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SADDAM HUSSEIN AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

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Abstract

On 22 September 1980, Iraqi forces launched a limited incursion into southern Iran. In ordering this attack, Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein sought to counter the revolutionary government of Ayatollah Khomeini, which had been attempting to destabilize Iraq's ruling Ba'ath government. Although Saddam survived the ensuing eight-year war, he clearly had miscalculated the costs he would have to incur during its course. Moreover, the Iraqi dictator failed to achieve the other political and military objectives he had set for himself. The Iran-Iraq War ended on 20 August 1988 with over 100,000 Iraqi soldiers killed, many more injured, an estimated \$65-80 billion in Iraqi war debts, and the 1980 status quo ante.¹ To explain how the war went so wrong for Saddam, the authors of this paper analyzed Saddam's presumed national security strategy and military strategy. They concluded that Saddam appeared to have had a rudimentary though somewhat incoherent national security strategy in his war with Iran. However, Saddam's military strategy was ill conceived at best, and possibly even non-existent. Saddam's gravest mistake was that he fundamentally misjudged the kind of the war he was initiating when he attacked Iran in September of 1980.

SADDAM HUSSEIN AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

Although Saddam Hussein survived the Iran-Iraq War, he did so in spite of his rudimentary, incoherent national security strategy and his lack of any real military strategy. In the first part of this paper, the authors analyze Saddam's national security strategy, examining Iraq's national interests, threats to and opportunities for furthering those interests, Saddam's political objectives, and his use of the instruments of statecraft. The second part of the paper explores Saddam's strategy for war with Iran, including Iraq's military objectives, its capabilities and vulnerabilities, and Saddam's strategic concepts for employing military means to achieve military and political ends. The final section of the paper evaluates Saddam's national security strategy and the degree to which his military strategy fit that strategy. The authors conclude that Saddam's gravest mistake was to misjudge the kind of war he was initiating in September 1980.

Saddam's Interests; ergo, Iraq's Interests

¹ Dilip Hiro, The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict (New York: Routledge, 1991), 250; Roland Dannreuther, The Gulf Conflict: A Political and Strategic Analysis, Adelphi Paper No. 264 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1991/92), 11; Efraim Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," Orbis (Spring 1989): 210 and 222-223.

At the start of the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam was Iraq's undisputed political and military ruler, and Iraq's national interests were his personal interests. A brief look at his background should indicate how this came to be. A conspiratorial operative from age 18, Saddam participated in several efforts to overthrow Iraqi governments, including a 1959 attempt to assassinate Premier Qasim, and a failed attempt to mount a Ba'athist coup during the regime of Abdul Salam Arif in the mid 1960s. His ambition began to pay off in 1968, when, after aligning himself with Ahmad Hassan Bakr, a cousin of his maternal uncle, Bakr assumed chairmanship of Iraq's Ba'ath Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). Saddam used this relationship to increase his own power, and in 1969 he secured a position on the RCC. By their "cunning decimation of their RCC colleagues,"² the Saddam-Bakr alliance dominated the party and the country throughout the early 1970s. By 1975, Saddam's power eclipsed that of Bakr.

In June 1979, following the Iranian Revolution and Iranian-backed uprisings amongst the Shia population in southern Iraq, Saddam Hussein and Bakr split over how to deal with the problem—Saddam favored a violent hard-line approach. Bakr stepped down, for "health reasons," enabling Saddam to consolidate his power, which culminated with Saddam becoming chairman of the RCC, president of the republic, and general secretary of the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command. In July, Saddam "discovered a major 'anti-state conspiracy' involving 68 top Ba'athist civilian and military leaders." Following a quickly orchestrated trial, 21 of the 68 were executed.³ Given Saddam's unchecked ambition and his ruthless assumption of power, his top interests were his regime's survival and, secondarily, his political ascendance in the Arab world. In the centrally controlled police state Iraq had become, Saddam's interests were synonymous with Iraq's national interests.

² Dilip Hiro, The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29.

³ Hiro, 25, and 29-30.

Threats and Opportunities

In January-February 1979, a fundamentalist Islamic regime led by the Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the secular Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and quickly provoked a direct challenge to Saddam's survival. "We [Iran] will export our revolution to the four corners of the world," Khomeini proclaimed on 11 February 1979, less than two weeks after coming to power. In a scarcely veiled reference to Saddam's Ba'athist regime, Khomeini advocated Arab nationalism be "eradicated, or subjugated," in order to achieve the "higher unity of Islam."⁴ Heeding Khomeini's call, his radical followers considered the export of the Iranian revolution their primary mission. Their initial targets included Arab states with sizable Shia communities, such as Iraq (65% of the population), Kuwait (30%), Bahrain (70%), and Saudi Arabia (up to 500,000 Shias).⁵

Tehran's virulent rhetoric manifested itself in Iranian-sponsored Shia demonstrations in southern Iraq. Shias, the politically disenfranchised majority in Iraq, had long been a potential source of trouble for the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist regime in Baghdad, but prior to the Iranian revolution, Bakr and Hussein had managed to suppress the Shias without being too heavy-handed. In February 1979, Saddam was forced to dispatch security forces to the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf to quell Iranian-instigated demonstrations. He later imposed martial law in several southern cities and in Baghdad, again in reaction to Shia uprisings.⁶ By June 1979, Saddam felt compelled to have Ayatollah Sadr, a leading Shia cleric with close contacts to Khomeini, placed under house arrest. The violence escalated in early 1980 when Iranian-sponsored Shia activists nearly succeeded in assassinating Tariq Aziz, Iraq's Christian deputy premier.⁷ In response, Saddam had Ayatollah Sadr executed. In addition, Saddam subsequently attempted to seal off

⁴ Ibid., 32-34.

⁵ Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 29.

⁶ Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press/MacMillan, 1991), 144.

⁷ Hiro, 35.

southern Iraq from Iranian worshippers wishing to visit Shia holy sites, and he forcefully expelled 100,000 Iraqi Shias to counter the growing Iranian-sponsored threat.⁸ As Khomeini consolidated power, his regime seemed certain to pose an ever-increasing challenge to Saddam's survival.

A mere 100 miles of flat terrain separates Iraq's capital, Baghdad, from Qasir-e-Shirin, the Iranian border town along the traditional attack corridor into central Iraq. By contrast, Tehran lies over 350 miles east of the same frontier, and is protected from invading armies by the Zagros Mountains. Geography favored Iran in other ways, too. Whereas Iraq's access to the sea was confined to a narrow 30-mile stretch of coastline, Iranian shores stretched nearly 1,000 miles and dominated the Straits of Hormuz where the Persian Gulf opened to the world's oceans. Moreover, Iran's population was more than three times the size of Iraq's.⁹ Non-Arab Kurds dominated the mountainous areas straddling the border between northeastern Iraq and northwestern Iran. Though not a direct threat to Saddam's survival, this minority sect—15% of the population—nonetheless desired autonomy from Baghdad, and Khomeini was unlikely to honor an earlier agreement to forego using the Kurds to destabilize Iraq. Southern Iraq is primarily desert, where peasant cultivators subsist upon extensively irrigated plots.¹⁰ Home to the country's majority Shias, the region served as a natural conduit for Iran to export its revolution into Iraq.¹¹

While threatening in many ways, the strategic environment in which Saddam Hussein found himself in the summer of 1980 seemed to present him with some opportunities. First, Ayatollah Khomeini's regime had troubles at home and it was diplomatically isolated. As Dilip Hiro, author on Middle Eastern affairs—including a book on the Iran-Iraq War—described the situation, Iran suffered from “low moral among military officers...rapid deterioration in the effectiveness of

⁸ Karsh and Rautsi, 146

⁹ John F. Antal, “The Iraqi Army Forged in the Gulf War,” Military Review (February 1991): 63.

¹⁰ Pelletiere, 25.

¹¹ Philip Robbins, “Iraq in the Gulf War: Objectives, Strategies, and Problems,” Chapter 5 in Hanns W. Maull and Otto Pick, The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 46.

Iranian weaponry...shortages of consumer goods, growing unemployment, and rising disaffection among the professional classes as well as ethnic minorities.”¹² Meanwhile, Saddam harbored expatriate Iranians such as former premier Shahpour Bakhtiar and General Gholam Ali Oveisi, “who possessed vital information and commanded the loyalties of hundreds of Iranians in key positions in the Islamic republic,” according to Hiro.¹³ The Iraqi dictator reportedly planned to use these men to exploit Tehran’s domestic weaknesses.

Diplomatically, Iran was isolated. The Shah’s former sponsor, the United States, loathed the Islamic regime in Tehran; relations were especially bad after April 1980, when Washington had bungled an attempt to rescue American hostages held in Tehran. The other Cold War superpower, the Soviet Union, had invaded Muslim Afghanistan in late 1979, thus increasing the traditional enmity and fear with which Tehran regarded Moscow. Khomeini’s doctrine and his revolutionary agents operating in the region threatened the monarchies ruling the Arab Gulf states, thereby adding to historical Arab-Persian animosities.¹⁴ Tehran’s domestic and international weakness seemed to present Baghdad with an opportunity to counter Khomeini’s revolutionary threat.

In addition to Iran’s woes, by 1980 there was no clear pan-Arab leader; Egypt had recently fallen from that role as a result of its peace accord with Israel. This turn of events offered the ever-ambitious Saddam an opportunity to fill the void left by Cairo.¹⁵ Saddam took his first step in this direction after the world’s two superpowers began flexing their military muscles in the region. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the US promulgated the Carter doctrine declaring the Persian Gulf an area of vital interest to America, thereby making the Gulf a Cold War arena. Saddam countered with a doctrine of his own, the Arab Charter, which called upon Arab states to

¹² Hiro, 36.

¹³ Hiro, 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁵ Robbins, 48.

protect Arab property.¹⁶ With Iran threatening to export Shia revolution to overthrow the monarchies of the Arab Gulf states, Saddam was well positioned figuratively and geographically to lead the Arab riposte. Furthermore, as Dilip Hiro indicated, “If the Iraqi army could cross the Iranian border and liberate the Arabs of Arabistan/Khuzistan...then it would entitle Iraq to a leading role in the Arab councils.”¹⁷ Leadership of the pan-Arab movement might also help vault Saddam into the leading position of the so-called non-aligned nations, whose worldwide summit the Iraqi dictator was slated to host in 1982. Although Ayatollah Khomeini’s regime posed a very real threat to Saddam, the international context seemed to proffer tempting opportunities as well.

Saddam’s Political Objectives

The combination of Saddam’s interests, along with the threats and opportunities facing Iraq, yielded four political objectives—three of them positive objectives, and one negative objective. The positive objectives flowed coherently one from the other, and included: 1) countering the destabilizing influence emanating from the fundamentalist Shia regime in Tehran,¹⁸ 2) regaining the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and 3) establishing Saddam Hussein as leader of the Arab world. By countering the Iranian regime, Saddam probably believed he could “quell the source, moral and material of the Shia insurrection, which, if not contained, might encourage Kurdish secessionists in the north to revive their armed struggle, and plunge the country into a full-scale ‘civil war.’”¹⁹

By re-taking the Shatt al-Arab, Saddam could right the “terrible injustice” levied upon him in the 1975 Algiers Agreement, whereby Iran took control of half of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, Iraq’s major outlet to the Persian Gulf. This outlet, disputed by Iraq and Iran for centuries, was of particular interest to Saddam, because he had been the Iraqi negotiator “compelled” by the relatively

¹⁶ Pelletiere, 30.

¹⁷ Hiro, 38.

¹⁸ The vagueness of the term “countering” is intentional. With the data available, it is impossible to know whether Saddam intended to oust Khomeini, or merely contain the threat the ayatollah posed. Some commentators credit Saddam with trying to overthrow the Khomeini regime, others claim his objectives were far more limited. The analysis below takes this uncertainty into account.

more powerful Iran to surrender half of the waterway.²⁰ Extremely unhappy with the negotiation's results, Saddam nevertheless agreed to Iranian conditions "in order to stave off any threat to Iraq's lands and his political position."²¹ Retaking the waterway would redress the 1975 affront to Iraqi sovereignty, redeeming Saddam at home and strengthening his image in the Arab world.

Saddam's fourth political objective, the negative one, became apparent soon after he attacked Iran; that objective was to "keep Iraqi casualties at a minimum."²² Not one to blanch at the violent loss of life, Saddam was most likely motivated to limit Iraqi casualties by practical rather than humanitarian concerns. Even dictators desire public support. Saddam, striving as he was to damp the revolutionary fires fanned from Tehran, could ill afford to "[incur] the wrath of the population," as William Staudenmaier has pointed out.²³ Shia casualties might prove especially problematic, and by one estimate the Shia composition of the Iraqi army was "perhaps as high as 85 percent."²⁴ This negative political objective did not flow from any of the three positive objectives listed above; in fact, as will be discussed later in this paper, Saddam's efforts to avoid casualties would become the basis for incoherence in his national security strategy.²⁵

Instruments Used to Achieve Political Objectives

As history indicates, Saddam ultimately turned to the military option for fulfilling his national security strategy. However, Saddam first attempted to use the other instruments of statecraft to achieve his political objectives. In early 1979, he used propaganda to counter the ideological challenge emanating from Tehran. Despite being a Sunni Arab, Saddam lauded the Shia's patron Imam, outlawed gambling, donned the traditional Shia robe, staged numerous

¹⁹ Hiro, 37.

²⁰ Pelletiere, 30.

²¹ Karsh and Rautsi, 136-137.

²² William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts ed. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 45.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pelletiere, 29.

²⁵ Ibid.

televised visits to Shia settlements in southern Iraq, and produced “proof” of his direct genealogical descent from the prophet Muhammad.²⁶ Additionally, he opened the Ba’ath party to new members, specifically calling upon Shias to join.²⁷ Saddam also attempted to co-opt the Islamic radicals’ argument by speaking out about the complementary nature of Islamic and Arabic revolutions. One such statement occurred in October 1979, when he remarked, “a true Islamic revolution would absorb the Arab ideology...and remove any contradiction between it and this [Arab] ideology.”²⁸ Saddam concurrently supported Iranian exiles in Iraq, providing them radio stations within his borders to conduct anti-Khomeini propaganda.²⁹

Saddam Hussein also used covert action to counter the Iranian threat. Although the literature on his use of this tool is sparse, Philip Robbins claimed “agents provocateurs were sent into [Khuzistan, Iran] to mount sabotage operations and rally the [Arab] indigenous community.”³⁰ Indications were that Saddam might have been seeking to separate Khuzistan, Tehran’s primary source of oil, from the rest of Iran, “thereby turning the latter into a fourth-rate power.”³¹

On the diplomatic front, Saddam achieved mixed results. For several months after Khomeini came to power, Saddam initiated diplomatic overtures with Iran only to be rebuffed by the Khomeini regime.³² In a glaring diplomatic oversight, Saddam alienated the Soviet Union, Iraq’s principal supplier of arms, by neglecting to coordinate with Moscow prior to initiating his war with Iran. Surprised by Iraq’s invasion of Iran, the Kremlin imposed an arms embargo on both countries. Soviet arms en route to Baghdad were turned back in “midjourney,” creating some serious shortfalls in arms and ammunition.³³ Saddam’s diplomatic efforts in the Persian Gulf region and in New

²⁶ Karsh and Rautsi, 144-145.

²⁷ Pelletiere, 27.

²⁸ Hiro, 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰ Robbins, 47.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Karsh and Rautsi, 138.

³³ Pelletiere, 44.

York proved more successful. Prior to initiating military operations, he sought and obtained active backing—political and financial—for his planned attack from the Saudi and Kuwaiti monarchies. Finally, during the early days of the war, with Saddam’s forces on the offensive, Iraq was successful in delaying UN Security Council deliberations that were sure to result in the world body calling for an end to the conflict—however, mutual self-interest between the Security Council members and Iraq, rather than skillful diplomacy on Saddam’s part, probably caused the delay.³⁴

Economically, Iraq was prospering immensely in 1979 and 1980, due to an unprecedented world oil boom.³⁵ Though there is no evidence that Saddam tried economic incentives or sanctions with Tehran prior to the war, the Iraqi dictator used economic incentives at home in an attempt to fortify his domestic base of support. Soon after seizing power, Saddam raised the salaries of key public sector employees, including those in the security and intelligence forces, and the judiciary.³⁶ As the crisis with Iran intensified, Saddam chose to liberalize his country’s economy by opening his country to imports and flooding it with a wide range of consumer goods. During 1980, he increased the total value of contracts signed and announced by the Iraqi government from some \$14.8 billion in 1980 to around \$24.3 billion a year later.³⁷ These measures appear to have been calculated to maintain a broad base of political support, and to downplay the costs of going to war; it was a “guns and butter” approach that forced Saddam to quickly deplete Iraq’s currency reserves and begin borrowing heavily.³⁸ Unsustainable over the long term, the policy was tolerable in light of Saddam’s plan for a short war. Ultimately, however, Saddam’s economic program quickened the pace at which he was to become dependent upon his wealthier neighbors in the region.

³⁴ Robbins, 49.

³⁵ Karsh and Rautsi, 136.

³⁶ Hiro, 30.

³⁷ Robbins, 50.

³⁸ Robins, 50.

By the summer of 1980, Saddam had been trying for over a year to employ the non-military instruments of power to achieve his political objectives. The non-military instruments often take a long time to produce effects, and Saddam might well have questioned their utility in his attempt to affect the uncompromising, revolutionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. Saddam had several reasons to believe that time was not on his side. The longer he waited, the more time Khomeini had to strengthen his grip on Iran, which was what the ayatollah was doing by purging the Iranian military in the wake of two coup attempts in mid 1980.³⁹ In addition, the American presidential elections might work as a catalyst to resolve the US hostage crisis, which in turn could lead to improved relations between Iran and its erstwhile arms supplier.⁴⁰ Finally, Saddam was planning to modernize his armed forces in 1981. Despite eventual improvements the new equipment would bring, the new arms would initially cause a reduction in Iraqi combat power until Saddam's forces received the requisite training with the new weapons.⁴¹ These are at least plausible reasons for Saddam to have turned to military force to fulfill his national security strategy in September 1980.

Analyzing Saddam's Military Strategy

While Saddam Hussein had a national security strategy, he failed to come up with a viable military strategy. From the available evidence, Saddam seems to have lurched from an ill conceived gambit to a succession of hastily decided upon and calamitous military actions that, by the summer of 1982, led directly to increased revolutionary activity in Shia-dominated southern Iraq, several attempted coups against Saddam, political maneuvering in Baghdad to oust him from leadership of Iraq's Ba'ath party, and efforts by his Arab allies to cut him out of a proposed peace agreement.⁴² Though Saddam ruthlessly clung to power and even consolidated his base of support

³⁹ Hiro, 36.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁴¹ Staudenmaier, 37.

⁴² Hiro, 61, 63, and 65.

in Iraq, he did so in spite of his “strategy” for war against Iran, and he failed to achieve any of his political or military objectives other than his own personal and political survival.

It is doubtful Saddam was familiar with the concept of a center of gravity; however, examining Iran’s center of gravity will aid in our analysis of his war with Iran. Clausewitz’s On War contains a six-page chapter on the “Closer Definition of the Military Objective: The Defeat of the Enemy” in which the Prussian theorist introduced the concept of a center of gravity:

[O]ne must keep the dominant characteristic of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all else depends. This is the point against which all our energies should be directed.⁴³

At the strategic level, the Khomeini regime and its virulent socio-religious ideology was the center of gravity. Though Saddam might not have called Khomeini a center of gravity, the Iraqi president clearly saw Khomeini as the source of his troubles and the principal threat to his survival.

However, Saddam lacked the wherewithal to defeat the Khomeini regime directly. Consequently, Saddam seemed to hit upon an indirect strategy for neutralizing the ayatollah—a strategy based on a number of dubious assumptions.

Linking Saddam’s Political and Military Objectives: Khuzistan and the Shatt al-Arab

Saddam Hussein sought to achieve three military objectives in support of his political objectives: 1) destroy the Iranian Air Force, 2) take control of a portion of the Iranian province of Khuzistan, and 3) capture the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Some observers believed the conquest of a portion of the Iranian province of Khuzistan was Saddam’s primary military objective—or should have been—because Saddam believed it would ultimately enable him to subdue the revolutionary tendencies within Iraq’s majority Shia population, and countering these revolutionary tendencies

⁴³ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595-596.

was his primary political objective.⁴⁴ Perhaps encouraged by overly optimistic intelligence assessments, Saddam banked on the Arabs in Khuzistan rallying to the side of their Iraqi liberators.⁴⁵ Arabs made up one third or more of Khuzistan's 3.5 million population.⁴⁶ After capturing the Khuzistan capital of Ahvaz, Saddam would install new Iranian leaders from the deposed Shah's regime—former premier Shahpour Bakhtiar and General Gholam Oveissi. Bakhtiar and Oveissi would then foment an anti-Khomeini campaign and join forces with Kurds already battling Tehran's control in northern Iran. According to Dilip Hiro, "These liberated areas were then to be declared the 'Free Republic of Iran' under Bakhtiar...[t]his was seen as a catalyst to set off widespread uprisings against the Khomeini regime."⁴⁷ With Khomeini out of the way, the Shia threat emanating from Iran would be neutralized. Thus, one plausible version of Saddam's strategy connected the military conquest of Khuzistan to the downfall of Khomeini, which in turn would lead to Saddam's successful repression of the revolutionary Shias in southern Iraq.⁴⁸

As others have argued, Saddam may have also reasoned that an attack into Khuzistan would be the right course of action even if it failed to unseat Khomeini, because control over Khuzistan would help Saddam contain the Iranian threat.⁴⁹ Khuzistan produced the bulk of Iran's oil, and oil revenues made up over 90 percent of Tehran's income; thus, Saddam's control of Khuzistan would enrich him while depriving Tehran of a significant source of its income.⁵⁰ Geographically, Khuzistan could serve as a buffer between the southern portions of Iran and Iraq. Finally, taking Khuzistan would give Saddam a bargaining chip, which he could use to extract guarantees from the mullahs that they would cease their attempts to export revolution to Iraq. Whether Saddam sought

⁴⁴ Hiro, 36-37; Staudenmaier, 47.

⁴⁵ Hiro, 38.

⁴⁶ Hiro, 41.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. Staudenmaier also believed "overthrow of Khomeini was a central objective." However he believed the Iraqi army would first have to defeat the Iranian army, and even that might not have sufficed. Staudenmaier, 47.

⁴⁹ Robins, 46; Efraim Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," *Orbis* (Spring 1989): 211.

to overthrow Khomeini, or merely contain the threat he posed, it seems the Iraqi dictator saw Khuzistan as the key to countering the threat from Tehran.

In addition to countering the revolutionary threat from Tehran, Saddam's military strategy would secure two subsidiary political objectives—or what should have been subsidiary objectives. First, the ground invasion would deliver him the Shatt al-Arab waterway, thereby increasing Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf and redressing the humiliating concessions Saddam had been forced to make in the Algiers Accord of 1975. Second, taking land from the Persians would help Saddam in his bid for leadership of the Arab world, an opportunity ripened by Egypt's 1979 suspension from the Arab League in the wake of the Camp David Peace Accords. Two of the four cities Saddam set as objectives for his army to capture, Khorramshahr and Abadan, served these subsidiary political objectives. Populated mostly by Arabs, their liberation would have contributed directly to Saddam's political objective of appearing to liberate Arabs from Persian dominance.⁵¹ Militarily, Saddam's forces needed to take Khorramshahr and Abadan in order to control the Shatt al-Arab, but the two cities did little to enhance Iraq's conquest of Khuzistan—his primary military objective.

Capabilities and Vulnerabilities: Balance of Military Forces

An analysis of the balance of military forces between Iran and Iraq suggests that in the summer of 1980 Iraq held an advantage over Iran, despite Iran's larger size and its historical military superiority. Although Iran was larger, had more people, and had a defense budget one and a half times that of Baghdad's, Iraq's army was 30 percent larger. Iran's air force was about twice the size of Iraq's; however, by the summer of 1980, Iran had been cutoff from its principal arms supplier, the United States, for nearly a year and a half. Saddam, like many outside observers, probably believed that the loss of spare parts, training, American military advice, and ammunition

⁵⁰ Hiro, 38.

⁵¹ Hiro, 49.

dramatically weakened the Iranian armed forces, especially its high-tech Air Force. Iran's navy was nearly five times larger than Iraq's, and its superiority was too great for Iraq to overcome, regardless of Iran's problems. Still, Saddam could well have concluded his forces held an advantage on the ground and in the air.

The Iranian military was also emasculated by the loss of a great many officers, especially senior officers, who had sided with the Shah. Those senior officers who remained in Iran instead of fleeing the country during the revolution were not trusted by the Khomeini regime.⁵² In the wake of coup attempts in late May and again in early July of 1980, Tehran's ruling mullahs began purging the armed forces of what little professional military leadership remained.⁵³ Thus, logistical and leadership problems within Iran's armed forces probably convinced Saddam Hussein of Iraq's martial superiority over his traditionally more powerful neighbor to the east. This temporary Iraqi advantage would wane as Khomeini consolidated power and found new sources for military supplies, thus adding to Saddam's motivation to act soon and win quickly.

Table 1. Comparison of Iraqi and Iranian Factors of Military Strength, Summer 1980.⁵⁴

Factors of Military Strength	Iraq	Iran
Population	13 million	38 million
Defense Budget	\$2.7 billion	\$4.2 billion
Total in Armed Forces	242,000	240,000
Army	200,000	150,000
Air Force	38,000	70,000
Navy	4,250	20,000
Tanks	2,850	1,985
Artillery	800	>1,000
Combat aircraft	332	445

⁵² Staudenmaier, 31-32.

⁵³ Hiro, 36.

⁵⁴ Table adapted from Staudenmaier, 30. Staudenmaier's source for the data was International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), The Military Balance, 1980-81.

As previously mentioned, geography and demographics also hindered Saddam. While Saddam could not hope to march on Tehran with his own forces, he had to defend Baghdad in case the Iranian Army came west. Moreover, comparatively shallow incursions of Iranian forces into eastern Iraq would put many Iraqi towns within Iranian artillery range; Iran was less vulnerable in this sense. Finally, Iranian lines of communication to the outside world were relatively secure, while Iraq depended on support from its neighbors to maintain imports and exports.

Overview of Saddam's Strategy: Aping the Israeli Strategy in the Six-Day War of 1967

The eight-year bloodletting that saddled once prosperous Iraq with an estimated 65-80 billion dollar war debt began as Saddam's military strategy for a war modeled on the lightning victory Israel won over its Arab neighbors in 1967.⁵⁵ Meant to last just a few weeks, the Iraqi military strategy involved a strategic offensive, direct and symmetrical in its application of force, and designed to quickly achieve a handful of limited military objectives. The Iraqi Air Force was supposed to deliver a knockout blow against Iranian airpower, while the Iraqi Army, its armored forces in the van, would quickly seize the Shatt al-Arab waterway and four cities in southwestern Iran: Khorramshahr, Abadan, Dezful, and Ahvaz.⁵⁶ Saddam would then install officials from the deposed Shah's regime, former premier Shahpour Bakhtiar and General Gholam Oveissi, in Ahvaz, the capital of Iran's oil-rich Khuzistan province.⁵⁷

Saddam's strategy can be characterized as more simultaneous than sequential, because the ground attacks followed closely behind the initial air attacks and Saddam did not wait to secure the objectives of any particular element of his strategy before going ahead with other elements. Each

⁵⁵ Roland Dannreuther, The Gulf Conflict: A Political and Strategic Analysis, Adelphi Paper No. 264 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1991/92), 11; Hiro, 40; Karsh and Rautsi, 135.

⁵⁶ Hiro, 40.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 36-37.

piece of his plan appeared to go off independently from the rest.⁵⁸ In addition to offensive activities employing five of Saddam's twelve army divisions, two Iraqi army divisions conducted blocking operations to prevent potential Iranian counterattacks into northern and central Iraq. The Iraqi president apparently did not have a naval component to his military strategy; he probably recognized the superiority of the Iranian Navy and believed he could secure his military objectives before the Iranian Navy could be brought to bear. Still, Iraqi naval forces clashed with Iranian warships twice during the opening days of the war, with a third and final engagement fought in the northern reaches of the Persian Gulf at the end of November 1980.⁵⁹ After that, the Iraqi navy retired for the duration of the war, allowing Iran's navy to impose a blockade on the Shatt al-Arab and otherwise operate freely in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁰

A Failure of Strategy: Misjudging the Nature of the War and Failing to Set Priorities

When military plans go awry, analysts must determine if the result was caused by poor execution of a good plan, good execution of a poor plan, or poor execution and a poor plan. While poor execution and poor strategy contributed to Saddam's failure in his war with Iran, Saddam's bankrupt strategy is mostly to blame; perfect execution by the Iraqi armed forces probably could not have compensated for Saddam's strategy. At the root of Saddam's defeat lay his failure to comprehend the type of war he initiated.

The Iraqi Air Force failed to deliver a knockout blow against the Iranian Air Force. On the night of 22 September 1980, the Iraqi Air Force launched a surprise attack against ten Iranian airfields. However, inept Iraqi fliers failed to inflict serious damage. Saddam had purposely kept

⁵⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

⁵⁹ Staudenmaier, 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid; and Hiro, 41-42.

his air force weak and he controlled it personally for fear it might someday assist in a coup against him.⁶¹ Inferior Soviet avionics and weapons probably compounded the Iraqi Air Force's inability to hit the most lucrative targets—Iran's airplanes—while similarly undermining attempts to damage the Iranian runways—a questionable tactic at best.⁶² Rather than following up with further attacks, Saddam virtually ceded control of the air to the Iranians. As Dilip Hiro recorded: “having realized that Iran's air force was functioning quite efficiently, and that all Iraqi air bases were within the striking range of its warplanes, the Baghdad government despatched [sic] most of its 332 combat aircraft...to Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen and Oman.”⁶³

As a consequence of Saddam's failure to eliminate Iranian airpower, by the end of September Iran was able to turn its air force against the invading Iraqi army to help blunt the Iraqi assaults on Dezful, Abadan, and Ahvaz. In addition, on 26 September Iranian airpower forced Iraq to suspend oil exports when “Tehran unleashed 140 warplanes on Iraq's poorly defended oil facilities in Basra and Zubair in the south and Mosul and Kirkuk in the north, with devastating effect.”⁶⁴ As Dilip Hiro pointed out, “the Iraqis had failed to provide adequate air defences for their vital oil facilities, on the cosy assumption that after Iraq's pre-emptive attacks on the Iranian air bases, the few enemy aircraft capable of taking off would be unable to use the damaged runways.”⁶⁵

Saddam also failed to think through the implications of his policy of limiting casualties for his strategy to quickly capture four Iranian cities in Khuzistan. In order to avoid costly urban fighting, Saddam's army resorted to the siege tactics it had used against Kurdish towns in northern Iraq.⁶⁶ This backfired at the tactical and strategic level. Tactically, tanks were sent forward without infantry in order to avoid casualties, but stripped of supporting infantry the tanks fell easy prey to

⁶¹ Hiro, 40-41 and 48.

⁶² Hiro, 40-41; and Staudenmaier, 42-43.

⁶³ Hiro, 41.

⁶⁴ Hiro, 42.

Iranians with anti-tank weapons.⁶⁷ In addition, slow-working siege tactics were most unlikely to produce results within the timeframe Saddam envisioned for his operations. At the strategic level, the shelling of Iranian cities destroyed any prospect that the Iraqis would be seen as liberators by the Arabs who lived in those cities or by the outside world. Hence, Saddam's policy of limiting casualties ultimately helped to undermine his subsidiary political objective of boosting his own stature as an Arab leader. More importantly, however, shelling Iranian cities worked counter to Saddam's primary military objective of winning control over Khuzistan. If Saddam wanted the Arabs of Khuzistan to rise up and join him, he could hardly have chosen a less effective tactic.⁶⁸

Evaluation of Saddam's National Security and Military Strategies

Unschooling as Saddam was in military matters, he lacked an appreciation for the capabilities and the limitations of his forces and those of Iran. Furthermore, the military leaders of Iraq did not become partners in their president's decision-making process until mid-July 1985, nearly five years into the war.⁶⁹ Perhaps this helps to explain the highly symmetrical application of force evinced by Iraq, the Iraqi military tactics that undermined certain political objectives, and the significant lapses in identifying Iraq's vulnerabilities. In the opening phase of the war, Saddam seemed to behave as though his military attacks were acts performed against inanimate objects.

Saddam also failed to prioritize objectives for his ground forces. In order to win control of Khuzistan, the Iraqis needed to capture Dezful and its air base, Vahidyeh.⁷⁰ By taking Dezful Saddam could have blocked Iran's main avenue for reinforcing its troops in Khuzistan. He could have deprived the Iranian Air Force an important base for sortieing warplanes against Iraqi military

⁶⁵ Hiro, 48.

⁶⁶ Hiro, 45.

⁶⁷ Antal, 64.

⁶⁸ Hiro, 43.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 51, 138.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

and economic targets. And, finally, by taking Dezful, Saddam could have controlled the “pumping stations linking the Khuzistan oilfields with Tehran.”⁷¹ Had Saddam focused the efforts of his army on Dezful, he might have been able to take it.⁷² Though Khorramshahr and Abadan were needed for Saddam to control the Shatt al-Arab, the resources used against those cities weakened Iraqi military efforts at Dezful. Because the Iraqi president did not prioritize military objectives for his ground forces, those forces were never concentrated enough to accomplish the tasks assigned to them, least of all the taking of Dezful, which should have been their primary military objective.⁷³

Saddam’s most important error was misjudging the kind of war he initiated. (See Figure 1.) Saddam began the war seemingly intent on overthrowing Khomeini. Within a week of attacking Iran, the Iraqi dictator signaled his willingness to cease operations provided the Iranians agreed to certain conditions, such as recognizing Iraq’s rights to the Shatt al-Arab waterway, ending its interference in Iraq’s domestic affairs, and yielding some islands in the Persian Gulf. By 20 October, less than a month after starting the war, Saddam in a televised speech called for a holy war against the Iranian leaders. In early March, less than six months into the war, Saddam seemed to entertain hopes for a negotiated settlement sponsored by the Islamic Conference Organization, but when that fell through Iraq’s deputy premier Tariq Aziz openly spoke of Iran’s dismemberment.⁷⁴ It is impossible to say for sure how committed Saddam was to the overthrow of the Khomeini regime. But that hardly mattered. The mullahs in Tehran perceived the threat Saddam posed to their political survival, and from the outset of the war the leaders of the Iranian revolution pursued unlimited political objectives, i.e., the end of Saddam Hussein.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

⁷² Ibid., 48-49.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 42, 44, and 50-51.

⁷⁵ Staudenmaier, 47.

Rather than rallying Iranians to Saddam's side, the invasion of Iran sparked strong nationalistic tendencies that united Iranians behind the Khomeini regime.⁷⁶ Regardless of whether Saddam sought limited or unlimited political objectives, the Iranian response put Saddam in the position of fighting a war of unlimited political objectives. Despite this unlimited character of the war, Saddam persisted in using limited military means in pursuit of limited military objectives. By mid-summer of 1982, he found himself fighting for survival against Iranian assaults into Iraq. Over time Saddam escalated the means he was willing to use, including attacks on Iranian tankers in the Persian Gulf, use of poison gas against attacking Iranians, and indiscriminate air and missile attacks on Iranian cities. The spasmodic nature of the Iraqi military action betrayed a lack of strategy. Saddam clearly failed to match the means available to him to the political ends he sought, and he apparently lacked a plan for linking his military objectives to whatever end-state he might have envisioned. According to Dilip Hiro, Saddam "attacked Iran without any clear-cut idea of minimum and maximum war aims, or how to end the armed conflict through military and/or diplomatic effort."⁷⁷

Although Saddam's national security strategy included all of the instruments of power, Saddam failed to adequately use diplomacy, resulting in a Soviet arms embargo against Iraq. More seriously, his strategy lacked coherence because he failed to reconcile the contradictory imperatives of limiting casualties and quickly seizing Iranian cities. Worst of all, Saddam failed to come up with a viable way to match his military means to the military and political ends he sought—that is, he had no real strategy. His military moves seemed to be predicated on a number of dubious assumptions, one of which was that he could take military actions without worrying about Iran fighting back. By the summer of 1982, he had nearly precipitated his own downfall, and by 1988 when the war ended, he had failed to achieve any of his political objectives aside from his personal

⁷⁶ Hiro, 2 and 49.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

survival, despite the immense human and financial costs to Iraq. The total disconnect between costs and the risks he ran can be attributed to his misjudging of the kind of war he started. He thought he could fight a limited war with Iran, and it took him a very long time to realize that Iran was fighting for unlimited political objectives—namely their own survival and Saddam’s downfall. One can only conclude that Saddam survived in spite of any strategy he may have had.

	Limited Military Objectives	Unlimited Military Objectives
Limited Political Objectives	Attrition/Erosion	Annihilation
Unlimited Political Objectives	Inappropriate	Annihilation

Figure 1. Matrix of appropriate strategies for various political and military objectives. Note that it is generally inappropriate to seek unlimited political objectives through limited military means.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Dr. Christopher Bassford, National War College seminar on “Political Objectives in War,” 7 Sep 00. The matrix is not intended to be prescriptive, and it does not depict absolute relationships between ends and means in war. We have used it here to highlight the general validity of the inappropriateness of pursuing unlimited political objectives with limited military means. Obviously a defense of all of the implications contained in the matrix could be the subject of a paper far longer than this one.