

What Kind of Defense Might Iraq Mount?

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Brief Analysis

If the United States and the "coalition of the willing" go to war, the result will be a comprehensive defeat of the Iraqi regime and its military and security forces. What is not so clear is how smoothly the military campaign will proceed. Many commentators seem to assume that any serious problems would emerge only after the war was over. Yet, could the Iraqis mount enough defense to cause problems during the war itself? How might they defend themselves, and why might they have some success?

Countering the Coalition's Strategy

Based on available information about U.S. war planning, coalition operations in Iraq would consist of several elements: speed; precision strikes; overwhelming force; operations on multiple fronts; special forces activities; psychological warfare; bypassing nonthreatening Iraqi units; minimizing civilian casualties and damage to economic infrastructure; and capturing the regime's leadership and any facilities or individuals associated with weapons of mass destruction. The coalition's intention would be to rapidly collapse the pillars of the regime while inflicting minimal damage on the economy and society.

The internal requirements of this strategy give the Iraqis some possibilities for resistance. The Iraqi "counterstrategy" outlined below, some elements of which are already being implemented, does not require Baghdad to initiate any highly provocative actions such as chemical attacks on coalition forces in Kuwait or missile strikes on Israel. Yet, to the extent that the Iraqis can carry out some of these countermeasures, the coalition's success will likely come more slowly and at a higher cost.

Potential Iraqi Defensive Strategy

Recognizing that they will not be able to move their forces strategically or even operationally once the war has begun, the Iraqis may limit themselves to fighting locally. Based on the 1999 NATO military operations in Kosovo and on their own experiences during the 1991 Gulf War, they doubtlessly understand that moving units would be detected quickly and destroyed. By placing combat units along key lines of communication (LOCs) and in strategically important areas before hostilities begin, the Iraqis can increase their chances of engaging coalition forces under the best circumstances: terrain of their choosing, with minimum exposure and advance preparation. In fact, several key Iraqi units are already deployed more or less in this manner. Such a tactic could also provide them

with perhaps the best opportunities to use chemical weapons. The Iraqis are not going to win any major battles simply by fighting locally, but they could increase the coalition's losses in terms of casualties and time.

Iraqi defensive strategy may also involve fighting in as many places as possible, employing all armed elements that are willing and able to battle coalition ground forces. These elements could include the Special Republican Guard in Baghdad; Republican Guard divisions in key cities and along key LOCs; several of the regular army's heavy divisions (e.g., those at Amarah and Samawah); and various "popular" forces (e.g., Ba'ath Party and tribal elements). Although these forces would vary widely in capabilities and cohesiveness, they present the possibility of varying degrees of resistance at multiple points, which could slow the coalition's operations and take some toll on its forces.

The Iraqis will also expect intensified coalition operations against the regime's ability to direct its forces and keep them loyal. They have considerable experience with attacks on their command system and could take several measures to mitigate the effects. Contingency plans could be established in the event that communication links with Baghdad are severed, including the devolution of some authority to lower levels of the military and civilian bureaucracies, along with the use of couriers to carry orders and reports. In order to offset the coalition's psychological warfare campaign, the Iraqis could stress national resistance and perhaps loyalty to Saddam Husayn rather than to the regime. If unit loyalty is questionable, commanders could be replaced or rotated, and units could be redeployed.

The Iraqis will also be looking to achieve some victories, even small ones, and the coalition's special operations may give them a chance to do so. Based on their own experience in 1991, on recent special operations in Afghanistan, and on media analysis of coalition plans and capabilities, the Iraqis probably have a good idea of what to expect from the coalition's special forces. Elements of the Republican Guard and regular army, as well as tribal and militia forces, would all pose threats to special operations, which, as was seen in Afghanistan, are inherently risky. Even the potential destruction or capture of a few special forces units would complicate coalition operations.

Iraqi forces are also likely to use both the terrain and the population for cover. Much has been made of urban environments posing a potential problem for the coalition, but other physical and cultural elements could prove important as well. For example, Iraq is dotted with hundreds of villages, all of which are possible points of resistance, with both physical structures and civilians to hide behind. Although many of these villages could be bypassed, coalition forces may have to fight for some of them. Iraqi authorities are already issuing orders to keep the population in place, and to the extent that they are successful in these efforts, they will present the coalition with some difficult military and political choices.

Baghdad could also encourage genuine popular resistance. Various commentators assume that Saddam is so widely, albeit secretly, opposed that the population will generally not resist the coalition. What if this assumption is wrong, though, even if only in a few areas? Some Iraqis are likely to see coalition operations as an invasion of Iraq, not just an attack on Saddam's regime, and they may react accordingly by actively resisting. Popular resistance could be particularly troublesome for coalition logistics units, which will be operating over hundreds of miles and which are more vulnerable than combat units to attack by irregulars.

In addition, the Iraqis can be expected to do everything they can to impede the movements of coalition forces. They could employ several such measures just before and during the early stages of a war, including flooding, airfield denial, destruction of bridges, and use of persistent chemical agents to deny assembly and approach areas. Although the coalition has tremendous mobility in the form of air transport, its heavy forces (along with logistical support elements) will be moving on the ground, often over Iraqi roads and bridges. Even partial denials of such infrastructure would likely complicate coalition operations.

Finally, the Iraqis can trade space, not necessarily for time, but for dissipation of the coalition's efforts. Although the

coalition may have as many as fourteen divisions to both crush Iraqi military resistance and secure large areas, its forces will also have to watch bypassed Iraqi units (even those sitting in garrisons), protect LOCs and rear echelon units, control urban areas, and prevent potential Kurdish and Shi'i opportunism.

Conclusion

Perhaps the Iraqis will be unable to carry out any of the above tactics, and coalition operations will unfold as planned. Yet, an old truism says that no plan survives the test of battle, and the hoary concept of "friction" -- the cumulative effects of small problems in military operations -- may yet rear its head in twenty-first century warfare. Saddam and his regime will be defeated, but the military campaign could be slower and more painful than some anticipate. A rather different question remains, though: what would be Iraq's strategic objective in mounting such a defense, beyond delaying the inevitable? This will be the subject of a forthcoming PolicyWatch.

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