

Operation Iraqi Freedom: One Year On

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the months of military activity that followed it constitute a particularly rich case study from which to draw lessons pertinent to the ongoing debate about the transformation of the U.S. military. Encompassing the full range of modern military missions, the Iraq campaign was exceptional in the sense that some parts of the battlefield had already transitioned into security and stabilization operations even while high-intensity fighting raged on in other sectors. In fact, the war and its aftermath were punctuated by a series of dramatic transitions: from the "not peace, not war" period of no-fly-zone enforcement, to intense warfare, to security and stabilization operations, to counterinsurgency operations.

Decisive Military Effects?

Operation Iraqi Freedom highlighted both the strengths and limitations of military force as a tool of foreign policy. The war demonstrated that U.S.-led coalition forces can maneuver through any type of terrain or weather. In Baghdad and other cities, coalition armored forces effectively breached urban areas that had previously been regarded as impenetrable, while "joint fires" -- that is, the synergistic use of airstrikes, artillery fire, attack helicopters, and other forms of firepower -- prevented enemy forces from maneuvering or mounting a cohesive defense.

Yet, the subsequent occupation phase has underlined the limitations of military force. Throughout the 1990s, military analysts often noted that air power alone could not be decisive. One overarching lesson of the period following Operation Iraqi Freedom is that a ground campaign is not necessarily decisive either. In other words, military force is a necessary, but not sufficient, tool of foreign policy.

Knowing the Enemy

Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. military had essentially conducted thirteen years of intensive surveillance in Iraq. This scrutiny helped the United States acquire an encyclopedic knowledge of Iraq's infrastructure and some elements of its operational capabilities and habits (particularly with regard to air defense). Beginning in the mid-

1990s, this knowledge expanded to an improved understanding of the nature and structure of the regime and its elite constituents.

Nevertheless, there was still much that the coalition did not know as Operation Iraqi Freedom began. Despite the fact that Iraq had been placed under closer and more persistent observation than almost any nation in the history of armed conflict, uncertainty remained over some of the regime's capabilities and plans, including those related to weapons of mass destruction. The extent of Iraq's use of asymmetrical guerrilla attacks was unexpected, as was its highly effective but relatively low-tech observer network (which contributed to the only major Iraqi military victory of the war, the repulse of U.S. attack helicopters on March 23). Although the U.S. military quickly adapted to these threats, the ability of such a closely watched opponent to adopt a new approach and achieve tactical surprise is instructive.

In fact, the U.S. military faced a sharp learning curve from the moment it entered Iraq. The country's terrain -- which had been viewed from a distance and from above for many years -- required extensive reinterpretation at ground level. As mentioned previously, urban areas that had long been regarded as the enemy's sanctuary from armored forces proved to be relatively hospitable environments for U.S. operations. At the same time, however, areas that appeared to be clear on maps turned out to be dangerous semi-urban sprawl that concealed dense enemy defensive positions. Moreover, many heavy weapons, ground vehicles, and aircraft were not found until after the war, highlighting the fact that even weak militaries can be quite capable at concealment and deception. In this context, the maneuverability of coalition forces proved highly effective at forcing concealed Iraqi units from cover and exposing them to heavy firepower.

Before, during, and in the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the coalition struggled to accurately gauge the fluid emotions of the Iraqi people, which were influenced by contending attitudes toward liberation and foreign occupation. Prewar assessments of the fragility of the Ba'ath regime may have underestimated that regime's ability to maintain local control and manage the perceptions of Iraqis. Indeed, one key lesson for future conflicts is that authoritarian regimes may be far more robust than they seem. The links forged between dictatorships and their subjects over decades of rule are unlikely to be quickly or cleanly brushed aside by any military effort to topple the regimes in question.

Integrating the Lessons

The knowledge of enemy intentions and capabilities that the U.S. military had painstakingly constructed during thirteen years of containment had to be reconstructed rapidly during the postwar period, as insurgent groups constituted a vastly more complex and adaptive enemy than the Ba'ath regime ever had. Indeed, coalition and insurgent co-evolution has been the overriding trend in postwar operations. The coalition must therefore systematically process and preserve the knowledge gained (at great expense) by its troops over the past year, particularly as new forces are rotated into Iraq. The war and its aftermath have highlighted the extremely valuable, if dangerous, role that ground forces play in increasing the number of "sensors" available to the military intelligence system. As many official "Military Lessons Learned" reports have noted, however, the value of individual soldiers as sensors is closely tied to the quality of their communications equipment as well as their ability to communicate in native languages, cultivate human intelligence, and understand local politics. If these and other recently learned lessons can be integrated into forthcoming training and procurement decisions, Operation Iraqi Freedom and the postwar period could prove to be a truly transformative experience for the U.S. military.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Bjorn Delaney.

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