

EPILOGUE: IRAQ AND KUWAIT

From a purely strategic aspect, we need to say something about the invasion of Kuwait. The action seems to contradict Iraq's primary operational behavior throughout the war with Iran. We noted how the Iraqis maintained a static defense for most of the war and only grudgingly went over to the offense in the very last days. In our Tactics and Operations chapter we opined that Iraq's ability to project power was limited, and that its commanders were not comfortable on the offense. And yet within 2 years after the war's end, the Iraqis invaded their southern neighbor. Why?

Conventional wisdom maintains that Iraq always was covetous of Kuwait, and that, indeed, the nature of the Ba'thists is to be expansionist; in invading, the Iraqis were merely following their instincts. This explanation does not hold up. Why, for example, if they desired territory, didn't they seize Khuzestan at the end of the war when Iran was prostrate. Why did they not at least ensure themselves control of the Shatt Al Arab? By withdrawing completely from Iran and turning the issue over to the United Nations for a settlement, the Iraqis behaved as responsible members of the world community.⁶³

Nor does it seem reasonable to argue that Iraq invaded Kuwait because it thought it could get away with it. Throughout the war, the Iraqis had ample evidence of the importance of Kuwait to the superpowers. The reflagging episode (in 1987) demonstrated clearly that the Soviet Union and the United States would defend Kuwait's integrity. Therefore, Iraq could not have hoped to take possession of Kuwait without opposition.

Taking all this into account, it seems obvious that Iraq invaded its neighbor because it was desperate. It had a million man army that it could not demobilize, because it had no jobs to send the men home to. It had no jobs because its economy had been ruined by the war. It could not get its economy going

again until it demobilized. Thus the Iraqi leadership saw itself trapped in a vicious dilemma. At the same time, Kuwait was fabulously wealthy, and Iraq—by seizing it—could hope to exploit its wealth to resolve its economic problems. Iraq's desperate gamble may yet pay off, but, as of this writing, its leaders appear to have dug themselves even deeper into an economic abyss.⁶⁴

The lesson would appear to be, never make war until you have assessed the potential of your opponent. Iraq's initial mistake in attacking Iran was in failing to appreciate the vast human potential that Tehran could exploit. Once the Iranian people rose to defend their country, it was too late for the Iraqis to call off the invasion. Iraq could do nothing but fight on, committing more and more resources, getting mired deeper and deeper in the struggle. And, in the end—although it emerged victorious—it practically bankrupted itself.⁶⁵

Clausewitz's dictum—that war should be considered an extension of policy—is applicable here. It makes no sense to resort to war unless it can be waged efficiently; otherwise one risks obviating the very policy that one is seeking to achieve. This clearly is what happened to the Iraqis. They went to war with Iran to achieve a limited objective—to retake the Shatt Al Arab. Under the circumstances, this aim may have been defensible. What was indefensible, however, was Saddam's failure to work out in advance what he would do if—as happened—he could not end the war quickly and successfully.

We think that U.S. policymakers would be well advised to draw a lesson from Saddam's experience. We are now poised for war with Iraq. Before we commit troops, it might be wise to ask ourselves, how much support does Saddam enjoy within his country? If his support is substantial, are we prepared to commit unlimited resources to bringing about his defeat?

Crucial to this question is the attitude of Iraq's army. We need to know how the army will react to a challenge from our side. This presents immediate problems, since—as our study has shown—the army is an enigma. Throughout most of the

war it kept well in the background, and only came to center stage at the end. Nonetheless, it is essential to understand what is important to the military leaders, and how their attitudes might affect Iraqi decisions.

Based on research our answer is that the army is primarily concerned about its honor. A cadre of professionals in the Iraqi Army do not mix in politics; they exist solely to fight. At the crucial meeting of the Ba'th in 1986, this element argued for a military solution to the crisis produced by the loss of Al Faw. They brokered a scheme to win the war, implemented it, and—when they had proved themselves successful—they returned to the barracks.

This tells us that Iraq's military leaders will fight for the regime, as long as it respects their dignity. Correspondingly, if they perceive that a military challenge from the United States threatens Iraq's vital interests, they will not hesitate to fight with great tenacity. Understanding this lesson from the Iran-Iraq War, it seems sensible to carefully weigh our future course of action in respect to Iraq. If we mean to fight Baghdad, we should be prepared to defeat it as quickly as possible, since the Iraqi military has shown that it fights well on the defensive. If we fail to force the Iraqis to capitulate in the first days of the conflict, we can expect them to "hedgehog." They will wrap themselves around Kuwait and force us to pry them loose—which could be a hideously expensive prospect for us, in lives as well as in resources.

These costs may be justifiable. Essential Western economic interests are at risk, as are the obligations of the international community to resist aggression. The military buildup has also placed U.S. credibility and prestige on the line. But if we come to believe that diplomacy has failed and that war is fatally inevitable, the promise of easy victory should not be the deciding factor. That promise may be illusive, drawing the United States into a protracted struggle with the Moslem world.