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### The Puzzle of Personalist Performance: Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War

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## The Puzzle of Personalist Performance: Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War

CAITLIN TALMADGE

*Saddam's Iraq has become a cliché in the study of military effectiveness—the quintessentially coup-proofed, personalist dictatorship, unable to generate fighting power commensurate with its resources. But evidence from the later years of the Iran-Iraq War actually suggests that the Iraqi military could be quite effective on the battlefield. What explains this puzzling instance of effectiveness, which existing theories predict should not have occurred? Recently declassified documents and new histories of the war show that the Iraqi improvements stemmed from changes in Saddam's perceptions of the threat environment, which resulted in significant shifts in his policies with respect to promotions, training, command arrangements, and information management in the military. Threat perceptions and related changes in these practices also help explain Iraq's return to ineffectiveness after the war, as evident in 1991 and 2003. These findings, conceived as a theory development exercise, suggest that arguments linking regime type and coup-ridden civil-military relations to military performance need to take into account the threat perceptions that drive autocratic leaders' policies toward their militaries. After discussing how to define and measure battlefield effectiveness, the article reviews Saddam's changes and their effects; addresses alternative explanations for the improvement in Iraqi effectiveness; and explains how further research based on this*

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*initial exercise could generate a better understanding of the observed variation in states' battlefield effectiveness, including variation within and across autocratic regimes.*

Perhaps no military has acquired a more disparaged status in recent years than the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein. In the 1990s analysts disagreed about the causes of us victory in the Gulf War, but virtually all agreed that Saddam's forces had performed poorly on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> In the years since the second Gulf War, scholars have debated the pitfalls of the us military occupation but again concurred that Iraqi effectiveness in the conventional phase of the war was very poor.<sup>2</sup> Although everyone acknowledges that Iraq never could have routed the powerful American military, the consistent inability of Iraqi forces to impose significant battlefield costs on the United States has more or less turned Saddam's military into a cliché—the quintessentially politicized, coup-proofed, authoritarian army unable to generate fighting power commensurate with its resources.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Saddam's Iraq has become the poster child for a growing body of research attesting to the poor military performance of personalist dictatorships, a distinct class of authoritarian regimes said to be uniquely deficient in war.<sup>4</sup>

Though this image accurately reflects Iraqi military performance in 1991 and 2003, it presents an intriguing contrast to Iraqi performance in the Iran-Iraq War. In the years immediately after that war, American military assessments effusively praised Saddam's military for its “exemplary command and control, excellent combined arms tactics, and the remarkable bravery of its

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Biddle, “Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us About the Future of Conflict,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 158–61; John Mueller, “The Perfect Enemy: Assessing the Gulf War,” *Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (1995): 100–2; Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 1996): 171–212; Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 258–59. For more general background on the war, see Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (Washington, DC: Joint Center for Operational Analysis, 2006); Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, “Saddam's Delusions: The View From the Inside,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 3 (May/June 2006). For general background on the war, see Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> On coup-proofing, see James Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 131–65.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Peceny, Caroline C. Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, “Dictatorial Peace?” *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (March 2002): 15–26; Erica Frantz and Natasha Ezrow, “‘Yes Men’ and the Likelihood of Foreign Policy Mistakes Across Dictatorships” (paper prepared for the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Ontario, 3–6 September 2009); Jessica Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, book manuscript, 2012.

troops.”<sup>5</sup> For both policy analysts and scholars of military effectiveness, this contrast is deeply puzzling. Many of the seemingly immutable factors said to have inhibited Iraqi effectiveness in the two conflicts against the United States—coup-ridden civil-military relations, Iraq’s Arab culture, its level of economic development, colonial legacy, ethnic and sectarian divisions, and political institutions, often called “regime type”—were all present in the 1980s when Iraq fought Iran.

Certainly, the circumstances of the wars were different, and Iran was a different sort of opponent from the United States. But even accounting for these factors, there were very real variations in the quality of Iraqi military performance in the three sets of ground battles and particularly within the Iran-Iraq War itself. Notably, as US assessments suggest, the final campaigns of the Iran-Iraq War evinced an Iraqi military able to sustain solid tactical proficiency and complex military operations that integrated activities across multiple combat arms—tasks it could not perform in the early years of the war against Iran or in 1991 and 2003. If the factors normally used to explain military effectiveness remained static across the three conflicts, and largely within the Iran-Iraq War itself, then what could possibly explain the good Iraqi performance in the late 1980s? What were the Iraqis doing then that they didn’t do before or after? And why did they do it? Answering these questions is important for two reasons.

First, Iraqi military effectiveness is a startling phenomenon for those who study the conflict behavior of autocratic regimes. A plethora of recent research has generated the seemingly ironclad finding that personalist dictatorships perform poorly in war, reinforcing a larger axiom that autocracies on average are less militarily effective.<sup>6</sup> Saddam’s Iraq should be an easy case for these theories to explain and in fact is invoked often as a stylized example in such research. If existing theories cannot explain a case about which they make such unambiguous and uniform predictions, however, then it strongly suggests the need for additional theorizing about the drivers of military effectiveness. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to engage fully in such theorizing, the analysis here offers a first step in that direction by generating inductive insights using new and detailed evidence on a case that virtually all scholars of military effectiveness regard as important. As such, the article offers a potentially powerful heuristic for theory development, even though it does not engage in definitive theory testing.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas V. Johnson, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*, vol. 1, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 3–202 (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1990), 52.

<sup>6</sup> On personalism, see Peceny, Beer, and Sanchez-Terry, “Dictatorial Peace?”; Frantz and Ezrow, “Yes Men”; Weeks, *Dictators*. On the larger regime-type argument, see David Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (1992): 24–37; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Second, there are practical reasons to want to understand the Iraqi case better. Although a commonly noted implication of the democratic peace theory is that we should not expect to see many future wars between democracies, another is that most future wars will involve at least one non-democracy. If that is true, then it is important to know what increases or decreases the fighting power of this class of states. Fighting power, or what I call “battlefield effectiveness” and define in more detail below, is distinct from war outcomes alone and is of particular relevance to us foreign policy. After all, the United States’ overwhelming power means that the ultimate outcome of its conventional wars is rarely in doubt. The real issue is cost: the casualties, time, and money that an opponent can impose on the United States along the way. Those could have been far higher in 1991 and 2003 had the Iraqi military fought as it did in 1987–88, even though the United States still would have achieved ultimate victory. The key question for net assessment, then, is when non-democratic adversaries or allies will fight more like the Iraqis did in 1991 and 2003, or the early 1980s, and when they might perform more as the Iraqis did in the late 1980s—a question that Iraq’s three wars, especially the Iran-Iraq War, provide an unusually well-controlled opportunity to explore.

Such exploration is possible because of a treasure trove of recently released, translated documents from Saddam’s regime, captured during American military operations in Iraq. These documents include audio recordings of Saddam’s meetings with his commanders, internal Baath correspondence, and Iraqi intelligence assessments and military journals. Along with other new sources of information, including declassified us documents and new histories containing interviews with Iraqi participants, the documents show that Iraq’s increased fighting power in the Iran-Iraq War stemmed fundamentally from changes in what I call “military organizational practices” related to promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management.

Saddam entered the war with a set of military organizational practices in these four areas that reflected his concern about internal threats, especially coups, as well as his lack of military expertise. Under the pressure of a lengthy war against a formidable external foe, however, his calculations changed, albeit belatedly. In the mid-1980s, and especially after 1986, Saddam seems to have realized not only that he might lose the war against Iran, but that this loss might result in his removal from power, either by the Iranians or his own frustrated officer corps. In a sense, and contrary to what the literature on coup-proofing would suggest, external conventional military effectiveness actually became the best way to secure Saddam’s rule internally. The result was a series of changes in Saddam’s promotion, training, command, and information-management policies that enabled select military units to generate much greater fighting power than before. Saddam never relinquished his highly personal control of the armed forces—he still had to be convinced of the need for all changes in these key military practices, and he

oversaw their implementation tightly—but he was using this power to implement a very different set of policies by 1986–87 compared to those of 1980.

The result was a relatively rapid defeat of Iranian forces once the new practices were in place, a success made all the easier by the decline in Iranian cohesion during the last two years of the war. Unfortunately for Iraq, however, Saddam reversed most of his changes when the war ended, and robust conventional military capabilities again became more of a threat to him than a lifeline, as they had been throughout the majority of Saddam's tenure. Unconvinced of the threat of external overthrow in both 1991 and 2003—in part because of the very information-management policies he had adopted to insulate himself from coups—Saddam retained his same policies, with devastating military (and eventually domestic) results against an external adversary that did not afford him the luxury of adaptation he enjoyed in the 1980s.

All of this suggests some important potential amendments to our understanding of both this case and the broader theories of military effectiveness built in part on past readings of it. There are certainly good general reasons to believe that autocracies are prone to civil-military pathologies that hinder military effectiveness. But if modern military effectiveness requires armies to adopt a particular set of practices and personalist leaders become convinced that these policies are the best way of securing themselves in power, there is no reason that their armies cannot adopt these policies and become effective on the battlefield. In these cases, the fighting power of such states can be surprisingly high, even though the regime remains personalist. In fact, precisely because personalist regimes concentrate decision-making authority so heavily in a single leader, they may be able to adopt such changes faster than other states. Furthermore, the fact that changes in these practices can produce improvements in military effectiveness in cases where other theories argue we should least expect them suggests that the practices themselves and the calculations driving them merit further research as an overlooked determinant of effectiveness.

This article proceeds in six sections. The first section defines battlefield effectiveness and discusses how to measure it. The next section reviews existing theories of effectiveness, explaining why Iraqi performance in the 1980s is puzzling from the perspective of these arguments and how they could plausibly be amended to make sense of the case. The third section moves to empirics, sharpening the puzzle of Iraqi battlefield effectiveness and identifying the observable military tasks that Iraq was able to perform in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq War but was unable to perform earlier in the conflict, or in 1991 or 2003. Using primary source documents, the article then tracks the shift in Saddam's policies that caused the temporary improvement in Iraqi performance during the 1980s, arguing that the policy shift was prompted by changes in Saddam's own threat perceptions. Specifically, the section compares Saddam's military organizational practices

over time with respect to promotions, training, command, and information management, and it connects his changes in these policies to Iraq's varying ability to perform critical battlefield tasks. The fifth section examines case-specific alternative explanations for the improvement in Iraqi performance, including the role of allies and Iran's own effectiveness problems. The article concludes with a discussion of the broader theoretical implications of the findings, the most promising directions for additional research, and the relevance for policy.

## DEFINING AND MEASURING BATTLEFIELD EFFECTIVENESS

The many definitions of "military effectiveness" reflect the fact that warfare is complex and has many aspects that merit attention. For the purposes of analyzing the puzzle of Iraqi military performance, it is most helpful to think of effectiveness as the power a state generates from its resources at the strategic, operational, or tactical levels of war.<sup>7</sup> I use the term "battlefield effectiveness" to refer to military performance at these latter two levels, where battles and campaigns are fought, and I examine whether the Iraqis were able to execute what I call "basic tactics" and "complex operations," two sets of tasks detailed more below. Effectiveness in this view is primarily a monadic concept referring to an army's own intrinsic capabilities. To be sure, war is a dyadic interaction, but it is often most useful to think about an adversary as providing constraints on or opportunities for the execution of key tasks rather than being the sole driver of effectiveness.

For the same reason, it is important to distinguish between effectiveness and victory. Other things being equal, of course, militaries displaying the highest degree of battlefield effectiveness should score the most victories. But those other things are rarely equal. War outcomes depend heavily on the political and strategic objectives of each side, the balance of economic and military power, terrain, weapons, allies, and many other external factors that may have little relationship to an army's actual fighting capabilities. After all, states can fight well on the battlefield but still lose: consider the Germans in both world wars. Or states can fight poorly but still win: consider the Soviets in the Winter War against Finland in 1939–40. Military effectiveness is related to victory, but distinct from it. As Martin van Creveld puts it, "Victory is by no means the sole criterion of military excellence. A small army may be overwhelmed by a larger one. Confronted with impossible political and economic odds, a qualitatively superior force may go down to defeat through

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Stanley and Risa Brooks, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–26; Allan R. Millet, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," in *Military Effectiveness, Volume I: The First World War*, ed. Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 1–30.

no fault of its own. Not the outcome alone, but intrinsic qualities as well must figure in an attempt to measure military (or any other) excellence.”<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Biddle has usefully focused attention on what he calls “force employment” as a key component of effectiveness at the tactical and operational levels. Force employment refers to the tactics and doctrine by which forces are used in combat, and Biddle has shown that different methods of force employment systematically alter the combat power states produce from any given level of soldiers and weapons.<sup>9</sup> Biddle argues that militaries perform best when they utilize the “modern system” of force employment that minimizes soldiers’ exposure to the increasing lethality of modern war. The system consists of a tightly interrelated complex of cover, concealment, dispersion, suppression, small-unit independent maneuver, and combined arms at the tactical level, as well as depth, reserves, and differential concentration at the operational level of war. Though not without its critics, this definition undoubtedly captures key elements of fighting effectiveness in mid-to-high intensity conventional conflict.<sup>10</sup>

This paper tracks two specific sets of tasks that the Iraqi military should have been able to perform if it was fighting in accordance with the principles of the modern system: basic tactics and complex operations. To code “basic tactics,” I examine whether Iraqi military units demonstrated proficiency in fundamental military skills such as weapons handling, marksmanship, and the use of terrain for cover and concealment. These are the sort of minimal capabilities required to conduct static defenses, ambushes, orderly retreats, or pre-planned attritional offensives—operations that depend on a basic degree of training and unit cohesion but do not necessarily require significant initiative or improvisation during battle, or extensive coordination with other combat arms or larger units.

To code “complex operations,” I examine whether tactically proficient Iraqi units were able to engage in operations that required both low-level initiative and high-level coordination among different parts of the military. Combined arms activities—for example, the integration of infantry and armor, armor and artillery, or ground and air forces—would be a hallmark of this higher level of battlefield effectiveness. So, too, would the execution of a mobile defense-in-depth, a fighting withdrawal, or breakthrough and exploitation operations. Units of any size, from the platoon to the corps, can conduct complex operations, although the ability to conduct such operations across larger and larger military units is an indication of increasing battlefield effectiveness.

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<sup>8</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> For critical reviews of Biddle, see the special issue, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (June 2005).

As we will see below, the Iraqis were not able to perform these key tasks early in the Iran-Iraq War (or in 1991 or 2003) but could in 1987–88. The question, then, is what might have enabled them to carry out these tasks at one point in time and not others. On this, the existing literature does not produce a satisfying answer.

### IRAQI EFFECTIVENESS: A PUZZLING CASE FOR THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Existing theories generate a decisive prediction that Iraqi military effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War should have been poor. It is true that these theories are probabilistic, meaning that they do not claim to account for every single case. But close examination of the causal mechanisms they identify makes it hard to understand why Iraq should be an exception to the rule, so to speak, especially when Baathist Iraq had such extreme values of the independent variables existing theories emphasize.

The theories generally fall into two camps. One set points toward states' material resources, such as demography and the level of economic development.<sup>11</sup> Much of this literature focuses on war and battle outcomes rather than the sort of process-oriented, task-based conception of effectiveness described in the previous section. Even if we accept the outcome-focused definition of effectiveness, however, the prediction in the Iraqi case is clear. Iran was wealthier than Iraq and had three times Iraq's population.<sup>12</sup> It also had more favorable geography with far greater strategic depth than the Iraqis. The Iraqis should have had little opportunity to display the battlefield effectiveness they did under these constraints.

A second set of theories relies more on the process-oriented conception of effectiveness described previously, taking resources as a given and emphasizing what might be called force multipliers (or dividers) that affect states' abilities or incentives to use those resources efficiently. The independent variables most commonly discussed here are culture and society, regime type, and civil-military relations.

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<sup>11</sup> On demography, see Marko Djuranovic, "Democracy or Demography: Regime Type and the Determinants of War Outcomes" (PhD diss., Department of Political Science, Columbia University, 2008). On economic development, see Michael Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Michael Beckley, "Economic Development and Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 43–79. Useful additional discussion appears in Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 4 (2004): 535–46.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 54. Material advantage could be defined in other ways, such as the balance of armaments, which is discussed as an alternative explanation in the fifth section of this paper.

Though controversial, the culture arguments are fairly straightforward: Arab militaries carry with them traits from their societies that hinder battlefield effectiveness. These include undue deference to authority, an aversion to manual labor and technical work, a tendency to hoard information, and a preference for conformity over creativity.<sup>13</sup> In this view, Arab culture means that the Iraqi military should have demonstrated a fairly static inability to maximize the fighting power allowed by its resources, especially against a non-Arab military such as Iran's (or the United States').<sup>14</sup> Related arguments point to Iraq's social divisions as another impediment to effectiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Theories emphasizing regime type also stress a relatively static factor: autocracy.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, this line of research initially focused more on explaining the relative advantages of democracies at war, so Iraq's good performance against a fellow non-democratic regime (Iran) is not necessarily confounding. Still, Iraq's ability to improve its actual military skills so dramatically should be surprising given that Iraq never developed the liberal political culture and harmonious civil-military relations emphasized as democratic advantages.

Indeed, it is important to note that arguments about regime type almost always invoke additional claims about civil-military relations. For example, Dan Reiter and Allan Stam posit "the weaker or nonexistent institutionalized civilian control of the military in autocratic regimes" as a key disadvantage that democracies do not face.<sup>17</sup> Two recent studies by Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt similarly argue that democracies' healthier civil-military relations produce superior battlefield effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> Mark Peceny, Caroline Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry refer to "the constraints

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness" (PhD diss., Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996); Norvell B. De Atkine, "Why Arabs Lose Wars," *The Middle East Quarterly* (December 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Pollack acknowledges the Iraqi improvements in effectiveness in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq War and attributes them in large part to a reduction in what he calls "commissarism," a type of politicization he identified in the Iraqi armed forces. In his view, however, Arab culture still placed a hard upper bound on Iraqi effectiveness during this period. See Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture," chap. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy D. Hoyt, "Social Structure, Ethnicity, and Military Effectiveness: Iraq, 1980–2004," in *Creating Military Power*, 55–79.

<sup>16</sup> Lake, "Powerful Pacifists"; Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*. Weeks has emphasized that more constrained autocracies (such as single-party states) behave much more like democracies, with only personalist dictatorships displaying the conflict behavior typically attributed to autocracies as a whole. Still, the implication is that there should be little variation in personalist regimes' military effectiveness because their military performance is a function of static institutions. Weeks, *Dictators*; Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 62 (Winter 2008): 35–64.

<sup>17</sup> Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "Do Democracies Engage in Less Coup-Proofing? On the Relationship between Regime Type and Civil-Military Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8, no. 4 (October 2012): 1–17; Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967–99," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no. 4 (September 2011): 331–50.

imposed on the political-military capability of states by certain patterns of civil-military relations” in explaining the poor war-fighting capabilities of personalist regimes.<sup>19</sup> Jessica Weeks, too, points to “coup-proofing” measures that “undermine the effectiveness of [military] institutions” as a key deficit in personalist regimes such as Saddam’s.<sup>20</sup> In short, existing research has generated both a finding and a rationale for it: autocracies perform poorly in war, and their poor performance stems from pathological civil-military relations.

The literature that focuses directly on civil-military relations also supports this prediction about Saddam’s Iraq. Multiple studies emphasize the importance of military autonomy for tactical and operational effectiveness, an idea that goes back at least as far as Samuel Huntington’s notion of objective control in *The Soldier and the State*.<sup>21</sup> Notably, the prediction that these theories make about Saddam’s Iraq does not have to be inferred from some tangential set of findings; many focus explicitly on this case as the quintessential example of how coup-ridden civil-military relations harm effectiveness.<sup>22</sup> As such, the implication is again clear: an Arab, socially divided, autocratic, personalist, coup-ridden autocracy was exactly the sort of state that should have been systematically unable to generate fighting power, especially against a wealthier, more populous, and geographically advantaged opponent.

The question, then, is what allowed Iraq to temporarily defy this expectation? I argue that Saddam’s shifting threat perceptions hold the key. Existing theories are right to note that at least some autocracies have to be more concerned about violent internal threats than their democratic counterparts and that the measures taken to combat these threats can harm conventional military effectiveness against external opponents. But where the leaders of these

<sup>19</sup> Peceny, Beer, and Sanchez-Terry, “Dictatorial Peace?” 17.

<sup>20</sup> Weeks, *Dictators*, 94–95.

<sup>21</sup> Biddle and Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare”; Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing”; Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). It should be noted that these are distinct from theories emphasizing the importance of civilian intervention in the military for strategic effectiveness, including Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Deborah Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Michael Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Biddle and Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare”; Brooks, *Political-Military Relations*; Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing.” Interestingly, just like Pollack (see n. 14), all three of these works do mention Iraq’s improved effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War, at least briefly. See Brooks, 52–53; Quinlivan, 145–46; Biddle and Zirkle, 204–5, nn. 22, 35. Biddle and Zirkle even offer some tantalizing speculation about what drove the change, making an argument similar to the one here, though they choose not to expand upon it or substantiate it empirically.

regimes perceive their greatest dangers as coming from external rather than internal sources, and in particular from conventional war, they may very well shift away from the coup-proofing practices identified in the existing literature toward promotion, training, command, and information-management policies that enable them to generate greater effectiveness from the same underlying national endowments.

Indeed, this is a logical implication of existing work on how leaders assess threats, particularly Steven David's argument that states engage in "omnibalancing," that is, the weighing of both internal and external threats when making their alliance choices.<sup>23</sup> It would explain both the improvement in Iraqi effectiveness during the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War—when, as we will see below, Saddam had serious reason to believe he might be overthrown either by the Iranians or by his own frustrated officers—as well as Saddam's reversion to his old policies after the war ended. After all, existing research shows that Saddam never truly believed the Americans were serious about overthrowing him (and, to be fair, he was right about this in 1991).<sup>24</sup> That said, Saddam's delayed adaptation in the 1980s and miscalculation in 2003 underscore that leaders' threat perceptions may not be as accurate or rational as David posits, particularly in the case of personalist leaders whose policies distort the information they receive about their environment.<sup>25</sup> The remainder of the article examines these claims in light of the empirical evidence from the war, before discussing their broader theoretical implications in the conclusion.

### VARIATION IN IRAQI BATTLEFIELD EFFECTIVENESS IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The Iran-Iraq War began with the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, ostensibly because of a border dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway. But the underlying cause of tension between the two nations ran deeper. Saddam's status as a secular, Arab Baathist and a Sunni ruling over a majority Shia population gave him good reason to fear the 1979 Iranian revolution. Tehran did nothing to quell this fear when it initiated a propaganda campaign calling for the removal of the "non-Muslim" Baathist regime in Baghdad, renewed its support for the Iraqi Kurds, proclaimed a leading Iraqi Shi'ite cleric in

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<sup>23</sup> Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (January 1991): 233–56.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Duelfer and Stephen Benedict Dyson, "Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience," *International Security* vol. 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 73–74, 82–83, 86; Woods et al., "Saddam's Delusions"; Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, vii–viii.

<sup>25</sup> Frantz and Ezrow, "Yes Men."

Najaf the “Khomeini of Iraq,” and attempted in April 1980 to assassinate the Iraqi deputy premiere, Tariq Aziz.<sup>26</sup>

Just as the very nature of the Iranian regime in this period seemed to threaten Iraq, so too did many aspects of the Iraqi regime appear threatening to leaders in Tehran.<sup>27</sup> Iraq gave safe harbor to numerous officials from the Shah’s regime, including former prime minister Shapour Bakhtiar and the former commander of Iranian ground forces, General Gholam-’Ali Oveisi, and allowed them to broadcast anti-revolutionary messages back into Iran.<sup>28</sup> While Tehran nurtured delusions that its co-religionists would overthrow the regime in Baghdad, Saddam similarly became convinced that his Arab brethren in Iran’s oil-rich southern region of Khuzestan would rise up to meet an Iraqi liberation force. Both sides were deeply mistaken.<sup>29</sup>

The war, arising after several skirmishes in September 1980, consisted of three major phases.<sup>30</sup> The first began with the Iraqi invasion and continued into early 1981, at which time Iran initiated a series of counteroffensives to regain its territory. This phase of the war was fought almost entirely on Iranian territory and lasted into the early summer of 1982. By mid-1982 Iran regained most of the land Iraq had conquered. A second phase of the war then began when Iran rejected Iraq’s attempts at a cease-fire and invaded. For the next five years, the war took place almost entirely on Iraqi territory and devolved into a bloody stalemate.

Finally, in 1987, the crucial third phase of the war began in which the Iraqis began to stop Iranian attacks decisively. More importantly, during the first half of 1988, the Iraqi Republican Guard and several key army divisions conducted five counteroffensives in quick succession. Iraq regained virtually all the territory it had lost in the previous five years, drove the Iranians back across the border, and called for a cease-fire, which Iran accepted in August.<sup>31</sup>

### Measuring the Shift in Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness

The puzzle for scholars of military effectiveness is what Iraq was suddenly doing on the battlefield in 1987–88 that it had not done earlier and that it failed to do again in 1991 and 2003. Although war is always a messy business

<sup>26</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 25; Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 138.

<sup>27</sup> Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), chap. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 36.

<sup>29</sup> This is consistent with existing research on the drivers of strategic assessment and the relationship between poor assessment and war initiation. Weeks, *Dictators*; Risa Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57–58.

<sup>31</sup> The terms had been established in UN Resolution 598, passed in 1987. Sick, “Trial By Error,” 242.

with something less than laboratory-grade control over the many variables in play, the evidence shows that Iraqi Republican Guard units and some regular army units displayed clear improvements in the two areas discussed earlier: basic tactical proficiency and the ability to conduct complex operations.

First, fundamental Iraqi military skills, such as weapons handling, marksmanship, and the use of terrain for cover and concealment, were clearly better than they had been before or would be in the later wars. Iraqi forces demonstrated significantly greater competence in conducting the basic military operations that depended on these skills, such as static defenses, ambushes, orderly retreats, and pre-planned attritional offensives.

Second, the Iraqis developed a much better ability to conduct complex operations. For example, in the final campaigns of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqis demonstrated that they could, in fact, conduct a combined-arms maneuver—a complex operation that they had repeatedly failed to execute earlier in the war and that would elude them in their subsequent ground conflicts as well.

Using these context-specific criteria, the rest of this section tracks the shifts in Iraqi performance during the period of ineffectiveness from 1980 to 1986 and the period of improvement from 1987 to 1988. It also briefly touches on the renewed Iraqi ineffectiveness in 1991 and 2003.

### Iraqi Ineffectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War, 1980–86

Iraqi military performance was poor during the first six years of the Iran-Iraq War, despite the fact that Iraq had initiated the conflict and enjoyed an overwhelming and ever-increasing advantage in both the quantity and quality of weapons. From the outset, Iraqi tactical proficiency was limited, and Iraq displayed virtually no ability to conduct complex operations.<sup>32</sup>

For example, the Iraqis achieved nearly total surprise in their initial attacks in September 1980, sending five well-equipped divisions up against a smaller, scattered, lightly armed Iranian force in the southern sector of the front (see Table 1).<sup>33</sup> Yet in the entirety of fall 1980 Iraq was able to capture only one major Iranian city, Khorramshahr, and doing so required weeks of house-to-house fighting. Iraqi armor and infantry proved unable to work together in an urban environment and had trouble moving through the city due to the prolonged Iraqi artillery barrage that had ruined the city's roads prior to the assault.<sup>34</sup> Iraqi artillery units also repeatedly made simple fusing errors that limited their weapons' impact, and artillery crews remained in

<sup>32</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, chap. 2; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*.

<sup>33</sup> Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 249–51.

<sup>34</sup> Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 157; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 93.

**TABLE 1** The Cakewalk That Wasn't: Iraq Invades Southern Iran, Fall 1980

	Iraq	Iran
Battle Plan	Air attack followed by multi-pronged invasion	Ambushes and roadblocks followed by retreat to more easily defended urban areas
Weapons	2,750 tanks, 1,400 artillery pieces, 4,000 APCs, 340 fighter-bombers	500 operational tanks, 300 artillery pieces, <100 aircraft
Manpower	Three armored and two mechanized infantry divisions	Two under-strength divisions, two under-strength brigades, lightly armed border forces

Source: Order of battle data taken from Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 186.

static positions that left them highly vulnerable to counterbattery fire.<sup>35</sup> Iraqi infantry did not conduct reconnaissance patrols, and reserve units were rarely committed in an efficient manner.<sup>36</sup>

In Abadan, the other major city they sought to take, Iraqi commanders faced similar problems and pulled their forces back from even attempting capture, apparently fearing high casualties. Soon after, having been in the field less than a month, Iraqi divisions all but stopped moving, neglecting even to seal the strategic Zagros mountain passes crucial to Iranian resupply and reinforcement.<sup>37</sup> In fact, September 1980 proved to be the high point of Iraq's territorial gains.

Ken Pollack attributes this outcome in part to the superior skill of Iranian regular army armor crews compared to their Iraqi counterparts. "In armor duels," he notes, "small numbers of Iranian tanks regularly outfought larger Iraqi units."<sup>38</sup> Pollack points in particular to an instance in which an under-strength Artesh tank battalion, reinforced by Revolutionary Guards, fought off an Iraqi armored division's advance on the town of Dezful. Despite the disparity in forces, Iranian armor crews successfully maneuvered, and their fire was more accurate.<sup>39</sup>

Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner generally concur, noting that the Iraqis repeatedly missed chances to maneuver, relying on their tanks more as big guns than as tools of offensive speed and shock.<sup>40</sup> As a former Iraqi general noted years later, "Our troops were just lined up on the border and told to drive into Iran. They had an objective, but no idea how to get

<sup>35</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 81; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 192.

<sup>36</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, 94–96.

<sup>38</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 190.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Arabs at War*, 90, 97.

there or what they were doing, or how their mission fit the plan, or who would be supporting them.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it turned out that the entire invasion was based on a British staff exercise organized at the Baghdad War College in 1941.<sup>42</sup>

Iran soon launched an escalating series of counteroffensives, eventually regaining all of its lost territory. This campaign included multiple battles from January to May 1981. But despite the shift from offensive to defensive operations, Iraq’s problems with tactical proficiency and complex operations continued. Over and over, the Iraqis’ inability to maneuver, protect their flanks, conduct reconnaissance, or engage in even basic combined arms operations led them to cede territory to the Iranians, often at a huge cost in terms of casualties and prisoners of war.<sup>43</sup>

For example, the Iranians did not simply win the battle of Dezful in March 1982. Their forces, mostly infantry, managed to crush an Iraqi mechanized division and armored division, inflict some fifty thousand Iraqi casualties, and take another fifteen to twenty-five thousand Iraqis prisoner. The Iranians demolished two hundred Iraqi tanks, four hundred other armored vehicles, and hundreds of artillery pieces. They captured so much other Iraqi materiel intact that they were able to use it to form new armored units of their own.<sup>44</sup>

A similar scene unfolded in nearby fighting for northern Khuzestan later that spring, where the Iraqis proved unable to defend their positions and eventually fled, leaving behind enormous quantities of functioning weapons, ammunition, and equipment.<sup>45</sup> The situation was so bleak for Iraq at this point that a CIA assessment virtually declared the war to be over, noting, “Iraq has essentially lost the war with Iran. . . . There is little the Iraqis can do . . . to reverse the military situation.”<sup>46</sup>

The problem was not the Iraqi hardware, but how it was used—or rather, was not used. The Iraqis simply did not seem to know how to employ their weapons. As a contemporary US analysis noted, “Our estimate is that equipment shortages have not been a major factor in Iraq’s battlefield reverses. . . . Iraqi failures to date have been due mainly to weak leadership, morale, tactics, and intelligence weaknesses.”<sup>47</sup> Captured documents show that around this time even Saddam recognized Iraq’s shortcomings in basic

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 184.

<sup>42</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, chap. 9; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, chaps. 5–6; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 193–216.

<sup>44</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, 257.

<sup>45</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 198–99; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 133, 139; Ward, *Immortal*, 258.

<sup>46</sup> “Implications of Iran’s Victory Over Iraq,” Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2–82, issued by Director of Central Intelligence, 8 June 1982, vii, available at <https://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> “Discussion Paper for SIG on Policy Options for Dealing with Iran-Iraq War,” mid-1982, available at National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as NSA).

tactical skills. At a meeting with his officials, he stated, "As for the artillery, it is certain that we see some negatives in all the phases. There are negatives in the accuracy, coordination and usage. The concentration is inaccurate and not hitting the target. . . . In the discipline of artillery I believe it is one of those areas where we are still in need of someone to teach us."<sup>48</sup>

These problems continued in battles on Iraqi territory for Basra, the Howizeh Marshes, and other areas during 1982–85. Indeed, the entire front devolved into trench warfare reminiscent of World War I. Notably unlike in World War I, however, one of the belligerents, Iraq, actually had access to huge quantities of modern armor, artillery, and other materiel, which made its inability to defeat an opposing force composed mostly of light infantry more than a tad perplexing. Already by 1983, total battle deaths had reached almost a quarter of a million men.<sup>49</sup>

During these middle years of the war, Iraq constructed extensive defenses, but these defenses remained simple and rigid rather than layered and flexible. Iraq did not adopt a mobile defense-in-depth, even though it clearly had the equipment, weapons, and numbers needed to do so. Iraq rarely engaged in offensive action to push the Iranians back across the border. Cordesman and Wagner note that even as Iranian attacks became more and more intense, "Iraq continued to fight relatively passively. . . . It failed to give proper emphasis to increasing its infantry and assault capability."<sup>50</sup> Instead, the Iraqis relied on their technological edge and fixed positional defenses to grind down Iranian human wave attacks to the point of exhaustion.

Iraq's battlefield situation was so dire that it began using chemical weapons in 1983. By 1984 the war also had spilled into the Gulf, with each side attempting to interdict the other's access to oil and shipping. In 1985 Iraq initiated large-scale missile strikes against Iranian cities.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, such attacks were one of Iraq's only ways to compensate for Iran's immense strategic depth: Tehran was always more than eight hundred km from the scene of the ground battles, while Baghdad was often little more than one hundred km away.<sup>52</sup> But Iraq's repeated escalation of the war suggests awareness that it was not winning the conventional ground battles.

Any Iraqi doubts on this score were erased in February 1986 when the Iranians overran the Faw peninsula, Iraq's economic lifeline to the Persian

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<sup>48</sup> "Meeting between Saddam and top advisors regarding neighboring countries and their regimes and nuclear threats to Iraq," Conflict Records Research Center (CRRRC) no. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, undated (circa 1984), 20–21 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies) (hereafter with citation format of document title, CRRRC, record no., date).

<sup>49</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 177.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>51</sup> For background on the Tanker War and the War of the Cities, see Hiro, *Longest War*, chap. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2009), 39.

Gulf and a key point of access to its oil-rich south. The peninsula's defenders panicked within the first two days of Iranian attacks, abandoning their weapons and equipment.<sup>53</sup> Iraq sent reinforcements to shore up its remaining lines, but the counterattacks flailed.<sup>54</sup> Then Iraqi armor attempted to attack, but its movement was poorly coordinated with infantry.<sup>55</sup> Even the Republican Guard division sent later proved unable to conduct an effective infantry assault against the dug-in Iranians. The Iraqi troops simply were not ready for close fighting, especially on swampy terrain.<sup>56</sup>

Iraq at last managed to break the momentum of the Iranian attacks through the use of chemical weapons and so much firepower that the Iraqis burned through two hundred main gun tank barrels.<sup>57</sup> Iraqi forces now held their lines, but repeated attempts to counterattack again failed.<sup>58</sup> According to Pollack, "Iraq was unable to suppress or defeat Iranian antitank teams either with artillery fire—slow to respond and inaccurate as ever—or with infantry, who simply did not know how to cooperate with tanks."<sup>59</sup>

Even with the use of mustard gas, Iraq's inability to maneuver cost it entire battalions in the attempt to regain Faw.<sup>60</sup> Iraqi casualties were so extensive that the military was said to have relied on taxis just to get all the bodies out of the area, and the government engaged in forced blood donation campaigns.<sup>61</sup> On 9–10 March, the Iraqis made a last-ditch effort to salvage the situation, attempting to conduct amphibious landings that would outflank the Iranians. But these, too, failed at great cost, and the Iraqis finally ceased their attempts to regain Faw.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, despite their superior weapons and home turf advantage, Iraqi forces still lacked tactical proficiency and the ability to conduct complex operations.

### The Improvement in Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness, 1987–88

Despite these disasters, the performance of Iraqi Republican Guard units and some regular army units began to improve in 1987. The shift first became evident in response to a series of Iranian attacks known as the Karbala offensives early that year. As one authoritative study notes of this period, "The major factor in the Iraqi ability to hold off the Iranian attacks lay in the skill and

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<sup>53</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 220.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>55</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 217; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 220–21.

<sup>56</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, 221.

<sup>57</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, 275–76.

<sup>58</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 222.

<sup>59</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 217–18.

<sup>60</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 222–23.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>62</sup> Hiro, *Longest War*, 169.

capabilities of the expanded and improved Republican Guard formations.”<sup>63</sup> Cordesman and Wagner concur that during the battles of early 1987 “Iraqi ground forces performed better than in previous years.”<sup>64</sup> This was despite the fact that the Iranians still were willing to incur huge losses and were now better armed with anti-tank weapons, including new TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles. Although the Iraqis continued to display difficulty conducting complex operations—for example, armor and infantry were still clearly unable to coordinate their movement—tactical proficiency was improving.

Then, in 1988, a more dramatic shift became evident when Iraq launched a massive counteroffensive in April and regained in a matter of weeks real estate that the Iranians had held for years. Led by the Republican Guard, Iraqi units displayed very solid tactical skills through five major battles. First, Iraq evicted Iran from Faw in a mere thirty-five hours. It did so by mounting an impressive combined arms attack that integrated combat engineering, aerial bombardment, artillery assault, amphibious assault, and a multi-division mechanized infantry attack that converged on the Iranians from several directions.<sup>65</sup> The skill, coordination, and initiative required to execute this sort of operation stood in stark contrast to the failures the Iraqis had demonstrated previously. To be sure, the Iraqis probably did not meet the standard of combined arms maneuver warfare set by, say, the best American divisions during the Cold War or the Israelis in 1967. But their performance still was, as an American intelligence cable put it at the time, “by far the biggest Iraqi military victory since 1981.”<sup>66</sup>

The improved battlefield effectiveness at Faw was no fluke, either. In four subsequent battles that spring and summer, the Iraqis consistently demonstrated these same improvements in tactical proficiency and complex operations. In May 1988 at Basra, for example, the Iraqis bombarded the Iranians with artillery, including chemical munitions, and then, before Iranian forces had to time to recover or react, Iraqi armored and mechanized forces struck the Iranian flanks, rapidly enveloping them.<sup>67</sup> Iran initially attempted a counterattack, but Iraq called in fixed-wing aircraft for close air support and also used aircraft as spotters for the artillery, which provided additional support to the ground forces.<sup>68</sup> Within hours, the Iranian forces retreated in disorder, surrendering the city that had seen some of the largest battles of the entire war.

<sup>63</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, 261–62.

<sup>65</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 15; Cordesman and Wagner, 370–74; Ward, *Immortal*, 292–93; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 225.

<sup>66</sup> CIA Directorate of Intelligence, cable, “Middle East Brief [Excised] for April 20, 1988,” available at NSA.

<sup>67</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, 293.

<sup>68</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, 382–83.

Similarly, at the end of June, Iraqi forces attacked Iranian outposts in the Howizeh Marshes. Like Basra, the marshes had been an area of extensive fighting earlier in the war. But just as they had done at Basra, the Iraqis followed an initial artillery barrage with a Republican Guard amphibious assault supported by air power and Iraqi tanks. After the Iraqi naval infantry initially overran Iran's positions, combat engineers then rushed in to build pontoon bridges and earthen causeways so that Iraqi armor could move in behind them, securing Iraqi control of the area.<sup>69</sup> Then the Iraqis, led by two Republican Guard division equivalents, initiated a double envelopment of the remaining Iranian forces in the area. According to Pollack, "The Iraqis mauled six to eight army and Revolutionary Guard divisions in their envelopment, seizing all of their weapons before pulling back across the border."<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, Iraqi tactical proficiency was clearly quite good compared to earlier in the war. It is important not to ignore the significant Iraqi advantages in weapons in these final offensives, of course, and they will be discussed in more detail in the fifth section. Still, being outgunned was nothing new for the Iranians: Iraq had enjoyed a qualitative and quantitative advantage in weaponry throughout the war, yet this edge, even with the use of chemical weapons, had never translated into a battle-winning advantage until 1987–88. The difference now seemed to be that the Iraqis finally knew how to use their weapons. Airstrikes and artillery reached their targets; Iraqi tanks were well positioned to provide fire support to advancing forces; amphibious forces gained control of marshy areas so that combat engineers could build the necessary bridges to transport heavier weapons and equipment. These activities all reflect improvements in basic tactical skills that Iraqi forces had repeatedly failed to demonstrate earlier in the war.

Most importantly, Iraq demonstrated a much better ability to conduct complex operations. Cordesman and Wagner repeatedly characterize Iraqi operations during this period as "effective combined arms and maneuver warfare."<sup>71</sup> An effusive American military assessment goes so far as to claim that the final Iraqi offensives represented "the perfection of the Iraqi attempt to develop combined arms practices."<sup>72</sup> Even Pollack, who is generally highly skeptical about the military capabilities of Arab armies, notes that the spring of 1988 saw "a higher degree of effectiveness than the Iraqi military had ever hinted at previously."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in the face of this improvement in Iraqi

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<sup>69</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 88; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 227–28; Cordesman and Wagner, 389.

<sup>70</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 227–28.

<sup>71</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 76, 382, 388.

<sup>72</sup> Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, 48. This sort of praise must be taken with a barrel of salt given that it was written as the US military prepared to fight a war with Iraq; surely, no American analyst wanted to make the mistake of underestimating the capabilities of a soon-to-be adversary. Still, the description is instructive.

<sup>73</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 229.

performance, Iranian forces virtually collapsed, and the war was over by August.

### The Return to Ineffectiveness: Iraqi Battlefield Performance, 1991 and 2003

Despite Iraq's improved performance in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq War, tactical proficiency and complex operations were again two of the major areas in which the Iraqis fell short in the 1991 and 2003 wars. To be sure, the United States enjoyed immense technological superiority over the Iraqis in both cases, which was no doubt a major reason for the coalition's low casualties. But even so, virtually all accounts emphasize the Iraqis' lack of military skills and inability to integrate and coordinate operations across different units as contributing to the lopsided outcomes. Although the losing side in a war often can still be described as tactically effective—consider the Serbs in the 1999 Kosovo war, for example—no analysts of the 1991 and 2003 wars describe the Iraqis that way.

In 1991 coalition soldiers reported that the Iraqis displayed little familiarity with their weapons and had poor marksmanship. Iraqi defensive preparations—often little more than mounds of sand—provided no protection and actually advertised the location of infantry units and combat vehicles in the otherwise barren desert. The Iraqis did not conduct regular patrols, and Iraqi units also operated in nearly total isolation from one another, resulting in poorly coordinated defenses.

Most importantly, the Iraqis displayed problems with even basic integration of combat arms. For instance, they routinely failed to orient their fields of fire on defensive obstacles, making them far less effective in slowing or channeling coalition movements. Even the Republican Guards showed a persistent inability to coordinate the use of armor, artillery, and mechanized infantry, though many such units remained intact and attempted to fight after the air war ended.<sup>74</sup>

In 2003 the story was similar, with the Iraqis again displaying major deficits in tactical proficiency and complex operations. Whether firing rocket-propelled grenades or tank rounds, Iraqi marksmanship was poor. Iraqi units showed a near-total inability to competently establish defensive positions, even though they were often operating in urban terrain ideal for doing so. Indeed, as in 1991, Iraqi defensive positions tended to draw attention more than provide protection. The Iraqis also failed to engage in relatively simple combat engineering that could have greatly complicated the coalition

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<sup>74</sup>Daryl G. Press, "The Myth of Air Power in the Persian Gulf War and the Future of Warfare," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 5–44; Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood," 158–61; Mueller, "Perfect Enemy," 100–102; Biddle and Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations"; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 258–59.

attack, such as blowing up the bridges that led to key cities or flooding predictable axes of advance.<sup>75</sup> Where the Iraqis did attack coalition forces, their efforts usually consisted of “simple frontal assaults, fully exposed, with no apparent attempt to coordinate movement with suppressive fire, use terrain for cover, or employ smoke or other obscurants.”<sup>76</sup> In fact, Iraqi units often had no idea where friendly forces were, making combined arms operations an impossibility.<sup>77</sup>

Because it has been discussed so thoroughly elsewhere, there is no need to harp on Iraqi ineffectiveness in 1991 and 2003, except to note that the poor performances then bear a strong resemblance to Iraqi performance early in the 1980s. Yet all three of these periods stand in sharp contrast to Iraqi performance in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq War. What is puzzling, again, is that the factors often said to influence military performance remained largely consistent in Iraq across this entire period, making the instances of effectiveness difficult to explain. So what did the Iraqis do differently in 1987–88? And why did they do it?

#### EXPLAINING IRAQI PERFORMANCE: SADDAM'S SHIFTING MILITARY ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

The empirical evidence shows that Iraq's increased fighting power in the Iran-Iraq War stemmed fundamentally from changes in four key sets of military organizational practices: promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. Saddam had entered the war with a set of policies in these areas that reflected his well-known concerns about internal threats, especially coups. For much of the war, he also genuinely seemed to have believed that winning was simply a matter of inciting Iraq's Sunni brethren in southern Iran and of buying enough advanced weaponry and ammunition to mow down Iranian forces.<sup>78</sup> As a result, Saddam promoted officers primarily on the basis of political loyalty and sectarian background and at times actively punished competence in the officer corps; he severely limited military training; he both centralized and fractured command arrangements; and he restricted horizontal communication within the military and developed an intelligence apparatus directed at his own forces.

By the end of the war, however, Saddam had reversed virtually all of these policies with respect to the Republican Guard and key army units,

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<sup>75</sup> Stephen Biddle, “Speed Kills? Reassessing the Role of Speed, Precision, and Situation Awareness in the Fall of Saddam,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 2007): 3–46.

<sup>76</sup> Biddle, “Speed Kills?” 23.

<sup>77</sup> Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*.

<sup>78</sup> It is important to remember that Saddam had no military background or experience. He rose to power under former president Bakr precisely because he lacked these traits, which made him less of a threat to Bakr than other Baathist collaborators. Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, 15.

**TABLE 2** Saddam's Shifting Military Organizational Practices

	1980–86, 1989–2003	1987–88
Promotions	Selection against merit	Selection based on merit
Training	Heavily restricted	Rigorous, realistic, frequent, large- and small-unit encouraged
Command	Fractured, centralized	More decentralized
Information	Restrictions on horizontal and vertical information sharing	Information sharing encouraged

although he never relinquished personal control of the armed forces. For example, Saddam continued to intervene constantly in promotion decisions but now did so in order to promote officers on merit and to remove incompetent officers from command; he still closely monitored training but jumpstarted rigorous, realistic, and frequent exercises at both the small- and large-unit levels, emphasizing combined arms skills; he decentralized and simplified command authority, endowing field commanders with greater freedom of action, although only after he became personally convinced of the need for such change; and he encouraged active communication among his commanders. These changes allowed for the development of military skill and enabled Iraqi military units to integrate and coordinate their actions, both of which factors fostered the rapid improvement in tactical proficiency and complex operations seen in the final battles of the war (see Table 2).

What motivated Saddam's shift? It is impossible to know exactly what was in Saddam's mind at the time, but evidence from the documentary record strongly suggests that starting in mid-1986 Saddam came to the belated belief that losing the war posed a greater threat to his rule than allowing the changed policies needed to win it. Although evidence of his disastrous approach had been mounting for some time, a series of battlefield setbacks in 1986 seems to have shocked Saddam into a reassessment of his threat environment. First among these was the aforementioned loss of the Faw peninsula. Not only did this setback suggest Iran's continued ambition to take Iraqi territory—which in itself posed a credible threat to Saddam's regime, given Iraq's lack of strategic depth—but the loss also fomented intense dissatisfaction among Saddam's officers, who blamed his policies for the defeat.<sup>79</sup> As an April 1986 report from the Hungarian embassy in Baghdad to the Hungarian foreign minister noted, "Unity among the three major forces of power, the Baath party, the army and other armed forces, and the president, has been broken. The army is unwilling to assume responsibility for the failures at

<sup>79</sup> CIA Directorate of Intelligence, intelligence assessment, "Is Iraq Losing the War?" (April 1986), 9, available at NSA; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 228; Hiro, *Longest War*, 171–72; Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 164.

Al Faw, and there are many voices now openly mentioning the role of the president and his immediate entourage in this failure. Military leaders eager to fight demand that they should be given a free hand in eliminating the consequences of this failure that had destroyed their prestige.”<sup>80</sup>

Despite this tension, however, Saddam doubled down. In May 1986 he ordered four Iraqi divisions to seize the virtually abandoned area of Mehran across the border in Iran, which was guarded by only about five thousand troops.<sup>81</sup> Saddam then proposed an exchange of Mehran for Faw, an offer Tehran rejected.<sup>82</sup> More importantly, however, Saddam also rejected his generals’ advice to seize the heights surrounding Mehran that were vital to defending the territory. Apparently, Saddam refused to let the general on the scene, Major General Adin Tawfiq, commander of the Second Army Corps, take the heights because it would have required the use of elite forces needed to defend Baghdad.<sup>83</sup>

Predictably, the Iranians soon seized the heights and used them to attack the Iraqi concentration of forces in Mehran. General Tawfiq, trying to defend his disadvantaged position, requested air support after his forces came under attack, but because the request had to be routed through Baghdad due to restrictions on army-air force communication, the approval came after the Iraqi ground forces had already been forced to retreat. Tawfiq was recalled to Baghdad and is believed to have been executed.<sup>84</sup> Iran rapidly regained control of Mehran.<sup>85</sup>

Coming on the heels of Faw, this debacle deepened the crisis within the Iraqi leadership.<sup>86</sup> Iraqi generals blamed Saddam for both setbacks, and even Saddam seems to have realized that changes were necessary in order to stave off both the Iranians and his own frustrated officers. Iraq needed to launch new offensives, and it needed a bigger—but most importantly, better—Republican Guard in order to do so.<sup>87</sup> The shifts in Saddam’s military organizational practices regarding promotions, training, command, and information management all followed, strongly suggesting a connection between the changed threat calculus and changed policies.

The fact that Saddam apparently reverted to his prior practices soon after the war ended lends further support to this notion, as detailed below. With the Iranian threat gone, he had much more to lose than gain from a

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<sup>80</sup> Hungarian Embassy Baghdad to Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Varkony, report, “The Negative Impact of the War on the Iraqi Domestic Situation,” 24 April 1986, available at NSA.

<sup>81</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 228.

<sup>82</sup> Hiro, *Longest War*, 171–72.

<sup>83</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 164.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>85</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 228.

<sup>86</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 164.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, ed. Efraim Karsh (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 232–33; Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, 37, 259–60.

capable military. Still, Iraqi performance in 1987–88 testifies to the powerful impact of variations in military practices, even in a personalist dictatorship with a highly politicized military. After all, Saddam's regime never changed character. As one general later put it, "He was the only decision-maker."<sup>88</sup>

### Saddam's Shifting Promotion Patterns

As Saddam rose to power in the 1970s, he had focused almost solely on political loyalty as the key criterion for officer selection and advancement. As one general noted in an interview decades later, "Whereas the saying in the early part of the Baath rule had been 'better a good soldier than a good Baathist,' it changed to 'better a good Baathist than a good soldier.'"<sup>89</sup> This same general also said that Saddam "ordered politicians to serve at the army level and . . . emphasized the principle . . . that as long as one was a Baathist he can always be a leader, since the Baathist is a truly natural leader."<sup>90</sup>

In fact, Saddam had selected against military professionalism in forming the officer corps. The government and officer corps were dominated by Sunnis, in particular those who shared clan or tribal ties with Saddam or his predecessor, General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr.<sup>91</sup> One authoritative study argues that "the emphasis was now on political reliability and unquestioned obedience to orders rather than on serious military professionalism. . . . Once firmly in charge, Saddam acted to promote a number of lieutenant colonels to major general, and subsequently to the command of divisions, without requiring them to hold any of the traditional or intermediate level command positions."<sup>92</sup>

Audio tapes of Saddam's deliberations with his advisors confirm that he paid close personal attention to senior officer appointments and even to those of many junior officers.<sup>93</sup> He cared somewhat about the professional qualifications of his potential commanders but also showed notable interest in a candidate's family background, political views, and likelihood that the candidate would support Baath objectives.<sup>94</sup> For example, in one exchange in 1980, a division commander reported to Saddam that a capable officer had been passed over for promotion to brigade commander because "he is not a party member. I am saying it frankly . . . there is no other reason." Although

<sup>88</sup> General Abid Mohammed al-Kabi, quoted in Kevin M. Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals: Perspectives of the Iran-Iraq War* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2011), 183.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>91</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 114–16.

<sup>92</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> "Text Versions of Cassettes Recorded of 1980 meetings held among Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials regarding tactics and plotting against the Iraqi enemy," CRRG no. SH-SHTP-D-000-624, 28–29 December 1980, 112, 119; "Written Transcripts of Audio Tapes of meetings between Saddam Hussein and Senior Military commanders discussing nominations to Baath Party Leadership and Iran-Iraq War Battles," CRRG no. SH-SHTP-D-000-864 (September 1982), 123–28.

<sup>94</sup> "Written Transcripts," CRRG no. SH-SHTP-D-000-864, 130–32.

in this particular case Saddam eventually relented and allowed the promotion of the officer, the very fact that he and his officers had such an extensive conversation about whether the individual could be trusted—despite the fact that all agreed “he is a good officer”—reflects the overriding importance of officers’ political credentials early in the war with Iran.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, Saddam repeatedly purged the officer corps of those he deemed disloyal.<sup>96</sup> According to one history, by the eve of the of war, “the high command structure had effectively become Saddam Hussein and his political supporters, none of whom had practical military experience and training. . . . Much of the high command was chosen more for loyalty than competence.”<sup>97</sup> The formation and rapid expansion of the Iraqi Popular Army before and during the war epitomized these practices, as “low-grade Popular Army ‘brigades’ were rapidly created with officers whose own real qualification was party membership and loyalty to the regime.”<sup>98</sup>

According to one general, however, “Saddam began looking for more competent individuals to run things” as early as 1982, the year of the Iranian invasion.<sup>99</sup> Saddam purged the Popular Army of its worst commanders, in part to shift blame for Iraq’s defeats.<sup>100</sup> He also ordered the execution of as many as three hundred senior officers for poor performance around this time.<sup>101</sup> Saddam then “began promoting officers who had fought well in the first two years of the war” and “began treating Baathist and non-Baathist officers on a par when it came to promotion.”<sup>102</sup> Still, many incompetent senior officers remained in place or even advanced during this time. For example, Generals Tali al-Duri and Ma’ahir Rashid, close personal friends of Saddam later described by a peer as “two of the dumbest generals in the army,” remained in command through 1987, despite having presided over multiple battlefield disasters.<sup>103</sup>

After 1982 Saddam reduced the use of the Popular Army and focused on enlarging and improving the leadership of the Republican Guard. According to one of his generals, “Saddam began to choose commanders from the best Iraqi armored battalions to command Republican Guard battalions, whereas previously he had chosen only his relatives. . . . He started picking the best officers, commanding officers, and junior officers within the Iraqi army and

<sup>95</sup> “Text Versions,” CRR no. SH-SHTP-D-000-624, 107–110.

<sup>96</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 43–44.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>99</sup> Lieutenant General Ra’ad Majid Rashid al-Hamdani, quoted in Woods et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 37. For confirmation of this in other interviews, see pages 122–23.

<sup>100</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 149; Director of Central Intelligence, Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2–83, “Prospects for Iraq,” (19 July 1983), 15, available at <https://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf>.

<sup>101</sup> Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, 191–92.

<sup>102</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 208; Hiro, *Longest War*, 89.

<sup>103</sup> General Hamdani, quoted in Woods, et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 30–31, 73.

put them in the Republican Guard, and he aimed to save this new force for the major counterattack. . . . This was in line with the recommendations of the general officers to create a special armored force that was well equipped and well trained, led by expert, high-ranking officers, with great experience.”<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, this expansion and improvement in the Guard was still quite limited.<sup>105</sup> The same general who noted some of the early changes in 1982 nevertheless commented that even four years later, “a substantial number of Republican Guard commanders were brave but professionally unprepared and often incompetent in the positions they held.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, there is some evidence that Saddam felt this way as well, as tapes from 1984 reveal him brainstorming about the possibility of bringing generals out of retirement to lead companies because the junior officer corps was so inept.<sup>107</sup>

These continuing problems were no doubt also related to training, a subject discussed below, but it is noticeable that after 1986, the merit component of promotion standards was made much more stringent due to Saddam’s selection of a new army chief of staff.<sup>108</sup> Though still overwhelmingly Sunni and Tikriti, the top command of the Guards was reconfigured during this year, with its highest post now filled by an officer “known for his courage and achievements” on the battlefield.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, “initiative on the battlefield was rewarded over political loyalty or blood relations to Hussein, and incompetent officers who were friends or relatives were purged.”<sup>110</sup> Saddam then combed the rest of the army to pull out the most “outstanding and exceptional” officers for transfer to the Guard, which expanded to over two dozen brigades by 1988 (see Table 3).<sup>111</sup> These officers—again, personally

<sup>104</sup> General Hamdani, quoted in Woods et al., *Saddam’s War*, 59.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>107</sup> “A meeting on 18 October 1984 between Saddam Hussein and unknown officials dated in which they discuss military operations and a large secret project,” CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000-735, October 1984, 9–10.

<sup>108</sup> General al-Khazraji had proven himself a competent commander in numerous battles by this point in the war. Woods et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 40–44.

<sup>109</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s War*, 83.

<sup>110</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 166.

<sup>111</sup> Saddam’s reflections on the process are discussed in “Meeting between Saddam and military officials regarding the condition of the Iraqi Army,” CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000-849, 1 May 1991, 4–5. For further details, see Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 219–20. Many accounts of the Iraqi order of battle, including the *IJSS Military Balance*, obscure growth in the Republican Guard over the course of the war by counting divisions only, and they often list Iraq as having only one Republican Guard division throughout the war. This may have been true as a matter of nomenclature, but experts on the Iraqi military note that the country’s divisions—including those from the Republican Guard—often had many more than the typical three brigades under their command. In some cases, divisional commands included up to ten brigades, as is evident from arithmetic based on the standard Iraqi order of battle numbers in Table 3. For example, in 1980, Iraq is listed as having had 200,000 ground troops organized into thirteen divisions, producing a rough average division size of about 15,300. But by 1987 Iraq is listed as having had 805,000

**TABLE 3** Iraqi Force Structure During the Iran-Iraq War

	1980	1987
Regular army	200,000 4 armored divisions 4 mechanized divisions 4 infantry divisions 1 Republican Guard division	805,000 5 armored divisions 3 mechanized divisions 10 infantry divisions 1 Republican Guard division 2 special forces divisions
Air Force	38,000	40,000
Navy	4,250	5,000
<b>Total regular</b>	<b>242,250</b>	<b>850,000</b>
Popular Army	250,000	500,000
Reserves	250,000	230,000

Source: Data adapted from Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, 294.

identified and promoted by Saddam—provided the human capital driving much of the improved Iraqi performance in the closing stages of the war.

Interestingly, however, at the same time that Saddam shifted the nature of his promotion policies with respect to the Guard, he created a new force known as the Special Republican Guard to continue to protect him in Baghdad. Its soldiers were drawn primarily from the original membership roster of the Republican Guard, which had been created to protect the regime.<sup>112</sup> During this time Saddam also “tightened up his control of the state apparatus” in non-military domains, transferring or dismissing from government service anyone outside his immediate circle of kinsmen and trusted long-time associates.<sup>113</sup>

Furthermore, as soon as the war was over, Saddam ousted much of the top Guard leadership from the period 1986 to 1988.<sup>114</sup> “What is sad,” explained one general, “is that we had heroes who survived the war, but they were dismissed by Saddam because he accused them of something or another.”<sup>115</sup> In short, the officer corps with which Saddam went to war in 1980, 1991, and 2003 was not the same one that saw action during 1987–88.<sup>116</sup>

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ground troops organized into twenty-one divisions, suggesting an average division size of over 38,300. These calculations are not important in their details, except for the more general point they illustrate: Saddam had increased the number of Republican Guard brigades by the final years of the war to an extent sometimes obscured by typical division-focused methods of force structure calculation. See also “The Middle East and North Africa,” *The Military Balance* 80, no. 1 (1980): 42–43; “The Middle East and North Africa,” *The Military Balance* 86, no. 1 (1986): 97–98.

<sup>112</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 219–20; Woods et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 77.

<sup>113</sup> Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” 233.

<sup>114</sup> Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, 185.

<sup>115</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s War*, 97.

<sup>116</sup> Woods et al., “Saddam’s Delusions”; Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, esp. chap. 3.

## Saddam's Shifting Training Regimens

The improved Iraqi combat performance in 1987–88 also stemmed from changes in Saddam's training policies. Prior to and during the early years of the war, the Popular Army had provided only nominal training to its members.<sup>117</sup> Soldiers usually received two months of instruction focused on the use of small arms and low-intensity conflict, with little attention to the use of heavy weapons or combined arms skills.<sup>118</sup> As one history notes, "These . . . units were usually led by senior members of the Baath rather than professional officers. They were not properly organized, led, or equipped for intense combat."<sup>119</sup>

This state of affairs was certainly odd, given that Saddam originally intended the Popular Army to serve as a paramilitary that could shore up the regime. Presumably, he would want his most politically loyal forces to be well trained. There is some evidence that Republican Guard members at least were given better training prior to the war, although even for them, there were limits.<sup>120</sup> Despite an infusion of modern weapons, for example, few Iraqi officers received foreign military training in how to use those weapons because of Saddam's fear that they would bring back communist ideas from the Soviet Union that would challenge Baath ideology.<sup>121</sup>

Perhaps the greatest indication of how little training the Iraqi military had received prior to the war is that, once the war escalated, Saddam had numerous conversations with his generals about how to correct training deficits.<sup>122</sup> Only a month into the conflict, for example, the director of military movements, Staff Colonel Maysar Ibrahim al-Jayouri, subtly warned Saddam, "Our soldier is raw material, we can accomplish miracles with him if he is better used and guided."<sup>123</sup> In another conversation, probably in the mid-1980s, Saddam noted, "We have formed a large army to be trained," but "our infantry training is a bit a lagging. . . . We have been in war . . . without training and of course all of you knew before the war we were in need of training. If there was any blame to be placed, it would be for not having the training done before the war started."<sup>124</sup>

Saddam himself initially gave specific instructions to improve training.<sup>125</sup> By 1984 he also had assigned a highly competent corps commander, General Aladdin Hussein Makki Khamas, to the task. Notably, Makki was not

<sup>117</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 69.

<sup>118</sup> Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 154–55.

<sup>119</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 426.

<sup>120</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 219.

<sup>121</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 44.

<sup>122</sup> "Meeting between Saddam and senior military officials regarding arms imports and other issues relating to the Iran-Iraq War," CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000-627, undated (circa Fall 1983), 20–21.

<sup>123</sup> "Meetings between Saddam Hussein and various Iraqi Officials," CRRC no. SH-MISC-D-000-695, 12–13 October 1980, 700–701.

<sup>124</sup> "Meeting between Saddam and senior military officials," CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000-627, 21–22.

<sup>125</sup> "Meeting between Saddam and top advisors," CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000-626, 10.

a Baathist and had been educated at Sandhurst; his father had been the minister of defense during the monarchy.<sup>126</sup> Makki tightened the academic standards for Iraqi officers assuming command, developed an after-action process whereby battles could be assessed to provide direction for future training, undertook a comprehensive review of Iraqi doctrine, and published new training manuals, all of which Saddam reviewed personally.<sup>127</sup>

Additionally, Makki launched a professional military journal modeled on the US Army's *Military Review*.<sup>128</sup> The content of this journal, which Saddam himself read, is in some ways striking in its banal exposition of basic military principles. For example, a 1984 article noted:

Training and maintenance are essential, basic elements in all circumstances. They are needed to build a qualified human and material base superior to that of the enemy, and to maintain the momentum and impact of that base in various stages of the conflict to achieve decisive results and to effectively remedy shortages and losses stemming from the length of the war. In this regard, emphasis must be placed on not restricting training and maintenance to a certain aspect or area to the exclusion of another.<sup>129</sup>

Although perfectly unobjectionable, the very fact that a senior officer devoted the time to write an article explaining the importance of unrestricted training four years into the war speaks volumes about the legacy of Saddam's pre-war policies. One can draw a similar inference from another article published in the same issue in which the author observed, "Constant drilling in peace based on the most likely scenario tends to produce good action in warfare. Training alone ensures gradual improvement in all exercises. . . . The constant execution of realistic procedures in peacetime will make matters proceed automatically and easily in war, which increases the chances of success in battle."<sup>130</sup> Clearly, it seems, some in the Iraqi military and political leadership were not yet convinced of these arguments.

Indeed, although there were efforts to improve training for particular units starting as early as the fall of 1980, they remained sporadic at best well into 1984–85.<sup>131</sup> In one recorded conversation with Saddam, for example, an officer carefully approached the topic of seeking foreign help with training, commenting, "We cannot say that the [foreign] officers are smarter than the

<sup>126</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals*, 111.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–40; "Meeting between Saddam and senior military officials," CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000–627, 33–34.

<sup>128</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals*, 134.

<sup>129</sup> "Quarterly military journal of Iraqi Ministry of Defense Training Bureau regarding strategic, operational, and tactical military research and studies," CRRC no. SH-MODX-D-000-853 (July 1984), 56.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>131</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Appraisal, "Iran-Iraq: The Second Year of War," 8 December 1982, 2, available at NSA; Cordesman and Wagner, 353.

Iraqi ones. . . . On the brigade level our officers can hold their own, but in other areas we can do better if some of those [foreign] officers can come here and train us. . . . We should have put more emphasis on training our troops. . . . Education in the military should take a larger scale and requires planning.”<sup>132</sup> Saddam eventually did authorize a return to foreign military education.<sup>133</sup>

As late as 1986–87, however, advisors still had to work to convince Saddam to ease restrictions on training. In one 1986 conversation, for example, the defense minister remarked, “The process of building the warrior and building the human being, it is not a haphazard process, it is not just giving a weapon to a person and train him for two weeks and tell him go ahead and fight, the process of building the fighter is a very difficult one and requires time.”<sup>134</sup> In another conversation in 1987, a commander struggled to convince Saddam of the need to reconsider Iraq’s training methods, or lack thereof: “if these brave troops were to be given room for training . . . , if they were to be given three to four months to be trained, our position will be much better. Sir, each battalion needs a month or a month and a half to be trained. . . . Can you see how it works, sir? . . . If you allow me sir, everything will be explained. . . .”<sup>135</sup> The general gingerly concluded that, more so than the size of Iraqi forces, the “quality, and the shortage of its training, [were] very important too.”<sup>136</sup>

Finally, in late 1986 and early 1987, Saddam formed a new command for his rapidly expanding Republican Guard brigades, known as the Republican Guard Forces Command.<sup>137</sup> Saddam rotated brigades away from the front to train intensively on mobile operations, and he personally replaced commanders who resisted these efforts. As one general later put it, “He knew he could not win the war with these people.”<sup>138</sup> According to one recent history, “There was [now] a greater willingness at the top to pay serious attention to the recommendations of the more professional officers to build up the Republican Guard’s capabilities. . . . This effort to improve the Republican Guard involved more extensive training at all levels to improve tactical and battlefield proficiency of officers commanding Republican Guard units.”<sup>139</sup>

For the first time, Saddam ensured that his forces actually practiced conducting both smaller-unit and large corps-level offensive and defensive

<sup>132</sup> “Meeting between Saddam and senior military officials,” CRRG Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, 32.

<sup>133</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 136.

<sup>134</sup> “Transcript of a Conversation between Saddam Hussein and High Ranking Officers during the Iraq-Iran war,” CRRG no. SH-SHTP-D-000-607, 25 February 1985, 31 July 1986, 6.

<sup>135</sup> “Meeting Between Saddam And The Military Corps Commanders,” CRRG no. SH-SHTP-A-000-634, 28 March 1987, 12.

<sup>136</sup> “Meeting between Saddam and Military Corps Commanders regarding the Great Day and Great Harvest Battles . . . ,” CRRG no. SH-SHTP-A-000-634, 15.

<sup>137</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s War*, 70; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 219.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Woods et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 140–41.

<sup>139</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s War*, 14.

operations in highly realistic, full-size mockups of Iranian defensive positions.<sup>140</sup> As one general recounted years later, “There was an extensive training curriculum, day and night. . . . Saddam Hussein continuously followed up with us to see how our training was coming, and the readiness of our forces. . . . We had several active firing ranges and training grounds that would run 24 hours a day.”<sup>141</sup> In fact, many officers no longer wished to serve in the Guard because of the intensive responsibilities.<sup>142</sup> Saddam was, of course, able to assuage some of these complaints by increasing the material and financial benefits of service.<sup>143</sup>

During this period, Iraq also formed Republican Guard naval infantry units that later performed the amphibious assaults needed to retake Faw and the Howizeh Marshes.<sup>144</sup> A few regular armored and mechanized infantry divisions were given additional training, too, and they also later played key roles in the 1987–88 battles.<sup>145</sup> As Cordesman and Wagner report, “Iraqi armor and infantry were given special training in maneuver and combined-arms operations. . . . Iraq conducted corps-level exercises in fluid defense and counterattack tactics. . . . Iraqi artillery units were given special training in concentrating and shifting fire and in providing fire at the call of forward air controllers in the forward area rather than prepared fire.”<sup>146</sup>

After the war, however, these skills quickly atrophied as Saddam reimposed restrictions on training. This reversal explains in part the decline in Iraqi tactical proficiency and ability to conduct complex operations in 1991 and 2003.<sup>147</sup> Notably, though, throughout the period Saddam himself dictated training regimens. His meddling clearly was a constant, but its nature varied, and so did Iraqi battlefield performance.

### Shifts in Saddam’s Command Arrangements

Iraq began the war with a command system that was both centralized and fragmented. It was centralized in the sense that virtually all battlefield decision-making authority lay in Saddam’s personal hands or in those of a small inner circle in Baghdad.<sup>148</sup> For example, Saddam went so far as to order that soldiers could never retreat unless they were outnumbered by particular force ratios. He even created a punishment corps that operated

<sup>140</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, 291; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 220–21.

<sup>141</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s War*, 78.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>144</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam’s Generals*, 77–78.

<sup>145</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 220.

<sup>146</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 355–56.

<sup>147</sup> Woods et al., “Saddam’s Delusions”; Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, esp. chap. 3.

<sup>148</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 420.

in rear areas to enforce this policy, and he approved commanders' executions of their own soldiers after battlefield defeats.<sup>149</sup> As a result, virtually everyone in the military was afraid to take any action without specific authorization from higher headquarters or a political officer.<sup>150</sup> Cordesman and Wagner note, "Every level of command tended to refer all decisions upwards. The entire burden of command eventually rested on Saddam Hussein and his immediate staff in Baghdad, a burden of command they lacked both the communications and the expertise to bear effectively."<sup>151</sup> This was in some sense what Saddam wanted, however, as he had explicitly modeled his command system on Stalin's.<sup>152</sup>

Saddam also intentionally fractured command lines to different parts of the military, ensuring that he personally controlled them and that no one unit could ever command the others. For example, Saddam ensured that the chain of command for the Popular Army ran outside the armed forces and the ministry of defense, so that he could control it independently.<sup>153</sup> The Republican Guard also bypassed the normal chain of command, reporting only to Saddam.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, Saddam frequently shuffled officers to prevent them from forming personal relationships with subordinates that could then be used to foment a coup.<sup>155</sup>

As the war went on, Saddam realized that these practices were detrimental to Iraqi effectiveness, particularly the ability to conduct complex operations. In one discussion with his generals, Saddam explicitly voiced his realization that "it is hard for the higher command to have a good control system when you have a large army with many brigades and it lacks coordination between its units."<sup>156</sup> Although the centralization and fracturing of command might have been feasible when the army's main tasks were palace protection, monitoring the Shia, or shelling the Kurds, they proved paralyzing and dangerous for a multi-division army operating across three huge fronts in a conventional war. Around the same time, the aforementioned Iraqi military journal observed that "there is a limit to the number of individuals which one supervisor can manage effectively" and that Iraqi lines of command authority needed to be clarified to avoid conflicting orders and "duplicate leadership."<sup>157</sup>

In another conversation, a military officer concurred with Saddam's dawning realization that a more decentralized command structure might

<sup>149</sup> Hiro, *Longest War*, 109; Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals*, 32.

<sup>150</sup> For a taste of these sorts of orders, see "Meeting Between Saddam . . .," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-634, 10.

<sup>151</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 80.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals*, 44–45.

<sup>153</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 126.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>156</sup> "Meeting between Saddam and senior military officials," CRRC no. SH-SHTP-A-000-627, 25.

<sup>157</sup> "Defense in Strong Points," CRRC no. SH-MODX-D-000-853, 60.

allow better coordination across different branches of the Iraqi military. According to this officer, “In other armies they make different branches of the military interact and have the same tasks. Usually the armed forces break soldiers of different branches into working together by forcing them to do joint tasks. As they ease into it, it becomes a routine.”<sup>158</sup> Saddam agreed with this officer that Iraqi command arrangements needed to be restructured to “hinder any chances that the enemy would use the lack of coordination or communication for his advantage.”<sup>159</sup> He also listened as another officer suggested the need to halt the destructive practice of frequently shuffling officers among different commands.<sup>160</sup> Still, there is little evidence that Saddam made any real changes to these practices early in the war.<sup>161</sup>

Finally, in 1986–87, Saddam did make significant changes in his command arrangements. First, he initiated a significant devolution of command authority.<sup>162</sup> Steven Ward writes that starting in mid-1986 “the Iraqi dictator limited his micromanagement of operations” and “allowed Iraq’s increasingly competent and professional commanders more control.”<sup>163</sup> Cordesman and Wagner also report that Iraq’s field commanders and fighting officers were given a much stronger voice in directing battles and campaigns.<sup>164</sup> Saddam recalled many of the political officers, often called commissars, who had formerly been assigned to all Iraqi units above battalion strength, and those who remained found their command authority curtailed.<sup>165</sup>

Saddam never ended the fracturing of command in the sense that the Guard continued to be separate from the Popular Army, which was separate from the regular army. But Saddam also did nothing to divide the Guard further, while more than tripling its size. Additionally, he encouraged the formation of a functioning general staff system among Guard officers, reversing some of the intra-Guard fracturing that had existed earlier.<sup>166</sup> He also halted the constant rotation of officers.<sup>167</sup> Iraqi forces now were able to react more quickly to events on the battlefield and coordinate action across different military units—exactly what was required in the battles of 1987–88. Unfortunately, again, there is evidence that these policy changes did not outlast the war. In 1991 and 2003 Iraqi command arrangements were again overly centralized and fragmented, hurting Iraqi combat performance.<sup>168</sup>

<sup>158</sup> “Meeting between Saddam and senior military officials,” CRR no. SH-SHTP-A-000-627, 9–10.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>161</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 133.

<sup>162</sup> Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” 69.

<sup>163</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, 276.

<sup>164</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 356.

<sup>165</sup> Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, vii; Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 119; Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 153, 166.

<sup>166</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 167.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>168</sup> Woods et al., “Saddam’s Delusions”; Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, esp. chap. 3.

## Saddam's Shifting Information Management

Throughout most of the war, Iraqi intelligence had been more concerned with tracking political developments inside Iraq and monitoring the loyalty of the armed forces than with gathering information on the Iranians.<sup>169</sup> In fact, on the eve of the war Iraq had only three intelligence officers in the entire country tasked with Iran. Saddam instead had spent most of the 1970s constructing a vast spy network to report to him on the activities of military officers and the general population. One study notes that “when the war started, political commissars, who did nothing but report back to Saddam, were attached to all units. This system was still in place in 1982, an indication of Saddam’s continued distrust.”<sup>170</sup> In fact, in one conversation with his generals, Saddam responded to their disagreement about part of a report by noting, “The Intelligence Officer will settle this matter, because he was eavesdropping on you.”<sup>171</sup>

Internal correspondence from the Iraqi General Military Intelligence Directorate similarly noted that after the war started, the government was facing difficulties gathering intelligence from its own population because Iraq’s citizens were so used to an intelligence apparatus focused on them instead of Iran. One document stressed that the government needed to work to “convince the masses that the staff intelligence directorates were established to watch the enemy and not our various sectors; we should end this sort of stereotype and convince them that intelligence is part of the armed forces and not a dominating department—with the only concern—of watching and looking for adversaries.”<sup>172</sup>

The same document also noted that thus far in the war, “intelligence is still not up to the required standard due to some organizational reasons.”<sup>173</sup> Indeed, one of the first articles published in the aforementioned military journal emphasized the importance of basic tactical information, describing it as “the vital nerve in warfare.” The author added that “long ago, it was said ‘Give me information and I will give you victory.’ The basis of warfare is the collection of information before and during the war. Information is indispensable to any commander regardless of his capability or status.”<sup>174</sup> Again, the fact that an officer had to spell out these facts suggests continuing problems with information flow in the Iraqi military.

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<sup>169</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 147.

<sup>170</sup> Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, 30.

<sup>171</sup> “A meeting between Saddam Hussein and High-Ranking Officers Discussing Battles in the Iran-Iraq War,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-612, undated (circa late 1980s), 7.

<sup>172</sup> “GMID Daily Intelligence Reports sent by the Military Attaché in Iran Concerning the Loss of Iran and Iraq Forces, during the War in 1981,” CRRC no. SH-GMID-D-000-883, 5 March-28 April 1981, 9.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>174</sup> “Accuracy in the Transmission of Information, by Staff Brigadier General Ihsan Qasim Bakr,” in “Military Journal,” CRRC no. SH-MODX-D-000-853, 31.

Given this climate, officers rarely reported information they thought Saddam might not want to hear. As one general explained in an interview after the fall of the regime, “Saddam put great pressure on Iraqi commanders on the ground to avoid losses, which led them not to report failures. Withholding losses from reports and thus not receiving reinforcements or other support left commanders in impossible combat conditions. However, this was better than reporting their failures and suffering execution.”<sup>175</sup>

Indeed, commanders often exaggerated their claims about battlefield events or chose not to convey important developments up the chain of command, which may explain why Saddam was so slow to recognize the effects of his policies and attempt changes.<sup>176</sup> Iraqi officers also were afraid to speak to one another, fearing that they might be accused of coup plotting. As Cordesman and Wagner put it, “The command-and-control system was incapable of transmitting the true tactical situation. Senior Iraqi officers later noted that they often got more timely information from the media than they did from their own commanders at the front.”<sup>177</sup>

That said, the problem was a two-way street: political leaders also severely limited the information that battlefield commanders received, even about events occurring directly in their areas of operation. According to Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, “Controlling the dissemination of information served as a means of manipulating the military during the war,” in other words, of preventing military units from collaborating in any potential internally directed actions that might threaten the regime. “Tactical field commanders rarely received timely intelligence down from the chain of command and thus never had a full picture of the nature of the Iranian forces in their theater.”<sup>178</sup>

Starting in 1983 Saddam initiated some changes in his information-management policies. First, he fired the security chief who managed the spy network in the armed forces.<sup>179</sup> The next year he made some attempts to gather more realistic information from his field officers, evident in the officers’ more frequent inclusion in high-level political meetings about the war.<sup>180</sup> By 1984–85 Saddam was seeking a more realistic assessment of how to win the war. In a memo to his commanders dated 16 February 1984, Saddam admitted, “We must quietly examine our defensive measures and find out what type of activity we could add to those measures to increase their effectiveness.”<sup>181</sup>

<sup>175</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 38.

<sup>176</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 147; Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals*, 73.

<sup>177</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 80.

<sup>178</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 147.

<sup>179</sup> Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, 30.

<sup>180</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, 153; Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 117.

<sup>181</sup> “Presidential Direction during War in 1984,” CRRC no. SH-AFGC-D-000-686, February-December 1984, 41.

Still, only in 1986–87 did Saddam institutionalize major changes in information management. According to Al-Marashi and Salama, Saddam finally embraced “the need for combined arms operations, even though in the past these had been discouraged due to political reasons. . . . To conduct these combined arms tactics, the officers had to convince Hussein to allow cooperation between the military services and devolve command and control authority to the commanders on the field.”<sup>182</sup> Saddam complied, slashing “the number of bureaucratic barriers to the rapid transfer of information to field commanders” and lifting restrictions on interservice communication.<sup>183</sup> Here, as in the area of command arrangements, Saddam clearly allowed for some additional military autonomy, although it was confined mostly to Republican Guard units.

The battlefield benefits of this change were obvious in 1987–88. For the first time, different Iraqi combat arms—artillery, air support, armor, mechanized infantry, amphibious assault, combat engineering forces—showed the ability to tightly and precisely coordinate their actions in a manner that reflected Saddam’s new emphasis on fostering horizontal communication. Unfortunately for Iraq, Saddam again reversed these moves when the war ended, refocusing the Iraqi intelligence apparatus internally and resurrecting barriers to information sharing within the Iraqi military—both problems that became evident in the battles of 1991 and 2003.<sup>184</sup> Still, the impact of the changes at the end of the Iran-Iraq War was remarkable.

#### OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR THE SHIFT IN IRAQI EFFECTIVENESS

The evidence above shows that shifts in Saddam’s military organizational practices were logically and temporally tied to subsequent shifts in Iraqi battlefield effectiveness and that these changes most likely stemmed from shifts in Saddam’s threat calculus. Existing theories of effectiveness emphasize static factors that are largely unable to explain this improvement, but it is important to note that more intuitive, case-specific alternative explanations also seem to have little purchase on the shift. Here I explore two: the notion that Iraqi improvements in performance were just a function of material advantages or support provided by allies, and the argument that apparent Iraqi effectiveness was really just a function of growing Iranian ineffectiveness.

<sup>182</sup> Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 166.

<sup>183</sup> Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 356; for further evidence, see Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 164–66.

<sup>184</sup> Woods et al., “Saddam’s Delusions”; Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, esp. chap. 3.

## The Role of Material Capabilities and Third-Party Support

One might point to the balance of material capabilities and third-party support to explain the period of improved Iraqi effectiveness. As noted in the analysis above, Iraq had a substantial superiority in both the quality and quantity of arms throughout the war. Not only did revolutionary Iran alienate most of the nations that could have sold it weapons, but many countries feared an Iranian victory and sought to bolster Iraq. After 1982 even the United States shared intelligence with the Iraqis, although it refrained from direct weapons sales.<sup>185</sup> Given these advantages, perhaps the eventual Iraqi victory in the war is not so surprising, irrespective of any changes in Saddam's military organizational practices.

This explanation is not convincing, however. First, Iraq had an indisputable weaponry advantage for essentially six full years before it demonstrated significant improvements in battlefield effectiveness (see Table 4). This gap widened as the war went on, but it is hard to understand why a 6:1 advantage (in 1986) would suddenly confer battlefield benefits that a 5:1 advantage (in 1984) had not already provided.

Second, although it is true that Iraq received extensive foreign military assistance, most of it was received from 1981 to 1983.<sup>186</sup> Despite the enormous capital advantage this assistance should have afforded Iraq, however, there was little to no change in Iraqi battlefield performance until much later in the war. In fact, during the period when the Iraqi military began to improve, Iranian defense spending was actually higher than Iraq's, as it had been throughout the war (see Table 5).

Similarly, Iraq had been receiving US tactical intelligence for years before it seemed to perform better militarily.<sup>187</sup> Until shifts in Saddam's policies allowed for better use of these resources, they did not make a substantial difference. As late as February 1986, in fact, internal US government correspondence on the matter suggested that the Iraqis were "unable or unwilling" to act on the information provided to them.<sup>188</sup> Saddam simply did not trust

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<sup>185</sup> On the tilt in US policy toward supporting Iraq after 1982, see US Department of State, Nicholas A. Veliotos and Jonathan T. Howe to Lawrence S. Eagleburger, information memorandum, "Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality," 7 October 1983; Geoffrey Kemp, National Security Council, memorandum for the record, "Near-Term Options in the Iran-Iraq War," 26 March 1984; US Department of State to American Embassy Cairo, cable, "Briefing Material for Ambassador Wisner: Iran-Iraq," 28 August 1986; Dennis Ross, White House, to John M. Poindexter, PROFs message, "Expanding Intelligence to [sic] Provided to the Iraqis," 3 October 1986; National Security Council, Ronald C. St. Martin to Robert C. McFarlane, memorandum, "U.S. Targeting Support re Iran-Iraq War," 16 October 1986. All documents are available at NSA.

<sup>186</sup> Iraq received an estimated US\$25–35 billion in foreign military assistance from 1981–83. "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* 84 (1984): 62.

<sup>187</sup> Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 211.

<sup>188</sup> Bob Pearson, White House, forwarding message from Ken DeGraffenreid to Donald Fortier and John M. Poindexter, PROFs message, "Intelligence Exchange with Iraq," 24 February 1986, available at NSA.

**TABLE 4** Comparing Arsenals: Main Battle Tanks

	1980	1984	1986
Iraq	2,750	4,820	6,150
Iran	1,735	1,000	1,000

Source: All data taken from Iran and Iraq estimates in "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* vols. 80, 84, 86 (1980, 1984, 1986): 42, 61–62, 96–97, respectively.

**TABLE 5** Comparing Capital: Defense Spending

	1980	1984	1986
Iraq	2.67	10.296	12.866
Iran	4.2	17.370	14.091

Source: All data taken from Iran and Iraq estimates in "Middle East and North Africa," *Military Balance* vols. 80, 84, 86 (1980, 1984, 1986): 42, 61–62, 96–97, respectively.

Note: Amounts recorded in billions of dollars. The table does not include foreign military assistance to Iraq.

the Americans, and this problem only grew more severe after the Iran-Contra scandal broke in late 1986; after all, it exposed the United States as providing intelligence and weapons to Iraq's opponent.<sup>189</sup> Even many years later, US officials were skeptical about whether Iraq ever really used or needed the intelligence provided.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, the US secretary of state at the time privately characterized the intelligence sharing as useful but "limited."<sup>191</sup>

These are all additional reasons that the role of outside countries should not be overestimated as a factor in Iraq's improved battlefield effectiveness. Once Saddam's military organizational practices shifted, the military was able to take advantage of these resources, but prior to 1986 Iraqi performance looked quite similar to how it had looked in 1980.

### The Role of the Opponent

Might the apparent shift in Iraqi effectiveness have been illusory and simply the result of declining Iranian effectiveness? The topic of Iranian performance is too complex to address thoroughly here, but it is true that the

<sup>189</sup> The actual content and military value of these exchanges for Iran remains the subject of significant controversy. Malcolm Byrne, "Mixed Messages: U.S. Intelligence Support to Both Sides during the Iran-Iraq War" (paper prepared for The Iran-Iraq War: The View from Baghdad, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and National Defense University, Washington, DC, 25–27 October 2011).

<sup>190</sup> "Towards an International History of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980–1988: A Critical Oral History Workshop" (transcript of workshop at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, 19 July 2004), 20.

<sup>191</sup> "U.S. Intelligence for Iraq," background paper, 15 December 1986, 1, available through the Digital National Security Archive, item number IG00383.

Iranians also were not implementing the modern system, and their one strong suit—cohesion driven in large part by religious fanaticism and revolutionary zeal—began to deteriorate in 1987.<sup>192</sup> This change no doubt made resistance to Iraqi forces lighter than it had been earlier in the war, as noted above in the discussion of the final battles.

Still, even if Iranian morale had remained robust in the final years of the war, it is difficult to see how Iran's human wave attacks would have been a match for the sorts of operations the Iraqis were conducting in 1987–88. One cannot run the experiment, of course, but it is hard to think of an historical example in which even very determined, massed infantry formations have been a match for a better-armed adversary adept in coordinating its own movement and fire across multiple combat arms.

Additionally, it is hard to see how the Iraqis could have taken advantage of any Iranian weakness absent the shifts in military organizational practices regarding promotion, training, command, and information management. Although the Iranians' waning enthusiasm for the conflict may have led them to flee faster than they otherwise would have in the face of improved Iraqi attacks, it is not as though the Iranians were walking away unprompted from their well-established, defended positions at places such as Faw, Basra, or the Howizeh Marshes. Without Iraq's improved ability to force the Iranians physically from these areas through the use of integrated air, naval, and ground attacks, it is unclear whether the Iranian forces would have budged. Furthermore, at least some of the decline in Iranian cohesion during the course of the final battles was endogenous to the improved Iraqi performance itself. Steven Ward notes that it was Iraqi fighting effectiveness early in the campaign, especially at Basra, that drained the Iranians of the last of their morale, rather than the other way around.<sup>193</sup>

Lastly, the evidence we have from inside the Iraqis' own campaign planning processes makes clear that the Iraqis really were doing something new in these battles rather than simply applying their old methods and getting a new result due to a weakened opponent. To return to a distinction made earlier, battle outcomes may not have been solely a function of Iraqi changes, but we can safely say the improvement in Iraq's own effectiveness was real.

By the same token, actual Iraqi battlefield performance in 1991 and 2003 should not be ignored. To be sure, the United States massively overmatched Iraq in these wars, and American victory in the conventional operations was never in doubt. Yet multiple studies suggest that Iraq should have been able to generate far more resistance to the coalition than it actually did. Just as it is important not to attribute low US casualties in these wars solely to US prowess, it is also important not to attribute the Iraqi victories in 1988

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<sup>192</sup> Woods et al., *Saddam's War*, 15; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, 231–32, 260–61, 324.

<sup>193</sup> Ward, *Immortal*, 293.

solely to Iranian weakness. In all three conflicts, the Iraqis' own fighting effectiveness varied substantially and in ways the evidence suggests were tied directly to Saddam's military organizational practices.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What does the Iraqi case suggest about broader theoretical debates on military effectiveness? Certainly, many aspects of the Iraqi experience bear out existing arguments suggesting that autocracy and coup-ridden civil-military relations are detrimental to battlefield performance. Over the roughly three decades of military performance examined in this paper, Iraq's instances of good military performance were the exception, not the rule. And Iraq probably never achieved the full fighting power of which it was capable given its material resources, simply because the time to adapt was still relatively short, and internal threats never receded completely.

Still, the exceptional period of improved Iraqi military performance sheds light on what it is about the regime type and civil-military relations variables that is so powerful: the information that these traits convey about the threat environment leaders may face and the ways in which this environment shapes the structure and behavior of their military organizations. In particular, the Iraqi case demonstrates that personalism and coup-proofing are best thought of as strong indicators that a leader is likely to be very concerned about internal threats in ways that can directly trade off with externally oriented, conventional military effectiveness. According to this same logic, though, where the threat calculus shifts, we should also observe shifts in the military organizational practices integral to generating fighting power. As a result, poor military effectiveness is not an immutable or inherent trait of autocracies, even personalist ones, but rather reflects leaders' often very rational responses to the different threats they must manage to stay in power. If this is true, then autocracies should be capable of solid military performance in situations in which internal threats are muted, external threats become severe, or external threats amplify internal threats, as occurred in Iraq in the 1980s.

Although it needs further testing, this hypothesis is intuitively plausible and has the potential to help make sense of other puzzling instances of observed variation within autocratic regimes. Consider, for example, the variation in Chinese military performance over time: why did the PLA do so well against democratic opponents in 1950 (versus the United States in Korea) and 1962 (versus India) yet fare so poorly versus its small autocratic neighbor Vietnam in 1979? The initial findings here would suggest that scholars should look for answers in the threat environment Mao faced in the 1960s and 1970s and the changes that he likely implemented in Chinese military organizational practices as a result. Given what we

know about the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, this line of reasoning certainly constitutes a plausible explanation for the otherwise surprising decline in Chinese battlefield effectiveness.<sup>194</sup>

One might apply a similar logic to explain the variation seen in Soviet military performance in World War II as well. After all, why did the Soviet military perform so much better in the war's early eastern battles (namely, those at Khalkhin Gol) than in the western ones (such as the Winter War against Finland), and then why did overall Soviet army performance improve so significantly as the conflict went on? Allied assistance is surely part of the story, but the argument presented here also would urge close attention to Stalin's shifting threat perceptions. Prior to the war, Stalin's concern about internal dangers, including coups, led him to engage in many Saddam-like practices with respect to his military that, interestingly, seemed to fall more heavily on commanders in the west rather than those who went on to command in the eastern battles. As the war went on and Nazi Germany clearly became the greatest threat to both himself and the Soviet Union, Stalin moderated his policies across the military in many of the same ways Saddam did and with similar results.<sup>195</sup>

Again, these patterns suggest that significant variation in military performance is possible even within the confines of personalism and distrustful civil-military relations, depending on leaders' threat perceptions. They also tentatively reinforce the notion that, whatever their other faults, the very lack of institutionalization characteristic of personalist regimes endows them with a sometimes remarkable agility in executing the dictator's whims—which can lead to relatively rapid shifts in effectiveness under the right conditions.

Numerous questions remain, of course. Threat perceptions are notoriously difficult to measure *ex ante*. Paradoxically, threats are so important that leaders often fail to discuss them explicitly in the documents they leave behind, which are often sparse in dictatorships anyway. As a result, further deductive work is needed to develop our expectations about where different types of threats should be most decisive. Even then, it is well known that leaders' threat perceptions are subject to bias, mistakes, and the strong imprint of formative personal and political experiences that may or may not be relevant to the situation at hand. These distortions seem more likely in

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<sup>194</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Andrew Scobell, "Military Coups in the People's Republic of China: Failure, Fabrication, or Fancy?" *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995); Ellis Joffe, "The Military as a Political Actor in China," in Roman Kolkowicz and Andrzej Korbonski, eds., *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernizing Societies* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 139–58.

<sup>195</sup> Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), chap. 3; David Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998); Earl F. Ziemke, "The Soviet Armed Forces in the Interwar Period," in *Military Effectiveness, Vol. II: The Interwar Period*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 1–38.

dictatorships, especially personalist ones, in which the path to power is often violent and the very information-management policies used to control the military also may shield the leader from valuable information needed for strategic assessment. The Iraqi experience in 1986 indicates that it may take particularly unambiguous information from the environment to stimulate updated threat assessments. Still, research and theorizing on these questions would enable scholars to predict when existing theories of military performance will apply and when they will need amendment.

The concept of internal threat also demands further disaggregation in several ways. First, we would expect different types of autocratic regimes to conceive of internal threats differently. In personalist regimes like the one examined here, for instance, threats to the personal survival of the dictator are likely to be paramount, whereas in one-party states the focus is more likely to be on regime survival rather than on the fate of any individual. Indeed, this difference might make coups a much bigger concern in the first type of regime and insurgency or mass protest a bigger worry in the second.

Second, all internal threats are not created equal. The Iraqi case demonstrates the stark trade-off between coup protection and conventional military effectiveness, but one can imagine other instances in which some types of internal military prowess would also be very useful externally, and vice versa. For example, it is not clear that Saddam-style policies would be very useful in protecting a leader against the threat posed by insurgency, and certainly they would be counterproductive in a conventional civil war. By the same token, a military optimized for external, conventional war likely would have trouble fighting external wars that took on an irregular character. Additional work should explore these distinctions and their impact on different types of effectiveness. Many seem relevant to explaining variation in the military performance of democratic states as well, particularly in counterinsurgency.

Lastly, for those concerned with contemporary US foreign policy, the Iraqi case should strongly caution against net assessments focused largely on static or slow-moving variables. Although these factors provide an important baseline for gauging likely military performance, it is crucial to assess what dictators are actually doing as they meddle in military affairs and why they are doing it. Leaders have little latitude to change structural factors but often enormous leeway to alter military organizational practices depending on the threat environment—a reality that the United States should bear in mind as it estimates the fighting power of adversaries and tries to build the fighting power of allies.