
On September 22, 1980, military aircraft from Iraq mounted a surprise attack on military airfields throughout Iran in an attempt to destroy Iran's air force on the ground. A day later Iraq's forces crossed the border in strength, igniting what was to develop into one of the longest, bloodiest, and costliest armed conflicts in the post-World War II era. By the time the war ended on August 18, 1988, there was neither victor nor vanquished; only a million casualties, untold economic dislocation, and widespread destruction on both sides.

Exactly what drove Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, to the extreme move of invading a neighboring state will probably never be known. The standard explanation views the invasion as an expression of Hussein's aggressive personality and his unbridled regional ambitions. These ranged from the occupation of Iran's territories (Shatt Al-Arab waterway and the oil-rich province of Khuzistan), through the infliction of a decisive defeat on the Iranian revolution, to the desire to make Iraq the preeminent Arab and Gulf state. It has even been suggested that by defeating Iran, Hussein hoped to become the most influential leader of the nonaligned movement.

Conversely, the invasion has been viewed as an excessive reaction by Hussein to the threat posed to his personal rule by the revolutionary regime in Tehran. Coming to power in January 1979 on the ruins of the Pahlavi dynasty, which had ruled Iran since the 1920s, the Islamic republic, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sought to substitute its own version of an Islamic order for the status quo in the Persian gulf.

Since this meant, first and foremost, the subversion of the nationalistic, secular Ba'th regime in Baghdad, and since his attempts to contain Iran's pressures by emergency measures short of war came to naught, Hussein was forced to conclude that he had no alternative but to resort to arms.
The reluctant nature of Iraq's invasion was clearly reflected in its strategy. Instead of dealing a mortal blow to Iran's army and trying to topple the revolutionary regime in Tehran, Hussein sought to confine the war by restricting his army's goals, means, and targets. His territorial goals did not go beyond the Shatt al-Arab and a small portion of Khuzistan, in southern Iran. The invasion was carried out by less than half of Iraq's army, five of twelve divisions. Also, the initial strategy avoided civilian and economic targets in favor of military targets. Only after Iran struck nonmilitary targets did Iraq respond in kind.

No less important, Hussein failed to grasp the operational requirements of his campaign. Rather than allow his forces to advance until their momentum was exhausted, he voluntarily halted their advance a week after the onset of hostilities and announced his willingness to negotiate a settlement. This decision proved catastrophic, turning what had been conceived as a brief campaign, at the most, into an eight-year war.

Iraq's limited campaign saved Iran's army from defeat and gave Tehran time to reorganize and regroup; it also devastated the morale of Iraq's army, and hence its combat performance. Above all, it did nothing to endanger the revolutionary regime, or to drive Ayatollah Khomeini to moderation. Instead of seeking a quick accommodation, the authorities in Tehran seized the initiative and moved onto the offensive.

In January 1981, Iran launched its first major counteroffensive. Although this attack was contained in one of the largest tank battles of the war, by the time 1981 was over, Iran had dislodged Iraq from most of its strongholds in Khuzistan.

In one of his wisest strategic moves, Hussein withdrew from areas of Iran still under Iraq's control and redeployed along the border. Citing Israel's invasion of Lebanon on June 6, 1982 he announced that his troops would be completely withdrawn from Iran within ten days. This move, however, failed to appease Tehran, and on July 13, 1982, following a bitter debate within Iran's leadership, a large-scale offensive was launched toward Basra, the second most important city in Iraq.

The war now became a prolonged exercise in futility, reminiscent of the trench warfare of World War I, in which human-wave attacks were launched by Iran against Iraq's formidable lines, only to be repulsed at a horrendous human cost.

In February 1986, after nearly four years of costly attacks, Iran gained its first significant foothold on Iraq's territory by occupying the Fao peninsula at the southern tip of Iraq and holding it despite desperate counterattacks.

By this time, the specter of a victory by Iran had gathered a most unlikely group to ensure that Iraq did not lose the war. The Soviet Union and France armed Iraq, and the United States provided vital intelligence support and economic aid; numerous companies in Europe built Iraq's nonconventional weapons; the Arab Gulf monarchies financed Iraq's war effort; and a million Egyptian workers serviced Iraq's overextended economy.
Meanwhile, Iran, starved of major weapons systems and subjected to an economic blockade, was showing signs of war weariness. Iraq's air and missile attacks on Iran's cities, the exorbitant human toll, and the economic dislocations gave rise to great frustration as shortages of basic commodities worsened, and a black market and corruption flourished. Discontent grew among the poor, the mainstay of the regime's support, and the number of war volunteers dropped sharply.

As early as mid-1982, a loose coalition of military and political figures began to question the logic of taking the war into Iraq. As national spirits fell, these skeptical voices became increasingly influential, but they could not sway the aged Ayatollah Khomeini, who would not budge until Iraq's regime was overthrown.

In April 1988, Hussein ordered his troops to move onto the offensive, after nearly six years on the defensive. Within forty-eight hours of fierce fighting, Iraq recaptured the Fao peninsula, signaling the final reversal in the fortunes of the war.

In May, Iraq drove Iran from Salamcheh (east of Basra), and a month later dislodged Iran from the Majnun islands, which it had held since 1985. In early July, Iraq drove the rest of Iran's forces out of Kurdistan, and later that month gained a small strip of Iran's territory on the central front.

The mullahs in Tehran desperately urged their spiritual mentor to drink from the "poisoned chalice" and order the cessation of hostilities. On July 18, 1988, Iran accepted Security Council Resolution 598 on a cease-fire. A month later the guns fell silent.

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FURTHER READINGS

Bibliography

