

Iranian Operational Decision Making

Case Studies from the Iran-Iraq War

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COP-2013-U-005291-Final
July 2013

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July 2013



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Executive summary

This paper examines Iranian operational-level military decision-making from the perspective of historical case studies. Specifically, it analyzes the various factors and processes that influenced Iranian military commanders during four major operations of the Iran-Iraq War and what these operations might tell us about current-day military decision-making. Although a significant period of time has elapsed since the war, most of Iran's senior military leaders participated in the conflict, which constituted a defining moment in the history of the Islamic Republic.¹ It is also the only example of a major state-on-state conflict in the post-revolutionary period. Iran's military academies and training centers, therefore, have devoted a great deal of attention to studying the war, in part to derive operationally useful lessons for the present. Thus, despite the passage of time, the war remains relevant to understanding the mindset of today's military leaders in Iran.

Key insights from this assessment include:

- Unlike some of their regional counterparts, Iranian military commanders are likely to be relatively flexible and demonstrate some initiative in combat.
- Coordination problems will continue to plague Iran's armed forces, but the Iranians are aware of these issues and have taken steps to diminish the seams between their different services.
- The Iranians are likely to use terrain, time, and weather to offset their material weaknesses and enhance the survivability of their forces.

¹ It is impossible to travel in Iran without being confronted with reminders of the war, including war memorials and martyrs' cemeteries. In many ways, it is analogous to the Soviet Union's "Great Patriotic War" against Nazi Germany.

- Denial and deception will probably figure prominently in Iranian operational planning.
- Domestic political actors and foreign proxies can have an important—and sometimes decisive—impact on Iranian operational decision-making.

Introduction

Understanding the various factors and processes that influence decision-makers in Iran has always been more of an art than a science. Government proceedings, especially on sensitive issues related to national security or foreign policy, are generally opaque to outside observers. Although leading political figures will often air their “dirty laundry” in the press—a testament to the fractious nature of Iran’s political system—Iranian media are still heavily censored and we only see what we are meant to see. We, as outside observers, do not know what is being discussed in the Supreme National Security Council (Iran’s top national security advisory body) or the Armed Forces General Staff (Iran’s equivalent of the U.S. Joint Staff)—hence, we are reduced to making assumptions about what the regime might do in a conflict, based on its record of behavior coupled with an assessment of its interests and equities in any given scenario.

These difficulties are compounded when one tries to analyze Iranian military decision-making, especially at the operational level. Not surprisingly, there is very little publically available information on how decisions are made in Iran’s two primary armed forces: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Artesh (Iran’s conventional military force). We lack substantial data on the backgrounds and proclivities of key Iranian military leaders, their decision-making processes, contingency plans, and force requirements. Faced with this informational conundrum, we must approach the issue of military decision-making tangentially, gleaning whatever we can using a variety of disparate sources and methods.

This paper examines Iranian military decision-making from the perspective of historical case studies. Specifically, it analyzes the factors and processes that influenced Iranian commanders during two of the war’s major turning points: the Iranian regime’s decision to invade Iraq following the ouster of Iraqi forces from most of Iranian territory

(1982); and Iran's capture of the al-Faw Peninsula (1986), which was the high point of Iran's war effort.²

The use of historic case studies is not without its drawbacks—most notably, that these operations took place in a specific context and in the past. Nevertheless, they yield interesting insights about current-day Iranian operational-level decision-making:

- First, the Iran-Iraq War provides the only concrete examples that we have of Iranian decision-making during a major armed conflict. Most of Iran's senior military commanders are war veterans. For them, as well as Iranian society, the war was a defining moment that continues to resonate.
- Second, while the parallels between that war and a potential conflict with the United States or one of its allies are limited, they are at least partly analogous in terms of their asymmetry—in the Iran-Iraq War, Iran was facing a technologically superior adversary, as it would be in a conflict with the United States.
- Third, the war has been thoroughly documented, making it possible to do a detailed analysis of Iranian operations.
- Finally, the Iranians themselves continue to take the war seriously. They document it and study it in their military academies and think tanks, partly to memorialize it and pay tribute to Iran's legions of war veterans and martyrs, but also with an eye towards deriving useful lessons for the future.³

² See the appendix for a map of the central and southern sectors of Iran and Iraq during the war.

³ Both the IRGC and the Artesh have published numerous volumes on the history of the war. Imam Husayn University, the IRGC's flagship educational institution, has established a special department, the Center for War Studies and Research (*Markaz-e Motaleat va Tahqiqat-e Jang*), which publishes its own quarterly journal about the war, *Negin-e Iran*. Brigadier General Valivand Zamani, the commander of the Artesh Command and Staff School (DAFUS), alluded to the importance of the war in that school's curriculum on DAFUS's website: "In the past, we only used translations of western texts but gradually the need was felt that these texts must change and we changed course to modify more than 90% of the texts of the technical groups of DAFUS and our point of reference is

The 1982 offensives

In May 1982, the Iranians liberated the port city of Khorramshahr, which had been held by Iraqi forces since October 1980. This was regarded as a major achievement by Iran's leaders and a divine endorsement of the revolution and its goals. In a series of costly—but ultimately effective—Iranian offensives spearheaded by the IRGC, Iraqi forces were expelled from most of the territory that they had occupied in Iran, two of Iraq's four armored divisions were severely depleted, and 12,000 Iraqi soldiers surrendered to the Iranians.⁴ Saddam Hussein subsequently offered to withdraw the remainder of his forces if such a move would guarantee an end to the hostilities. However, the Iranians by this time were feeling confident and there was little appetite among the regime's leaders to reach an accommodation with Baghdad. According to General Mohsen Rezai, the commander of the IRGC,

Following the liberation of Khorramshahr, the Americans had intended to impose a truce on us. This meant a no war-no peace situation that could last up to 20 years. This is the same situation that exists between Syria and Israel. If we had accepted a truce following the liberation of Khorramshahr, at a minimum our several border provinces would have remained ruined for years and could not have been reconstructed, and 2.5 million of their inhabitants would have been homeless.⁵

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of the Majlis (Iranian Parliament), formally articulated the regime's prerequisites for agreeing to a ceasefire: Iraq's admission of guilt, the payment of a \$100 billion war indemnity to Iran, the reaffirmation of the 1975 Algiers

no longer western texts; rather, our point of reference is our experience in the Holy Defense [the Iran-Iraq War] and the wars which have happened in our region." <http://dafusaja.ac.ir>. Accessed on March 2012.

⁴ Rob Johnson, *The Iran-Iraq War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 65.

⁵ "Reza'i's Untold Account of the War," *Farhang-e Ashti*, 25 September 2005.

Accords,⁶ and Saddam Hussein's ouster and trial for war crimes.⁷ Predictably, Iraq rejected these demands and an early opportunity to end the war was squandered.

Following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Iranian territory and the subsequent discussions about a ceasefire, a strategic pause ensued, during which Iran's military and civilian leaders were given the opportunity to reassess Iran's overall wartime strategy and ultimate objectives. In June, a general meeting of the Supreme Defense Council (SDC) was convened to discuss the relative merits of pursuing the war on Iraqi territory. Most of the top military commanders, along with key civilian leaders, were present. So too was Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's Supreme Leader and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.⁸ According to Rafsanjani,

Our forces at that time were fresh and ecstatic. They argued that they would follow the enemy into its own territory [quickly] to prevent them from getting entrenched, setting up defenses, and making it difficult for us to overcome them. A meeting of the Supreme Defense Council was held before the Imam. Top military commanders from both the army and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) attended that meeting along with Ayatollah [Seyyed Ali] Khamene'i. [At that time,] Ayatollah Khamene'i was President and I was speaker of the Majles. In that meeting we discussed what to do. One suggestion was for us to enter in-

⁶ Border disputes had been a constant feature of Iran's relationship with Iraq since Ottoman times. The 1975 Algiers Accord fixed the southern boundary between the two countries at the *thalweg*—the line following the deepest part of the river— of the Shatt al-Arab/Arvand-rud River, in return for Iran's cessation of support for Iraqi Kurdish rebels. However, the dispute over the boundary continued to fester, until Saddam Hussein unilaterally abrogated the Accord prior to Iraq's invasion of Iran.

⁷ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 86.

⁸ Khomeini usually did not attend SDC sessions. The fact that he did so on this occasion is a testament to both the importance attached to the topic matter and the contentious nature of the debate.

to Iraqi territory and then accept a ceasefire from a position of strength.⁹

While the council was unanimously in favor of pursuing the war until all Iranian territory had been liberated, the issue of whether Iran should invade Iraq proved to be more contentious. Subsequent post-war accounts suggest that the debate in the SDC soon fractured along institutional and ideological lines. Those who were against pursuing the war on Iraqi territory—including Khamenei, Ali Akbar Velayati (the foreign minister), and Mir Hosein Mousavi (the vice president)—argued that if Iran were to invade Iraq, it would be viewed as the aggressor, thereby losing its moral standing, undermining its outreach to Muslims, and, in the process possibly losing the support of its only two Arab allies, Libya and Syria.¹⁰ Pointing to the poor state of Iran's economy and ongoing insurgencies within Iran's borders, particularly in the Kurdish areas, they also suggested that Iran did not have the resources to pursue a costly offensive.¹¹ Senior Artesh officers, including General Zahirnejad, echoed these concerns, claiming that Iran's forces lacked the training, mobility, firepower, and air cover to carry the war to Iraq.¹²

The hawks on the council, led by Rafsanjani and Rezai, argued that Iran could compensate for the challenges faced by its forces with revolutionary zeal, which they believed had been a critical factor in Iran's battlefield successes up to that time. On a more practical level, they pointed out that the only way to silence Iraqi artillery—which at the time was still shelling Iranian border settlements—would be to advance into Iraqi territory to create a buffer zone. Even if Saddam Hussein agreed to a ceasefire, they argued, he would remain a military threat. Better to seize Iraqi territory, including lucrative oil fields along the border in the south—and then bargain from a position of

⁹ “Ayatollah Hashemi's Untold Stories of the Imposed War,” *Mardom Salari*, 23 May 2011,

<http://www.mardomsalari.com/Template1/News.aspx?NID=105637>.

¹⁰ Johnson, 71.

¹¹ Hiro, 86-87; Johnson, 71-72.

¹² Ibid.

strength.¹³ Some, including Rafsanjani, argued that if the regime abandoned the war effort on the cusp of victory, it would have a deleterious effect on military and civilian morale. In this sense, the war had been kind to the nascent Islamic Republic, forging a sense of national unity in the face of a foreign aggressor.¹⁴

Initially, Khomeini appears to have sided with those who were against invading Iraq. According to Rafsanjani,

His [Khomeini's] rationale was strong. Firstly, he argued that the people of Iraq have a positive view of Iran. If you enter that country's territory, their sense of Arabism would cause them to resist and join hands with Saddam. Secondly, he argued that the Arab nations, which until that point did not show much sensitivity [about the Iran-Iraq war], would become more sensitive and would cooperate with Iraq more closely. Thirdly, the world and the international system would not accept having us inside Iraq.¹⁵

The IRGC commanders on the council met separately with Khomeini and succeeded in convincing him that the course proposed by Khamenei and others—i.e., continuing the war without invading Iraq—was not possible. They argued that Iraq would only end up using the protection afforded by its borders to rebuild and re-equip its forces to mount another invasion of Iran. Khomeini, persuaded by their line of reasoning, told the senior military commanders to begin planning for an invasion, but insisted that the invading forces avoid heavily populated areas.¹⁶

Khomeini had changed his mind in part because he had become convinced that Saddam's regime was ready to fall and the Shia population would welcome the Iranians as liberators. He was therefore anxious to avoid any unnecessary collateral damage that an invasion

¹³ Hiro, 86.

¹⁴ "Hashemi: The Imam Considered Reza'i's Conditions as Excuses," *Jahan News*, 18 July 2011.

¹⁵ "Ayatollah Hashemi's Untold Stories", op cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

might entail.¹⁷ Khomeini's views on Iraq were in part colored by information he was getting from leading Iraqi exiles and dissidents such as Baqir al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and a supporter of Khomeini's vision of Islamic government. Iraqi Shia mujahedeen associated with SCIRI and Da'wa¹⁸ had already stepped up their armed campaign against Saddam's regime in May with several high-profile attacks on Iraqi military logistics nodes.¹⁹ When the IRGC and the Artesh were given the green light to invade in July, Khomeini dispatched Baqir al-Hakim to the front to assist the IRGC with its attempts to win over Iraq's Shia.²⁰

On July 13, Iran invaded Iraq and the war entered a new phase. Iran's ultimate objectives were encapsulated in the popular revolutionary refrain "The road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala."²¹ Iraq was now regarded as a stepping stone for the export of Iran's revolution across the region.

¹⁷ Rafsanjani, in an interview conducted long after the war ended, stated, "I think that the Imam's (peace be upon him) ultimate goal was to free the people of Iraq from the evil of Saddam Hussein and from the Ba'ath Party. He sometimes would make remarks to that effect. But, he never identified that as a war objective. There was also ground for such sentiment. The majority of the people of Iraq wanted to get rid of Saddam Hussein. That was a sacred goal and, if we could have achieved it, not only would we not have asked for war reparations, but in fact we would have helped Iraq to solve its problems." Ibid.

¹⁸ Da'wa, like SCIRI, was a Shia opposition group dedicated to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Baathist government. Although they shared a common goal, SCIRI was more closely aligned with Tehran.

¹⁹ Johnson, 66.

²⁰ Hiro, 88-89.

²¹ The popular refrain implies that Karbala, a major town in southern Iraq and the site of the third Shia Imam's martyrdom, would be the first step in the Islamic Republic's efforts to eventually liberate Israeli-occupied Jerusalem.

Operation Ramadan al-Mubarak

Between July and November 1982, Iran launched three separate major offensives into Iraqi territory: Operations Ramadan al-Mubarak, Muslim ibn Aqil, and Muharram al-Haram. The first of these—Operation Ramadan al-Mubarak—was concentrated in the south, between Basrah and Amarah. Its main objective appears to have been to capture Basrah, or, failing this, to bypass the city to the north, thereby severing the lines of communication between southern Iraq and Baghdad. The region was defended by the Iraqi Army's 3rd Corps, which consisted of seven divisions—a mix of infantry, mechanized infantry, and armor, supplemented with various independent brigades and special operations. Five of the seven divisions were entrenched near the border, and the other two were held in reserve. Basra itself was heavily fortified with extensive earthworks, minefields, and canals, which the Iraqis had flooded in order to inhibit the invading forces and channelize them into pre-designated kill zones.²² All told, the Iraqis had about 80,000 troops mustered in and around Basra.

Against these, the Iranians mustered approximately 100,000 irregulars—mainly IRGC and paramilitary Basij—reinforced with five depleted Artesh divisions (three armored and two infantry),²³ with one division held in reserve.²⁴ All total, the Iranians probably mustered around 150,000 troops of mixed quality and training, well short of the standard 3:1 ratio that military theorists generally recommend for attacking forces.

The operation itself was launched during the holy month of Ramadan—hence the name. Prior to launching their invasion, the Iranians had prepared the battle space with a cross-border artillery barrage lasting several days. Then, on the night of the 13th, Iran's armed forc-

²² Hiro, 88-89.

²³ The Artesh units included the 16th, 88th, and 92nd Armored Divisions, and the 21st and 77th Infantry Divisions.

²⁴ At this time, the typical Iranian division, at full strength, was 12,000-15,000, whereas the typical Iraqi division was only 10,000. See Anthony H. Cordesman, and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: The Iran-Iraq War* (London: Westview Press, 1990), 147.

es broadcast the code phrase “*ya saheb al-zaman!*”²⁵ on all radio frequencies and the invasion began. Much of the fighting took place in the swampy terrain of the Hawizah marshes and the Shalamcheh Salient, east of Basrah. Light infantry, including Basij, spearheaded the operation, using human-wave assaults to overwhelm Iraqi defenders and, in some cases, clear Iraqi minefields. Regular troops followed with heavy weapons, exploiting success where the Basij and IRGC had opened gaps in the Iraqi lines.²⁶ Lacking armor, the Iranians used three-man teams armed with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to disable Iraqi tanks in close-quarters fighting.

Initially, the Iranians’ advance progressed rapidly. They punctured the Iraqi lines in several sectors. By the eighth day, they had penetrated 15 kilometers into Iraqi territory; the invading forces could see the lights of Basrah in the distance.²⁷ However, as the Iranians’ supply lines became ever more attenuated, their offensive stalled. The Iranians—who were perpetually focused on maintaining the offense, despite their lack of mobility—often failed to consolidate their gains by reinforcing their frontline troops and digging in. The Iraqis also used their helicopter gunships, manned by East German-trained crews, to great effect—thus, complicating Iranian resupply efforts. Significantly, the Iraqis also used chemical weapons for the first time—mainly CS gas—to disrupt Iran’s human-wave assaults.

A second Iranian push was launched 10 kilometers to the north on July 22, but failed to achieve any results. By this time, the Iraqis had managed to mount a counterattack with their reserve forces, striking the Iranians from their exposed flanks. The resulting pincer movement threatened to cut off the lead Iranian units near Basrah, so the Iranians withdrew.²⁸ By the time the Iranians called a halt to opera-

²⁵ “Literally, “Oh, the Lord of the Age.” The phrase refers to the Mahdi—the Shia 12th Imam—whose advent will bring peace and justice to the world.

²⁶ Johnson, 72-77; Hiro, 87-89.

²⁷ *A Review of the Iran-Iraq War, vol. II: Khorramshahr to Faw* (Tehran: Center for Studies and Research of War of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps).

²⁸ Johnson, 72-77.

tions on August 3, they retained only 50 square kilometers of Iraqi territory. They had also suffered approximately 20,000 casualties.²⁹ The expected Shia uprising, upon which Iran's leadership had pinned its hopes, failed to materialize. The Iraqis had also suffered heavy losses. The 9th Armored Division, for instance, was so heavily depleted that Iraq's commanders decided to disband it and farm out its remaining assets to other divisions.

From Iran's perspective, the only tangible benefit from this first offensive into Iraqi territory was that for the first time, a major Iraqi population center—Basrah—was now within range of Iranian artillery. Despite Khomeini's injunction to avoid civilian casualties, the Iranians began to shell the city in retribution for atrocities that the Iraqis had committed on the other side of the border, in Khorramshahr.

Even the limited gain of having Basrah within artillery range was mitigated by the fact that Iraq had retaliated by declaring a maritime exclusion zone in the northern Persian Gulf and attacking Iranian oil installations, export facilities, and tankers. Within months, Iranian oil exports had declined by as much as 55 percent.³⁰

Although Iran's leaders stubbornly clung to the belief that Operation Ramadan had been a success because it demonstrated Iranian resolve,³¹ it was hard to camouflage the fact that the operation had not achieved its objectives. Moreover, the Iranians had suffered appalling casualties in exchange for very limited territorial gains. According to scholar Rob Johnson, "Operation Ramadan was, by any standard, a criminal failure of leadership and strategy."³²

²⁹ Hiro, 88.

³⁰ Hiro, 91.

³¹ *A Review of the Iran-Iraq War, vol. II: Khorramshahr to Faw.*

³² Johnson, 74.

Operation Muslim ibn Aqil

A second, smaller Iranian offensive, codenamed Muslim ibn Aqil,³³ followed on October 1 in the central sector. The objectives of this operation were less ambitious in scope. The Iranians planned to seize the Sumar Hills—the strategic high ground overlooking the Iraqi border town of Mandali—and the primary lines of communication linking Baghdad with Kirkuk. Most of the fighting for this operation took place in the mountainous terrain to the east of Mandali, along the border. The Iranians mobilized 70,000 troops for their assault—three infantry divisions, an independent armored brigade, and an airborne detachment. Most of the troops were IRGC and Basij.³⁴ The Iraqis maintained three divisions in the area—a total of about 30,000 troops. As with the previous operation, the Iranians planned to use massed human wave assaults to open fissures in the Iraqi lines, which could then be exploited by the armored and mechanized units held in reserve. Unfortunately for the Iranians, these tactics were ill suited to the mountainous terrain around Mandali.

The Iranians initiated their assault at dawn on October 1, at 18 separate points along a 22-mile front.³⁵ Although they succeeded in sweeping the Iraqi defenders from the ridgelines around Sumar, inside Iran, their progress was slow, in part because they had spent a lot of time mobilizing and the Iraqis were prepared for their attack. The Iraqis counterattacked along the Mandali-Sumar road, supported by helicopter gunships and MiG-25s conducting close air support (CAS). The counterattack was unsuccessful, and the Iranians resumed their assault on the morning of October 2. By the third day, the Iranians had reached the outskirts of Mandali, about 5 kilometers into Iraqi territory; however, lacking adequate air cover, they were forced to retreat.

³³ The operation was named after the martyred cousin of Imams Hasan and Husain, Muslim ibn Aqil ibn Abu Talib.

³⁴ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 98.

³⁵ Ibid.

While the operation was underway, the Iranians deployed large formations in the southern sector in order to convince the Iraqis that the real blow would come to the south and in hopes that Saddam Hussein would therefore draw some of his mobile reserves away from Mandali.³⁶ However, instead of reacting to this feint, the Iraqis ended up reinforcing the central sector with a Special Operations Forces (SOF) brigade from the Republican Guard.³⁷ Subsequent Iranian assaults on October 5-6 were repulsed, and the fighting eventually stalemated between the border and Mandali. The Iranians had managed to liberate some of their own territory, and occupy 65 square kilometers across the border, but they had once again failed to achieve their objectives. Mandali, and the heights surrounding the town, remained in Iraqi hands. This time, an open quarrel erupted between the leading IRGC and Artesh commanders over the tactics employed in the operation: the former accused the Artesh of lacking sufficient revolutionary zeal, and the latter suggested that the IRGC were unprofessional and badly trained. In the wake of this infighting, Rafsanjani announced that the new Iranian policy must be to “hit the enemy with restricted blows.”³⁸

Operation Muharram al-Haram

The third—and arguably the most successful—of the Iranian offensives in 1982 was Operation Muharram al-Haram.³⁹ Launched on the night of October 31, this offensive had two prongs: one in the south, near Amara; and one in the central sector, around Naft Shahr, just north of Mandali. The objectives of Operation Muharram were limited in scope and had a more economic nature than the previous operations. In addition to removing existing Iraqi salients within Iranian territory, severing the Sharahani-Zobeidat Road (one of primary lines of communication linking Basrah and Baghdad), and occupying the heights around Mandali, Iranian troops were to seize several Iraqi oil

³⁶ O’Ballance, 98-99.

³⁷ http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_214.shtml. Site accessed on 24 October 2012.

³⁸ O’Ballance, 99.

³⁹ Literally, “Holy Muharram.” The name refers to the holy month of Muharram, when the operation was launched.

fields—including the large Bayat field—and industrial towns in both sectors, including Tib, Zobeidat, and Abu Qarrab.⁴⁰ Evidently, the officials on the SDC had concluded that these sites could later be traded at the negotiating table for concessions.

For this operation, the Iranians mustered four Artesh divisions, five separate brigades of IRGC augmented with Basij, and two regiments of attack helicopters.⁴¹ The assault was initiated in the south along a 10-mile front at night. This time, the Iranians were better prepared. Despite suffering heavy losses, they made a number of tactical breakthroughs in both sectors, using massed frontal assaults. In the south, they managed to penetrate 8 kilometers into Iraqi territory and seize Tib and Zobeidat. In the central sector, they advanced more slowly, but they managed to occupy the Bayat oilfield and Abu Shirib oil installation, while also destroying an Iraqi armored brigade.

For Baghdad, the situation was regarded as critical. Alarmed at the Iranian rate of advance and by the fact that Mandali was on the verge of being lost—and, thereby, the road to Baghdad in the central sector opened—the Iraqi high command mobilized its only remaining reserves, consisting of an army corps stationed south of the capital, two understrength brigades in the northern oil fields, and the elite units of the Republican Guard.⁴² The latter deployed T-72 tanks, only very recently delivered from the USSR,⁴³ which the Iranians had a difficult

⁴⁰ Hiro, 92; O’Ballance, 99-100; See also:

http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_214.shtml. Site accessed on 24 October 2012.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Prior to Iran’s invasion of Iraq, the Soviets had briefly curtailed their arms shipments to Baghdad in order to pressure Saddam to come to the negotiating table. The prospect of Iranian success on the battlefield, coupled with Tehran’s suppression of the Communist Tudeh movement, goaded Moscow into redoubling its efforts to support the regime in Baghdad. Tehran’s rejection of Baghdad’s offer of a ceasefire and its subsequent invasion of Iraq provided Moscow with an excuse to abandon its façade of neutrality.

time countering.⁴⁴ The Iraqi counterattack secured Mandali and forced the Iranians to abandon Tib and Zobeidah. However, the Iranians managed to retain Abu Bayat as well as 210 square kilometers of Iraqi territory. By the middle of the month, when torrential rains had brought about a stalemate in the fighting, the Iranians had managed to capture 3,000 Iraqi soldiers and approximately 140 tanks.⁴⁵

According to author and analyst Dilip Hiro, during Operation Muharram, “In Iraqi ruling circles, pressure mounted on Saddam Hussein to accede to Tehran’s prime demand to give up power to prevent a massive invasion by Iran, and bring the war to an end.”⁴⁶ However, Saddam was in no mood to budge. Instead, he orchestrated a massive demonstration in support of himself on November 13 in the Iraqi capital, involving as many as 4 million people.⁴⁷ By the time Operation Muharram wound down, the Iraqi dictator had succeeded in cowing his domestic opponents as well as frustrating Iranian attempts to advance on Baghdad.

Analysis of the 1982 Iranian offensives

At the time, Rafsanjani claimed that Operation Muharram al-Haram had paved the way for subsequent offensives; however, in reality, 1982 ended in a strategic stalemate that was to persist for much of the next four years.⁴⁸ The Iranians had achieved some success at the tactical level, including the occupation of several hundred square kilometers of Iraqi territory. Individual Iranian commanders had displayed considerable initiative and were adept at using terrain, weather, and the

⁴⁴ According to one observer, “The Iranians had no effective weapons against the T-72, except TOW-armed Cobras and motorcycle-riding RPG-7 teams. Both were apparently ineffective against the frontal armor of the T-72s, so they had to search positions which would enable them to engage from the flank.”

See http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_214.shtml. Site accessed on 24 October 2012.

⁴⁵ Johnson, 78.

⁴⁶ Hiro, 92.

⁴⁷ Hiro, 92-93.

⁴⁸ O’Ballance, 100.

cover of darkness to compensate for their lack of materiel. Iran's leaders had also demonstrated to their own people that they were capable of taking the war to Iraq.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, for minimum territorial gains the Iranians had suffered ultimately unsustainable numbers of casualties. They had also failed to achieve their primary objectives of destabilizing the Iraqi regime and ending the war on terms favorable to Iran.

A closer look at operations Ramadan, Muslim ibn Aqil, and Muharram suggests that the Iranian war effort was hampered by a number of factors at the operational and tactical levels. These are discussed below.

- **The Iranians were hampered by their lack of mobility, firepower, and close air support.** As General Zahir Nejad had correctly noted during the SDC meetings in June 1982, the Iranian military simply was not equipped to carry out an offensive on Iraqi territory at that time. Although the Iranians had successfully expelled Iraq's forces from the bulk of Iranian territory—a factor which was to cloud the thinking of many members of the SDC—the tactics and resources they brought to bear in this effort were less applicable to forces on the offense. In terms of sheer numbers, the Iranians lacked the requisite armor and heavy artillery to go on the offense: they had 900 tanks to Iraq's 3,000, and 900 artillery pieces to Iraq's 1,800.⁵⁰ The Iranians also had only 120 airworthy fighters and ground attack aircraft in comparison to Iraq's 300.⁵¹ Although both sides were experiencing critical materiel shortages by late 1982, the Iraqis—who by this time were receiving considerable support from the Soviet Union, France, and the Arab Gulf states—were better positioned to replenish their forces.

⁴⁹ The Iraqi military had also had its own problems. Following the Soviet model, its commanders were heavily wedded to doctrine. They were given little latitude for independent action on the battlefield. Also, the Iraqi Army faced critical shortages of manpower and war materiel, although the latter was partially alleviated by a major influx of Soviet equipment at the end of the year.

⁵⁰ Hiro, 88.

⁵¹ Ibid.

- **Sustainment was a perpetual problem for the Iranians.** Operations Ramadan, Muslim ibn Aqil, and Muharram reflect a general pattern for Iranian offensives during the early phases of the war. In each operation, the Iranians managed an initial breakthrough and rapid advance. However, several days into the operations, their offensives would inevitably peter out, only to be followed by equally rapid retreats. As a result, the Iranians ended up suffering heavy losses for only minimal territorial gains. Iran's failure to consolidate its gains can be ascribed to several factors, including a lack of advanced planning, overly ambitious objectives, failure to disperse and fortify after the initial advance, and failure to devote adequate attention and resources to maintaining logistical support. This last factor was particularly critical, as Iranian infantry generally carried its own supplies, and the system for resupply—particularly on the offense, when lead units often outpaced supporting echelons—was rudimentary at best. According to scholars Cordesman and Wagner, “The system worked on the basis of supply push as long as the Iranian units were not forced to retreat or alter their plan but often broke down if they were forced to regroup or advance too quickly.”⁵²
- **The IRGC and the Artesh were constantly at loggerheads.** In-fighting between the two organizations severely hampered the Iranian war effort and came to a head following Operation Ramadan. Each service blamed the other for battlefield failures. Artesh officers criticized their IRGC counterparts for their lack of professionalism and training. They resented the IRGC's favored status in the military hierarchy and the fact that the latter exerted a disproportionate weight in terms of military decision-making. At one point during Operation Ramadan, General Zahir Nejad actually threatened to resign “if unqualified people continue to meddle with the conduct of the war.”⁵³ For their part, Senior IRGC leaders were constantly criticizing their Artesh counterparts for lacking revolutionary zeal and a commitment to the war effort. Their prejudices were exacer-

⁵² Cordesman and Wagner, 149.

⁵³ O'Ballance, 96.

bated by various coup attempts by Artesh officers⁵⁴ as well as some instances of lackluster support from Artesh units in the field.⁵⁵

- **The Iranians lacked effective mechanisms for coordinating operations at the operational and tactical levels.** Not only were the IRGC and the Artesh different in terms of their training, organization, and doctrine, but they reported up through two separate chains of command, through their respective joint staffs, to separate ministries.⁵⁶ As a result, it was difficult for the two services to synchronize their operations. Within the IRGC, these command and control issues extended to the lower echelons, where commanders often operated autonomously, and there was poor coordination between infantry units and their artillery counterparts for fire support.⁵⁷
- **Iran's leaders believed that the IRGC's faith and revolutionary élan could compensate for its logistical shortfalls and lack of training.** This view partly stemmed from the ideological underpinnings of the regime, which were rooted in concepts such as martyrdom and sacrifice, as well as the revolutionaries' general disdain for the Artesh, whom they considered to be too Westernized and too closely tied to the Ancien Régime. It was also motivated by practical considerations. Prior to the 1982 offensives, the leadership on the SDC determined—not entirely without reason—that Iran could harness its large manpower re-

⁵⁴ These culminated in the February 1982 “Qotbzadeh plot,” in which 70 Artesh senior officers were charged with attempting to orchestrate a coup. See Hiro, 99.

⁵⁵ According to writers Brian Dunn and Yaghoub Ta'sasi, “The government in Tehran did not even seem to mind that the regulars had largely opted out of what had become an offensive war to strengthen the revolutionary government.” Brian Dunn and Yaghoub Ta'sasi, “The Stages of the First Persian Gulf War (Iran-Iraq War),” *Negin-e Iran* 8, no. 30 (August 2009): 77-100.

⁵⁶ At the operational level, however, there were joint regional headquarters. These entities were understaffed and did not exert sufficient control over their subordinate units.

⁵⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, 147.

serves to wear down the Iraqis in a general war of attrition. As a result, the IRGC (and the Basij in particular) eschewed conventional military tactics, which would have required additional training, in favor of massed, frontal assaults on heavily defended positions. The so-called “human wave” assaults figured prominently during the 1982 offensives, and were to cost the Iranians dearly over the long term, before they were eventually abandoned in the latter half of the war in the face of mounting casualties.⁵⁸

- **The Iranians were also hampered by their lack of operational security (OPSEC).** During each of the 1982 offensives, the Iranians broadcast critical indicators of their intent prior to the actual operations, which allowed the Iraqis to mobilize effective counteroffensives. Long mobilization times and the massing of troops on the border—which were easily detected by overhead imaging satellites⁵⁹—were perhaps inevitable, given the structure and make-up of Iran’s armed forces at the time. However, the Iranians also had not yet mastered the denial and deception techniques that they were to use later in the war to camouflage their maneuvers. On several occasions, including Operation Ramadan, they even broadcast their intentions publicly prior to the start of operations.

Prior to the 1982 offensives, when the Iranians were operating on their own territory, most of these factors were not critical impediments. The tactics they employed, such as massed frontal assaults, were more effective in Khuzestan, where they were able to concentrate their forces along a narrow front against static Iraqi positions. Their supply lines were shorter and more secure. The need for mobility was less acute, especially in urban areas such as Abadan and Khorramshahr. The Artesh and the IRGC were also able to operate more effectively in tandem, with the former concentrating on con-

⁵⁸ In the opening stages of the war, the Basij were primarily employed as porters, to ferry equipment and supplies to the front. In Operation Ramadan and subsequent offensives, they were routinely employed as human cannon fodder.

⁵⁹ The United States was reported to be sharing imagery intelligence on Iranian troop positions with the Iraqis.

ventional operations and the latter conducting a campaign of guerrilla warfare against the invading Iraqi forces. In addition, Iran's military could count on the support of the local population, which, despite being predominantly Arab and harboring its own separatist movement, nevertheless rallied around the flag against the Iraqi invaders.⁶⁰ In short, the Iranians had the advantage of operating on the defense.

The liberation of Khorramshahr and most of occupied Khuzestan had left the leadership on the SDC overconfident. Operations Ramadan, Muslim ibn Aqil, and Muharram revealed that the Iranian military was ill prepared and ill equipped to transition to offensive operations on Iraqi soil. The Iranians were able to adapt, however, and apply lessons learned from these and subsequent operations to mount more successful offensives later in the war.

⁶⁰ The same could be said of Iraq's Shia population, who ended up rallying around the flag after the Iranian offensives in 1982.

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The Battle for Al-Faw (1986)

The year 1986 represents another major turning point in the Iran-Iraq War. Since Operation Ramadan al-Mubarak, the leadership on the SDC had been convinced that time was on Iran's side and that Saddam Hussein's regime would eventually fall if sufficient strain could be brought to bear on Iraq's war effort.⁶¹ Toward this end, the Iranians launched numerous offensives along the 1,500-kilometer border between the two countries. Over time, they managed to incorporate lessons learned from their previous failures. In particular, they worked to improve coordination between the IRGC and Artesh through the formation of a joint operational headquarters, referred to as Khatam al-Anbiya.⁶² The Iranians also attempted to mold the IRGC into a more effective, conventional fighting force with extensive training, particularly in amphibious and combined operations.

Despite these improvements, the Iranians failed to deliver a decisive blow to the Iraqi regime between 1982 and 1986. They achieved only modest gains in terms of territory, notably the liberation of most of the remaining Iranian districts in the central sector that had been occupied by the Iraqis prior to 1982. The Iranians also continued to suffer major casualties at the front. Despite Iran's greater strategic depth and larger population—more than double that of Iraq—by 1986, the country was capable of mobilizing only around 1 million people versus Iraq's 800,000.⁶³

Iraq also continued to benefit disproportionately from international support. Between 1982 and 1986, the Iraqis, flush with loans and

⁶¹ Cordesman and Wagner, 217.

⁶² "Ayatollah Hashemi's Untold Stories," *op. cit.*

⁶³ Cordesman and Wagner, 217. Also, Iran's superiority in numbers was diminished by the fact that a significant portion of its mobilized reserves were poorly trained Basij.

credits from the Gulf Arab countries and the United States, embarked on a major military spending spree, procuring arms from a diverse array of international suppliers, including the USSR, France, and China. In 1984 alone, the Iraqis imported \$7.7 billion worth of arms and ammunition.⁶⁴ By 1985, the Iraqis were able to launch a number of counteroffensives—the first time they had done so since 1982. In contrast, the Iranians, who were languishing in relative isolation, faced major procurement hurdles—they could field only about 1,000 main battle tanks to Iraq’s 4,500. Iraq’s advantage in the air was even more profound. The Iranians possessed between 60 and 80 operational combat aircraft to Iraq’s 500.⁶⁵ Although seemingly ill poised to conduct a major offensive, on February 9, 1986, the Iranians launched Walfajr-8, one of the most ambitious and ultimately successful Iranian operations of the war.

Walfajr-8⁶⁶

The primary objective of Operation Walfajr-8 was to seize the Faw Peninsula south of Basra, thereby depriving Baghdad of its access to the sea. Like many other Iranian operations, Walfajr-8 had an economic dimension. As Rafsanjani was to note in a later interview, “Faw was important to us for a number of reasons: First, because with the capture of Faw, Iraq would lose its ability to use the sea, unless they could sneak a boat through Khor Abdullah under the cover of night. But they would no longer have a military presence in the sea. In addition to that, Iraq no longer could make use of its two oil terminals south of Faw: the al-Amayah and the al-Bakr [sic] oil terminals.”⁶⁷ Then, as now, the Al-Basrah Oil Terminal (ABOT) and Khawr al-Amayah Oil Terminal (KAOT) accounted for most of Iraq’s oil ex-

⁶⁴ Johnson, 109.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The name is derived from the opening line of the 89th *Surah* of the *Quran*, and is literally translated “By the dawn.”

⁶⁷ “Ayatollah Hashemi’s Untold Stories,” op. cit. See also *A Review of the Iran-Iraq War, vol. II: Khorramshahr to Faw*.

ports.⁶⁸ Cutting Iraq off from its access to the sea not only would deprive Baghdad of much-needed revenue but also would benefit the Iranians by driving up the price of oil in general (at the time, the price was very low due to increased Saudi and Kuwaiti production).⁶⁹

Walfajr-8 differed from previous operations in terms of its scope and the amount of planning and preparation that it entailed. The Iranians mobilized huge numbers of troops for the operation—roughly half of the Artesh and two-thirds of all of the IRGC.⁷⁰ In order to free up men for the front, they began to use women for rear-area military tasks for the first time in October 1985.⁷¹ They also drew up provisions for sending civil servants to the front.⁷² In preparation for crossing the lower reaches of the Shatt al-Arab, they conducted extensive amphibious training, including simulated assaults on the Caspian coast in northern Iran. The Iranians had also begun to stockpile small boats and bridging equipment in Abadan. Finally, they had begun to field special commando units that were specifically trained to fight in wetlands.⁷³

Rather than concentrate their forces in one area, the Iranians opted for a two-pronged attack: the primary effort was focused on the capture of the Faw Peninsula in the far south; and the supporting effort was directed farther north at Basrah, probably as a diversion to pin down Iraqi forces and keep them from reinforcing their existing units in Faw. The supporting effort consisted of three separate thrusts

⁶⁸ Compounding whatever revenue might be lost from KAOT and ABOT was the fact that the Iranians had convinced the Syrians to sever their only pipeline to Iraq, the Kirkuk-Baniyas Pipeline.

⁶⁹ Rafsanjani also suggested that Iran's leadership was motivated by humanitarian concerns. According to him, one of the reasons that the SDC settled on Faw was because of its low population density.

⁷⁰ Hiro, 167.

⁷¹ Cordesman and Wagner, 218.

⁷² Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 75-76.

⁷³ According to a CSIS report, these units had a command structure "similar to that of airborne or special forces units." See Cordesman and Wagner, 218.

to the north of Basrah. The first occurred on February 9 near Qurnah and the southern end of the Hawizah marshes, where the Iranians attempted to split the seam between the Iraqi 3rd and 4th Corps' areas of responsibility. Unfortunately for the Iranians, they ran headlong into heavily fortified Iraqi positions, and, despite three days of sustained human-wave attacks, were repulsed with heavy casualties.⁷⁴

Two days later, the Iranians initiated another push 60 kilometers to the south, in the relatively open terrain around the southern periphery of the Hawizah marshes. This operation, which was smaller than the first one, rapidly developed into a shooting match between opposing armored forces at short range. Iraq, which possessed both quantitative and qualitative advantages in terms of its armored forces, repulsed the Iranian assault, with both sides suffering heavy losses. The third thrust, a final push of the supporting offensive, occurred on February 14 in the Hawizah marshes, where the Iranians mounted an amphibious assault to capture the northernmost Majnoon island.⁷⁵ Again, the Iranians suffered heavy losses and were unsuccessful.

Although the northern supporting effort failed from a tactical perspective—the Iranians were repulsed on all counts—it was ultimately successful as a feint. It took the Iraqis several days to realize that the primary Iranian thrust was aimed further south, at the Faw Peninsula. By the time the Iraqi high command had committed its reserves to that front, the Iranians had already achieved substantial gains and were well entrenched. Saddam's generals had failed to recognize the Faw Peninsula's strategic importance or its vulnerability. It is possible that the Iraqis had underestimated Iran's amphibious capabilities, trusting the Shatt al-Arab to act as an effective barrier. They may have also been led into a false sense of complacency by Iranian operating patterns. Over the previous six years, none of the major Iranian offensives had occurred in the far south. Whatever the reason, when the big Iranian push occurred on the night of the 10th, the peninsula was only lightly defended and its garrison was caught off guard.

⁷⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, 219.

⁷⁵ The Majnoon Islands were a series of artificial sand domes erected by the Iraqis in the Hawizah marshes to serve as platforms for oil wells. The islands were heavily contested, and changed hands several times.

The attack began with an amphibious assault at night in driving wind and rain.⁷⁶ The Iranians used the cover of darkness to cross the 1,000-meter-wide Shatt al-Arab, establishing six separate beachheads. Frogmen were employed to secure Umm al-Rassas Island in the middle of the Shatt, which the Iranians subsequently used as a logistics staging area. Eventually, the Iranians were able to erect a pontoon bridge and begin funneling tanks and heavy artillery across the Shatt. In the meantime, the Iranian advance proceeded rapidly across a 65-kilometer-wide front. In the north, Iranian troops headed towards the main artery linking Faw with Basrah; however, they were checked by particularly strong Iraqi resistance. In the center and south, the Iranians rapidly subdued and occupied most of the peninsula, meeting only limited resistance. The town of Faw, which had been largely abandoned prior to the operation, fell on the first day. The Iranians also managed to capture Iraq's main air control and early-warning center covering the Gulf, which caused temporary panic in the Gulf Arab capitals. By the 12th, the Iranians had managed to reach the Khor Abdullah waterway on the border with Kuwait, although they failed to take Iraq's primary naval base at Umm Qasr, just to the north on the other side of the waterway. Recognizing that an Iraqi counter-attack was inevitable, the Iranians consolidated their gains and began to disperse and dig in.

The Iraqi high command, which had been fooled into thinking that the main Iranian thrust was towards Basrah, was slow to react and commit any of its reserves to the defense of Faw. In the meantime, Iran managed to funnel 20,000 troops onto the peninsula.⁷⁷ When the Iraqi counterattack finally occurred on the 12th, it was poorly organized and equipped, and failed after one week of sustained combat. Terrain and weather proved to be a major factor in mitigating many of Iraq's advantages. Iraq's armor and artillery was of little use in the swampy terrain of Faw, especially against entrenched infantry armed with anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and RPGs.⁷⁸ Moreover, poor visibility limited the effectiveness of Iraq's air force. Iraqi pilots were forced to conduct low-altitude bombing runs, which left them

⁷⁶ Johnson, 113.

⁷⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, 221.

⁷⁸ Johnson, 113-115; Cordesman and Wagner, 220-221.

vulnerable to Iranian air defenses. As a result, the Iraqis sustained heavy losses—55 fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft over the course of the offensive.⁷⁹ The heavy rains also diminished the effectiveness of Iraqi chemical attacks, which featured prominently in the Iraqi counteroffensives.⁸⁰ By the time the weather began to lift, on February 22, the Iranians had had more than a week to move men and supplies onto the peninsula.

On the 24th, Saddam sent one of his best commanders, General Maher Abd al-Rashid, to begin a new counterattack to capture Faw. Three independent brigade groups from the Iraqi 7th Corps, reinforced with Republican Guards, moved along three separate axes: one along the bank of the Khor Abdullah, one in the middle of the peninsula, and one along the Shatt al-Arab. Better weather and improving visibility allowed the Iraqis to bring the full weight of their advantage in the air to bear against the Iranians. The conditions also allowed the Iraqis to effectively employ their multiple rocket launcher systems (MRLSs), which tend to be more successful for area targets than tube artillery.⁸¹ A new round of heavy fighting ensued, in which both sides committed many of their key assets to the battle. Over the course of four days, the Iraqis suffered 10,000 casualties, while the Iranians may have lost as many as 30,000.⁸² The extent of Saddam Hussein's resolve to retake the Faw Peninsula can be gauged by the number of Iraqi air sorties flown: 18,548 between 9 February and 25 March, compared to 20,011 for all of 1985.⁸³

Although the Iraqis had stabilized their front lines and halted the Iranian advance, they sustained heavy losses in armor and aircraft, and failed to recapture most of the territory occupied by the Iranians.

⁷⁹ Hiro, 168.

⁸⁰ The Iraqi chemical attacks consisted primarily of mustard gas and also limited amounts of Tabun. Although only moderately successful at inflicting casualties, they successfully interrupted Iranian rear area activities.

⁸¹ Cordesman and Wagner, 222.

⁸² Ephraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2002), 48.

⁸³ Hiro, 169.

In particular, they continued to face mobility problems, as several of the main arteries that have been specially constructed to facilitate movement into the Faw Peninsula had been turned into a muddy morass by the recent rains. Despite a subsequent Iraqi counterattack on March 11, at the end of three weeks of fighting, the Iraqis had managed to advance only seven kilometers onto the peninsula. The line gradually stabilized, with the Iranians retaining most of the peninsula.

An analysis of Operation Walfajr-8

Walfajr-8 constituted the high point of Iran's war effort and has generally been hailed as its most successful operation. It rekindled the hopes of Iran's leadership—falsely as it would turn out—that Saddam Hussein's regime was on the verge of collapse. For the first time in two years, the Iranians had captured and retained Iraqi land—thereby, according to Hiro, “disproving the prevalent perception among local and foreign observers that Iran was incapable of breaking the military stalemate.”⁸⁴ Although they had failed to completely cut the Iraqis off from the sea (the latter retained a very narrow foothold on the Gulf through Umm Qasr), the Iranians' capture and retention of Faw was a major blow to Saddam's prestige. The Iranians had managed to destroy or capture large numbers of Iraqi troops and weapons, seize a missile-staging area in Faw that menaced Ahvaz and Khorramshahr, and occupy the Iraqi early-warning station mentioned above. Although Iraq's total manpower losses were probably half those of Iran, this ratio was unacceptable to Baghdad, partly because its losses included many skilled pilots and technicians who could not be easily replaced, and partly because of the demographic imbalance between the two countries.⁸⁵ The presence of Iranian troops on the Khor Abdullah also menaced Kuwait and alarmed many neighboring Arab governments.

In contrast to the earlier offensives described above, Walfajr-8 represented a maturation of Iranian tactics. The human-wave assaults that featured so prominently in Operations Ramadan and Muslim ibn

⁸⁴ Hiro, 170.

⁸⁵ Hiro, 169.

Aqil were used only sparingly and in conjunction with more conventional military tactics. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to discern additional reasons for Walfajr-8's success. These are discussed below.

- **The IRGC and the Artesh had improved battlefield coordination and operational command and control.** Walfajr-8 was the first time that the Iranians had successfully mounted simultaneous offensives on multiple fronts: a supporting effort to the north of Basrah, a main thrust to the south in the vicinity of Faw, and a subsequent operation in the Kurdish highlands in the north—dubbed Walfajr-9, which was still underway as Walfajr-8 was winding down. During the course of operations, Iranian commanders demonstrated a degree of flexibility, diverting troops and resources from one sector to another when they achieved a breakthrough, in order to reinforce success. This contrasted with the earlier offensives, such as Ramadan al-Mubarak, when commanders were unable, or possibly unwilling, to make mid-course corrections on the battlefield. In this regard, the Iranians had clearly benefitted from their attempts to improve coordination between the IRGC and the Artesh at the operational level with the creation of the Khatam al-Anbiya Joint Headquarters (see above) and at the tactical level within the respective services.
- **The Iranians were adept at using terrain and weather to their benefit.** Iran's commanders recognized that Iraq's forces possessed distinct advantages in terms of armor, airpower, and artillery. In order to mitigate Iraq's lead in these areas, the Iranians picked their terrain carefully and launched their main assaults in areas that would obstruct vehicular traffic and favor infantry.⁸⁶ In the case of Walfajr-8, these areas included the Faw Peninsula, which was crisscrossed with natural and man-made obstacles, the Shatt al-Arab, and the Hawr al-Hawizah marshes. Once the Iranian forces had dug in, they used the terrain effectively to channelize Iraqi counterattacks into kill zones. The

⁸⁶ Hoseyn Zakariani, "Safavi: If the Enemy Acts Foolishly, Our Response Will Be Very Strong and Crushing," *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 22 September 2004. See also *A Review of the Iran-Iraq War, vol. II: Khorramshahr to Faw*.

critical role of terrain in Iranian wartime planning was noted by IRGC General Rahim Safavi in a post-war interview. Referring to Walfajr-8 and a couple previous operations, he stated, “Usually we would choose land suitable to our forces, which were mostly infantry forces, in order for the enemy not to be able to counter them with its armored forces, or if it could, it would have a difficult time fighting us, and instead we would be at an advantage with our infantry forces.”⁸⁷ The Iranians also deliberately planned Walfajr-8 to coincide with the rainy season in the Northern Gulf, a factor that further diminished the mobility of Iraq’s armored forces as well as the capacity of the Iraqi Air Force to conduct close air support (CAS) attacks against Iranian ground units.

- **The Iranians used denial and deception (D&D) extensively and effectively, both as a prelude to Walfajr-8 and during the operation itself.** In order to deceive the Iraqis into thinking that the main thrust was going to be directed at Basrah, the Iranians erected a large tent city on the outskirts of the Hawr al-Hawizah marshes. They also made mock preparations for a major amphibious assault by positioning numerous decoys—actually old dilapidated vessels—in the same vicinity.⁸⁸ When they began repositioning troops into the border region around Abadan in preparation for the main assault, they used commercial—rather than military—trucks to transport personnel.⁸⁹ Most of their logistics operations were conducted under the cover of darkness. They also camouflaged their fixed positions along the Shatt al-Arab. In order to deceive the Iraqis as to their true intentions, they began a disinformation campaign, feeding false intelligence to the Iraqi high command through double agents.⁹⁰ Because of these measures, the Iranian build-up in the

⁸⁷ Hoseyn Zakariani, “Safavi: If the Enemy Acts Foolishly, Our Response Will Be Very Strong and Crushing,” *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 22 September 2004.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ According to Hiro, “[American] intelligence analysts concluded that these vehicles were carrying goods rather than men.” See Hiro, 170.

⁹⁰ One such operation was described by IRGC General Rahim Safavi: “In connection with misinforming the enemy in the Faw Operations, we

south went undetected, both by the Iraqis, who were heavily dependent on aerial reconnaissance and human and signals intelligence, and the Americans, who were providing the Iraqis with imagery acquired from satellites. Once Walfajr-8 was underway, the Iranians were able to keep the Iraqis off-guard with their repeated feints in the Hawr al-Hawizah region. Although the Iraqis subsequently laid most of the blame for the Faw debacle on Washington, which they said had provided them with false or misleading intelligence,⁹¹ the fact is that the Iranians waged a very successful D&D campaign that caught everyone—including the Americans—by surprise. Over the course of the four years between Operations Ramadan and Walfajr-8, the Iranians had also become better at OPSEC. For instance, during the latter operation, they tended to rely on couriers on motorcycles to deliver messages to front-line commanders, rather than using radios. Thus, the Iraqis and their allies could no longer read Iranian messages through signal interception.⁹²

- **The Iranians planned and trained extensively for Walfajr-8.** Unlike in the earlier phases of the war, in which Iran's leaders believed that the faith and revolutionary zeal of the average Iranian foot soldier could compensate for his lack of training and equipment, the IRGC and the Artesh spent a great deal of time training and preparing for Walfajr-8. In the months lead-

planned a very large disinformation operation in which the Americans, the Soviets, and the Iraqis were deceived. This operation consisted of, first, having caught an Iraqi spy in Ahvaz who for a long time reported by wireless radio on the preparedness of our forces and the disposition of the Basij in Ahvaz to the Iraqis. Hence, we located the frequency and traced it, and we found the location of the wireless radio, caught the spy, and told him that the sentence for him according to the laws of the Revolutionary Court is execution because he was giving information to the enemy during war, but if he did not want to be executed, he would have to communicate the information that we would give him to the Iraqis. That person was under our control and communicated the information that we wanted." Hoseyn Zakariani, "Safavi: If the Enemy Acts Foolishly, Our Response Will Be Very Strong and Crushing," *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 22 September 2004.

⁹¹ Hiro, 170.

⁹² Ibid.

ing up to the operation, they conducted multiple amphibious exercises in northern Iran. They created new units that specialized in amphibious and maritime unconventional warfare. They also acquired specialized amphibious equipment, including small boats, for use on the Shatt al-Arab.

- **They were also better at sustainment.** As noted above, in the early phases of the war, most of the Iranian offensives tended to fizzle out after three or four days, as lead units would outpace their rudimentary supply lines and eventually lose cohesion. As a result, the Iranians often failed to consolidate their holdings. It became a case of “two steps forward, one and a half steps back.” By 1986, however, Iran’s forces had demonstrated a remarkable improvement in terms of sustainment, particularly in the area of logistics. During Walfajr-8, the Iranians used ingenious methods to funnel men and equipment—especially heavy artillery—onto the peninsula, including a pontoon bridge that spanned the Shatt al-Arab and that could be sunk during the day and refloated at night. As Iranian units fanned across the peninsula, they rapidly dispersed and dug in, making themselves difficult to target.

Ultimately, however, these improvements were unable to compensate for Iraq’s material and innate advantages as the defending force. In the wake of Operation Walfajr-8, Arab and Western countries redoubled their support to Iraq. Despite the triumphalist rhetoric on the Iranian side, a much-talked-about “final offensive” failed to materialize. The conflict settled back into a largely static war of attrition, until the final months of the war, when the Iranians were ejected from most of the territory they occupied in Iraq, including the Faw Peninsula.

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Lessons for the present

As the above examples illustrate, Iran's armed forces are capable of adapting to different circumstances and incorporating lessons learned from previous operations. They also devote a great deal of attention to studying wartime operations in their military training centers and institutes of higher learning. Although a significant period of time has elapsed since the war, many of Iran's senior leaders are veterans of the "imposed war" and their only combat experience stems from that war. So, what might operations such as Walfajr-8 tell us about Iran's current-day operational planning and military decision-making?

- **Iranian military commanders are likely to be relatively flexible and demonstrate some initiative in combat.** As the operations above illustrate, the Iranians are nothing if not resourceful. Thirty years of sanctions, coupled with a revolutionary drive for self-sufficiency, have made the Iranians adept at making do with less. Unlike some of their regional counterparts, including the Iraqis during the war, Iran's armed forces—both the IRGC and Artesh—are not overly constrained by rigid doctrinal principles. Nor are they saddled with a highly centralized decision-making apparatus that offers no latitude for independent thinking.⁹³ This flexibility stems partly from the nature of the Islamic Revolution itself, which had a leveling impact on the military and society in general. It probably also stemmed from necessity—the armed forces of the nascent Islamic Republic were forced to innovate in order for the regime to survive. **During operations such as Walfajr-8, frontline commanders would abandon their initiatives or shift their efforts mid-course if a particular operation was not showing promise.** More recent developments, within both the IRGC and the Artesh, suggest that

⁹³ The Iraqis, by contrast, rigidly adhered to Soviet doctrine and discouraged initiative among all but the most senior military decision-makers.

local commanders will still have considerable latitude for independent action, at least in wartime.⁹⁴

- **Coordination problems will continue to plague Iran’s armed forces, but the Iranians are aware of these issues and have taken steps to diminish the seams between the IRGC and the Artesh.** During the war—and especially in its early phases—the Iranians were hampered by poor coordination between the IRGC and Artesh as well as inter-service rivalries. These problems are likely to persist for the foreseeable future—an inevitable outgrowth of having two parallel armed forces with similar missions and overlapping responsibilities. However, it is worth noting that the Iranians have evidently thought about these issues and in some cases taken steps to alleviate the seams between the two services and improve coordination. As noted above, in 1984, the SDC created the joint Khatam al-Anbiya Defense Headquarters to oversee and coordinate activities between the services at the regional level. Following the war, in 1989, the Iranians abolished the IRGC Ministry—and with it, the IRGC’s autonomous status—and subordinated both services to the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS). This trend continues, as shown by the IRGC and Artesh navies’ recent attempt to delineate their respective operating areas—with the

⁹⁴ In 2005, the IRGC announced that it was incorporating a flexible, layered defense—referred to as a “mosaic defense”—into its doctrine. As part of this plan, “the IRGC has restructured its command and control architecture into a system of 31 separate commands—one for the city of Tehran and 30 for each of Iran’s provinces. The primary goal of restructuring has been to strengthen unit cohesion at the local level and give commanders more latitude to respond to potential threats—both foreign and domestic.” See Michael Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine,” in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer* (Washington, D.C.: The United Institute of Peace, 2010), 71. The Artesh also appears to be introducing changes to its force structure which are likely to give operational commanders more scope for independent decision-making in times of war. For instance, the Artesh appears to be moving away from a division-centric model to a brigade-centric model. According to Galen Wright, author of the blog *Arkenstone*, these changes “can be seen as flattening decision making by giving brigade commanders a larger tool-box that can be called upon without relying on divisional-C2 to remain intact.” <http://thearkenstone.blogspot.com/>. Accessed on 25 November 2012.

former assuming responsibility for the Persian Gulf and the latter the Gulf of Oman.⁹⁵

- **The Iranians will continue to use terrain, time, and weather to offset their material weaknesses and enhance the survivability of their forces.** During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran had to compensate for its lack of hardware and the limited maneuverability of its forces by using the environment to its advantage. As Walfajr-8 and other operations illustrate, the Iranians were adept at doing this. They usually chose their terrain carefully, opting for muddy, swampy, or mountainous ground that favored infantry over armored or mechanized forces. Three of the four operations detailed above were launched at night. In Walfajr-8, the Iranians used cloud cover to maneuver their forces and inhibit Iraqi CAS. Given the asymmetric nature of a potential conflict between Iran and its principal adversaries, including the United States, these dynamics are likely to continue to factor heavily in Iranian planning, both on land and at sea. **In particular, the Iranians are likely to concentrate their operations at times and in locations that offset their adversary's room to maneuver and technological superiority.**
- **Denial and deception will figure prominently in Iranian operational planning.** It took the Iranians a while to master the art of D&D during the war, but by the war's final years, it had become a regular feature of Iranian operations. **Walfajr-8—arguably the most successful Iranian operation of the war—featured the use of decoys, feints, and a disinformation campaign that successfully fooled not only the Iraqis, but also their American allies.** Any lessons the Iranians derived from the war are likely to be reinforced by other, more recent examples of the successful application of D&D techniques, such as Serbian deception and concealment efforts during the NATO air campaign in Kosovo.
- **Domestic political actors and foreign proxies can have an important—and sometimes decisive—impact on Iranian operational planning.** During the war, Iranian generals routinely

⁹⁵ Michael Connell, "The Artesh Navy: Iran's Strategic Force," <http://www.mei.edu/content/artesh-navy-irans-strategic-force>. Accessed on 15 October 2012.

complained about interference from Tehran, especially during the war's early phases. The SDC—whose members included senior Artesh and IRGC officers as well as civilians—was a divided and querulous body, in part because it tended to reflect the Iranian political landscape at the time. **Decisions were often made with an eye toward pleasing domestic political constituencies.** One driving factor behind Iran's decision to invade Iraq, for instance, was the desire of Iran's leaders to foster unity and improve morale on the home front. Another factor was the lobbying efforts of key Iraqi Shia opposition figures, including Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the head of SCIRI. **Domestic political actors and foreign proxies will probably continue to have an impact on Iranian operational planning, in part because the factors that allowed them to influence decision-makers during the Iran-Iraq War remain in place.** Iran's political landscape remains highly factionalized. The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)—the institutional successor to the SDC and Iran's top national security advisory body—is still a mixed military-civilian entity that reflects Iran's diverse political make-up. Foreign—especially Shia—proxies continue to be a major enabler for Iran, allowing the Islamic Republic to project its power and influence over neighboring countries and strike its enemies at will. Given the extent to which Iran has leveraged such groups in the past, particularly in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the growing influence of the Qods Force, it is hard to imagine a scenario involving a major armed conflict with an external power in which proxies would not factor heavily in Iranian operational planning.

The approach employed in this paper—using historical case studies to shed light on current operational decision-making—clearly has its limits. More than two decades have elapsed since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Since that time, Iran's armed forces have continued to evolve and adapt to changes in the regional security environment. The most significant changes have been technological, as the IRGC and Artesh have acquired more advanced weapons systems, particularly for their naval and ballistic missile forces. Iran's command and control architecture has also evolved considerably. This evolution began with the creation of the Armed Forces General Staff in the immediate post-war period and was reflected in the recent trend toward

the decentralization of decision-making authority, both within the IRGC and the Artesh.

Many elements of Iranian operational level decision-making are undoubtedly context specific. For instance, Iran's use of human wave tactics during the early phases of the war stemmed from a combination of specific factors—for instance, ideological hubris, lack of training, and Iraq's use of static defenses—that are unlikely to be replicated in the same shape and form in a current-day scenario.⁹⁶ With this caveat in mind, however, a close analysis of Iran's wartime operations can still provide valuable insights about some of the broad parameters of present-day operational decision-making in Iran's armed forces, especially in light of the lack of available information on the topic. The war is the only concrete example of Iranian operational decision making during major combat operations that we can analyze in any detail. On a smaller scale, the asymmetric principles that dominated Iranian strategy during the war are still relevant—albeit on a different scale—to a potential conflict between Iran and the United States. Finally, as has been noted above, the Iranians themselves take the war seriously and study it in their military academies and training centers with an eye toward deriving lessons for the present.

⁹⁶ Human wave tactics do have a modern parallel, however, in the swarming tactics used by the IRGC Navy. Both are premised on overwhelming their enemy with a massed concentration of forces.

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Appendix: Map of the Iran-Iraq War: The Central and Southern sectors



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COP-2013-U-005291-Final



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