regime to sue for peace under terms favorable to Iraq. At a minimum, the Iraqi body politik must have estimated that the seizure of two cities of vital significance to Iran would increase national support for the invasion and strengthen the army's confidence in its leadership. Regardless of the reason, Iraq's plan backfired; the invasion strengthened Iran's revolution and served to unify what had been disorganized. This political development directly influenced

operations on the battlefield because it inspired the Iranians to fight with fervor against Iraqi aggression.

As further evidence of the impacts of political considerations upon the military operation against Abadan Island, one can examine various reasons why the Iraqi advance lacked speed - especially in view of Iraq's tremendous edge in mobility and firepower. Perhaps Saddam Hussein restricted the aggressiveness of the army's assault in recognition of the high Shiite population within his army? Iraqi officers, on the other hand, proffer a different explanation by claiming that their reluctance "to move harder and faster . . ." can be attributed, in part, to their recognition that " . . . the bulk of the population in the area is ethnically Arab rather than Persian."⁸⁶

This perception has merit since one goal of the Iraqi campaign was to "liberate" Arab-populated Khuzestan from the grip of radical, non-Arab Iran. Iraqi politicians probably sensed (and may have warned the military) that too aggressive an attack by the armed forces might cost Iraq the support of the local citizenry. Yet, such sentiments are also diametrically opposite the army's tactic of employing massed artillery against the cities. Indeed, soon after the start of the bombardment, the citizens of Khorramshahr and Abadan ran for their lives instead of defending their property. The mass exodus did little more than choke local road networks and further inhibit the advance of Iraq's armored columns.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ J. Kifner, "Finished! Iraqi Officers in Iran Say of Ahwaz, Khuzistan Capital," New York Times, 29 September 1980, A14.

⁸⁷ Kifner, "Baghdad Says Its Troops Capture Khorramshahr and Cut a Rail Line," A1.

A second reason for Iraq's sluggish pace may stem from a political decision to have the military keep its casualties to a minimum. From a strictly demographic perspective, Iraqi leaders surely realized that their national population of 15-million could scarcely afford to trade casualties man-for-man with an Iran inhabited by 45-million people. In other words, a "war of attrition" would not be Iraq's best interest. Here, it is again ironic to point out how the battle became precisely the type of fight the Iraqis hoped to avoid.

Iraq's poor showing also suggests they clearly underestimated the defensive capabilities of their enemy.⁸⁸ Though "it was obvious that the present Iranian forces were only a shadow . . . " of the Shah's old military machine, the Iranians fought courageously and displayed high morale.⁸⁹ That the few Iranians defending Khorramshahr and Abadan so easily drew Iraq into costly attrition warfare clearly points out deficiencies in Iraq's command estimate, mission planning, and intelligence gathering processes.⁹⁰

Still, the military's lack of progress presented the Iraqi leadership with a paradox: Should the army attack with all force and accept casualties, or should it continue operations at its slow pace? As noted in the campaign narrative, the Iraqi solution was a compromise. By committing a second division to interdict approaches into the area, Iraq hoped to isolate the Iranian forces and then to defeat them in

⁸⁸ H. Tanner, "Jordan Acts to Aid Iraq with Supplies for War with Iran," New York Times, 7 October 1980, A14.

⁸⁹ Tanner, "Iraqis Intensifying Shelling of Abadan; Refinery in Flames," A4.

⁹⁰ Tanner, "Jordan Acts to Aid Iraq with Supplies for War with Iran," A14.

detail. That the Iraqis did not foresee the need for a second division until more than two weeks after the start of the war (October 6-7) leads to the conclusion that a faulty invasion plan was indeed a significant factor affecting the military's poor performance. In effect, the Iraqis were reinforcing a failing attack, as opposed to committing their reserves in areas experiencing success.

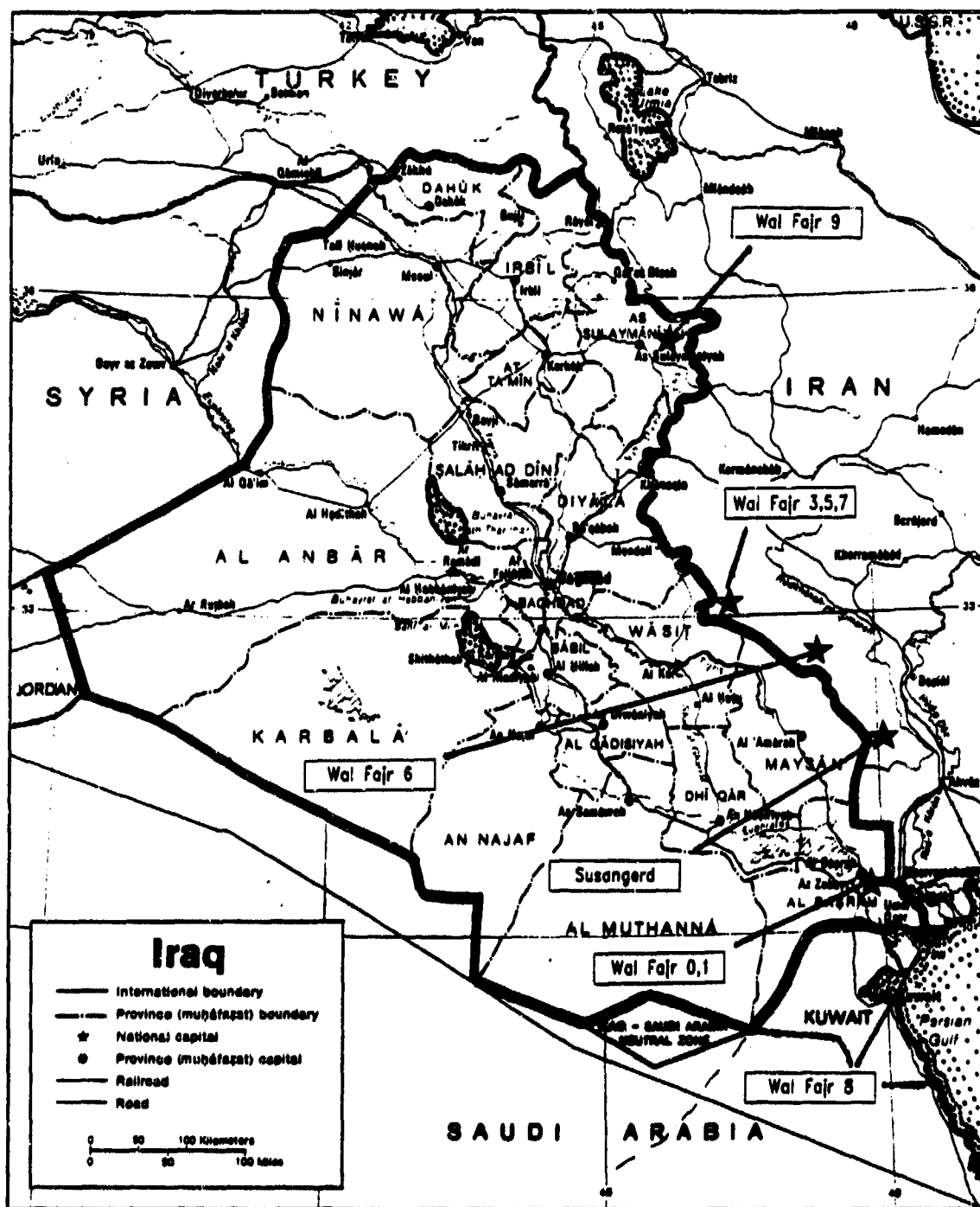
In sum, *The Battles of Abadan Island* surfaced many problems within the military leadership. In the next campaign analyzed by the thesis, readers will see that the Iraqis manage to solve some of their more pressing problems (especially, command and control), but they retained major weaknesses (notably, intelligence).

CHAPTER 3

THE BATTLES OF FISH LAKE

The months between December 1981, when the most substantial of Iraq's opening offensives essentially ended, and December 1985 contained more than fifty significant battles between Iraqi and Iranian ground units. After regrouping from the shock of Iraq's invasion, Iran went on the offensive in an effort to regain territories lost since the start of the war. A few fights developed into major confrontations between ground forces (i.e., Susangerd, January 1981; Bostan, November 1981; Iran's *Wal Fajr* series of offensives 1983-1986). In reality, one could best characterize the fighting from 1981 through 1985 as a classic "war of attrition" punctuated by an occasional major scrap (see Map 12). Iran, with its thrice greater population base, was clearly pinning its strategy on wearing down the Iraqis. Indeed, by the beginning of 1986, an end to the fighting seemed nowhere in sight.

In February 1986 Iran seized the Iraqi port city of Al-Faw with a series of daring nighttime amphibious attacks called *Operation Wal Fajr-8*. The Ayatollah Khomeini, encouraged by successes elsewhere on the battlefield, believed it was time for his armed forces to launch the "final offensives" that would conclude the war before March 21, the



Map 12: Selected Major Battles and Campaigns between 1981 and 1988. An end to the conflict seemed nowhere in sight. Battle information extracted from Cordesman and Wagner, and O'Ballance. Map base from United States Central Intelligence Agency, "Iraq," March 1979.

Iranian New Year.¹ To satisfy the Ayatollah's demands, the Iranian military planned the series of attacks known as the *Karbala* offensives.²

The battles analyzed in this chapter comprise the fifth of the ten separate operations eventually comprising the *Karbala* campaigns. To the Iranians, the battles are known as *Operation Karbala-5* (9 January-27 February 1987). In this thesis, however, the battles are designated *The Battles of Fish Lake*, after the name of the man-made lake where most of the fighting occurred.³

Referred to by some historians as the "Iranian Kursk," the fight around Fish Lake and Basra is noteworthy for several reasons.⁴ First, it provides an opportunity to study the TTP employed by Iraqi forces during the deliberate defense of an area. Second, because the Iranian army spent more than a year planning and preparing for the attack against Basra, the campaign promised to be one of Iran's "best" offensives.⁵ Third, the number of men participating in the Battles of

¹ G.H. Jansen, "The Gulf War: A Costly Failure," Middle East International 291 (9 January 1987), 4; P. Tyler, "Missiles Hit Cities in Gulf War," Washington Post, 12 January 1987, A20.

² Robin Wright, In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 47 and 155. "Karbala" is the Iraqi city where the martyr Hosain and his followers were massacred in A.D. 680 during a battle against Sunni Muslim troops of the Umayyad dynasty.

³ I have also been told by officers from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates that Arab officers refer to these battles as the Battle of Basra.

⁴ R. Jupa and J. Dingeman, J., "How Iran Lost/Iraq Won the Gulf War," Strategy & Tactics 133 (March-April 1990), 49-55. Here, the reference to Kursk is quite misleading, indeed, inaccurate. At Kursk, one of the great armored battles of World War II, both combatants had tanks. At Basra, however, only the Iraqis used them. Jupa and Dingeman are not the only authors to make this inaccurate comparison.

⁵ B.E. Trainor, "Turning Point: Failed Attack on Basra," New York Times, 19 July 1988, A9.

Fish Lake was one of the largest amounts massed by either side since the start of the war - Iran sent more than 200,000 men and boys into the teeth of defenses eventually manned by at least seven Iraqi divisions. And fourth, although the fighting did cost Iraq "a strategic salient of territory" near Fish Lake, the army turned back "the most intense and dangerous Iranian offensive of the entire war."⁶

About a week after the start of the fighting, Middle East analyst Heino Kopietz predicted that the next few months would mark a turning point in the war.⁷ He was right. After *The Battles of Fish Lake*, Iran's war effort was militarily bankrupt, its people somewhat demoralized, and the Iranian will to fight lost steam quite rapidly.⁸

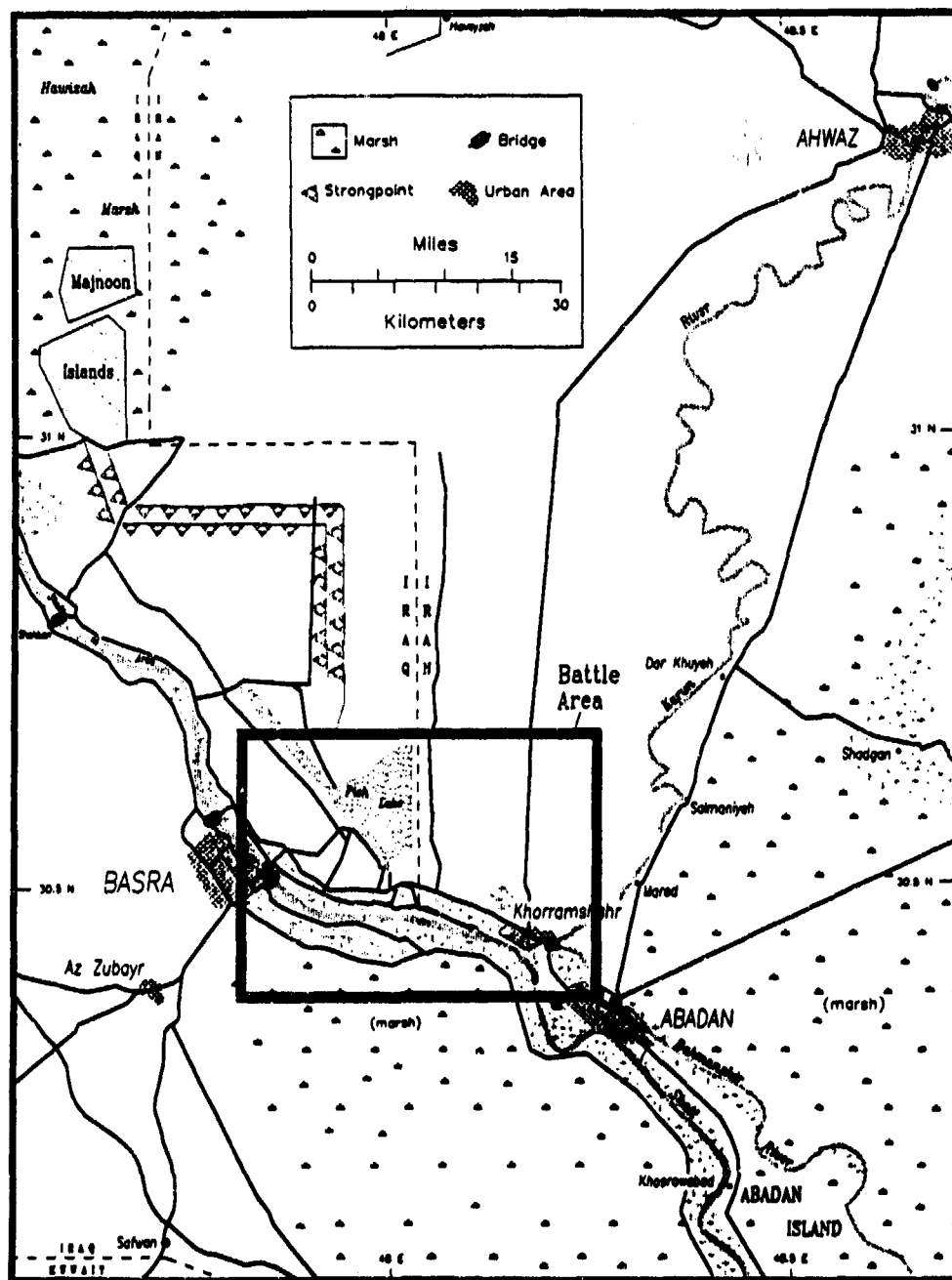
Military Aspects of the Battle Area Terrain

Most of the fighting associated with *The Battles of Fish Lake* occurred between the city of Basra and the Iran-Iraq border west of Khorramshahr (see Map 13). Except for the Iraqi Shi'i holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, Basra is the most important economic, political and social center south of Baghdad. The city's rapidly growing population is about eight-five percent Shiite, making Basra one of only three cities in Iraq with more than one million inhabitants. Like the nearby Iranian urban centers of Abadan and Khorramshahr, the proximity of Basra

⁶ Jupa and Dingeman, "How Iran Lost/Iraq Won the Gulf War," 50.

⁷ Michael Dobbs, "Iran Opens 2nd Front in Gulf War," Washington Post, 15 January 1987, A1 and A36.

⁸ Trainor, "Turning Point: Failed Attack on Basra," A9; C. Herzog "A Military-Strategic Overview," in The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, ed. Efraim Karsh, (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989), 263; S.C. Pelletiere, D.V. Johnson, and L.R. Rosenberger, Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1990), 77.



Map 13: Geographic Setting for the Battles of Fish Lake, 1987. The majority of the fighting occurred near Fish Lake, the man-made water barrier at the heart of Iraq's defenses east and north of Basra. Trace of Iraqi defenses derived from satellite imagery supplied by Earth Satellite Corporation (dated Sep 1990). Map drawn by the author.

to the fighting throughout the war brought extensive damage to many areas of the city, significantly disrupted daily life, and led to the flight of many townspeople.⁹

Located some 110 kilometers (68 miles) up-river from the Persian Gulf, Basra consists of an agglomeration of smaller towns on both the east and west banks of the Shatt-Al-Arab. Basra handles by far the greatest proportion of Iraqi foreign trade. The city is also surrounded by date groves and serves as the center of Iraq's date industry, which, with the exception of petroleum, is the principal item of export.¹⁰

In the 1970s, the region around Basra assumed greater importance in the economic vitality of Iraq. The massive Rumaila oil fields are located southwest of the city, as is a reversible, 900,000 barrel-per-day (bpd) capacity pipeline connecting Basra to Iraq's northern petroleum center at Kirkuk. Approximately two-thirds of Iraq's total oil exports of 3.2 million bpd before the conflict left Iraq through the facilities southeast of Basra at Al-Faw. Yet, within months after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, oil production in Basra dropped to a standstill.¹¹

When Ayatollah Khomeini announced in early 1981 that the southern sectors of the battlefield would be the focus for his war strategy, the Iraqi government quickly developed concern for the

⁹ P. Tyler, "Resurrection in Modern Mesopotamia," Washington Post, 8 May 1989, A26.

¹⁰ W.B. Fisher, The Middle East: A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography, 6th ed., (London: Methuen, 1971), 368 and 375.

¹¹ C.M. Helms, Iraq: Eastern Flank of the Arab World, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1984, 20-21; H.C. Metz, ed., Iraq: A Country Study, (Washington, DC: U.S. Govt, 1990), 234.

security of Basra. Because the city is less than fifteen miles from the Iranian frontier, any plan to defend Basra would be one without the advantages of strategic depth.¹² Other than the Shatt-al-Arab waterway and a few other ephemeral streams, the short expanse of periodically marshy land between Basra and Iran is an unrestricted avenue of approach - a situation of which Iraq and the citizens of Basra were all too aware.

Prompted by Khomeini's threats, by mid-1981 the Iraqis began work on an elaborate defensive system to protect Basra.¹³ The Iraqi barrier would stretch from a point on the Shatt-al-Arab about three miles east of the Jasim River, and run north paralleling the north-south segment of the border with Iran (see Map 13). About four miles south of the east-west portion of the frontier, the barrier trace would turn west and parallel the border until finally veering northwest and tying into the Majnoon Islands (which were also became an extensive Iraqi barrier complex). Eventually, there were at least five separate lines to the defensive barrier between Basra and the Iranian border.¹⁴

Fish Lake was the core of the defensive system. The man-made water body formed when the Iraqis built "earthen barriers" along the perimeter of the marshy area near the border with Iran and flooded an

¹² G.H. Jansen and S. Haeri, "At the Gates of Basra," Middle East International 292 (23 January 1987): 3.

¹³ Washington Post, "Missile Hits Baghdad; Iraqi Planes Retaliate," 14 January 1987, A19.

¹⁴ S.C. Pelletiere, D.V. Johnson II, and L.R. Rosenberger, Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1991), 35; E. O'Ballance, The Gulf War, (London: Brasseys, 1988), 195.

area of about 120 square miles.¹⁵ The main obstacle within Fish Lake was a deep, one-half mile wide channel that ran northwest-southeast along the length of the lake. Forward of this channel, the marshes were studded with a devious maze of underwater barbed-wire entanglements, mines, electrodes, and other sensing devices.¹⁶

In the short expanse of land between Fish Lake and the Shatt-al-Arab, Iraq's fortifications aimed to take advantage of the natural terrain. Here, the Iraqis built a series of at least three semi-parallel, linear defensive positions along the west banks of the Jasim and Duayji rivers.¹⁷ North of Fish Lake, and linked with the Majnoon Islands, Iraqi engineers constructed two parallel lines of triangular, battalion-sized strongpoints.¹⁸ In front of each strongpoint the Iraqis emplaced minefields and dug anti-tank ditches. To link the strongpoints and linear defensive positions, Iraqi engineers also constructed an elaborate system of roads and supply dumps.¹⁹

¹⁵ A.H. Cordesman, The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-87: Strategic Implications and Policy Options, (London: Jane's, 1987), 126.

¹⁶ O'Ballance, 194.

¹⁷ Pelletiere et al., 35; A.H. Cordesman and A.R. Wagner, The Lessons of Modern War, 3 vols. Vol 2: The Iran-Iraq War, (London: Westview, 1990), 249.

¹⁸ These triangular strongpoints gained particular fame during the weeks prior to the ground phase of *Operation Desert Storm*. Since these fortifications played no direct role in *The Battles of Abadan Island*, a detailed analysis of them is outside the scope of this thesis. Interested readers should refer to Winning in the Desert II, Newsletter no. 90-8, (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, September 1990), 34-36.

¹⁹ Pelletiere et al., 35; E. O'Ballance, The Gulf War, (London: Brassey's, 1988), 195.

Geo-Strategic Setting

From a strategic perspective, Iran could exert pressure on Basra through one of two courses of offensive action - by seizing or by sieging Basra. To capture the city, Iranian ground forces would have to negotiate Iraq's ominous barrier complex, an approach that promised to cost many lives and equipment. On the other hand, a siege of Basra appeared the less risky and thus a more likely alternative. Indeed, siegecraft warfare also seemed to fit nicely within the context of the attrition strategy adopted by Iran since March 1984. Yet, as the previous six years of war had shown, Iran's strategic decision-making processes were often haphazard, founded more upon the religious zeal and fanaticism of the Iranian Revolution than in any careful analysis of the strategic situation.

Iran's decision to grab Basra, therefore, came as no surprise to military analysts; it was the logical alternative in view of Ayatollah Khomeini's professed goal to unseat the Baathist regime in Iraq.²⁰ Indeed, since the start of the war Khomeini aimed to instigate a major uprising in southern Iraq with a view toward the establishment of a Shiite government in the region. Obviously, Iran anticipated that a successful operation against Iraq's second largest city "would be a terrific psychological blow to the Iraqi government's mandate," perhaps even fatally undermining the political power of Saddam Hussein.²¹

²⁰ P. Tyler, 12 January 1987, A20; T. Masland, "Iran Launches Southern Assault, Maintains Foothold Near Basra, Iraq," Washington Post, 10 January 1987, A16. S. Chubin and C. Tripp, Iran and Iraq at War, (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), 49.

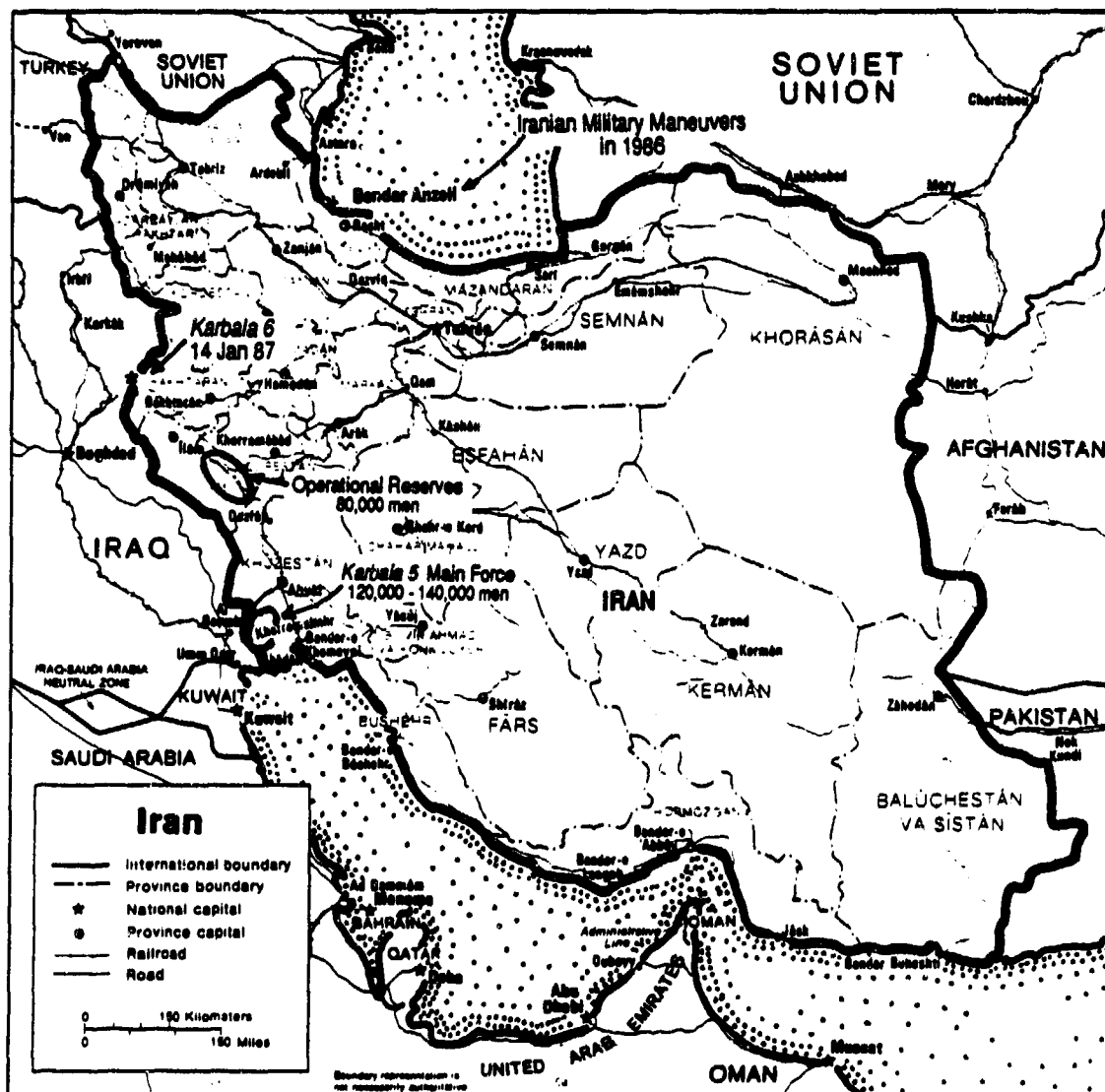
²¹ Jupa and Dingeman, "How Iran Lost/Iraq Won the Gulf War," 49.

Thus, in 1985 Iran began considering plans for a major strike against Basra, and by 1986 they were staging military maneuvers to evaluate various concepts of amphibious operations. To conduct these exercises, Iran sought terrain similar to the projected battle area near Basra. They chose the marshy areas near Bandar Anzeli, a coastal settlement on the Caspian Sea northwest of Rasht, capital city of Gilan Province (see Map 14). During the rehearsals, Iranian soldiers and their leaders drilled and tested the proposed ideas for overcoming the Fish Lake barrier system before Basra. Several Iranian divisions participated in the training which saw Pasdaran units (also known as the Revolutionary Guards) practicing combined arms operations for one of the first times in the war. As a result of these exercises, the Revolutionary Guard units earmarked for the *Karbala-5* offensive were to contain some of Iran's most able and well-trained small unit leaders.²²

Indeed, the quality and quantity of Iran's preparatory efforts prompted Gary Sick, a former National Security Council staff member and expert on Iran, to note that the Iranian offensive against Basra "which had been in preparation for an entire year, was arguably [Iran's] best-prepared, best-armed and most skillfully conducted operation in the long history of the war."²³

²² Cordesman and Wagner, 248; Wright, 157.

²³ G. Sick, "The United States and the Persian Gulf," in The Gulf War, eds. Hanns Maull and Otto Pick, (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1989), 133.



Map 14: Selected Strategic Aspects of Karbala-5. This map portrays the location in north-central Iran where the Iranian military held rehearsals during 1986 for Karbala-5. The map also shows where Iran later assembled these troops prior to the offensive. Map base from United States Central Intelligence Agency, "Iran," August 1986.

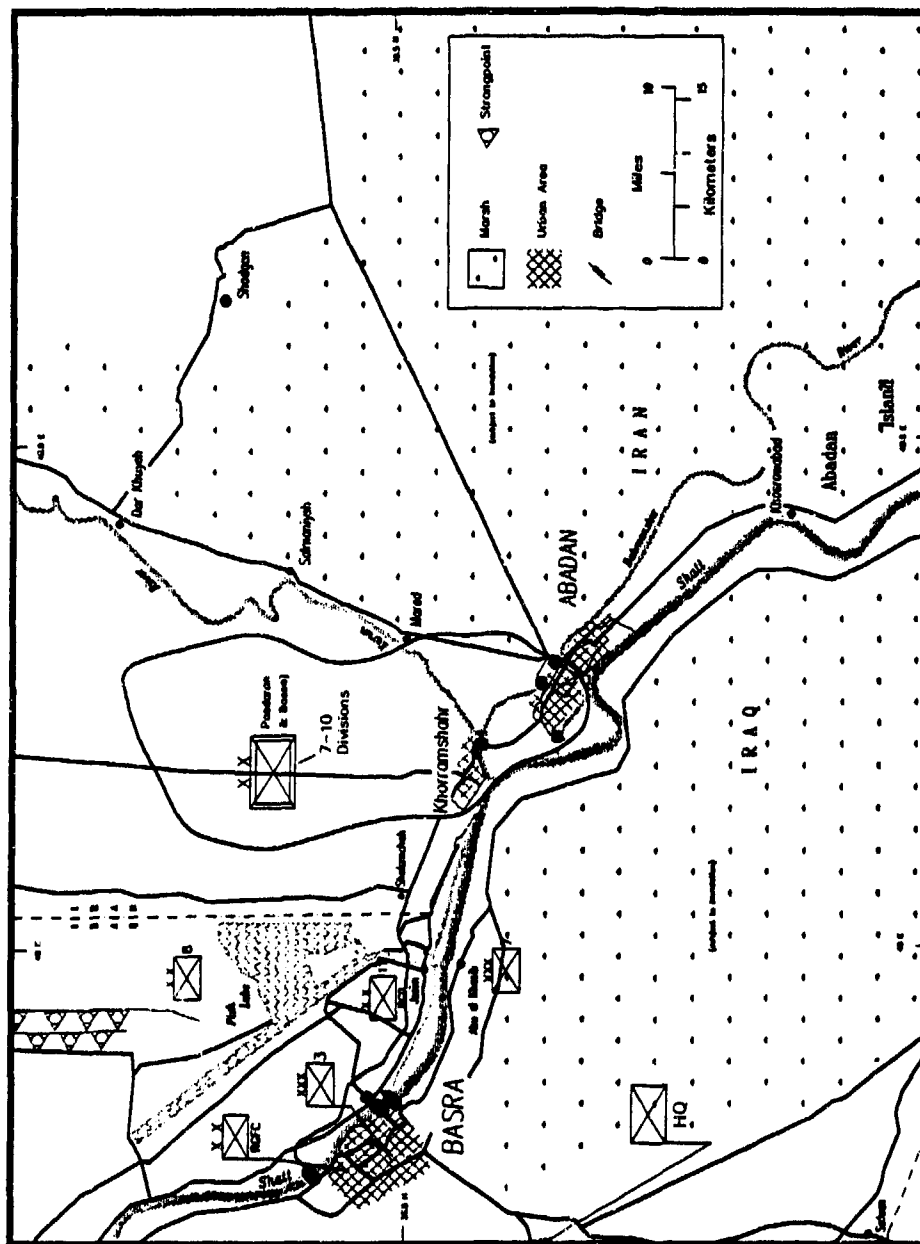
Phases of The Battles of Fish Lake

The engagements of Iran's Karbala-5 campaign comprise six distinct phases: (1) Iranian force build-up and final preparations; (2) Iran's opening assault and the Iraqi response (9-10 January); (3) Iran's drive toward the Shatt-al-Arab (11-16 January); (4) Iran's attempt to cross the Shatt-al-Arab (16-26 January); (5) Iranian "Ya Zahra" attack (27 January - 22 February); and, (6) Iran's last assault and other activities bringing about the end of the operation (22-27 February).²⁴

Phase One: The Iranian Build Up

Toward the end of 1986 and during the first week of January 1987, Iran began the initial phase of Karbala-5 by massing between 200,000 and 250,000 troops at several locations near the Iran-Iraq border east of Basra (see Map 15). Of these men, however, only 120,000 to 140,000 (about sixty percent) were destined for use in the opening assault of Basra. This main attack force, largely a collection of infantry units and supporting artillery, consisted of seventy percent Pasdaran divisions and Baseej volunteers (also known as the People's Army), and thirty percent Iranian regulars.

²⁴ One of the best works on the Karbala-5 campaign is entitled Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War by S.C. Pelletiere and D.V. Johnson (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1991). However, in this work the authors claim that the Karbala-5 campaign ended on 2 February 1987. Yet, as discussed in the thesis, the campaign did not conclude until 27 February 1987. The thesis definition of Karbala-5, taken from the definition given to it by the Iranians, includes the combat activity during the final twenty-five days of fighting. With the exception of occasional references to "phasing" made by various military analysts in issues of the Washington Post, the account of the battle by Pelletiere and Johnson is also unique in it provides the only history that divides the battle into separate phases (they recognize five).



Map 15: Tactical Situation, Phase I. Of the 200,000 to 250,000 Iranian Pasdaran, Baseej volunteers, and regular army forces prepared for the offensive, only 120,000 to 140,000 (an estimated 7 to 10 divisions) were used in the initial stage of the Iranian offensive. Locations of all units are approximated. Map drawn by the author.

The remaining 80,000 Iranian soldiers assigned to the southern front gathered in an assembly area near the Simareh River basin, some 200 miles to the north of Basra. It is likely that these units formed Iran's operational-level reserve. More importantly, however, these forces possessed the bulk of the Iranian army's remaining tanks and consisted primarily of the more experienced Iranian Regular Army units.²⁵ Yet this outwardly unusual allocation of forces is important for the light it casts on the turmoil within Iran's military hierarchy.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Iranian army was extremely weak at the start of the war; the result of purges and executions by the Khomeini regime in 1979 and 1980. During 1981, however, repeated Iranian setbacks forced the Ayatollah to recall (or release from prison) many former soldiers of the regular army. The rebuilt Iranian army became a respectable force and was largely responsible for several important victories in 1982. Jealous of the regular army's increasing influence, the fanatical Revolutionary Guards (the Pasdaran) reasserted themselves in 1984 by demanding a more active part in the war effort. By 1986, the important preparatory time immediately prior to Karbala-5, the Pasdaran had retaken the lead role in the planning and conduct of Iranian military operations.²⁶

Opposing the Iranians in the region were a similar number of Iraqi soldiers. Altogether, Iraqi army units represented elements of two corps and at least five brigades of Republican Guards. Most of

²⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, 248; O'Ballance 1988, 195; Metz, 234; P. Tyler, "Iraq Stops Iran; War of Attrition Seen Likely," Washington Post, 9 February 1987, A13. Most sources agree that Iran had about 1,000 tanks remaining in its army.

²⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, 420.

these soldiers were garrisoned behind the front at locations near Basra. Responsibility for the battle area was divided between the two Iraqi corps. The 3d Corps, commanded by Major General Khalil al-Dhourri, owned Fish Lake and was also responsible for the defense of Basra (see Map 16). The lands south of the Shatt-al-Arab, from Basra to the Iranian front lines near Al-Faw, were under the watch of Iraq's 7th Corps.²⁷

In the area around Fish Lake, the 3d Corps' defensive scheme employed at least three divisions - the 8th Infantry Division (I.D.), the 11th Border Guards Division (B.G.D.), and the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division (M.D.). The territory north of Fish Lake was defended by the 8th I.D., while the 11th B.G.D. manned positions on their right (or southern) flank. The 3d Corps' tactical reserve in this sector is believed to have been the 5th M.D.²⁸

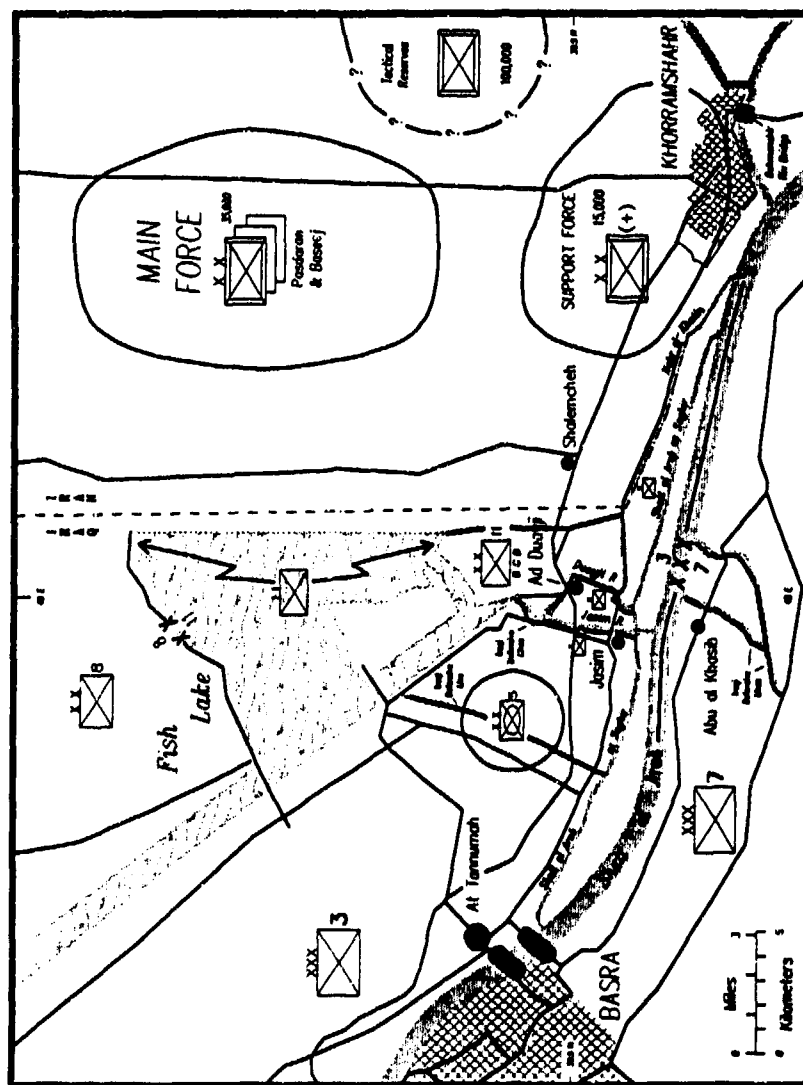
The 3d Corps commander evidently decided to employ the majority of his forces to the north and south of Fish Lake, while the marshy center of the lake lent itself to the employment of "economy of force" defensive techniques. Thus, at the time Iran launched its offensive, only a single battalion from the 11th B.G.D. was covering the six-mile wide frontage of Fish Lake.²⁹

South of Fish Lake, the remaining units of the 11th B.G.D. were accountable for the four-miles of land to the Shatt-al-Arab. In

²⁷ Nick Childs, "The Gulf War: Iraq Under Pressure," Jane's Defence Weekly, vol. 7, no. 18 (9 May 1987): 901.

²⁸ S.C. Pelletiere and D.V. Johnson II, Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1991), 83-84; Cordesman, 130; O'Ballance, 194-195.

²⁹ Pelletiere and Johnson, 83-84.



Map 16: Tactical Situation near Fish Lake, 8 January 1967. The Iraqis were so confident in the obstacle value of Fish Lake that the barrier was "screened" by only one battalion of infantry. South of the lake, the Iraqis built at least four defensive lines. Map modified after Pelletiere and Johnson, 84 and 86.

this area the 11th's positions were bolstered by three separate lines of eastward-facing defensive berms.³⁰

Phase Two: Iran Attacks (9-10 January)

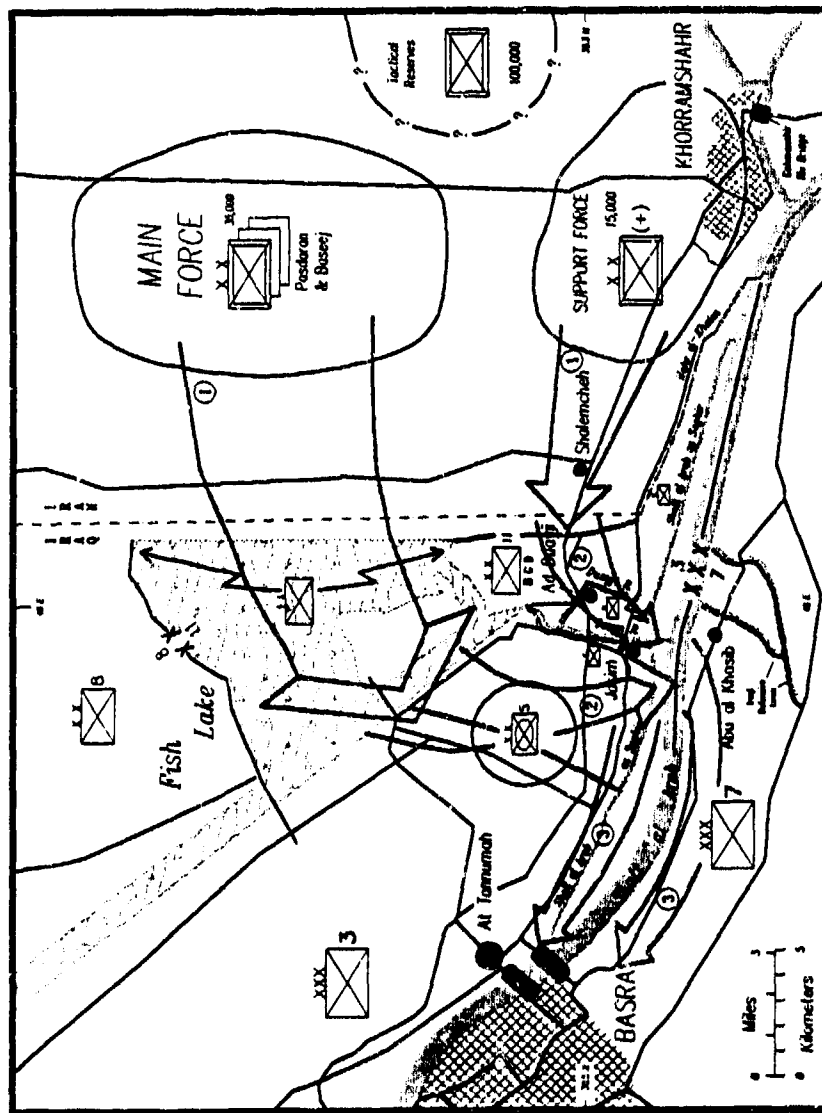
Iran planned to launch its attack at 0100 hours in the morning of the Moslem Sabbath, Friday 9 January 1987. Using at least two axes of advance spanning a sixteen mile-wide front, the Iranian assault would rely upon stealth to surprise the Iraqis (see Map 17). The main effort would spring from the east and plunge directly into the weakest portion of the Iraqi defenses amidst Fish Lake. Using small motor boats and wading through chest-deep waters, three divisions of Pasdaran and Baseej soldiers (about 35,000 men and boys) intended to rapidly cross the lake, emerge on its west bank, and head southeast to secure the eastern bank of the Shatt-al-Arab - a move the Iranians hoped would envelop the 11th B.G.D.

Simultaneously, a supporting strike by at least one division (about 15,000 men) would attack the first line of Iraqi fortifications south of Fish Lake to pin-down the forward elements of 11th B.G.D. Then, after linking-up to the rear of Iraq's main defenses, the Iranians intended to assault Basra using both the east and west banks of the Shatt.³¹

The time and season chosen by the Iranian military leadership to commence the assault were fair, but were by no means ideal. While the marshes in the region were wet, they were not at full-saturation

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cordesman and Wagner, 249; Masland, "Iran Launches Southern Assault, Maintains Foothold Near Basra, Iraq," A16.



Map 17: Probable Iranian Campaign Plan. Iran intended to crack Iraq's defenses at two locations in the 11th B.G.D. sector. The main attack would overrun the battalion screening Fish Lake, while a supporting attack aimed to cross the Duayji and Jasim rivers. After link-up, the Iranians would send forces across the Shatt-al-Arab and strike toward Basra using both banks of the river. Map drawn by the author.

because the "rainy season" was still two months away. Nonetheless, given the unpredictable nature of the swampy terrain, the Iranians undoubtedly estimated that their infantry forces would have a mobility advantage over the Iraqis who were most likely to counter using their mobile armor and mechanized forces.³²

Fighting during the first day of *Karbala-5* (9 January) progressed well, in accordance with Iran's (see Map 17). For their main attack the Iranians used their infamous "human wave" tactics in which Baseej volunteers gained first contact with the enemy, absorbed the initial shock of combat and subsequently passed the more experienced Pasdaran units forward into the fray.³³ Although this technique cost the lives of several hundred Iranian men and boys, it worked as the main effort achieved sufficient momentum to overwhelm the battalion of infantry defending Fish Lake, exited the water, and established a "bridgehead" on the lake's western shore.

Meanwhile in the south, units of the Iranian supporting attack were also making headway. Apparently several brigades of the 11th B.G.D. were surprised and caught out of their defensive fighting positions. The tactical initiative clearly belonged to Iran as they easily penetrated Iraq's first defensive line at several locations and overran the small border town of Ad Duayji.³⁴

During the afternoon of 9 January, Iran continued to expand its bridgehead, successfully moving between 30,000 and 40,000 men (more

³² Masland, "Iran Launches Southern Assault, Maintains Foothold Near Basra, Iraq," A16; Cordesman and Wagner, End Note no. 101, 269.

³³ Iraqi forces first saw Iran's human wave assaults in 1981.

³⁴ Cordesman, 127; M. Ross, "Iraq Counterattacks After Iran's Thrust," Washington Post, 11 January 1987, A30.

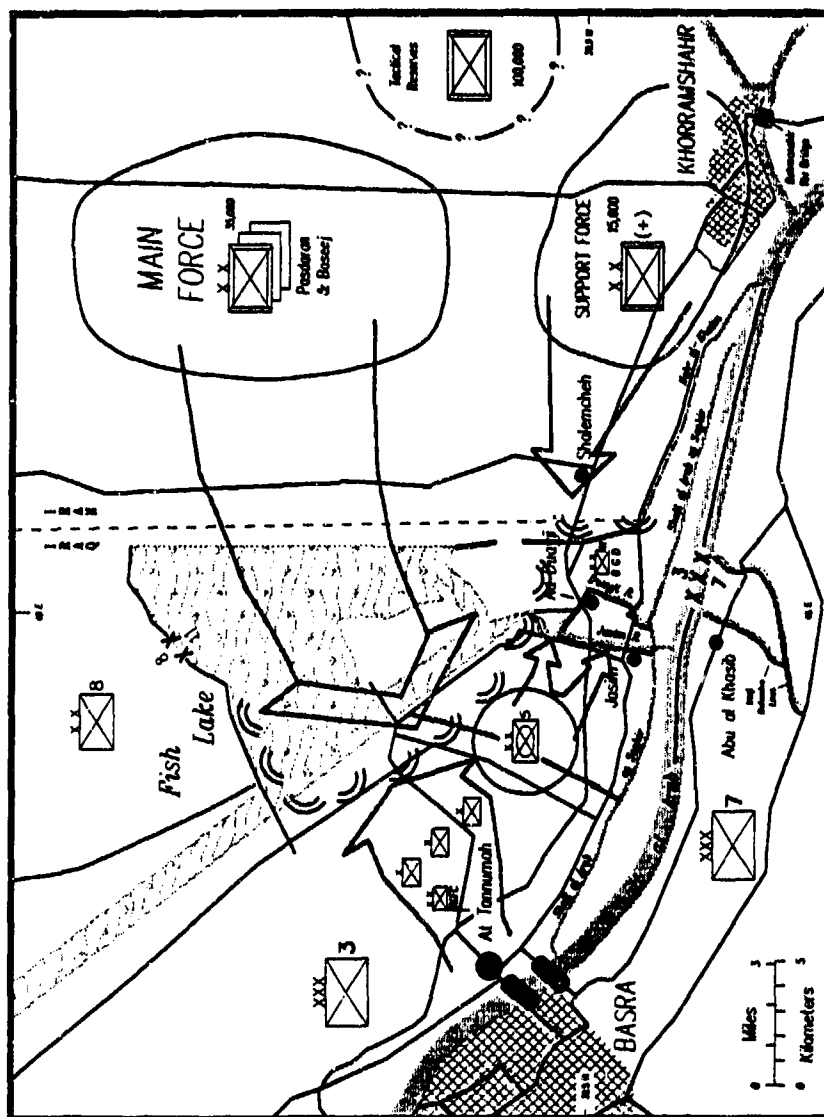
than three-quarters of its main effort force) to dry ground across Fish Lake. Accounts of the fighting suggest that some elements of Iran's main attack actually completed the encirclement of the 11th B.G.D. by reaching the east bank of the Shatt-Al-Arab behind the Iraqis. In addition, Iranian artillery units following the supporting attack south of Fish Lake came within range of Basra and began firing upon the city prompting one resident to quip that "shells are falling like rain."³⁵

By the evening of 9 January the startled Iraqis realized that an attack was underway, but were unsure of its magnitude. They responded by mounting a counterattack intended to restore the situation (see Map 18). In this effort, three brigades of Republican Guard infantrymen moved out of Basra to confront the lead elements of the Iranian penetration. The bulk of the Iraqi force met the Iranians on 10 January, spoiling their encirclement and preventing the Iranians from getting major combat units into proper position to conduct their crossing of the Shatt-al-Arab.³⁶

Now, with the main Iranian thrust successfully checked by the Republican Guard's maneuver, the attacking Pasdaran and Baseej units began a new breakthrough effort along the southwestern tip of their penetration near the Jasim River. This action, which began on 10 January, placed the 11th B.G.D. in even greater peril. For now, besides the strong pressure coming from the east, the 11th B.G.D. found itself facing a new, formidable threat along its northern flank as well as the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Cordesman, 127; Pelletiere and Johnson, 83-84; Ross, "Iraq Counterattacks After Iran's Thrust," A30.



Map 18: Tactical Situation, Phase II. While some elements of Iran's main attack may have reached the Shatt-al-Arab, the Iraqi high command counterattacked with the Republican Guards to curtail the size of the Iranian penetration. Modified after Pelletiere and Johnson, 86.

possibility of being trapped between the obstacle system to their rear and the Shatt-al-Arab waterway in the south.³⁷

At the same time the Republican Guards moved into action and the 11th B.G.D. was about to be flanked, the 5th M.D. prepared for combat and deployed to positions along the west bank of the Jasim River - the third line in the Iraqi defensive scheme. The 5th M.D. completed its move by 11 January and brought its direct fire weapons to bear upon the right (or western) flank of the Iranian forces pushing south from Fish Lake. The 5th's maneuver probably saved the 11th B.G.D. from annihilation and signalled the conclusion of Phase II of the battle.³⁸

Phase Three: Iranian Drive Toward the Shatt-al-Arab (11-16 January)

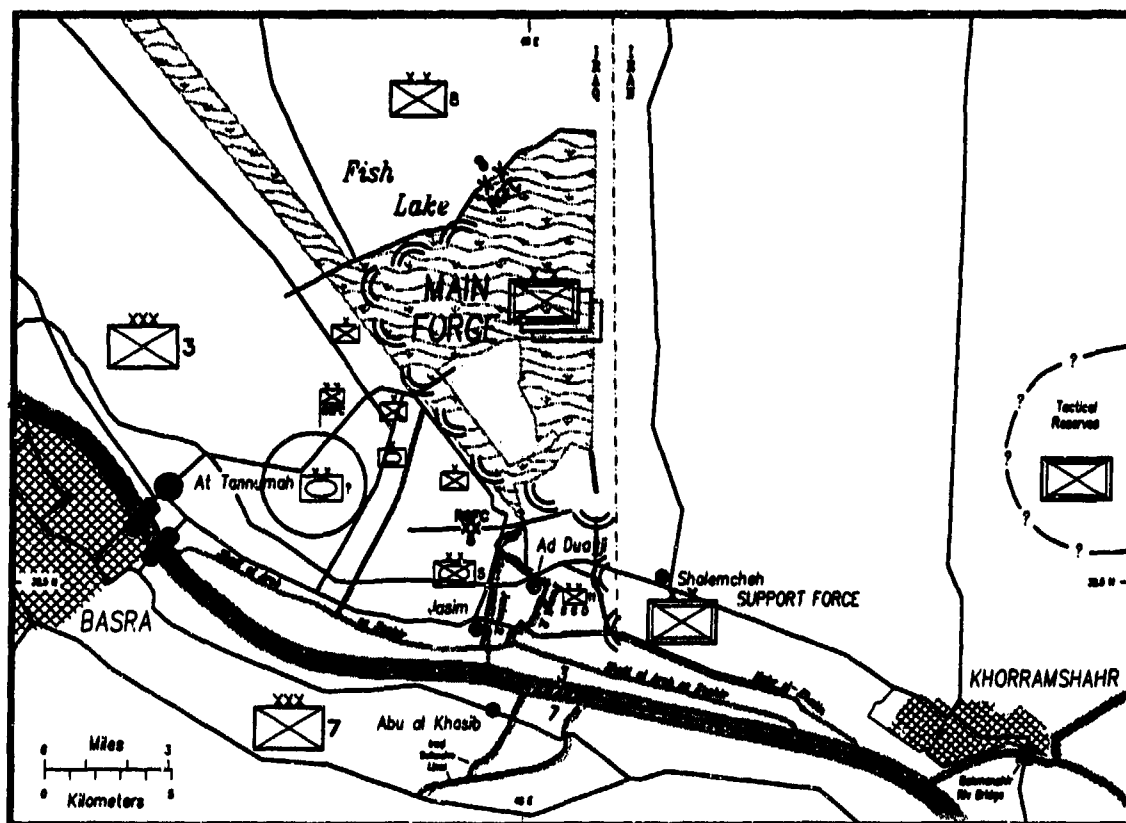
While the counterattack launched by the Republican Guards and the 5th M.D. failed to completely remove Iranian forces from the area, it was somewhat successful - the front had been "stabilized" and the size of the enemy incursion limited to a five hundred meter-deep area on the west bank of Fish Lake (see Map 19).³⁹ However, the territory where this engagement occurred obviously favored the foot soldier; for whenever the 5th M.D. or the Republican Guards attempted to send their "amphibious armored vehicles" against the Iranians they soon discovered how much "[their] vehicles lacked mobility" in the soft marshes of the Shatt-al-Arab floodplain.⁴⁰

³⁷ Pelletiere and Johnson, 83 and 85.

³⁸ Ibid., 85.

³⁹ Cordesman, 127; Pelletiere and Johnson, 83-84; Ross, "Iraq Counterattacks After Iran's Thrust," A30.

⁴⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, 250. Here, the vehicles referred to were probably either wheeled armored personnel carriers (A.P.C.) of the Soviet BTR series or the tracked BMP. Few maps can accurately portray



Map 19: Tactical Situation, Beginning of Phase III. By the end of Phase II, the Iraqis had limited the Iranians to a small penetration on the western shores of Fish Lake. Modified after Pelletiere and Johnson, 86.

the intermittent, unpredictable character of the marshes of the Shatt-al-Arab alluvial valley. Suffice it to say, however, that the areas in which the majority of the Karbala-5 fighting occurred would be classified by most military terrain analysts as either "slow-go" or "no-go" landscapes.

Along the western shore of Fish Lake, Iraqi Republican Guard forces continued to prevent the Iranians from breaking out of their narrow beachhead. Here, Republican Guards Forces Command (R.G.F.C.) apparently took control of the northern half of the sector that once belonged to the 11th B.G.D. North of the R.G.F.C., elements of Iraq's 8th I.D. struck south into the right flank of the Iranian penetration, but the effort only had limited success.⁴¹

On 12 January, after President Saddam Hussein visited his commanders at the front, the Iraqis moved at least one division of armor into an assembly area about midway between Basra and Fish Lake.⁴² Since the 5th M.D. (formerly the tactical reserve for the 3d Corps) was already committed to battle, this tank division probably became the Corps' new tactical reserve in the area. Clearly, the most likely mission facing the commander of this division was to be ready to employ his firepower should the Iranians cross the easily fordable Jasim River and then head for Basra.

The shifting of forces, however, was not the only significant event to occur as a result of President Hussein's visit to the front. In a significant shake-up within the Iraqi army chain of command, Saddam Hussein relieved his 3d Corps commander, Major General Khalil al-Dhouri. Presumably, President Hussein's decision was in retaliation for the perceived poor level of preparation displayed by 3d Corps units during the first days of the Iranian attack upon the Basra area. Several lesser-ranking officers were also dismissed from duty, with some being

⁴¹ Pelletiere and Johnson, 87.

⁴² Cordesman and Wagner, 251; Pelletiere and Johnson, 87; O'Ballance, 195.

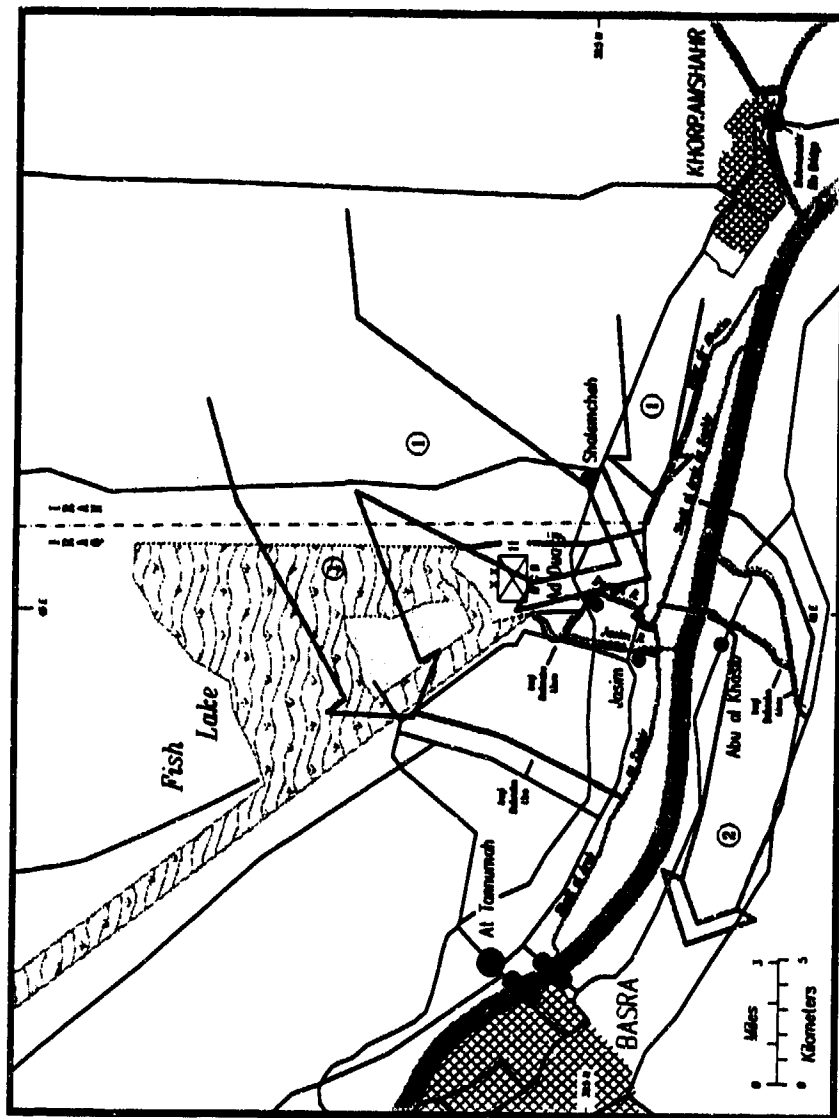
summarily executed.⁴³ Command of the 3d Corps was promptly given to Lieutenant General Dhia ul-Din Jamal, previously the commanding general of the 5th Corps in northern Iraq.⁴⁴

The terrain between the southern end of Fish Lake and the Shatt-al-Arab presented Iranian commanders with somewhat of a quandary: as long as the fighting remained east of the Jasim River, Iran's infantry would possess the mobility advantage; however, to make an attack toward Basra, the Iranians knew they would have to cross the Jasim and traverse dryer ground where Iraqi armor would likely be waiting for them. So for the time being, the Iranians opted to forego their intended push toward Basra in favor of a revised plan (compare Map 17 and Map 20).

To continue their attack, the Iranians evidently decided to redouble their effort to reach the Shatt-al-Arab in the sector of the beleaguered Iraqi 11th B.G.D. After reaching the Shatt, a task that would require Iranian forces to ford two small rivers enroute, the Iranians meant to cross the 400-meter wide river at a location east of the Iraqi village of Abu-al-Khasib. After negotiating the Shatt, the Iranians intended to wheel their force toward the west and march upon

⁴³ O'Ballance, 210.

⁴⁴ Childs, "The Gulf War: Iraq Under Pressure," 901; Cordesman and Wagner, 252; Cordesman, 136; Jupa and Dingeman, "How Iran Lost/Iraq Won the Gulf War," 51; Tyler, "Iraq Stops Iran; War of Attrition Seen Likely," A16.



Map 20: Revised Iranian Plan of Attack. Compare with Map 17. The Iranians appear to have opted to focus their effort on Iraq's beleaguered 11th B.G.D. The new Iranian plan would be executed in two steps - : 'tack south and cross the Shatt-al-Arab, then continue the attack toward Basra. Map drawn by the author.

Basra along the south bank of the river, thereby avoiding Iraq's armor
ing west of Fish Lake.

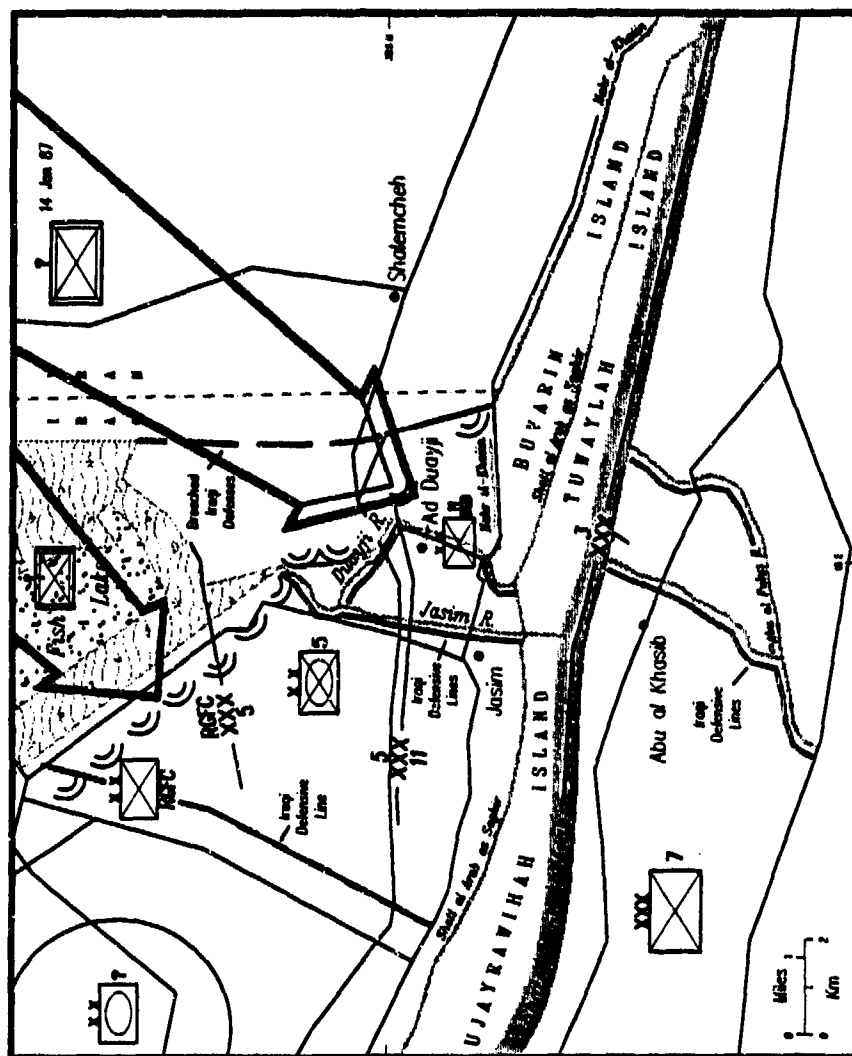
Accordingly, by 14 January the Iranians increased their pressure on Iraq's 11th B.G.D. by attacking fiercely in the direction of the Shatt-al-Arab along two axes of advance (see Map 21). The two-pronged thrust by Iranian infantry came in the area between Iraq's three east-facing lines of defense, but the spirit of the 11th B.G.D. would not be broken. Responding to the Iranian strike, which may have included about 50,000 relatively fresh Pasdaran and Baseej soldiers moved up from Iran's tactical reserves, the commander of the 11th B.G.D. skillfully orchestrated his units in a "slow, fighting retreat to the south, keeping the Jasim River on [his] left."⁴⁵

Yet because the soldiers in the 11th could see that they had only limited terrain in which to perform their rearward maneuver, they probably knew that their fate rested on two hopes - that the volume of their fires would discourage the fanatical Iranian attackers, and that relief would somehow come from their comrades on the west bank of the Jasim. It would not be until 17 or 18 January (three days later) that the 11th B.G.D. could finally extricate itself from the clutches of the Iranian infantry and reach safer ground across the Jasim River.⁴⁶

While Iranian soldiers drove for the Shatt-al-Arab, their high command took action at the operational level of war. On 14 January, Iran commenced *Operation Karbala-6* in the Simar/Qasr-e-Shirin area (along the border about 90 miles northeast of Baghdad, see Map 14).

⁴⁵ Pelletiere and Johnson, 85 and 94; troop figures from Cordesman and Wagner, 251.

⁴⁶ Pelletiere and Johnson, 85.



Map 21: Tactical Situation, 14-18 January 1967. The 11th B.G.D. received the brunt of Iran's new drive. But instead of collapsing, the 11th executed a "textbook" withdrawal under pressure between 14 and 18 January (see text). Modified after Pelletiere and Johnson, 87.

This offensive, which employed forces from Iran's operational reserves in the Sumar River basin, had an indirect, but important effect on operations in the southern front - it forced Iraq to carefully weigh its options before committing massive armor forces to the defense of Basra. Unfortunately for the Iranians, however, this new attack along the central front also diverted the preponderance of their armored forces and at once killed the possibility of Iranian tanks being thrown into battle against the Iraqi forces at Fish Lake.⁴⁷

The intensity of the slaughter prompted Caspar Weinberger, then U.S. Secretary of Defense, to note that by 16 January, "about 40,000 Iranian troops, many as young as 14, have been killed [or wounded] in human-wave attacks against Iraqi positions" in Basra.⁴⁸ Iraqi casualties during the same period were estimated to number about 10,000 men. Furthermore, Basra, which was undergoing increasingly heavy shelling from Iranian artillery, was fast becoming a ghost town as residents began fled the city by the thousands shortly after the start of the Iranian offensive.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ P. Tyler, "Iran Advances on Basra; Iraq Bombs 11 Cities," Washington Post, 19 January 1987, A13; Dobbs, 15 January 1987, A1 and A36; Cordesman and Wagner, 256-257; O'Ballance, 198.; Cordesman, 129. In the context of the war, the five-day *Karbala-6* campaign was comparatively insignificant. While this Iranian threat was closer to Baghdad than the strike against Basra, it did little more than recapture some border lands that Iraq had seized at the start of the war. Writers with Jane's Defense Weekly speculate that *Karbala-6* "was clearly meant only as a diversion" (in Childs, "The Gulf War: Iraq Under Pressure," 899).

⁴⁸ G. Wilson, "Iran Losses Put at 40,000 in Weeks," Washington Post, 16 January 1987, A19; Cordesman and Wagner, 251.

⁴⁹ Tyler, "Iran Advances on Basra; Iraq Bombs 11 Cities," Washington Post, A13.

Phase Four: Iran Attempts to Cross the Shatt-al-Arab (17-26 January)

The 11th B.G.D.'s fighting retreat across the Jasim River went well, but not without incident as some Iranian infantry units apparently followed the 11th's rear security element across to the river's west bank (see Map 22).⁵⁰ But of greater significance to the battle, once the 11th completed its movement over the Jasim, the last remaining Iraqi forces between the Iranians and the Shatt-al-Arab were gone and the way was now clear "for the Iranians to surge" to the bank of the river.⁵¹ However, before the Iranians could negotiate the nearly half-kilometer width of the Shatt, they would have to "island hop" across two smaller, but fordable, waterways - the Nahr el Khain and the Shatt-al-Arab as Saghir (hereafter, Khain River and Saghir River). The marshy terrain between these two drainages and the Shatt-al-Arab forms several small islands whose lengths parallel the Shatt.⁵² Two of these isles, Tuwaylah and Buvarin, would soon play host to most of the combat occurring over the next several days.

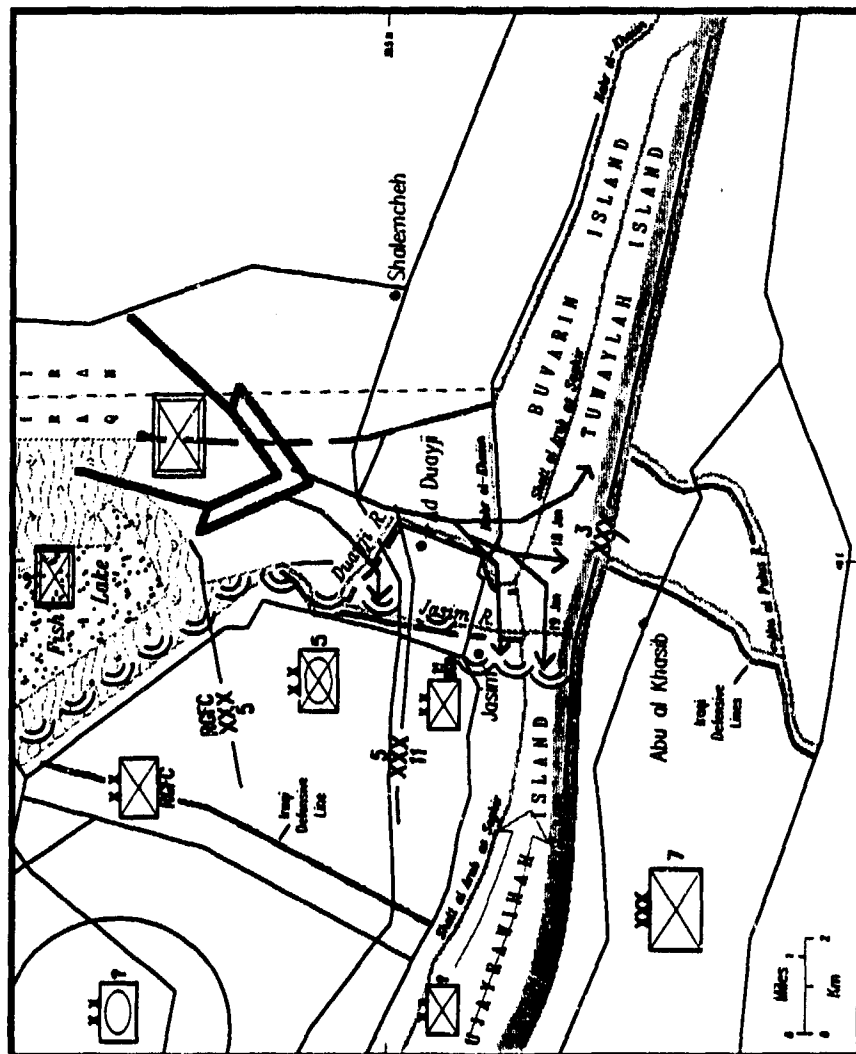
Within hours after the 11th B.G.D. cleared the battlefield, probably during the pre-dawn hours of 18 January, Iranian forces completed their thrust to the Shatt-al-Arab. Upon reaching the river, they quickly dispatched a force of about 3,000 Pasdaran infantrymen over the Saghir and Khain rivers to seize Tuwaylah and Buvarin Islands.⁵³ Although the two islands were undefended, Iraqi artillery and multiple-

⁵⁰ Tyler, "Iraq's Central Front Shows Few Scars," Washington Post, 20 January 1987, A16; Pelletiere and Johnson, 85 and 88.

⁵¹ Pelletiere and Johnson, 85.

⁵² Ibid.; Childs, "The Gulf War: Iraq Under Pressure," 899 and 901;

⁵³ Cordesman and Wagner, 251.



Map 22: Iran Reaches the Shatt-al-Arab. On 18 January, after the 11th B.G.D. extracted itself across the Jasim River, the Iranians reached the Shatt and quickly took the eastern quarter of Ujayrawihah Island in preparation for a river crossing. The Iranians on the island did not realize that there were no Iraqi forces between them and Basra. Map drawn by the author.

launched rockets bombarded the Iranians from positions on the west side of the Jasim River and across the Shatt-al-Arab, where units of the Iraqi 7th Corps manned defensive positions near Abu-al-Khasib.⁵⁴

On 19 January, a second Iranian force slipped across a somewhat undefended segment of the Jasim River immediately south of the area where their countrymen had slyly followed the 11th B.G.D. during its withdrawal. This maneuver gave the Iranians a foothold on the eastern end of Ujayrawihah Island, a one-by-fifteen kilometer land mass between the Shatt, and the Saghir and Jasim rivers.⁵⁵ The small Iranian force probably had the mission of providing "right flank security" for the planned river crossing of the Shatt-al-Arab. Yet the Iranian commander presumably did not realize that the island was only lightly defended and that his unit had stumbled upon a relatively open avenue to Basra beside the southern flank of the 11th B.G.D. If this writer's appraisal of the tactical situation at this time is correct, then it was indeed fortunate for the Iraqis that the Iranians misread the battlefield and did not go beyond the simple occupation of the easternmost kilometer of Ujayrawihah Island.

The 11th B.G.D., which had assumed responsibility for a small sector south of the 5th M.D., undoubtedly reported to higher authorities the presence of Iranian units on its right flank. The Iraqi high command must have grasped the potential gravity of the situation, because they quickly responded by committing another division of

⁵⁴ P. Tyler, "Iraq's Central Front Shows Few Scars," A16.

⁵⁵ Tyler, "Iraq's Central Front Shows Few Scars," A16; Pelletiere and Johnson, 85 and 88. Some sources refer to Ujayrawihah Island by the name "Fayaziyah."

infantry to battle in the 3d Corps' sector.⁵⁶ This division (designation unknown) gained access to Ujayrawihah Island from the west near Basra and moved to take-up positions from which they could temporarily block and eventually expel the Iranian infantrymen. By 20 January, the new unit was in contact with the enemy and holding them to about a one or two kilometer stretch of the island.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, on the north side of Fish Lake, the 8th I.D. maintained its pressure upon the right flank of the Iranian penetration (see Map 23). Further, by 21 January the Iraqis also moved a second division of tanks into an assembly area to the west of the 8th I.D.⁵⁸

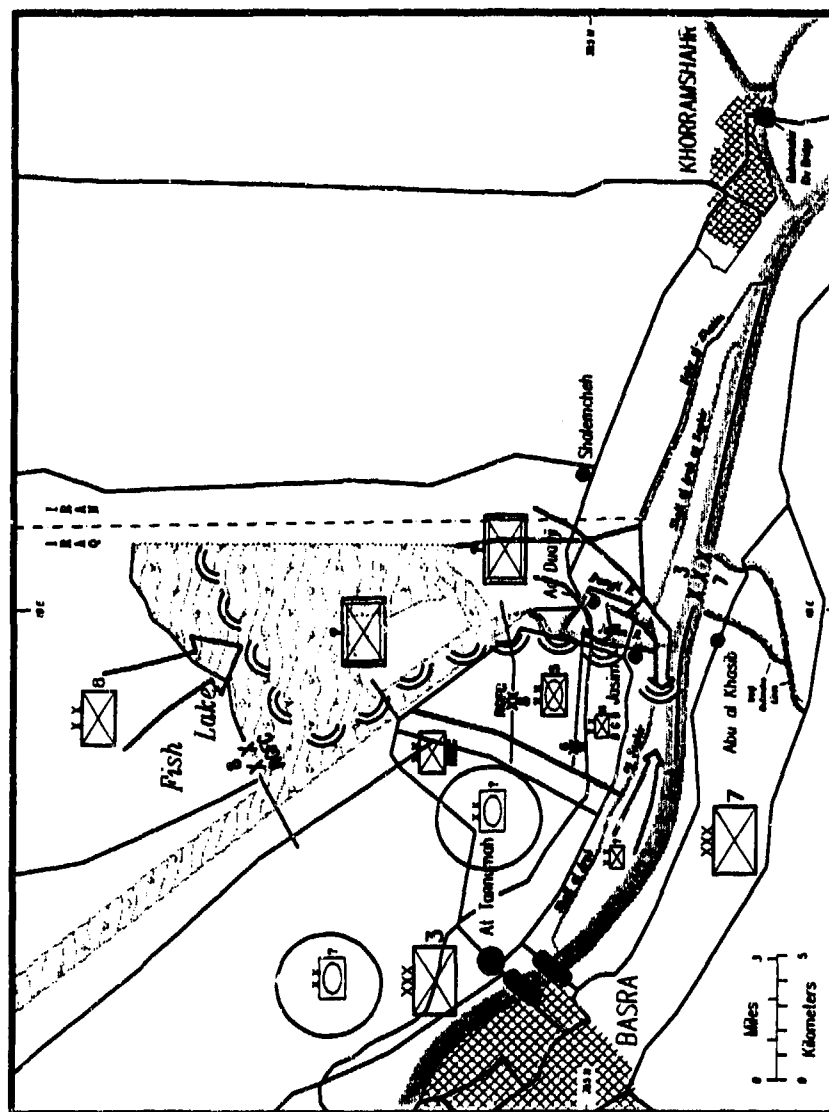
On or about 22 or 23 January, the Iraqi infantry division on Ujayrawihah Island attacked with sufficient violence to clear the remaining Iranians. Indeed, the arrival of this Iraqi division completely foiled Iran's plan to cross the Shatt-al-Arab.⁵⁹ After 23 January, Iranian ground forces never made another serious effort to traverse the Shatt in the remaining five weeks of *Karbala-5*. Given the small frontage of the battlefield (at most about one kilometer), as well as the almost complete lack of cover (the date trees on the island had

⁵⁶ This writer was unable to uncover any information regarding whether this division was, in fact, "chopped" to (i.e., under the tactical control of) the Commander, 3d Corps or operating independently under the direct control of the Iraqi high command. Numerous reports in the Washington Post mention how the 7th Corps sent reinforcements to aid the 3d Corps in its defense of Basra; however, no unit designations are provided. The author assumes that the division committed to Ujayrawihah Island came from either the 7th Corps or from operational reserves maintained by the Iraqi high command. (For example, see P. Tyler, "Missile Shatters Baghdad Homes," Washington Post, 23 January 1987, A22; and Cordesman, 130.)

⁵⁷ Pelletiere and Johnson, 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85.



Map 23: Tactical Situation, 21-23 January 1987. The Iraqis were massing tanks in two assembly areas behind Fish Lake while simultaneously attacking with an infantry division to spoil the Iranian plan to cross the Shatt-al-Arab. Modified after Pelletiere and Johnson, 88-89.

long been casualties of the war), the fight between the Iraqi and Iranian foot soldiers on the eastern quarter of Ujayrawihah Island must have been a "classic" light-infantry engagement.

With the end of the previously mentioned scuffle on Ujayrawihah Island came climax of Phase Four in *The Battles of Fish Lake*. During the next several days, or through 26 January, the fighting quieted substantially all along the southern front. On both sides, commanders used the lull to consolidate and refortify their positions.⁶⁰ To date, Iranian forces had not crossed the Jasim River in appreciable strength, they had not managed to break out of their stagnant penetration of Fish Lake, and they were unable to get across the Shatt-al-Arab. In effect, the Iranian attack was dying about nine miles short of Basra. This dismal recap notwithstanding, some military analysts believed that Iran's breach of Basra's outer defenses was a significant tactical victory and morale booster - citing the heavy losses Iranian forces had inflicted on the Iraqi army.⁶¹

During this short respite in the fighting, the Iraqi 5th M.D. was relieved in place by a division of regular infantry (designation unknown). Evidently, the effort enabled the 5th to reposition to a tactical assembly area a few kilometers rearward of their former sector and to prepare for future operations. With the 5th in a secure area behind the front, the 3d Corps had now assembled all its highest

⁶⁰ L. Jenkins, "U.S. Arms Cited in Iran: Major Role Seen in Basra Offensive," Washington Post, 27 January 1987, A14. Tyler, "Missile Shatters Baghdad Homes," A22; Pelletiere and Johnson, 85.

⁶¹ L. Jenkins, "Iran's Drive on Basra Seen a Tactical Success," Washington Post, 26 January 1987, A13; Jenkins, "U.S. Arms Cited in Iran: Major Role Seen in Basra Offensive," A1 and A14; Cordesman and Wagner, 252.

mobility forces in three division-sized assembly areas, a certain indication that the Iraqis were getting ready to counterattack in strength.⁶² Since there is no evidence to suggest that the Iranians made any counter-moves, it is most likely that they were completely unaware of Iraqi preparations for offensive operations. However, since most of Iran's armored forces were too far away to have an immediate impact on changes in the tactical situation, it is improbable that the Iranians could have taken sufficient preemptive action even if they knew of Iraq's plan.

While the action may have subsided temporarily on the battlefield, times were not as serene within the Iraqi military hierarchy. On or about 20 January, Saddam Hussein relieved his armed force's chief of staff - General Abdul Jawal Zannoun.⁶³

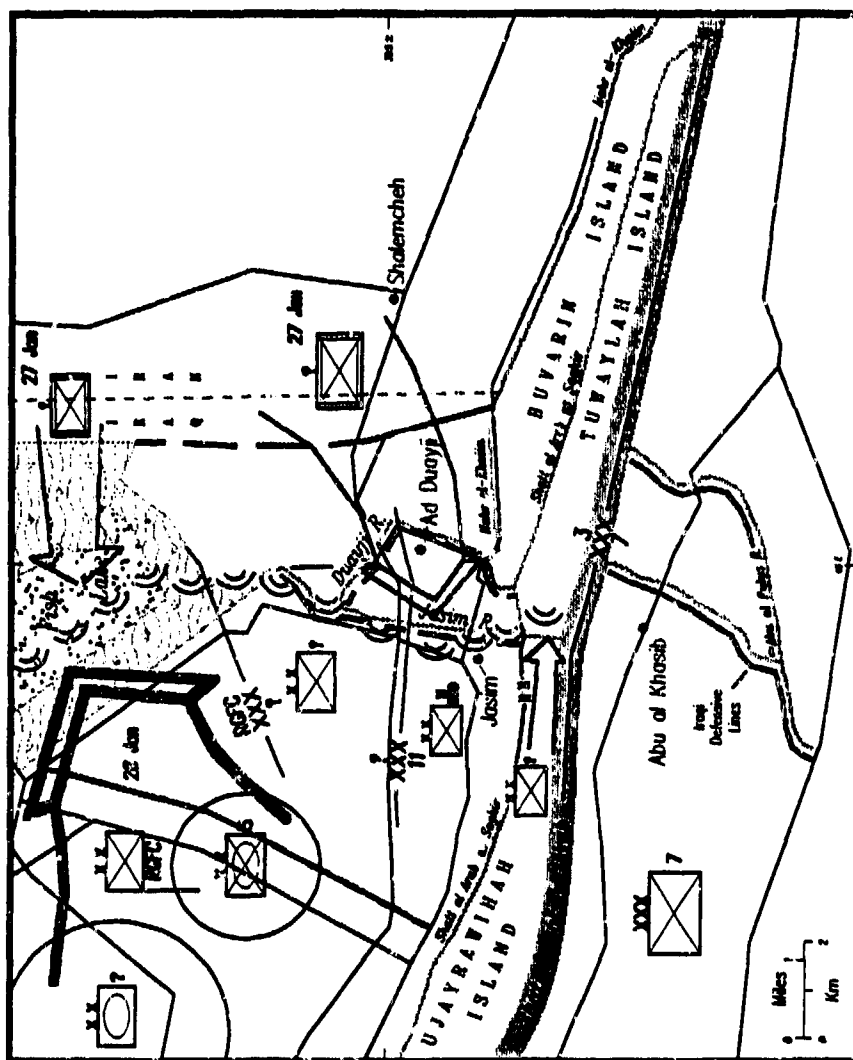
Phase Five: Iran Renews the Attack toward the West (27 Jan - 22 Feb)

In the early morning hours of 27 January, Iran launched a new assault against the Iraqi 3d Corps (see Map 24).⁶⁴ Like previous Iranian attacks during the campaign, this one came "human-wave" style led by the Baseej and Pasdaran. The main effort, or at least that portion of the assault achieving greatest success, seems to have focused upon the sector of the battle-weary 11th B.G.D. One or two supporting

⁶² Pelletiere and Johnson, 90.

⁶³ Tyler, "Missile Shatters Baghdad Homes," A22; Tyler, "Iraq Stops Iran; War of Attrition Seen Likely," A16. Apparently General Zannoun was absent from a televised meeting of the military command with President Hussein. The Iraqi government did not confirm or deny the status of General Zannoun. Although later press reports from Iraq quote statements made by "the armed forces Chief of Staff," no name is ever attributed to them.

⁶⁴ O'Ballance erroneously gives the date as 29 January (p. 195).



Map 24: Iran Renews its Attack Toward the West. On 27 January 1987 Iran initiated a new push toward Basra, but made little headway. On the following day, Iraq counterattacked with its assembled armor and mechanized forces - effectively ending Iran's offensive against Basra. Modified after Pelletiere and Johnson, 90.

attacks were probably launched farther north from within or near Fish Lake, but none made any significant progress.⁶⁵

A communique issued by the Iranian high command boasted that their forces "had managed to push 1.2 miles down the road from the Iranian border toward Basra." Yet, in reality the Iranian infantry never advanced more than a few dozen meters to the west after fording the Jasim.⁶⁶ Iraq's 46th Brigade (11th B.G.D.?) apparently absorbed the brunt of this Iranian attack before collapsing. Nearby units were quickly mustered into the breach and the Iraqi defenses stiffened enough to push the Iranians back across the Jasim by nightfall.⁶⁷

The next day, 28 January, Iraq shocked the Iranians with a massive counterattack. Under tactical control of the R.G.F.C., the 5th M.D. joined with one of the two armored divisions for a lightning strike against the head of the Iranian penetration in Fish Lake. The Iraqi thrust smashed the nose of the Iranian bulge, threw the Persians back into the quagmires of Fish Lake, and quickly regained almost twenty square miles of territory lost earlier in the campaign.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ O'Ballance mentions the assault came on three axes (p. 195). Similar references can be found in Tyler, "Iran Claims It Advances 1.2 Miles Toward Basra," A16 and on page A30 of the 30 January 1987 issue of the Washington Post. On 30 January 1987 Iran ordered all reporters out of the country. After this date, first hand accounts of the fighting become almost non-existent.

⁶⁶ P. Tyler, "Iran Claims It Advances 1.2 Miles Toward Basra," Washington Post, 28 January 1987, A15; Pelletiere and Johnson, 85, 88, and 89.

⁶⁷ Tyler, "Iran Claims It Advances 1.2 Miles Toward Basra," A15; Pelletiere and Johnson, 89 and 90.

⁶⁸ Pelletiere and Johnson, 89; "Iranian Missile Hits Baghdad," Washington Post, 1 February 1987, A26.

Yet, because the Iraqi thrust had no place to go once it reached Fish Lake, there was little chance that their attack would achieve a major victory and present opportunities for exploitation. At this point one wonders why the Iraqis did not make their drive south of the lake. There appear to be at least two answers to this issue. First, vehicular trafficability for mechanized combat operations south of the lake was rapidly degrading due to the onset of the rainy season. Second, and perhaps more important, the Iraqis may have calculated that the Iranian threat from within Fish Lake harbored the greatest potential for breaching the final lines of defense before Basra. Thus the Iraqis aimed to "take the wind" out of Iran's attack by striking at the units in the Fish Lake bulge.

By 2 February the front again stabilized, but the number of men killed and injured on both sides continued to increase. Iranian casualties were now estimated at 17,000 dead and 35,000 to 45,000 wounded. The corresponding numbers for the Iraqis list roughly 6,000 fatalities and between 12,000 and 15,000 injuries.⁶⁹ These tallies prompted one Middle East observer to note: "Although Iran's casualties may run three times as high as Iraq's, its ability to send throngs of zealous new volunteers to the front forms an unshakable strategic power in the conflict."⁷⁰ Other analysts voiced similar views and wondered how long Iraq's political leadership could survive losing men at such a staggering rate.

⁶⁹ "Iranian Offensive Broken, Iraq Says," Washington Post, 2 February 1987, A15; P. Tyler, "Iraqi Planes Sweep Iran, Hit Capital," Washington Post, 15 February 1987, A30. Casualties figures from Cordesman, 131.

⁷⁰ Tyler, "Iraq Stops Iran; War of Attrition Seen Likely," A16.

In mid February, Iran began repositioning some of its armored forces south from the central front raising speculation that another attack was forthcoming.⁷¹ Also, the Ayatollah Khomeini emerged from almost three months of public silence to address his country over Tehran radio. He denigrated the Iraqis and called for more volunteers to join the "divine cause . . . to make war until victory."⁷²

Phase Six: Iran Launches Its Last Attack (22 - 27 February)

In the late afternoon of 22 February, Iran initiated their final phase of the Karbala-5 campaign.⁷³ Dubbed the "Ya Zahra" ("victory") attack, the effort came on two narrow axes south of Fish Lake and once again featured Iran's "human wave" tactics (see Map 25).⁷⁴

As the attack continued throughout the evening hours of 22-23 February the Iranians had little to show for their efforts, having made only limited penetrations of Iraq's strong third defensive line at the Jasim River. Still, there were more reports of "high casualties" in the Iraqi front lines (the 98th, 437th and 705th infantry brigades - divisional affiliations unknown).⁷⁵

To defeat these small Iranian penetrations, the Iraqis apparently devised a tactic whereby they would deliberately permit a

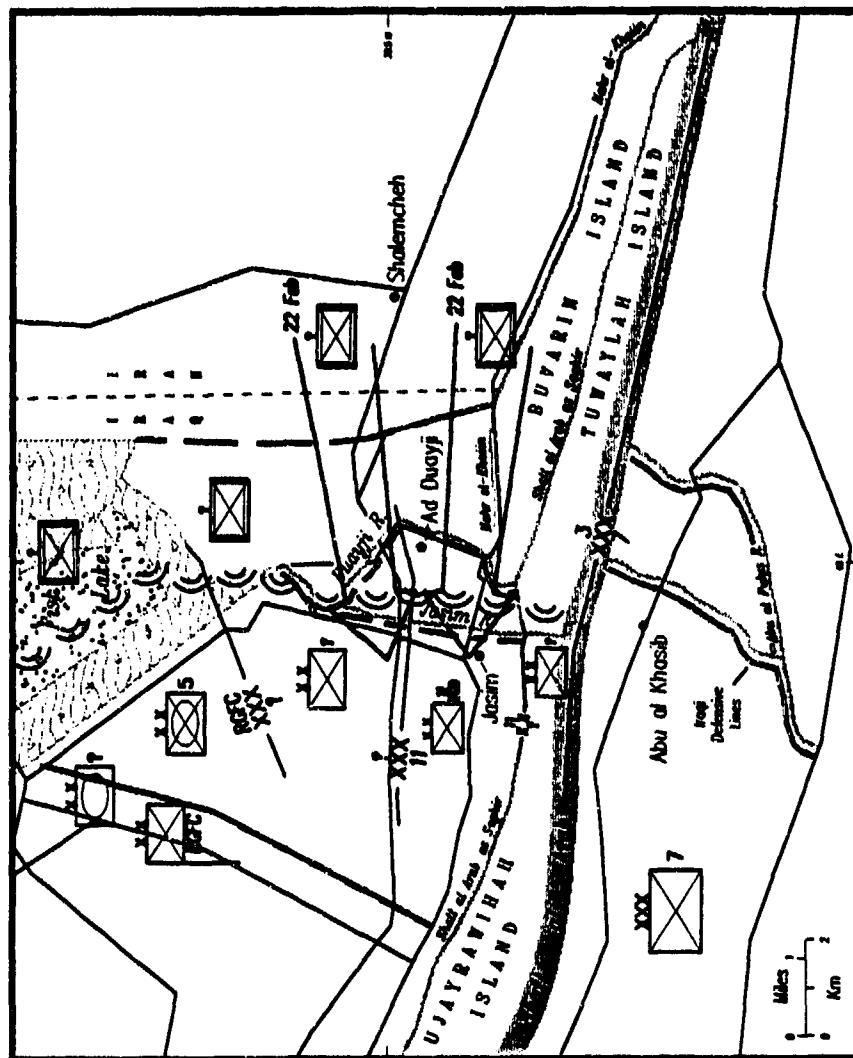
⁷¹ Cordesman, 136; Cordesman and Wagner, 253.

⁷² "Khomeini Calls War Crusade," Washington Post, 11 February 1987, A16. Prior to this appearance, the Ayatollah was last heard in public on 20 November 1986.,

⁷³ Washington Post, "Iran Claims New Gains in Drive Against Iraq," 24 February 1987, A17.

⁷⁴ O'Ballance, 196; Cordesman, 136; Cordesman and Wagner, 253-354.

⁷⁵ Cordesman, 136; Washington Post, "Iran Claims New Gains in Drive Against Iraq," A17.



Map 25: Iran's "Ya Zahra" Attack. On 22 February 1987, the Iranians launched their final attack of Karbala-5. The Iraqis lured the attacking Pasdaran and Baseej infantrymen into kill-zones, pinned them down with direct fires, and annihilated them with massed artillery. Map drawn by the author.

breakthrough to occur. Once the Iranians had been "encouraged" into a predetermined "killing zone," the Iraqis would open fire and "maximize the slaughter." The unfortunate Pasdaran and Baseej volunteers ensnared in such places were pinned down by direct fires and annihilated with massed Iraqi artillery.⁷⁶

On 27 February the "Iranian Joint Staff Command" declared the official end of *Karbala-5*.⁷⁷ The Iranian offensive had lasted for more than six weeks. While Iran's gains were cause for worry among the Iraqis (particularly the residents of Basra), the offensive had failed to break the back of the Iraqi war movement.

Official reports out of Iran crowed that the Iranian ground forces had attained all their "present objectives . . . [and] . . . had completely destroyed eighty-one Iraqi brigades." The Iranians also claimed to have wiped out some 700 tanks and APCs. In Iraq, a Defense Ministry spokesman countered by noting how President Saddam Hussein's army had killed over 80,000 and wounded as many as 200,000 Iranians in the six weeks of fighting.⁷⁸ The true casualty figures from these battles may never be uncovered; however, by most systems of measure, the numbers were certainly very high.

⁷⁶ Pelletiere and Johnson, 91.

⁷⁷ "Iranian Offensive Halted," Washington Post, 28 February 1987, A20. Cordesman and Wagner show the Iranians as having caused 56,500 Iranian casualties (p. 254).

⁷⁸ Washington Post, "Iranian Offensive Halted," A20.

Conclusions

In thwarting Iran's *Karbala-5* offensive, Iraqi armed forces displayed many interesting tactics. Some of these procedures had been observed in previous battles, while other techniques were new. Among the characteristics of Iraqi warfare seen during *The Battles of Fish Lake* and at earlier times in the Iran-Iraq War were: (1) the unhesitating speed with which unsuccessful leaders, both officers and NCOs, were relieved of their commands or responsibilities; (2) the extensive use of combat engineers to fortify defensive lines and improve the lines of communication; (3) the ability of the Iraqi supply system to sustain field units; (4) the continuing absence of aircraft in a dedicated close air support role; (5) a general lack of awareness regarding the activity of enemy forces preceding the start of the offensive; (6) an excellent ability to conduct static, area defensive warfare against massed infantry assaults; and, (7) an ability to mount limited-objective counterattacks to restore the front, but with a marked absence of efforts to exploit local tactical successes.

More important, however, may be the distinctly fresh TTP shown by the Iraqis during the course of the fighting. For instance, the Iraqis now displayed greater ability to cope with the "fog of war" at the tactical and operational levels of war. New techniques of command and control, the re- and pre-positioning of reserve and front-line forces, and general improvements in battlefield management apparently allowed Iraqi commanders to respond more quickly and decisively to changes in the situation. Iraq's use of "killing zone" or "fire sack" defensive techniques was a second new TTP seen during the fighting at

Fish Lake. With this new tactic, commanders had the capability to "shape the battlefield" to their own tactical advantage.

In the early years of the war with Iran, Iraqi ground forces had developed their ability to conduct static, area defensive warfare by coupling strong linear defenses with limited objective counterattack tactics. In July and August of 1982, for example, the Iraqis soundly defeated Iran's *Operation Ramadan al-Mubarak* offensive (their first attempt to seize Basra). In several battles during this campaign, the Iraqis repeatedly showcased their ability to rebuff Iranian attacks with massed direct and indirect firepower. Iranian attacks managing to penetrate the front typically left their flanks exposed to counterattack by massed Iraqi armor, often allowing them "to flank the Iranian force from both sides."⁷⁹ It is also quite likely that such experiences led to the development of the technique first seen during *Karbala-5* in which the Iraqis drew the Iranians into killing zones.

To conduct this type of static, but mobile defensive fight, Iraqi command and control had to be more efficient and responsive to ongoing events at both the tactical and operational levels of war. At the tactical level, unit commanders through division level had to learn to rapidly transition from defense to offense, and then back to defense. While one may argue that Iraqi counterattacks were only limited objective operations of short duration (rarely did they take longer than a day, or proceed beyond artillery range), one must admit that it is far easier to fight in place than to be ready, on order, to strike back in force. The activities of the Iraqi 5th M.D., as it first defended along

⁷⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, 151.

the front and then joined with an armored division to attack the head of the Iranian penetration at Fish Lake, serve as an excellent example of the Iraqi's evolving ability to quickly shift from the defensive to the offensive.

Perhaps the story of Iraq's 11th B.G.D., a non-elite unit, provides the best example of the new flexibility possessed by leaders at the tactical level in the Iraqi army. Early in the battle, when faced with the possibility of being surrounded by strong Iranian pressure from the east and north, the 11th B.G.D. conducted a "textbook" tactical withdrawal under pressure across the Jasim River (see Maps 21 and 22).

More freedom to act was also in evidence at higher command levels in the Iraqi army. Indeed, this may have been "the secret of the Iraqis' success" during the defense of Basra.⁸⁰ By reexamining the series of maps portraying the events during the battles, the reader can see how the Iraqis moved several units into tactical assembly areas behind the front, how they adjusted defensive sectors of responsibility on numerous occasions, and how some front line units were relieved in place by fresher forces. These shifts "were conducted without apparent confusion and no loss of operational cohesion."⁸¹

Still, despite its new level of flexibility in command, control, and battlefield management, the Iraqis rarely exploited their success. For example, the successful counterattack by the 5th M.D. and an armored division on 28 January threw the Iranian offensive into disarray, but the Iraqis did not follow-up with an attack in the south -

⁸⁰ Pelletiere and Johnson, 89.

⁸¹ Ibid., 91.

an area where their armor and mechanized forces might have found additional maneuver space and more enemy.

Combined and joint operations are still missing as of this point in Iraqi warfare. For example, no airmobile assaults were employed against the rear of the Iranian army, nor were there any significant close air support missions provided by the Iraqi air forces. Instead, Iraqi helicopter gunships (which had been transferred to the control of the army after 1985) appeared at the front on strafing runs similar to methods used to quell the Kurds in the 1970s. The Iraqi air force was too busy bombing Iranian cities and oil refineries ("in retaliation" for Iranian Scud-missile attacks upon Baghdad and Basra) to get involved in the action at the front.⁸²

Outside the scanty information obtained from prisoners once the fighting began, the Iraqi intelligence collection system seems to have evolved little since the beginning of the conflict with Iran. As evidence of this continuing problem in the Iraqi military one need only recall the surprise, both tactical and operational, that the Iranians achieved during the first phase of *Karbala-5*. Apparently the Iraqis were so frustrated by this problem that at one point they tried to pin their intelligence failures upon faulty information provided by the United States.⁸³

⁸² The Iraqi air force was, at this point in the Iran-Iraq War, facing its first formidable air defense threat in the form of U.S. Hawk missiles that Iran had obtained from the United States in the "Arms for Hostages" deal of 1986. See, for example, Tyler, "Iran Claims It Advances 1.2 Miles Toward Basra," A15-A16 and Cordesman, 131.

⁸³ P. Tyler, "Western Aides Dispute Iraqi's Charge," Washington Post, 22 January 1987, A27. This article refers to Iraqi charges levelled in the wake of Iran's capture of Al-Faw in February of 1986.

On the home front, President Saddam Hussein's war effort seems to have acquired unprecedented popular support. More than any other factor, the Iraqi people were probably becoming tired of the long years of war. They were ready and anxious for a return to the business of reaping the potential benefits of Iraq's vast petroleum resources. In the eyes of the Baath leadership, the intensity of the fighting in Basra had the potential to turn popularity into hatred. Therefore, in an effort to "regulate" the return of casualties and veterans from the front, the Iraqis "set up a long series of checkpoints on the highways leading from Basra" for the express purpose of halting Army deserters.⁸⁴ Further, there were reports that the authorities were placing "large numbers of bodies into cold storage . . . to minimize the impact of the losses on the public."⁸⁵ Wounded soldiers presumably were kept away from the general population by restricting them to "special hospitals" until they recovered.

Still, while most Iraqi families had personally experienced the pains of war in some form or another, their morale seems to have sustained (and even strengthened) itself. As opposed to taking on a mood of despair, the people of Iraq developed a rock-hard will to finish the war as quickly as possible.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Childs, "The Gulf War: Iraq Under Pressure," 901.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

FINAL APPRAISAL

. . . our souls were filled with pride for our history and its glories, compelling us towards the achievement of miracles in our homeland. Captivated by the dream (of Wahida) we awakened to see in the Iraqi army, the Arab Prussia, the force able to realize our dreams of establishing a great Arab state which would restore to the Arab nation its past glories and forgotten civilization.

Mahmud Durrah¹

The preceding words, spoken by a former Iraqi officer reflecting upon the mood within the officer corps in the 1920s and 1930s, might just as well have been part of a speech to an assembled mass of Iraqi soldiers as they waited to invade Iran in September 1980, or Kuwait almost ten years later. The words also vividly represent the strong linkage between political aspiration and military reality in Iraq - a characteristic of the Iraqi way of war that is plainly evident after one reviews the army's record of performance. Indeed, many of the improvements in tactics, techniques, and procedures made by the Iraqi army during the war occurred because of changes at the political and strategic levels. Here, a brief examination of this cause-and-effect relationship is in order because it further illuminates the role of The

¹ Quoted in Paul P.J. Hemphill, "The Formation of the Iraqi Army, 1921-33," in The Integration of Modern Iraq, edited by Abbas Kelidar, (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 101.

Battles of Fish Lake in the evolution of Iraqi combat tactics through the conclusion of the war.

From Fish Lake to the End of the War

In the previous chapter, this writer identified *The Battles of Fish Lake* as a turning point in the eventual outcome of the Iran-Iraq War by recognizing that the 1987 campaign against Basra was Iran's last great ground offensive. Yet, concerning the evolution of Iraqi tactics, the events at Basra were important for another reason. After the fighting, the Iraqi army seems to have realized it had the potential to conduct mobile, combined arms warfare on a multi-division basis.² Yet, in order for the reader to understand better the implications of Iraq's victory at Fish Lake, it is essential for the discussion to deviate for a moment and briefly address several important decisions effecting the basic combat capabilities of the Iraqi army.

During the six years of war preceding their win at Basra, the Iraqi army usually demonstrated its ability to execute successfully the political leadership's "static defense strategy." Yet this game plan was slowly sapping Iraq's strength, it would never take the fight to the enemy, and it was reactionary instead of anticipatory.³ Indeed, following a meeting of the Extraordinary Congress of the Baath in July 1986:

. . . there appears to have been general recognition among the Baathist leaders that their existing strategy of static defense was

² S. Pelletiere and D. Johnson II, Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1991), 93.

³ S. Pelletiere, D. Johnson II, and L. Rosenberger, Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1990), 11.

not working and required drastic overhauls, if not complete abandonment.⁴

Although the Iraqi military leadership was somewhat comfortable with the execution of static defensive warfare, they felt that mobile combat loomed as a far more complicated task, one apt to contain many "unknowns." Indeed, this was a lesson the army had learned well following their failed attempts in 1980 to break the stiff resistance offered by Iran's disorganized forces during *The Battles for Abadan Island*. Iraq's solution to the problem, which came out of the Extraordinary Congress gathering in 1986, resulted in several changes to the "force structure, command system, and training" of their army in order to "create a force capable of effective maneuver warfare."⁵

The most important shift in Iraq's military policy enabled young men, primarily college youths, to join the ranks of the Republican Guards which had previously the exclusive domain of men from Tikrit - Saddam Hussein's home town. Eligible men soon flocked to the Republican Guards by the hundreds, seizing the unique opportunity to acquire "a Palace connection."⁶ Readers can get an indication of the phenomenal success the Baath's move had on enlistment in the Iraqi army by noting the increase in the number of Republican Guards divisions portrayed in Table 2 (at the end of Chapter One, units coded "PG" in 1986-1988).⁷

The young men joining the guards divisions were not only more educated, they were also more motivated than most other soldiers in the

⁴ Ibid., 14. See also Pelletiere and Johnson, 37-39.

⁵ A. Cordesman and A. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, 3 vols., Vol 2: *The Iran-Iraq War*, (London: Westview, 1990), 413.

⁶ Pelletiere, et al., 15.

⁷ Ibid.

Iraqi army.⁸ Truly, the influx of college youths juxtaposed with the experience of the veteran Iraqi commanders, may have been one of the most fortuitous circumstances for Iraq since the beginning of the war. Apparently, the recruits out of college learned faster than other, less educated Iraqi soldiers. Moreover, the new men did not have years of bad experiences behind them. As one analyst observed: "To counter [Iranian] fanaticism, aggressive spirits were needed."⁹ The positive effect that these moves had on Iraqi combat capabilities would come to the fore only fourteen months after the conclusion of *The Battles for Fish Lake*.

The first of these new spirits formed the core of the Republican Guard infantry brigades that counterattacked with success in the defense of Basra.¹⁰ Somehow, the successful counterattacks by Iraq's Republican Guard, armored, and mechanized forces during the defense of Basra seems to have given commanders new confidence and inspired them to think about the offensive, about maneuver, about striking at the enemy (see Chapter 3).

With Basra having rejuvenated their self-confidence, the Iraqi army apparently began preparing for large-scale offensive operations.¹¹ A second catalyst prompting the Iraqi leadership to think about offensive warfare was the indisputable reality that "the war had wrecked Iraq's economy."¹² The country desperately needed money; and one way to

⁸ Pelletiere and Johnson, 38.

⁹ Pelletiere, et al., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

¹¹ "Iraq Says It Has Recaptured Strategic Peninsula from Iran," New York Times, 19 April 1988, A11.

¹² Pelletiere, et al., 11.

help matters would be to recapture Al-Faw, Iraq's principal oil export terminal to the Persian Gulf.

Therefore, on the morning of 17 April 1988 the Iraqis attacked Al-Faw. In a plan envisioning a five-day battle, the Iraqi VII Corps and a Republican Guards Corps joined to envelop the Iranian defenses. The actual fight lasted about 36 hours and was a total victory for the Iraqis. In retaking the most important piece of territory Iraq had lost to Iran since the start of the war, the Iraqi army showed "that it is now able to conduct major attacks successfully."¹³ Surprise, mass, and combined arms were the greatest contributors to Iraq's victory at Al-Faw.¹⁴ In that the brigade is "the basic combat formation" in the Iraqi army, the overwhelming success at Al-Faw marked the first time in the war that a large-scale Iraqi attack had, so to speak, "hit on all cylinders."¹⁵

A month later, on 25 May 1988, the Iraqis shocked the Iranians for a second time and recaptured all territory lost during 1987 in the Fish Lake area. In a battle that finished in less than nine hours, the Iraqi army's massive attack threw "several thousand tanks" against the out-classed Iranian defenders. "Again, the huge disparity in numbers seems to have tipped the balance in Iraq's favor."¹⁶ This story repeated on 25 June with even greater efficiency when several divisions

¹³ Bernard Trainor, "Iraqi Offensive: Victory Goes Beyond Battlefield," New York Times, 20 April 1988, A16. The Iranians had captured Al-Faw from the Iraqis in 1986; the loss of the city was a major embarrassment to Iraq.

¹⁴ According to Pelletiere et al., 28, the Iraqis had roughly a 12-to-1 numerical advantage at Al-Faw.

¹⁵ Pelletiere and Johnson, 62.

¹⁶ Pelletiere et al., 29.

of Iraqi armor and mechanized forces joined to recapture the Majnoon Island oilfield complex north of Basra.¹⁷

Putting It All Together

This thesis has focused upon several tactics, techniques and procedures that the Iraqi army acquired during its eight-year war with Iran. At the risk of making too general of an appraisal, it is the opinion of this writer that the Iraqi army that emerged from the war in 1988 was not a clone of Soviet warfighting methodologies; nor was it an army created in the image of other Arab armies. Simply put, the Iraqi army in 1988 was an organization that is uniquely "Iraqi" - a working blend of local, regional, and international military influences.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the most salient points of this thesis is to organize the conclusions by topic according to the seven "Battlefield Operating Systems" - maneuver, fire support, air defense, intelligence and electronic warfare, mobility / counter-mobility / survivability, sustainment, and command and control.¹⁸ Before proceeding, however, the reader must be reminded that the Iraqi army's ability to close out the war may be attributable as much to troubles within the Iranian military as it is to improvements in the Iraqi army.¹⁹

¹⁷ Youssef Ibrahim, "Iraqi Troops Recapture Big Oil Field," New York Times, 26 June 1988, 3.

¹⁸ Student Text 100-3: Battle Book, (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1989), 1-2 and 1-3; Field Manual 100-5: Operations, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1986), 11-14, 95-98, 106.

¹⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, 420. Iran's last significant victory in the war was at Al-Faw in 1986. Chapter Three of the thesis outlines the rise and decline of the Iranian military in greater detail.

Maneuver

Maneuver "is the movement of forces in relation to the enemy to secure or retain positional advantage."²⁰ In essence, "maneuver means moving and acting consistently more rapidly than the opponent."²¹ No matter which definition the reader prefers, maneuver has become a major feature of Iraqi tactics. Indeed, it has always been an important element of Iraq's way of fighting, but not on the scale (synchronized at division and corps level) seen by the end of the war.

At the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi army showed its inability to perform large scale maneuver during *The Battles of Abadan Island*. The army's attack of Khorramshahr failed when commanders did not anticipate that tanks simply do would not move very well in urban environments.²² However, the events of early 1987 prove that the Iraqis reversed this situation - for in defending Basra the army employed mobile defensive techniques (i.e., the use of offensive tactics during a fundamentally defensive operation) to turn back Iran's *Karbala-5* offensive.

Iraq's use of maneuver also evolved in other respects. For example, the combined arms operations seen during the Iraqi counterattacks at Fish Lake in 1987 represent the army's new ability to coordinate the simultaneous activities of multiple combat arms - a characteristic missing from the 1980 campaign when Iraqi tanks fought without the assistance of properly trained infantry at Khorramshahr and

²⁰ Field Manual 100-5: Operations, 12.

²¹ William S. Lind, "Defining Maneuver Warfare for the Marine Corps," Marine Corps Gazette, (March 1980), 56.

²² Cordesman and Wagner, 437.

Abadan. By the end of the war, this evolutionary trend continued to the extent that one can safely conclude that combined arms operations had become "the norm" in Iraqi warfighting. Still, one must temper such a conclusion with the knowledge that Iraqi "successes have been largely against light infantry forces" bent on conducting a static, area defense.²³

On the surface, Iraq's concept of combined arms operations in maneuver warfare is similar to western ideas, but there is at least one major difference - the Iraqis still do not like to employ their air forces in a dedicated close air support role. Indeed, aviation played little or no role in either campaign described in this thesis. In the Iraqi way of war, the air force is a strategic asset. On the other hand, rotary aviation is believed by most analysts to be Iraq's prime close air support asset at the tactical level. During 1985, control of Iraq's helicopter units moved from the air force to the army. Yet despite this reorganization, helicopters made no noticeable contribution to Iraq's victory during *The Battles of Fish Lake*. In view of the tremendous vulnerability of unprotected masses of Iranian infantry to potential aerial fires, it is somewhat amazing that the Iraqis did not try to send their helicopters on deep sorties after Iranian assembly areas.

Therefore, it is unlikely that Iraqi attack helicopters would be seen venturing much beyond the forward edge of the battle area (the F.E.B.A).²⁴ This situation can result in a "gap" in Iraq's aerial

²³ Pelletiere and Johnson, 62 and 63.

²⁴ Ibid., 63.

coverage of the battlefield that begins about three kilometers beyond the F.E.B.A. (i.e., the range limit of typical helicopter-borne anti-armor missiles), and extends to the depths at which the Iraqi air force happens to strike. Because this weakness takes away an important element of a ground force's ability to isolate elements of an opposing army, it is a problem that has tremendous impacts upon the Iraqi army's potential to wage mobile warfare against an equally or more mobile opponent.

Mass and shock also appear to play somewhat larger roles in the Iraqi concept of maneuver warfare.²⁵ At the beginning of the war the Iraqis apparently hoped that the shock effect of their massed armor would send the Iranians reeling. At first the army's tactic worked, but the slow pace with which Iraq's mobile forces executed its maneuvers often allowed the Iranians to hold out. Six years later, the shock produced by Iraq's armor and mechanized infantry counterattack at Fish Lake was merely a glimpse of Iraqi capabilities yet unseen. For instance, when the Iraqis recaptured the Majnoon Islands in 1988, their tanks rapidly overran Iranian positions and achieved force ratios of roughly 20-to-1.²⁶ This new characteristic of Iraqi tactics marks a major turnabout from the tentative advances made by Iraqi tanks during *The Battles of Abadan Island*.²⁷ Regardless, the most significant

²⁵ Ibid., 62.

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, 437.

contribution of mass and shock to the Iraqi way of war may be the way they act to reduce Clausewitz's "friction" and "fog of war."²⁸

Fire Support

There can be little doubt concerning the importance of fire support to Iraqi combat operations. The quantity of artillery pieces Iraq possessed by the end of the war is astonishing (see Table 1, Chapter 1). Yet raw numbers of artillery tubes do not, in and of themselves, equate to effective fire support. Indeed, competent tactical fire support is achieved only when the assets detailed to provide it (artillery, mortars, air power) are positioned to "mass [their] lethal fires throughout the depth of the battlefield, to be responsive to multiple targets, and to be able to rapidly shift priority of fires."²⁹ (Italics mine.)

In both battles analyzed in this thesis, the Iraqi army never attacked beyond the range of its large contingent of towed artillery pieces. At Abadan and Khorramshahr, the army had the luxury of positioning its cannon on the west bank of the Shatt-al-Arab. Similarly, at Fish Lake, Iraq's tactic was simply to restore the front. Even the counterattack by the Republican Guards did not push forward in a bold stroke that would have required Iraqi artillery units to "follow and support" a moving army. Therefore, this writer contends that Iraqi

²⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 119-121. Clausewitz defined friction as "the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult" and "the countless minor incidents - the kind you can never really foresee - [that] combine to lower the general level of performance" (p. 119).

²⁹ Student Text 100-3, 1-3.

field artillerymen were not obligated to develop aggressive and flexible fire support techniques.

Another major flaw in Iraq's equation for tactical fire support is the clear lack of Iraqi TTP regarding the potential contributions of air power. As noted earlier, Iraqi air forces tend to avoid coming under the tactical control of ground force commanders - with the minor exception of helicopter aviation. Therefore, air power makes at best only a minimal donation to fire support. It will be interesting to observe how the results of *Operation Desert Storm* influence this woefully deficient aspect of Iraqi TTP. In sum, the Iraqi army's conspicuous limitations in the two italicized aspects (see above) of fire support severely hamper its overall rating in this battlefield operating system.³⁰

Air Defense

From the two campaigns described in this thesis it is difficult to draw many conclusions regarding Iraqi air defenses other than to note that the army possessed large numbers of weapons designed for air defense. Indeed, the quantity of air defense systems purchased by the Iraqis in the years before and during the war is formidable; however, the vast majority of these weapons were simple, manually operated guns. In 1980, for example, Iraq's air defense weaponry consisted of about 1,200 guns and fewer than 100 surface-to-air

³⁰ Although it is a subject outside the scope of this thesis, the Iraqis are believed to be well-versed in the employment of chemical fires in support of both offensive and defensive operations.³⁰ It is this author's opinion that they would integrate chemical fires into their defensive plans, and would use them to assist a breakthrough or penetration during the offensive. (See Pelletiere and Johnson, 53-54).

missile.³¹ Yet, by the time of *The Battles of Fish Lake*, the Iraqi air defense inventory had more than tripled in size so that it contained about 3,000 guns and more than 300 missile systems of either Soviet or French origin.³² However, as *Operation Desert Storm* has so clearly demonstrated, the types of weapon systems the Iraqis possess, especially the gun systems, can easily be defeated by modern aircraft, well-trained pilots, and sound counter-air defense measures.

Next to force modernization, training becomes a central point of concern regarding Iraq's air defense potential. Since Iranian airframes never swarmed over the battlefield during the Iran-Iraq War, a soldier in an Iraqi air defense unit did not need to develop his marksmanship skills much beyond the "familiarity" stage.³³ During the recent war against the coalition forces, because allied air power lost well under 100 aircraft should give the Iraqi army sufficient cause to reexamine its air defense system in entirety.

Intelligence and Electronic Warfare

Intelligence, especially at the strategic and operational levels, may be Iraq's single greatest battlefield weakness. In the battles for Khorramshahr and Abadan, for example, the Iraqis clearly underestimated Iran in several areas. First, the Iraqis believed that the shock of their attack would cause the downfall of the Khomeini regime. Second, Iraq figured that its army could easily overrun all

³¹ "The Middle East and North Africa," in The Military Balance 1980-1981, (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1980), 42.

³² "Iraq," in The Middle East Military Balance: 1987-88, (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1987), 100.

³³ Pelletiere and Johnson, 58.

Iranian resistance since the once powerful Iranian army had been all but dismantled by the Revolution. Third, the Iraqi army felt that its operation against the largely Arab populous in Iran's Khuzestan Province would be viewed with favor.

Seven years later, the Iraqis seemed to have made little progress in the area of intelligence. At Fish Lake, slow-moving Iranian infantry forces consistently gained tactical surprise on the Iraqis. Apparently, Iraqi commanders were in the dark regarding Iranian battlefield movements. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, the United States is reported to have periodically provided the Iraqis with intelligence information.³⁴ Yet, it appears as though the Iraqis made little effort to confirm any of the information given to them.

In many respects, Iraq's weaknesses in strategic level intelligence gathering probably set the stage for their poor performance in the area of tactical intelligence. Undoubtedly, intelligence was not an area subject to the highest "command emphasis" in the Iraqi army during the Iran-Iraq War. Here, it is interesting to quote the findings of one Iran-Iraq War analyst, "although numerous battlefield radars and night vision devices were available" the war the Iraqis and Iranians fought was very much "a visual-range war."³⁵

Mobility, Counter-mobility, and Survivability

Mobility, counter-mobility, and survivability are three of the Iraqi army's most consistently outstanding strengths. Even before the war with Iran, Iraqi combat engineers distinguished themselves during

³⁴ See, for instance, P. Tyler, "Western Aides Dispute Iraqi's Charge," Washington Post, 22 January 1987, A27.

³⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, 414 and 450-451.

the Kurdish campaigns - an observation mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis. This author's inspection of satellite and aerial photographic imagery covering the area east of Basra reveals the extensive nature of the work performed by Iraqi engineers in completing the formidable Fish Lake barrier system. Indeed, one group of observers familiar with the complexity of this obstacle noted that Iraq's precise use of:

. . . certain physical arrangements of fortifications and weapons .
. . [would] . . . warm the hearts of Vauban, the 18th century
French father of fortification, and Andre Maginot, France's 20th
century Vauban.³⁶

The Iraqis also believe in employing their engineers throughout the depth of their side of the battlefield. This mission requires Iraqi sappers to be proficient in a variety of tasks from mining, to fortification construction, to road building.³⁷ Indeed, it was on the strength of the Fish Lake road system that the Iraqis were able to move their reserves around the battle area in response to Iranian drives toward Basra.

Ingenuity may be the hallmark of Iraqi mobility, counter-mobility, and survivability operations. Indeed, they seem to have come up with several ingenious, and often devious methods of protecting their forces from Iranian human wave assaults; water barriers and electric fences being two of their more notorious adaptations. This expertise clearly carried directly over into the war in 1990-91, as coalition forces spent many hours rehearsing for attacks through what seemed like a "world class" obstacle system of anti-tank ditches, minefields, barbed wire, and "fire trenches" along the Kuwaiti-Saudi frontier.

³⁶ Pelletiere and Johnson, 55.

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

The literature contains little discussion regarding the role of Iraqi engineer units in obstacle breaching. When the Iraqis assaulted Abadan Island in 1980, there were few obstacles to rupture other than the ones the Iraqis created with their artillery fires. In fact, one of the few references this author uncovered relates a story of how Iraqi commandos used the cover of night to breach the Iranian forward defenses at Al-Faw in preparation for the Iraqi VII Corps' attack in 1988. From this one source, the author would hazard to estimate that the Iraqis may sincerely believe that mobility and counter-mobility operations are not the solely the mission of combat engineers. If true, then the "mobility, counter-mobility, and survivability" battlefield operating system is quite healthy in the Iraqi army.

Sustainment

Battlefield sustainment is more than resupply operations; it also encompasses tasks in the areas of fueling, arming, manning, maintenance, transportation, and protection. Succinctly, battlefield sustainment does not appear to have been a problem hampering the Iraqi army combat operations in either campaign analyzed in the thesis. None of the sources involved in the investigation mention Iraqi forces going without ammunition or fuel for unusual periods of time, or units that lost an inordinate number of vehicles due to shortcomings in the maintenance system. Despite the ravaged state of Iraq's economy, one can argue that the Iraqi never lost its ability to "sustain the force" during the war.

Iraq's success in the area of sustainment can be attributed to at least two factors. First, their experiences in making the long road marches through Jordan and Syria in order to get to the battlefields of Israel would appear to have paid great dividends in the development of Iraqi sustainment operations. Indeed, Iraq's use of heavy-transport tractors is one example previously mentioned in this thesis. Second, when the war began with Iran the only notable deficiency in Iraqi sustainment operations was in the area of manning. Here, political loyalty seemed the most certain guarantor of promotion, easily outweighing minor qualities like professional competence and tactical ability (especially in the officer ranks).³⁸

However, one also must express concern about protection -- that aspect of sustainment that secures an army's lines of communication and logistical support areas. During *The Battles of Abadan Island*, Iraqi equipment parks and LOCs were periodically struck by Iranian artillery fire and aircraft. But as the attacks never came in large quantity, they were little more than an insignificant distraction from business as usual. At Basra in 1987, the Iranians made absolutely no concerted effort to interdict Iraqi supply lines.

In sum, throughout the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq's supply lines were never seriously in danger, thus the need to "protect" the army's LOCs was never a significant issue. Yet, the successes of coalition air power during *Operation Desert Storm* points to significant problems in Iraqi sustainment. In particular, the Iraqis need to reassess the

³⁸ Ibid., 50.

contributions of the other battlefield operating systems (especially air defense) to the successful conduct of sustainment operations.

Command and Control

One study describes Iraqi command and control as "the biggest mystery of the war."³⁹ Nonetheless, the limited scope of this thesis provides room for a few comments about the Iraqi command and control system.

"Flexibility," the ability to cope with the unknown during combat, may be the most important aspect of command and control in which the Iraqis made major improvements during the war with Iran. In 1980, for example, the Iraqi army's attacks against Khorramshahr and Abadan revealed an inflexible, "stick to the plan" mentality among field commanders. Even after Iraqi commanders realized that their attacks suffered from the lack of quality infantry support, they do not seem to have suggested that Khorramshahr and Abadan be bypassed in favor of isolation. Instead, the commanders of both divisions on the Abadan front kept plugging away with frontal assaults upon both cities. Still, one can easily argue that this situation was more a function of Iraq's intransigent political system than it was an indication of inflexibility by unit commanders.

During the fighting near Fish Lake in 1987, the 11th Border Guards Division's well-orchestrated "withdrawal under pressure" across the Jasim River provides an excellent illustration of how some Iraqi commanders were learning to "think on their feet." Although the 11th's leaders obviously had few alternatives, the fact that the withdrawal was

³⁹ Ibid.

a success reveals that some sectors of the Iraqi army had learned how to act under extreme pressure and knew how to handle one of warfare's most testing battlefield scenario.

During *The Battles of Fish Lake*, the Iraqi high-command also displayed a new capacity for reducing the "fog of war" through several of its actions. For instance, no less than five divisions reinforced the Iraqi III Corps sector during January 1987. That the commander and staff of this unit handled these forces without so much as a break in ongoing operations is a tribute to the Corps' command and control process. Furthermore, when III Corps sent these divisions into battle, it did so in areas where the Iraqis could achieve a significant advantage in force ratio. Apparently, the Iraqis developed the notion that one effective way of lessening the impact of friction in war was by "piling-on" the combat power.

These aforementioned examples of improvements in Iraqi command and control bring this discussion full circle; back to the intimate link between politics and the military in Iraq. For without the freedom to make "the best" decision, Iraqi commanders fought the Iranians with one hand tied behind their backs.

The Future of the Iraqi Army?

In view of its recent experiences in Kuwait, only time will reveal what lessons the Iraqi army can extract from its humiliating defeat. If the past can be summoned as a guide to what is yet to come, then it seems likely that politics will, for at least the next several years, reassume its old role as the dominant actor in the future of the Iraqi army. A new round of shake-ups in the army hierarchy seems almost

certain, even if Saddam Hussein loses control of the government. Furthermore, in view of the obvious political ramifications, it is improbable that the leadership in Baghdad will be permit the military to make an "honest assessment" of what went wrong in Kuwait. Until it is allowed to reassess, reorganize, and retrain, the Iraqi army will hardly be more than the "big stick" the government uses to quell internal disorder against the Kurds, the Shiites, or whomever else stands in the way of "progress in Iraq."

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