



# IRAQ'S UNWAVERING fist

Major John F. Antal

The Iraqis launched a series of successful combined arms offensives in 1988 that shattered Iran's military forces and brought an end to the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. These offensives emphasized the shock power and mobile firepower of Iraq's armored and mechanized infantry forces. Using armor units as spearheads, Iraq conducted synchronized combined arms attacks that made it the regional superpower of the Middle East.

The use of armor and armored fighting vehicles has been an integral part of Iraqi military doctrine. In late 1980 the Iraqi armor force had about 2,750 main battle tanks, most of which were Soviet-made T-54s, T-55s, and T-62s. But the Iraqis also had 100 Soviet T-72s. By 1990 this number had increased to almost 6,000 main battle tanks, more than 500 of them Soviet T-72M1s. (See also "Armor in DESERT SHIELD," by Michael R. Jacobson, *INFANTRY*, November-December 1990, pages 32-37.)

If war comes again to the Persian Gulf, armor can be expected to play a major role in Iraq's operations, and for the immediate future the mainstays of the Iraqi armor force will still be the Soviet T-55 and T-62 and the Chinese T-59/69 tanks. Dependable and easy to maintain, the T-55 tanks are

equipped with a 100mm main gun that has an effective range of 1,000 meters. The T-62s are equipped with a 115mm gun that has an effective range of 1,600 meters, while the T-59 has a 105mm gun with an effective range of 1,800 meters. All three tanks have a four-man crew (tank commander, gunner, loader, and driver). Because of the age of these tanks, the Iraqis have begun upgrading some of their T-55 and T-62 tanks with additional armor and the 125mm gun from the T-72.

The most modern tank in the Iraqi inventory is the Soviet-built T-72M1, and it is a worthy opponent. All of Iraq's T-72M1s are in Republican Guard units that are likely to lead the main effort of any Iraqi attack or counterattack. (According to reports, the T-72M1 is now being manufactured in Iraq as the *Assad Babi*, or Lion of Babylon.) Its improved composite laminate armor will defeat the U.S.-made Dragon, improved TOW, and TOW-2 missiles fired at any range against its 60-degree frontal arc. (Soviet models of this tank are reportedly equipped with kevlar-type top-attack protection.) The T-72M1 has a cruising range of 480 kilometers, which can be extended by 160 kilometers with the addition of external fuel drums.

The T-72M1 is equipped with a 125mm smoothbore can-



non that has an effective range of 2,000 meters. It has a rate of fire of eight rounds per minute with its automatic loader and carries a basic load of 40 rounds. It is equipped with an improved fire control system, a laser rangefinder, and passive-infrared gunnery sights. The 125mm gun is fully stabilized, providing the tank with a full shoot-on-the-move capability. The tank can accelerate to a speed of 80 kilometers per hour and has an effective NBC over-pressure protection system to help its crew of three survive in a chemical environment.

Iraqi armor is organized with four tanks per platoon in the tank units assigned to infantry divisions and three per platoon in tank and Republican Guard divisions. In addition, a company headquarters section normally consists of two or three tanks. With three companies in a standard battalion and four in a Republican Guard tank battalion, each standard tank battalion therefore has 40 to 45 tanks and a Republican Guard battalion has 55 to 60.

Iraqi armor units are supported by combat support and combat service support elements from their assigned brigade. The movement of Iraqi armor is greatly improved by the use of heavy equipment transport trucks. (The Iraqis purchased more than 1,300 West German tank transporters and used them effectively in the war with Iran.)

During the first year of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqis employed a modified version of Soviet offensive tank doctrine, which depends heavily on mass and speed. Iraqi commanders exercised rigid control of the formations, often neglecting the combined arms. They seldom achieved speed in the attack.

Initially, the attack into Iran in 1980 was nothing more than a road march supported by artillery. Tank-on-tank battles were rare. Iraqi armor, faced with ineffective and scattered Iranian resistance, was virtually unopposed. Convinced that an "all-tank" doctrine was the surest way to defeat the Iranians and save Iraqi lives, the Iraqis sent tank units without infantry support to capture towns and cities. But this proved to be a major mistake, because the tanks moved too slowly to be decisive.

Iranian resistance increased as the Iraqis drove deeper into Iranian territory. The Iranians husbanded their armor for counterattack purposes and fought the Iraqis with a force composed mostly of enthusiastic Revolutionary Guard infantrymen.

Against Iraqi armor, the Iranians used infantry rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), antitank guided missiles (ATGMs), Cobra attack helicopters, and even water from irrigation canals to flood low tracts of land.

Faced with these antitank islands of resistance, the Iraqis suffered prohibitive armor losses and their plan for a quick victory failed. Their offensive bogged down because of their failure to use dismounted infantry in terrain that clearly called for this support. During the five months of fighting in 1980 for the urban areas of Abadan, Ahwaz, Dezful, and Khorramshahr, for example, the Iraqis lost 200 to 300 armored vehicles, almost 10 percent of their tank force.

Because of these losses in city fighting, the Iraqis made a major shift in their armor tactics. They switched to defensive missions and continued in a predominantly defensive role from 1981 until 1988. During this period, tanks were employed as mobile artillery, pillboxes, and part of meticulously planned counterattack forces. The Iraqis normally did not mix their tanks with infantry in the front lines but held them in reserve behind the triangular infantry defensive positions, and used them for counterattacks by fire from prepared positions.

The standard Iraqi defensive battle with armor was illustrated during the Battle of the Kharkeh Plain in January 1981. The Iranians assembled almost 300 tanks and conducted an uncoordinated attack that managed to breach the initial Iraqi defensive line. The Iranians moved slowly, however, and without the benefit of reconnaissance. This gave the Iraqis time to maneuver their armor into a prepared defensive area that opposed the Iranian direction of advance. An Iranian division drove into this preselected kill sack and lost its lead brigade in a matter of minutes to the direct fires of Iraqi tanks and ATGMs. Then, proving that revolutionary fervor is a poor substitute for military professionalism, the Iranian commander committed a second and then a third brigade to the same killing ground. When the battle was over, an entire Iranian division of 140 to 215 tanks had been destroyed.

This battle also dramatized the poor state of crew training in both armor forces. The Iraqis lost between 80 and 130 armored vehicles in this battle in spite of the fact that they ambushed the Iranian forces and occupied strong defensive po-

sitions. Most of the tank gunnery occurred at near point-blank ranges. Both sides relied heavily on ATGM fires for the long range destruction of armored vehicles. In fact, long range hits by tanks were the exception throughout the war. Once the Iraqis won control of the area, however, they were able to recover and fix many destroyed tanks, while the Iranians could not.

The Iraqis stayed on the defensive until early 1988 and beat back successive Iranian attacks. The Iranians launched one "final offensive" after another and gained ground but suffered enormous casualties. Their personnel losses could be replaced, but equipment losses were another matter. Their tanks and antitank missiles were soon in desperately short supply. In contrast, the Iraqi's ability to field large numbers of modern tanks steadily increased.

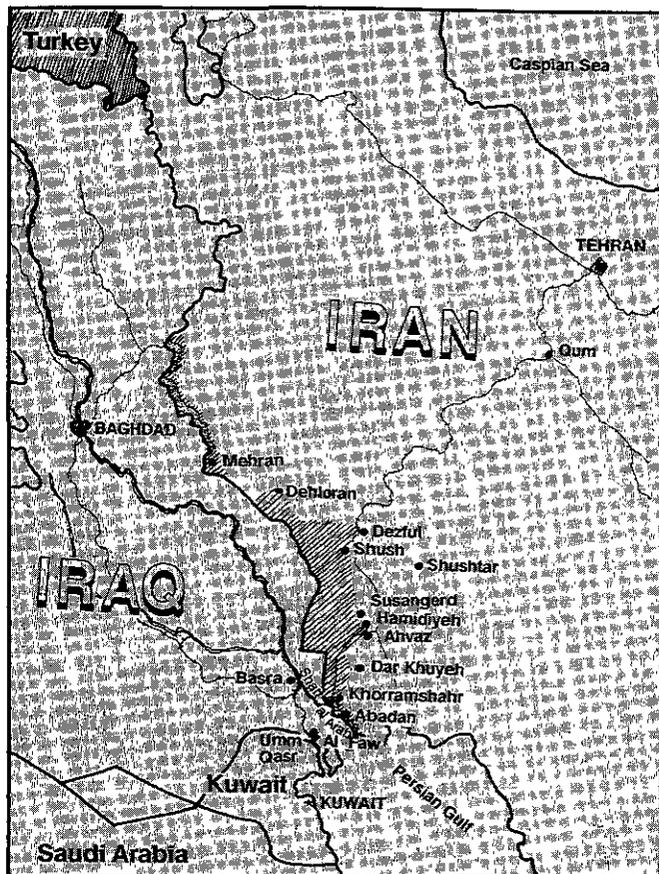
The Iranians continued to suffer excessive casualties as a result of their "human wave" attacks. These heavy losses, coupled with Iraq's continued use of chemical weapons and missile attacks against Iranian cities, lowered Iranian morale until fewer and fewer Iranians were willing to join the Revolutionary Guards. Still, not wanting to give up and counting on the valor of their massed infantry assaults to destroy Iraq in one last push, Iran planned to continue its offensive operations.

The Iraqi offensive of 1988 changed all that by using armor decisively in four major combined arms offensive operations. In a massive attack on 17 April 1988, Iraq launched its "Blessed Ramadan" offensive and recaptured the Faw Peninsula. With a force ratio of 6:1, Major General Maher Rashid, with the 7th and 3d Corps, conducted a coordinated combined arms attack that included two amphibious operations. Tanks and BMPs of the Iraqi Republican Guard spearheaded the attack in the south through complex obstacles and prepared antitank defenses. In 35 hours, the Faw defenses collapsed and those soldiers of the Iranian garrison who had not been killed retreated in disarray across the Shatt Al-Arab waterway.

On 25 May 1988, Iraq launched its next offensive near Basra at Fish Lake, a marshy area that had dried enough to permit good tank trafficability. Conducting a forward passage of lines through their own defending infantry forces, Iraq's Republican Guard forces attacked with speed, mass, and professionalism. The Iranians defended stubbornly behind a well-prepared belt of complex obstacles and antitank positions, despite intense Iraqi artillery barrages and chemical attacks.

Massed Iraqi armor and close support from attack helicopters punched through the defenses and beat back a major Iranian counterattack. Nearly five Iranian divisions began a rapid retreat. After 10 hours of intense combat, Iraq reconquered the town of Salamchek, the goal of the offensive.

In June 1988 Iraq launched two major attacks that captured the town of Mehran and the Iranian positions to the rear of the Manjnu Islands in the Howezah marshes north of Basra. At Manjnu the Iraqis again launched a massive frontal attack against the Iranian defenses. This attack was coordinated with armor, infantry, chemical weapons, and hundreds of artillery weapons and tanks that had been placed in built-up positions in the marsh.



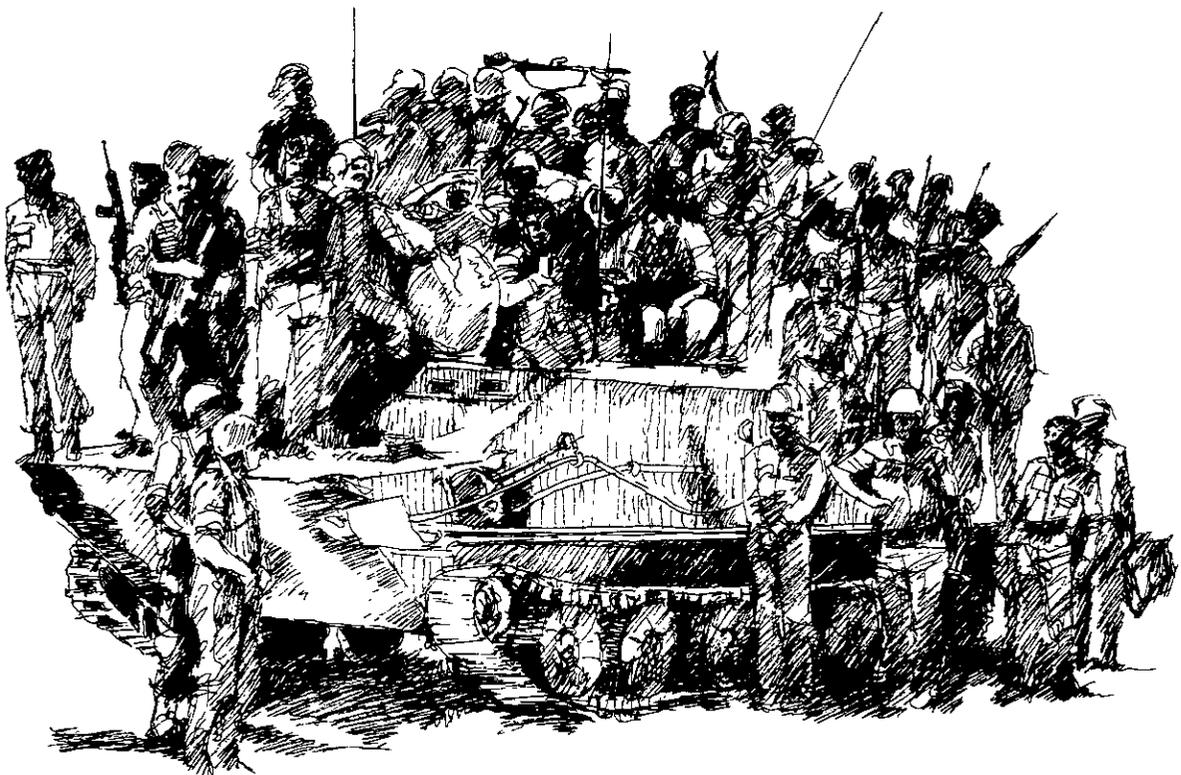
As the Iranian defense collapsed, the Iraqis used bridging equipment and bulldozers to improve mobility corridors so they could continue the attack into Iran. Again, Republican Guard armored units led the way. With the tanks of the Third Army, they attacked into Iran for the first time since 1982 with a force ratio of more than 20:1. Against such odds, the demoralized Iranians gave way.

The Iraqi offensives in 1988 resulted in the defeat of the Iranian military forces and drove them back to the 1982 battle lines. Moreover, Iraq captured immense quantities of usable military equipment, much of it abandoned in perfect condition by the Iranians.

On 13 July 1988, Saddam Hussein threatened to continue his attack into Iran, and on 20 July Iran reluctantly accepted a cease-fire. Except for continued Iraqi attacks on Kurdish rebels, the long and bloody war was over.

The Iraqis' offensive successes of 1988 resulted from detailed, synchronized planning by a few well-trained staffs. Iraqi forces trained for nearly a year before conducting the offensives. These battles proved that the Iraqi high command had learned how to synchronize the employment of a large land force and effectively defeat a less agile enemy. The Iraqis greatly outmatched their opponents in battlefield mobility and firepower, capabilities furnished by their armored forces and supporting artillery. The Iranians, unable to respond with mobile armored forces, were not strong enough to hold the line with their under-equipped infantry units.

This strength for detailed, synchronized planning, however, also revealed an important weakness. The Iraqis needed a



tremendous amount of time to synchronize their battle elements in such detail. After each attack, they needed at least a month to reorganize, plan, rehearse, and mass their strength for the next operation. Political control over the officer corps consistently competed with the need for military professionalism and this over-centralization resulted in a detailed orders approach to armor combat.

Complete justification for battle actions was required of small unit leaders to ensure that their actions were approved by their superiors. Full-scale rehearsals were conducted to verify this justification and to ensure the unity of the combined arms effort. But what would have happened if the Iraqis had been forced to react to fast-moving situations without enough planning time? What would have happened if the initial plan had not worked and the Iraqis had been forced to think on the move? The 1988 offensives went according to plan only because of favorable force ratios that allowed the Iraqis to steamroll over the Iranian positions.

The Achilles heel of the Iraqi Army, then, is its command, control, and communications (C3). As a result of a command style that requires senior leaders to control actions directly on the battlefield, the Iraqis employ their armor in determined, set-piece moves. In this system, an act of initiative that fails can result in the summary execution of a leader. They have no concept that permits an officer to disobey orders if the situation changes and the reality of battle demands immediate action. As a result, the officers have little initiative.

Current Iraqi doctrine for the employment of armor is the product of their experiences during the war with Iran. During that war, the Iraqi Army initially proved ineffective in its attempts to employ armor to achieve decisive results. By 1988,

however, it was able to use its armor in combined arms operations that decisively defeated the Iranians and brought the long war to an end.

The lessons of the Iran-Iraq War prove that the Iraqi armor force is vulnerable. Although it is effective in the defense against a dismounted infantry opponent, its ability to maneuver against a more agile opponent remains to be seen. Iraqi armor has certainly proved less than capable in conducting fast-moving offensive operations.

The Iraqis' rigid command style, their lack of initiative at small unit level, the difficulty their armor has in working with infantry and artillery units, and their overdependence on detailed synchronized planning are vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

Any future operations against the Iraqis must therefore stress a high degree of agility, initiative, and speed—and combined arms must be the key. The focus of these efforts must be to destroy and disrupt their command, control, and communications (C3). Their C3 facilities, military and political, must be priority targets.

If the Iraqis can be denied the time for detailed planning, their synchronization can be disrupted and they can be defeated piecemeal. These factors should be considered carefully in developing a mechanism for defeating an Iraqi armor force.

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