

Iraq Fights Its War 'Outside-In'

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Mar 25, 2003

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Brief Analysis

Iraqi forces have been countering the U.S.-led Operation Iraqi Freedom with a form of "outside-in" strategy, defending their country from the periphery to the center. Although the coalition is winning every significant engagement and has penetrated to the heart of the country, Saddam Husayn's regime is not giving ground easily, and the costs of bringing it down will rise. The regime is demonstrating once again that it is a dynamic opponent, capable of understanding what it faces and coming up with surprises.

Iraqi Strategy

Iraq's war strategy appears to consist of several preplanned elements. The first of these is to stay in the fight as long as possible. This approach has entailed avoiding actions that would be tantamount to suicide (e.g., use of weapons of mass destruction against Israel or Kuwait, which was expected by many in the West) and preserving combat units by avoiding any large-scale strategic movement (e.g., from northern to southern Iraq) or operational maneuvers. In fact, the largest attempted maneuver to date was at the battalion level, showing that the Iraqis have learned valuable lessons from the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent crises.

The second major element of Iraqi strategy has been to trade space for both time and dissipation of the coalition's ground forces. The Iraqis are using the long distances from the border to Baghdad and the large volume of the country as a whole (the size of California) to absorb coalition effort. Coalition forces are committed in western, southern, and northern Iraq and have not completely secured the areas that they have passed through. This is evident from the repeated outbreak of fighting in southern Iraq and from reports that elements of the 101st Airborne Division have been assigned to convoy protection. These problems are exacerbated by the difficulty of reducing resistance in built-up areas such as Basra and Nasiriyah without risking significant coalition and civilian casualties.

Before the war, many military analysts emphasized the potential for a difficult fight in the urban terrain of Baghdad. Yet, the challenge of fighting in complex terrain is in fact much broader. For example, small cities, towns, and agricultural areas are presenting problems. In such areas, coalition forces must sort out the civilians from the combatants, even though many of the latter are in civilian dress. The regime has clearly decided to fight from within the country's own population, and this tactic will inevitably slow coalition ground operations. So far, the coalition has been unwilling to take the humanitarian and political risks of fighting through the civilian population in order to get at Iraqi combatants. The Iraqis will exploit this restraint to the hilt. The coalition's precision attacks on a limited set

of regime-associated targets in Baghdad have allowed the regime to portray a resilient population standing behind its government without having the morale of that population suffer from attacks on power, transportation, and other services vital to everyday life. Although there are good reasons for such restraint, the coalition's strategy in Baghdad is to the regime's advantage in the short run.

The regime has also conceded the air war to the coalition. Aside from mostly ineffective anti-aircraft fire, nothing has been done to defend Iraqi airspace. In fact, Iraqi anti-aircraft batteries have had their greatest effect in a counter-helicopter role and as direct-fire weapons in ground fighting, where they have the potential to pose a significant hazard to troops in lightly armored or "soft" vehicles. The Iraqis have also demonstrated skill in mobile missile and rocket operations. Although their occasional missile and rocket launches into Kuwait have had no direct military effect, such attacks divert coalition assets, keep Iraqis in the fight in a highly visible way, and might eventually strike a valuable target.

Finally, the Iraqis are showing that they can both achieve and exploit small victories. The drawing out of fighting at Umm Qasr, Basra, and Nasiriyah has allowed the regime to cite these cities as examples of heroic national resistance. Moreover, the U.S. combat losses at Nasiriyah have been broadcast widely as examples of Iraq's ability to inflict damage on the coalition. The losses themselves are small, but the images are large, and they are playing well on the Arab street.

Iraqi Military Operations

Broadly speaking, the Iraqi regime has implemented its strategy in the form of two major operations since the beginning of the war. In the south, it has conducted a delaying and dissipating action centered on the towns and cities and featuring local battles with only limited maneuvers. Moreover, Iraqi forces have not completely unraveled at their first encounters with the coalition. Even some regular army units (e.g., the 11th Infantry Division at Nasiriyah and the 51st Mechanized Division in Basra), or pieces of them, have resisted, while forces such as the Ba'ath Party militia and the Saddam Fedayeen (neither of which has ever been given much credit for combat effectiveness) have apparently fought hard in some areas. At least one Ba'ath militia commander has been killed during the fighting, and coalition reports have indicated that Fedayeen elements were involved in several engagements.

The second major operation has been the "battle for Baghdad." For the most part, this has been an air operation; the major fighting has yet to begin, and the Iraqis have thus far weathered some of the effects of "shock and awe." At least outwardly, the central government appears to be operating, whether or not Saddam is dead, wounded, or in hiding. There have been no significant breakdowns of civil order or uprisings by the population. Press conferences and briefings are being held, the government's handling of the first U.S. prisoners of war was rapid and coordinated, and the ability of the Baghdad security services to operate effectively was displayed in the recent hunt for reportedly downed coalition aviators. The regime was also able to send its foreign minister to the Arab summit in Cairo.

The Political Dimension

Iraqi nationalism has been a strong theme in the regime's wartime pronouncements, with the leadership appealing to images of heroic Iraqis fighting invaders. Such rhetoric seems to have had some effect, with certain Iraqi elements demonstrating a willingness to stand up to the coalition's overwhelming firepower. The regime has also been able to give at least the appearance of remaining in control, as indicated above. Its success in maintaining its diplomatic posts has contributed to this perception. Moreover, the regime has been able to get its story out to the Arab world and the West, its two most important audiences. Hence, Iraq is still holding ground in the information and image war; the regime was no doubt heartened to some degree by the response in the Arab street and by the international calls to end the war. Perhaps most important, Iraqi command and control, although degraded, is still working.

Implications

Precisely how long the Iraqis can sustain a coherent defense is uncertain, but it cannot be for very long. The absence of a northern front has made their task easier, but this advantage will soon come to an end. Whenever the coalition can find and fix Iraqi forces, and whenever these forces try to maneuver, they are either defeated by superior firepower or bypassed. As coalition forces close on Baghdad, the Iraqi defense is likely to become denser, presenting problems and opportunities for both sides. Although the regime will have no more space to trade, it will still be able to fight from behind the urban terrain and the Iraqi people.

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