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They Bring Their Pathologies With Them**

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April 2022

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IDA Document NS D-33090

Log: H 22-000193



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About This Publication

This work was conducted by the Institute for Defense Analyses as part of Corporate Research Project C09 "When Authoritarians Invade". The views, opinions, and findings should not be construed as representing the official position of either the Department of Defense or the sponsoring organization.

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When Strongmen Invade, They Bring Their Pathologies With Them

The [attack](#)...should have been a short one, like a blitzkrieg, because [we] did not have the resources for a long campaign. We knew that we were not prepared to fight a long war...We had 9 divisions to cover the 9 roads....Only one division advanced along each road. There was no main axis of advance and no secondary axis of advance...we were weak everywhere....The objectives of the attack were not what they should have been.

A paranoid but intelligent authoritarian leader decides to invade a neighboring country with little notice. He seeks to improve his country's regional heft, settle historical grievances, and fight against "revolutionary" ideas. He expects to achieve significant military objectives in a matter of days, and therefore has insufficient plans and logistics for the long-term conflict that ensues. He wants to exploit his enemy's internal political instability, but the invasion only solidifies popular support for the neighboring government. He overvalues his military's sizable numerical advantage, but undervalues less quantifiable factors, such as morale, combat effectiveness, and the operating environment. He has selected his advisors and officer corps based on loyalty instead of competence, and so he believes them to be unstoppable. He is shocked when they perform poorly. He tries to narrow his objectives and still claim victory. He is not Vladimir Putin. He is Saddam Hussein. The epigram above is an Iraqi general describing the 1980 invasion of Iran, not the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Iraq [invaded](#) Iran, expecting to win in just a few days, but found itself mired in a brutal conflict that lasted nearly a decade. Analyzing the early years of this conflict suggests political, strategic, and tactical problems that tend to limit combat effectiveness in "strongman" regimes. While regime type is just one of many factors in combat effectiveness, looking closely at what unfolded in the Middle East two generations ago can help understand what is happening today in Ukraine. This article delves into Iraqi military's promotion, training, command, and information sharing behaviors, all of which express themselves in Russia's military today. The parallels suggest that Russia has much learning and adapting to do, and may escalate to buy the time needed to adapt.

What is the Army For?

Militaries may inspire awe on the parade ground, and they may achieve objectives on the battlefield. "Strongman" authoritarians tend to prioritize the former at the expense of the latter.

In [The Dictator's Army](#), Caitlin Talmadge offers a framework for assessing authoritarian regimes and their military organizational practices. She considers four areas of military behavior—promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management—that shape combat effectiveness, arguing that¹ the authoritarian desire to deter coups (or to solidify power) requires specific military organizational practices that impede battlefield performance. The Iraq of 1980—fraught with internal security problems, but few serious external threats—structured its military to mitigate the potential for a coup and found itself unable to win against an external foe.

Promoting for Talent or Loyalty?

Effective militaries center their promotion patterns on merit, but authoritarian regimes tend to prize political loyalties and personal ties over competence.² Saddam Hussein's consolidation of power over Iraq prioritized loyalty to Saddam and "Bedouin tribal culture" over all else, including competent leadership, honest assessments, and professionalism.³ Cronyism and political concerns overshadowed skill in building civilian and military leadership. Saddam purged senior military leaders he saw as disloyal and replaced them with more junior Ba'athist and Tikriti officers.⁴ The result was a politicized leadership that translated quasi-tribal ties into political power, rather than one comprising a professional officer or NCO corps that wanted to be in the military. These promotion practices encouraged an increasingly corrupt and incompetent system, which proved too ineffective to carry out a large-scale invasion.

The "Corruptive Influence" of Training

Successful militaries implement robust training regimens that enable complex operations; however, training is expensive, and it risks creating a broad base of effective troops that could threaten the centralized power of an authoritarian state.⁵ Authoritarian leaders tend to avoid combined arms live-fire exercises and other realistic training methods, fearing that armed military units marching within the country might offer a pretext for a coup. Saddam limited the amount of training that Iraqi soldiers received, sometimes due to neglect, and other times because he feared that sending them abroad to learn how to use foreign weapons systems might undermine their Iraqi nationalism.⁶ Here a more subtle form of nepotism trumped

¹ Talmadge, Caitlin. 2015. *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015, 13.

² Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army...*, 13.

³ Murray, Williamson, and Kevin M. Woods. *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 24–25

⁴ Williamson and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 62–63.

⁵ *The Dictator's Army...*, 13–14.

⁶ *The Dictator's Army...*, 158–60

competence: protecting prestigious career assignments incentivized parades and demonstrations over quality and potentially risky training.⁷

Commanding from the Palace Instead of the Battlefield

Complex combined arms (or “all-domain”) operations, especially against an agile foe, require decentralized, clear authority that allows quick unit-level decision-making and improvisation.⁸ By definition, authoritarian regimes concentrate power at the top; allowing autonomy among military units or building a strong NCO corps risks creating alternative power structures that could undermine state power. In Iraq’s case, the paranoid leadership in Baghdad directly ordered local units, leaving them with little to no flexibility to improvise as conditions changed on the ground. Saddam’s micromanagement went so far as to define the size of individual trenches and to summarily execute troops for retreating from a fight.⁹ The result was a military terrified of creatively approaching problems that instead followed centralized orders to the letter, even when they made no strategic or tactical sense.

Hiding Information and Silencing Dissent

Militaries benefit from robust information-sharing processes, ensuring the free flow of honest information, both horizontally and vertically.¹⁰ Paranoid states limit information to a small, trusted group. In addition, authoritarian regimes limit dissenting information and prevent officers from openly disagreeing with leadership, which, invariably leads to dishonest, overly optimistic assessments. Saddam was confident and certain in his expertise and view of history. He ran his government through fear, not respect, quashing opposing opinions that might have better understood risk or fostered a more realistic or creative approach. He [listened](#) to advisors he would often respond to dissenting opinions with incarceration, or worse.¹¹ His advisors found his strength of conviction intimidating; if Saddam believed something to be true, he believed it even in the face of contradicting evidence.¹²

All four of these factors underpinned Iraq’s early failures in its invasion of Iran, on political, strategic, and tactical levels.

⁷ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 68

⁸ *The Dictator's Army...*, 14

⁹ *The Dictator's Army...*, 160–61

¹⁰ *The Dictator's Army...*, 14

¹¹ Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, Elisabeth A. Nathan, Laila Sabara, and Ana M. Venegas. “Interview with (Former) Lieutenant General Ra’ad Majid Rashid Al-Hamdani, Amman, Jordan, 6-7 November 2009,” *Project 1946: Phase II* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010), 59.

¹² Woods et al., “Interview with (Former) Lieutenant General Ra’ad Majid Rashid Al-Hamdani...” 59.

Invading

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein—eager to exploit temporary Iranian weakness and internal instability to revise the disputed border amid near daily land, air, and sea skirmishes—decided to conduct a full-fledged invasion of Iran. This decision reflected a series of political problems inherent to his state’s structure. Contemporary sources and interviews suggest Saddam was intelligent and ruthless leader with demonstrably well-developed understanding of his domestic environment. However, his appreciation for strategic contexts outside of Iraqi (even close neighbors) was limited, and his advisors did little to mitigate these flaws.¹³ The incentives he created left Saddam with subordinates who were too loyal, sycophantic, and fearful to provide him with anything but rosy view of the invasion’s chance for success.

Lacking a practical, strategic mindset towards the war, Saddam turned to emotions and culture. He believed in fundamental Iraqi and Arab superiority over his Iranian foes, letting prejudices and stereotypes supplant facts.¹⁴ He overestimated the ability of Iraqi nationalism to keep morale high. He also overestimated the popularity of pan-Arabism—convinced that other Arab countries and Iranian Arabs would immediately support the Iraqi side, he was shocked that most decided to sit out the war, and some even supported Tehran. Conversely, his dismissive view of Persians clouded his view of how well his opponents would fight.

Saddam’s overconfidence meant that his grandiose objectives overshadowed any realistic understanding of Iraq’s capabilities. Iraq might have performed well enough if the war sought merely to exploit Iran’s temporary weakness to take a small amount of territory and settle a long-standing border dispute. Instead, Saddam thought he could destroy the Islamic Republic and replace it with a compliant regime. He thought the quick, powerful blow would lead the other Arab states to unite around a new Iraqi regional hegemony, and the precedent of Arab states “recovering Arab lands” would shatter the confidence of Israel in the bargain. In reality, the invasion and ensuing atrocities only led Iranians to “rally around the flag,” allowing Tehran to consolidate power over its still incomplete revolution.

Maximalist Ends, Minimalist Means

As Saddam’s overconfidence shaped his political goals for the war. He believed that simply sending troops across the border would be sufficient to prompt Tehran’s surrender. This optimism meant that Iraq’s forces did not coordinate their drives into Iran or integrate forces for an effective invasion.¹⁵

¹³ “Interview with (Former) Lieutenant General Ra’ad Majid Rashid Al-Hamdani...,” 59

¹⁴ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 70

¹⁵ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 108

Centralized command arrangements also led to strategic problems. Decision-makers in Baghdad directed Iraqi forces to take the cities instead of strategically important infrastructure like oil fields and highways. Instead of cutting off Iranian supplies or exploiting Iranian weaknesses, Iraq fought bloody urban battles that just exhausted its troops and bolstered Iranian resolve without offering strategic benefit.¹⁶ Nationalist optimism contributed to this ineffective strategy: Saddam chose to attack the largely Arab cities to instigate rebellion against Tehran, but the brutal urban warfare only worsened anti-Iraqi sentiments among a population already unwilling to rebel.¹⁷

Underestimating Training and Logistics

On a tactical level, a poor training regimen meant that Iraqi conscripts could not defeat their enemy despite having far larger numbers. Their poor training and morale could not match the fervor of the Iranian defenders. Even Iraq's most sophisticated capabilities were unprepared for the initial air campaign. Some in the air force thought they were preparing for an exercise until hours before the invasion resulting in munitions and fuel loads inappropriate to the tasks.¹⁸

Iraq's poor military leadership did not sufficiently consider the importance of logistics in this fight. While Iraq did stockpile Soviet-made ammunition and spare parts to avoid having to appeal to Moscow in the midst of a crisis, it fell short of its true needs because it discounted the possibility of a long war.¹⁹ Central planning, corruption, and incompetence only exacerbated the problems.

Iraq also underestimated environmental factors. Iraq invaded in September, immediately before the rainy season, when much of the marshy Iran-Iraq border area would mitigate Iraq's armor advantage. Iran managed to exploit environmental factors, in one case opening sluice gates on a river to flood 150 Iraqi tanks up to their turrets.²⁰ These environmental issues would have had limited effects in the short war that Saddam had hoped for, but of course, the war lasted far longer.

What Does this Teach Us About Ukraine Today?

The combined weight of the factors above doomed the initial Iraqi invasion to failure. Iraq managed to take considerable territory in its early invasion of Iran, but soon found itself

¹⁶ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 123

¹⁷ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 138

¹⁸ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 101

¹⁹ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 152–59

²⁰ *The Iran-Iraq War...*, 124–25

stalemated and holding indefensible positions after suffering enormous casualty counts. Political aims hardened, and the war ground on for another six years. Iraq held out against an Iranian counter-invasion, less through improved military professionalization than with support (and a blind eye) from the international community. Increasingly desperate, Iraq tried to fill its competence gap with increasing atrocities, including chemical weapons use on military and civilian targets, both Iranian and Iraqi. In the end, Iran accepted a ceasefire rather than suffer continued civilian casualties, and neither side achieved its primary objectives. Despite attempts at learning and increasing professionalism, the Iraqi military would face the same issues again in 1991 and 2003.

Problems in these four areas—[promotion patterns](#), training [regimen](#), command [arrangements](#), and information [management](#)—have all plagued Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, contributing to a poorly thought-out strategic [decision](#) to invade, [overconfidence](#) in a set of simplistic military objectives, and a lack of [preparation](#) to sustain anything but the shortest of conflicts. Much like 1981 Iraq, Russia now seems to be [scaling](#) back its definition of “victory” to better align with military realities, but has not shrunk from its strategic objectives.

These four factors seem deeply embedded into Russia’s military behaviors. Iraq learned painful lessons from its initial failures, the most important of which was the need to adapt. That required time. To buy time and maintain his regime until this learning process could take effect, Saddam escalated: he disrupted global energy (“the Tanker War”), he attacked civilian populations (the “War of the Cities”), and he used chemical weapons on both military and civilian targets. Here, the parallels between the two conflicts prompt a set of questions: is the Russian military capable of learning and adapting after its initial failure? If yes, and given the parallels between the early phases of these two ineffectual campaigns, how might Russia buy time?

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