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# **Iraq’s Military Capabilities: Fighting A Wounded, But Dangerous, Poisonous Snake**

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If we go to war with Iraq, we will go to war with forces that are the military equivalent of a wounded poisonous snake. They are weakened, but still dangerous, and they may lash out in ways that are truly dangerous. In broad terms, Iraq's forces have been in steadily decline ever since the beginning of the fighting in the Gulf War. They have been weakened by military defeat, by the impact of UN inspections, by wars of underfunding and by a decade without significant arms imports. At the same time, they are still the most powerful conventional forces in the Gulf, and Iraq may have some very unconventional weapons.

### **Iraq's Warfighting Capability at the Time of the Gulf War**

At the start of the Gulf War, Iraq was a regional superpower. During the Iraq-Iraq War, it had built up to a force of nearly one million men. Its army had the equivalent of seven corps and over 50 divisions, some 5,500 main battle tanks, nearly 10,000 other armored vehicles, 3,700 major artillery weapons, and 160 armed helicopters. It had at least 500 operational combat aircraft, and probably well over 600. Many were then some of the most modern combat aircraft in the region. It had some 320 major surface-to-air missile launchers, perhaps another 1,000-1,500 light surface-to-air missile launchers, and some 4,000-6,000 antiaircraft guns. Its navy was still weak and small, but it had eight modern Italian frigates and corvettes on order, considerable mine warfare capability, and modern French Exocet anti-ship missiles it could launch by air, ship, and from land. It had some air refueling capability and a primitive airborne early warning system.

Iraq was anything but a paper tiger. It had survived eight years of war with an Iran with three times its population. It had shown that could fire sustained volleys of long-range ballistic missiles, and that it had large amounts of chemical weapons and was willing to use them. In the climatic battles of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq had destroyed or captured some 40-60% of Iran's land order of battle.

At the same time, Iraq had many grave weaknesses that became apparent during the Gulf War. Its land forces were massively equipped and had far more mobility and firepower than a slow moving, infantry-dominated Iran. However, some 42 of its 50-odd division

equivalents were relatively low-grade infantry divisions, many manned by young Shiites and Kurds who were not strong supporters of the regime. Its overall ability to coordinate armor, artillery, and infantry operations was poor. For all of the Iraqi army's vast size, its seven heavy armored and mechanized divisions were the units that made up most of its actual teeth and only about two-thirds of the brigades in these units were really combat effective.

Iraq's air force had modern equipment and large numbers of aircraft and weapons, but was poorly organized and trained. It had limited air-to-air combat proficiency and had failed to perform effectively in any of Iraq's offensive operations. Its land-based air defense capabilities were also of limited effectiveness, and its ability to coordinate land and air forces was very weak.

Iraq's military machine also was only effective because Iraq had massive flows of aid and modern arms imports – particularly from Russia and France. Iraq received well over \$70 billion in arms imports during the ten year period before it invaded Iraq, and it used this flood of arms to make up for the lack of revolutionary fervor in its troops, its massive losses to Iraq in earlier battles, its lack of skill in using most of its equipment effectively, its inability to rapidly deploy effectively in the middle of an offensive, and a relatively weak logistics, maintenance, and supply system.

By the time the Gulf War was over, Iraq's army had lost nearly 60% of its major combat equipment. It had lost about 40% of its air force or had had it seized by Iran. Its navy had virtually disappeared, and about 30-40% of its land-based air defenses had been destroyed. It also could not resupply or reequip. Months before the fighting began, the UN Coalition had taken steps that cut off Iraq's access to arms imports. Iraq's military forces had survived the war, but Iraq was badly wounded.

## **Iraq's Military Decline Since the Gulf War**

Those wounds did not end with the war. Shi'ite and Kurdish uprisings immediately after the war showed that Iraq could no longer rely on mass drafts and mobilizations of its reserves. It had to purge its forces down to a much smaller number of loyalists, and purge

them whenever there were any signs of resistance to the regime. Equally important, Saddam Hussein lost much of the Kurdish area of Iraq, and this forced him to deploy large numbers of his troops near the border of the Kurdish security zone. He was forced to spend some four years defeating various Shi'ite opposition groups in the South, and he is still fighting against low-level Shi'ite resistance, particularly small underground elements of the Iranian-backed Hakim faction. The lingering impact of defeat and of economic sanctions forced him into repeated further purges of his military forces, and to concentrate many of his military resources simply on protecting the regime.

While the UN Coalition did relatively little during the war to successfully attack Iraq's missiles and weapons of mass destruction, the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) that was established to oversee the destruction of these assets had more success between 1991 and 1997 – when Saddam first undercut it and then forced it out of the country. UNSCOM succeeded in destroying most of Iraq's ballistic missiles and production capabilities, most of its chemical weapons and production capabilities, most of its nuclear weapons production capabilities, most of its chemical weapons and production capabilities, and much of its biological weapons capabilities. While UNSCOM could not keep Iraq from maintaining a core of such production capabilities, and significant numbers of weapons and parts remain unaccounted for, UNSCOM did succeed in destroying billions of dollars worth of Iraqi weapons and equipment.

The controls on Iraq's imports of arms and technology had an additional massive impact. While the US spend several hundred billion dollars modernizing its forces to react to the lessons of victory, Iraq could not import a single major new weapon or item of military technology to react to the lessons of defeat. While significant smuggling did go on, Iraq could not begin to recapitalize either its conventional forces or weapons of mass destruction. It at most smuggled in several hundred billion dollars worth of largely dual-use equipment and military spare parts between 1990 and 2001. It would have needed to obtain at least \$25-30 billion worth of arms imports to rebuild and modernize its forces to reach their pre-Gulf War level of capability, and over \$50 billion worth of imports to fully react to the military lessons of the Gulf War.

Moreover, the imposition of “no-fly zones” and de facto restrictions on Iraq troop movements further limited Iraq’s ability to retrain its army and air force. In fact, the only part of its forces it was able to actively reorganize and train for realistic combat were its land-based air defenses. While Iraqi land-based air defenses have benefited from major post-Gulf War improvements in command, control, and communications systems – and a number of technical modifications -- they have also been under US and British attack for half a decade. Furthermore, the missiles and radars in these forces land-based air defenses are essentially 1970s technology.

### **Iraq’s Military Forces Today: A Still Poisonous Snake**

Iraq is still poisonous. It is still the largest military power in the Gulf in terms of sheer numbers. Iran only has about half Iraq’s major equipment strength. Mismanagement and underfunding have led to a significant decline in Saudi army and air force capabilities since 1995, and Kuwait has a limited military strength of around 15,000 men. Without the US and Britain, Iraq would still dominate the Gulf.

Iraq’s military forces still have over 400,000 actives, some 375,000 men in its army, and the ability to mobilize up to 400,000 more reserves with some degree of combat capability. They still have some 2,200 main battle tanks, some 3,700 other armored weapons, 2,200 major artillery weapons, and 70-90 armed helicopters. They still have some 316 combat aircraft, most of which can be operational for at least short periods. They have some 140-160 major surface-to-air missile launchers, perhaps another 500-700 light surface-to-air missile launchers, and some 3,000 antiaircraft guns.

The six heavy armored and mechanized divisions in the regular Iraqi army, and the four heavy armored and mechanized divisions in the Republican Guards, now have about 65% of the major weapons numbers they had in 1990. This means they are still relatively strong and well trained by Gulf standards. The Iraqi air force has shown it can sustain several hundred sorties a day for at least several days, and the Air Defense Command has shown since 1997 that it can survive constant US and British attempts to defeat it.

At the same time, at least half of Iraq's army consists of low-grade reserve and conscripts and many of these personnel are Shi'ites of uncertain loyalty. About half of its land order of battle consists of relatively low-grade infantry units, and only one of its seven corps really seems combat ready enough to conduct major offensive or defensive operations. The Iraqi army has only had a few meaningful large army exercises since 1991, and its maneuver exercises do not show it has learned all that much from defeat. Its land force equipment is at best mid-1980s technology and combat worn, and much of it is obsolescent. Even its much-touted T-72 tanks proved incapable of successfully engaging earlier models of the US M-1 during the Gulf War.

Iraq lacks all of the modern airborne platforms, sensors, and other equipment need to carry out effective air battle management for either air defense or offense. Only about one-third of its force now consists of relatively modern high performance aircraft like the Su-20, Mirage F-1, Su-24, MiG-25, and MiG-29. Even these airframes are now 1970s-1980s models, with no major modernization of avionics, munitions, or electronic warfare equipment. While some individual pilots perform well, overall air battle training is outdated, unrealistic, and incompetent.

Its heavy surface-to-air missiles can survive by dispersing and hiding in populated areas, but almost certainly cannot be concentrated and forward deployed to protect its ground forces without being targets and destroyed by the US. Only its massive numbers of short-range surface-to-air missiles and AA guns present a highly survivable threat, and the US has shown in previous fighting with Iraq, as well as in Kosovo and Afghanistan, that it can operate quite effectively while virtually disregarding such weapons.

### **Iraq's Capability Against US and British Forces**

Given all this, how well could this wounded snake fight? Well, much depends on intangibles and the particular contingency. One key intangible is morale and loyalty. Americans tend to be far too glib about assuming that Saddam is highly unpopular and much of the Iraqi force is disloyal. Such disloyalty and defections are possible if the military believes it faces decisive defeat, or does not see an attack as a threat to Iraq as a nation or the Arab world. Saddam has, however, had a decade in which to indoctrinate

the Iraqis into believing the US and outside world are responsible for Iraq's defeats and hardships, and Iraq has always been a relatively well managed tyranny that mixed incentives with terror, and Iraq's military and leadership elite is now much wealthier than it has been in years. In spite of the propaganda from self-serving opposition groups, this snake might still prove to be willing to fight.

It could not fight well, however, if it attempted to defend by deploying into the open desert as it did in 1990, and/or by attempting to ride out the air phase of an attack by staying in its peacetime bases and locations. The US and Britain would need access to friendly bases in the Gulf – particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Saudi air support, and bases in Turkey as well. It would probably take a massive US air buildup that could sustain and protect something on the order of 300-400 offensive sorties per day. But, US and British air and missile power could then destroy much of Iraq's exposed war fighting capability before the ground offensive began. While it would probably still take at least one US-British heavy corps to defeat the Iraqi army and substantial light land forces to ensure the rapid occupation of Iraq, such a conventional fight would probably lead to a relatively quick Iraqi defeat and one with limited casualties.

The outcome could, however, be very different if Iraq did not fight conventionally and there are two ways it might be able to use asymmetric warfare. While much would depend on the loyalty of the population and the army, dispersing and sheltering in towns and cities would make it much harder to use air and missile power effectively. Iraqi fixed facilities would remain highly vulnerable, but Desert Fox, Kosovo, and Afghanistan have all shown that air targeting and weaponry have not reached the point where it is possible to destroy massive amounts of major ground weapons without high collateral damage and civilian casualties.

Similarly, forcing the US and its allies to fight urban warfare on a city by city basis means close combat of a kind where many of the technical advantages of US troops have far less effectiveness. It also would mean giving the war a far more negative public profile in the eyes of the rest of the world. It must be stressed that it is unclear Saddam can count on the necessary degree of military and popular loyalty – particularly in the

Shi'ite South – but it is equally uncertain that he cannot. It is particularly likely that Saddam might persuade his forces to fight such a battle if he concentrated such a defense in those Sunni and religiously mixed areas most loyal to him.

## **The Problem of Iraqi Proliferation**

The other form of unconventional war could be fought as part of this urban redoubt strategy or as an independent approach to battle. Saddam and the Revolutionary Council around him, as well as many who have profited from Saddam's regime, probably see their control of Iraq and their own survival as the most important single objective. At the same time, Saddam and his closest associates may see their death or defeat as removing all barriers to military escalation.

In spite of some defector claims, it seems doubtful that Saddam has even one nuclear weapon. The same, however, is probably not true of biological and chemical weapons and a radiological weapon is possible. Iraq may also have enough components to assemble as many as 25 Scuds, has shorter range missiles, can modify drones and combat aircraft to act as "cruise missiles," and has significant capability to smuggle weapons of mass destruction out of Iraq and deliver them covertly. There is considerable evidence that he may have the capability to make dry, storable biological weapons in aerosol form.

The effectiveness and lethality of such weapons is easy to exaggerate, and Iraq has often failed to properly design many of its weapons and technical modifications. Nevertheless, Saddam did disperse chemical weapons, missiles, and biological weapons and warheads for a "last strike" during the Gulf War and did create a primitive launch under attack capability.

As we are learning the hard way, weapons like Anthrax can be all too lethal even in small amounts. A World Health Organization (WHO) estimate based on the weapons technology available in the late 1960s estimated that the release of 50 kilograms of Anthrax -- over a developed urban area with a population of five million -- could infect as many as 250,000 people, of whom 100,000 could be expected to die. A 1993 report by the Office of Technology Assessment of the US Congress estimated that the release of

100 kilograms of aerosolized Anthrax over the greater Washington area would kill between 130,000 and three million and have economic costs of \$26.2 billion per 100,000 persons exposed. UN Coalition forces would be largely immunized, but no one can afford to underestimate the number of casualties that might occur, particularly if the attack came against a US or allied population center and not military forces.

It is both easy and dangerous to be an armchair field marshall. Anyone can assert how easily Saddam's regime will collapse in the face of the slightest opposition, or produce worst case scenarios that argue against any form of attack. The reality is, however, that no one can firmly predict Iraq's military capabilities and the uncertainties and intangibles are as important as the numbers. It is also important to remember that one key risk – Iraq's unceasing efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction – will grow steadily worse with each year in which the UN cannot conduct effective inspections and take effective action. There are risks in not acting as well as acting.

Perhaps the best way to assess Iraq's military capabilities, therefore, is to understand that a war *might* lead to extensive fighting, large civilian casualties, and significant US and allied casualties. It *might* involve weapons of mass destruction, and it might be far more costly than other recent wars.

This is not an argument for paralysis, but rather to avoid thinking of war as some safe and antiseptic process where other people's sons and daughters take the risks. It is an argument against facile half-measures like arming a weak and ineffective opposition, and taking the risk that the Bay of Pigs may be followed by the Bay of Kurdistan. It is an argument against trying to do the job with limited amounts of air power or with air power alone, and without coalition allies and access to friendly bases in Turkey and the Gulf. It is an argument against trying to avoid the deployment of "decisive force" and several sustainable heavy US divisions. It is an argument against going to war without announcing clear redlines to prevent Iraq from using weapons of mass destruction, and without preparing a devastating US conventional response if it does.

One does not play with poisonous snakes – wounded or not. One either kills them as safely and efficiently as possible or leaves them alone

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