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Deterrence in the Gulf War: Evaluating New Evidence

An article by **Avner Golov**

Abstract:

A recently published collection of captured Iraqi records offers an opportunity to better understand Saddam Hussein's perception of US and Israeli deterrence signals, affording innovative insights into the reasons behind Iraq's restraint from using weapons of mass destruction against Israeli targets during the 1991 Gulf War. This article tests a wide range of suggested hypotheses, and suggests that US and Israeli deterrence played only a minimal role in dissuading Iraqi use of WMD. The article concludes with some thoughts on the practical implications, particularly on the effectiveness of a “no-first-use” nuclear policy.

During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq launched forty-three missiles at Israeli cities, not one armed with unconventional warheads, even though Saddam Hussein threatened to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against Israel if he were attacked by the coalition forces. Many Americans and Israelis attribute the lack of Iraqi WMD use to effective US and Israeli deterrence policies. However, since “all deterrence is self-deterrence,” Israeli and US deterrence policies—and their effect on Saddam's behavior during the Gulf War—must be linked to evidence from the Iraqi side.¹ In 2003, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, more than 800 Iraqi records were captured, including government documents, videotapes, audiotapes, maps, and photographs from before April 2003.² These records offer a hitherto inaccessible Iraqi perspective on the Gulf War and thus may shed light on how the Iraqi leadership perceived US and Israeli deterrence decisions during this war and afterward, providing an evidentiary basis for assessing deterrence effectiveness. Deciphering Iraq's motivation for eschewing the use of WMD against Israel could offer a new deterrence case study. Academic efforts to exhaust the knowledge provided by these records for analyzing the Iraqi perception of the Gulf War are only in their preliminary stages, and their main focus is on the bilateral relations between the United States and Iraq.³ Accordingly, the research question of this article is as follows: what is the relationship between US and Israeli deterrence and Saddam Hussein's decision to refrain from launching an unconventional attack during the Gulf War? By focusing on the Israeli arena while expanding the scope to both US and Israeli signals, this research can provide an innovative analysis of existing knowledge about US and Israeli deterrence efficacy during the Gulf War.

This article will argue that although US and Israeli deterrence had some impact on Saddam's decision, it did not play a primary role in his calculus. Hussein assessed that he could hit Israeli targets with unconventional weapons and he planned to do so under certain conditions. Ultimately, he did not give this order because his conditions had not

been met. Nevertheless, one should consider the limitation of this research while addressing the proposed conclusions. The new Iraqi data offer several more pieces of evidence, but not the whole picture, of Hussein's decision making: in addition to his previous orders to staff to avoid documenting any actions associated with his secret projects, including Iraq's WMD arsenal, Hussein also appointed a committee responsible for erasing all documentation of Iraqi WMD capabilities.⁴ In view of this limitation, this analysis tests alternative hypotheses in order to widen the range of potential explanations and maximize the validity of this research.⁵

This article begins with common explanations for the Iraqi restraint given by observers who sought to elucidate Iraqi policy during the Gulf crisis, including the popular notion that US and Israeli deterrence succeeded. It then discusses the Iraqi perspective of the war, as can be interpreted from the recently revealed Iraqi data. It concludes with lessons we can learn for contemporary discussion of the effectiveness of a no-first-use nuclear policy. This part examines three key terms in this discussion: ambiguous nuclear policy, existential deterrence, and the stability-instability paradox. In doing so, this article underlines the complexity of using nuclear deterrence against non-nuclear threats, including chemical and biological weapons (CBW) as well as conventional arms. Therefore, this article makes a double contribution: first, it offers an innovative analysis of the Gulf War in order to widen the existing empirical data in the deterrence literature; and second, it offers a theoretical contribution to one of the main contemporary policy debates.

For full article:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10736700.2013.857127#.UqA7IOL4s84>