

Iraq's Nascent Nuclear Doctrine: Insights from a Captured Document

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Brief Analysis

During Operation Desert Storm, U.S. forces captured several million Iraqi military documents. Among these was one titled "The Operational Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction; Volume 2; Part 2; Foundations for the Use of Nuclear Weapons in War." The manual was published in July 1988 by the Ministry of Defense and bears the approving signature of then-chief of staff Lt. Gen. Nizar al-Khazraji. As such, it represents official Iraqi thinking on the topic, providing the most detailed description of how Baghdad might use nuclear weapons if it were to acquire them. The existence of the manual indicates that the Iraqi military was thinking ahead to a time when Iraq would have nuclear weapons, and that it was preparing to integrate such weapons into its arsenal and its overall military doctrine

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According to the manual, nuclear weapons are practical tools of war rather than weapons of last resort or deterrent weapons with mostly political significance. In fact, the text approaches the possibility of a nuclear battlefield with an equanimity that had long disappeared in the West; the Iraqi military clearly believed that nuclear war was survivable. Iraqi doctrine, as described by the manual, presumed the existence of a fairly large nuclear arsenal and envisioned the tactical and operational (i.e., battlefield) use of nuclear weapons. This points to a considerably lower threshold for nuclear warfare than would be the case if Baghdad viewed nuclear weapons as an exclusively strategic deterrent. In fact, the manual emphasizes that nuclear weapons could be used to inflict casualties, block enemy attacks, and facilitate penetrations or flanking movements by friendly forces, both defensively and offensively.

The Nuclear Battlefield

Iraq had long considered the possibility of fighting on a nuclear battlefield, albeit in an environment where only the enemy (probably Israel) possessed nuclear weapons. As such, the focus of early Iraqi thinking and training had been defensive, with an emphasis on force protection. For example, the manual begins by noting, "It is not far-fetched that the Iraqi Army will take part in a future Arab-Israeli war in which the enemy may resort to using nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction." Iraq had also focused on potential Iranian nuclear threats as far back as the days of the shah, and this concern has continued into the present.

The underlying premise of the manual is that escalation to nuclear war would be almost automatic, and to be expected: "Ordinarily, there is no clearly distinct boundary between the conditions of nuclear war and non-nuclear war as long as both contending sides or one of them possesses nuclear weapons."

Tactical Employment. The manual also claims that nuclear weapons resemble conventional weapons, being in a way no more than a "bigger bomb." Hence, the basic principles of war would not change because of the nuclear factor: "ordinarily, there is no clear distinction between nuclear war and non-nuclear war. . . . The nature of battle will reflect the traditional earlier concept."

Fires. According to the manual, "Ordinarily, nuclear fires are used in the same way and with the same objectives for

which non-nuclear fires have always been used." The text even envisions the use of air-delivered nuclear munitions in the "close air support" role. Indeed, the manual is very prescriptive, spilling over into detailed tactics, techniques, and procedures, with a "how to" focus indicative of an expectation that practical application would be necessary in the not-too-distant future. For example, templates are provided in the appendices for use by personnel in preparing nuclear fire plans, operations orders, and requests for fire support.

Command and Control. According to the manual, the actual allocation of nuclear weapons would be handled by the commander of the army, who would distribute them to his subordinate corps on a limited basis, "either for a specific phase of operations or enough for several days' use." Division commanders could then distribute them to their own subordinate brigades, although such a measure is deemed "an exception," to be employed only when brigades are operating in isolation on "distant fronts" or in "movements of a fluid nature." Final target selection and prioritization would be the responsibility of area commanders, advised by the chemical officer and the operations and intelligence staffs, in "a process as that used for attacks against ground targets." In an unresolved tension between centralization and decentralization, however, the manual elsewhere puts a premium on "decentralized command," arguing that subordinate commanders need to be granted license to use nuclear weapons on their own authority in order to take advantage of "rapid changes" on a dispersed battlefield.

Defense and Offense. The manual states that nuclear fires could be used alone "in the majority of cases" in order to repulse the enemy and meet unexpected threats. Offensively, combining maneuvers and nuclear fires is portrayed as the key to success on the new battlefield. Hence, the conventional forces of choice on a nuclear battlefield would be small mobile units, including helicopter-borne forces, which could maneuver independently and operate over a wide area in conjunction with nuclear fires. The Iraqi military recognized that nuclear weapons, because of their lethality, could have a disproportionate impact on the battlefield: "by themselves they may dominate the battlefield, along with mobile forces, [the latter] exploiting the success which nuclear fires have achieved."

The manual also identifies strategic targets for nuclear attacks in cases of unlimited nuclear war ("if no limits are imposed on the use of nuclear weapons"), to include bases, airports, means of production, and storage and transportation facilities, while "administrative and civil organs would be paralyzed."

Force Protection and Survivability. Due to the lethality of nuclear weapons, the manual treats force protection measures with "the utmost importance." Indeed, "when the number and size of the nuclear weapons used on the battlefield escalates," the potential for forces to maneuver may decrease, and the greatest priority for Iraqi forces then becomes survival, after which they could, if possible, take advantage of their "nuclear superiority." The manual also discusses related defensive measures such as deception and post-attack damage control.

Conclusion

The 1988 manual provides unsettling insights into Iraqi thinking about the utility of nuclear weapons. It indicates that the nascent Iraqi nuclear doctrine of the late 1980s envisioned a low use threshold and a high likelihood of rapid escalation in wartime; prescribed battlefield use in large quantities in order to achieve tactical and operational objectives; and was based on a belief that nuclear war is survivable. The doctrine spelled out in the manual raises serious questions about the viability of efforts to deter and contain a nuclear Iraq. Moreover, to the degree that this manual reflects an institutional perspective on the subject, it underscores the need to strengthen normative barriers in a post-Saddam Iraq against the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons, and to educate the Iraqi officer corps regarding the dangers of nuclear war.

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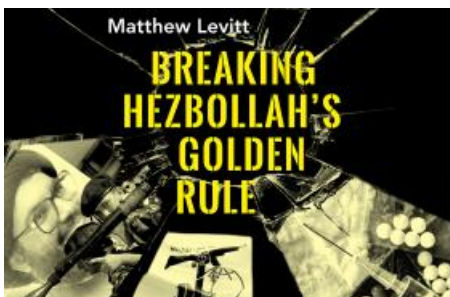
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