

# War in Iraq: A Preliminary Assessment

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## Brief Analysis

**S**addam Husayn's regime is under relentless attack, and its days are numbered. Exactly when or how the end will come is unclear but not in doubt. After a week of major combat, it is reasonable to assess the progress of this war: accomplishments by both sides, surprising -- and not so surprising -- elements, emerging patterns or trends, and battlefield implications.

### Coalition Achievements

The coalition has accomplished much in a short time. In the mass of detailed reporting and compelling "real-time" television images, it is easy to lose track of the scope of the enterprise. For the first time since World War II, the United States and its allies have invaded a large and well-armed country with the express intention of toppling its government, disarming it, and reconstructing it. Coalition accomplishments include both military and political gains. Militarily, the Iraqi air defense system has been suppressed to the point that it can offer only token resistance, a necessary measure to allow freedom of action over Iraq. Coalition ground forces penetrated rapidly to the heart of the regime, and within four days were developing a direct threat to the enemy's capital. Iraqi command and control was significantly degraded, though not eliminated. No Scud missiles have been fired from western Iraq, and missiles fired at Kuwait have been intercepted and destroyed without damage to coalition targets. Most importantly, U.S. and British forces have won all battles and engagements with the exception of the ambush at Nasiriyah, and possibly the Apache helicopter operation against the Medina division. The combination of tactical skill, lethal weapons, and air superiority has precluded all attempts by the Iraqis to inflict any serious damage on the allies. Politically, the coalition has managed a complicated and potentially dangerous situation in the north, preventing Turkish-Kurdish tensions from erupting, acquiring an overflight agreement with Turkey, and laying the groundwork for opening a northern front.

### Iraqi Achievements

Saddam's regime has not proven as brittle as many originally believed; when the coalition kicked in the front door the rotten edifice did not collapse. The Iraqis are still in the fight, which may be their greatest accomplishment to date. They have withstood a decapitation strike and recovered from the effects of "shock and awe." They are not

doing badly in the media war; some would say they are winning on that front. Spectacular broadcast images of a seemingly defenseless Baghdad under violent air attack are not received well in the Arab world or in those parts of the West in which antiwar sentiment is strong. Militarily, the Iraqis can claim a few small victories. The ambush of the logistics unit at Nasiriyah -- resulting in both dead Americans and prisoners of war -- and the capture of the Apache helicopter crew have been exploited for maximum advantage. The Iraqis have also taken advantage of the coalition's remarkable restraint in order to delay operations and continue resistance in areas that primary combat units have passed through. The regime has been able to retain the loyalty of most of its armed forces and much of the population. There has been no revolt against the regime from within and no uprisings of any consequence thus far; some Iraqis appear to be fighting for Iraq, if not the regime. Even some regular army units, which were not assessed as being particularly dedicated to the regime, have fought. Finally, the Iraqis retained for some time the ability to fire missiles and rockets at Kuwait, providing further, highly visible evidence that they are still in the fight.

### Surprises

The first surprise of this war is the resiliency of the regime. Saddam and the Ba'ath Party are facing their most comprehensive crisis, but they have not collapsed and are resisting in creative ways. Their military strategy has succeeded in complicating coalition operations, demonstrating that an evil regime can still be capable and effective. A second surprise has been the tenacity of local resistance. Most analysts believed that the only serious fighting would come from the Republican and Special Republican Guards. In fact, regular army units have fought at Nasiriyah and around Basra. Even more surprising has been the resistance mounted by paramilitary forces -- the Saddam Fedayeen and Ba'ath Party militia. These organizations were considered to be the regime "brown shirts," bullies capable of terrorizing the citizenry. But they have fought, and not just by firing a few shots at coalition rear-echelon elements. Armed primarily with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, they have attacked and been killed in some numbers by major combat elements of U.S. and British ground forces.

Also surprising, at least to some analysts, has been the absence of predicted catastrophic actions. Saddam has not attacked Israel; there has been no use of chemical or biological weapons, no flooding, and no massive destruction of civil or economic infrastructure. In part, this may be due to the military and psychological operations of the coalition, and Saddam still has the potential to take some of these actions as he becomes desperate.

### Non-surprises

Many aspects of the conflict have gone as expected. The overwhelming flexibility, maneuverability, precision, and firepower of coalition forces have allowed them to range widely over Iraq, penetrate to the center of the country, and destroy Iraqi forces as they are encountered. Nonetheless, the resistance of some paramilitary elements and Iraq's decision to fight from within its own population have made operations more difficult. The coalition has almost completely contained the maneuverability of Iraqi forces. Most Iraqi operations have taken place at the tactical level -- brigade or lower -- without attempts at either operational maneuver or strategic movement. In short, the Iraqis have waited for the coalition to come to them.

### Emergence

The Iraqis seem to be learning how to fight, where to fight, and whom to use in the fighting. They have learned to "hug" their civilians, forcing coalition troops to either take increased tactical risks or risk inflicting civilian casualties. Iraqis are also utilizing paramilitary forces -- many in civilian dress -- to do much of the fighting. Tactically, Iraq is using infantry with light antitank weapons to engage coalition forces from cover at night, under favorable weather conditions, and when the tactical situation is advantageous. In at least one case, at Najaf, wire-guided antitank missiles were used, possibly the very modern and effective Russian-made KORONET. Iraqi troops are also employing light, automatic anti-aircraft weapons in both a counter-helicopter role and against ground

elements, capacities in which they have been effective in past wars. A large action by Apache helicopters of the 11th Aviation Regiment was met by a "storm of steel" from Iraqi antiaircraft artillery and small arms, with one helicopter lost and a number damaged, reportedly causing a U.S. tactical reassessment.

## Conclusions

Drawing major conclusions from an unfinished war is hazardous, but a few elements are worth considering even at the early stages of this conflict. The end is not in doubt: a criminal and evil regime will be comprehensively defeated and dismantled. Estimating exactly when that end will come is more difficult. The fall of Baghdad will be decisive for the regime, but will not necessarily signal the end of all resistance by regime-associated elements. The final costs, especially in casualties, are also difficult to forecast. If casualties are the "currency of battle," the major battles of this war -- against the Republican Guard and for Baghdad -- have yet to be fought.

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