

Operation Desert Fox: Results and Ramifications

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Background

Operation Desert Fox, conducted on December 16-20, 1998, brought to a climax a process that had begun in October 1997, when Saddam Hussein undertook an intensified effort to free himself from the supervision conducted by the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the international sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council (UNSC). Following the Iraqi actions, UNSCOM reported to the UNSC that Iraq was interfering with the execution of inspections and refusing to supply requested information about its chemical and biological weapons programs. Iraq responded with a demand that UNSCOM remove the American members of its team from Iraq. This demand was rejected.

In January 1998, Iraq prevented a UNSCOM team headed by an American inspector from carrying out its mission. The resulting crisis led to a U.S. decision to conduct a military operation against Iraq, if it continued to refuse to cooperate with UNSCOM. The United States threatened that this would be a broad and effective military action, different in nature from the limited attacks it had made against Iraq on a number of previous occasions since the Gulf War.

The US threat amplified concerns that there was now a higher degree of likelihood that Saddam would respond with military action against Israel. Tension ran high in Israel, and vigorous steps were taken to beef up defense of the home front,

while reinforcing – in coordination with the U.S. – defense systems against surface-to-surface missiles and chemical and biological warheads. The effect on the Israeli public mood was severe; indeed, reactions seemed somewhat exaggerated and even hysterical.

The United States concentrated forces in the Persian Gulf area and prepared for the operation. The American attack was avoided temporarily when in February, 23rd, the Secretary-General of the UN succeeded in arriving at an agreement with Saddam Hussein, that committed Iraq to enable the UN inspectors to carry out their missions undisturbed. However, the Clinton administration did not have any illusions, and operated under the assumption that Saddam would not maintain his commitment for long.

Planning of the Operation and Its Considerations

On the basis of this assessment the U.S. Armed Forces made extensive efforts over the coming months to improve its ability to conduct a broad and comprehensive operation in Iraq. These efforts focused primarily on two areas: Refining the operation plan prepared in early 1998, and readying the forces to carry out the operation on short notice, eliminating the need for a protracted period for moving in forces between the time an operational decision is taken and the onset of military action. The central dilemma was how to achieve the goals of the operation through

military action that would not require advance positioning of forces, and with a minimum of casualties.

Defining the goals of the operation was also not simple. The U.S. government understood that it would not be able to reform Saddam Hussein over time. It was clear that Saddam will continue to conceal missiles and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and will make every effort to have the sanctions lifted and renew his WMD program. This assessment should have led the U.S. government to conclude that the only apparent way to eliminate this problem is the removal of Saddam Hussein. It was clear to the United States, however, that it could not bring down Saddam via military actions at acceptable cost. Physical elimination of Saddam was untenable, in view of the measures he takes for his personal protection. In any case, U.S. law forbids its defense organizations from assassinating leaders of other nations. Moreover, the overthrow of Saddam's regime by the US military would require an invasion of Iraq. It can be assumed that such a high-cost operation would involve considerable number of casualties, have the potential for Vietnam-like complications, and risk causing Iraq's dismemberment into a number of entities, consequently strengthening Iran. The political price of all that would be heavy.

As a result, the Clinton administration had no choice but to forego its interest in bringing down Saddam, adopting more

modest and realistic goals. It defined these as: **"To strike military and security targets in Iraq which contribute to Iraq's ability to produce, store, maintain, and deliver weapons of mass destruction."** It implied three missions, that were also defined by the administration:

- Degrading Saddam Hussein's ability to make and use weapons of mass destruction
- Diminishing Saddam Hussein's ability to wage war against his neighbors
- Demonstrating to Saddam Hussein the consequences of violating international obligations.

The ability to implement an extensive operation on short notice, without a major buildup of forces and with a minimum of casualties, made it necessary to rely on attacks from air and sea. Any land operation requires a concentration of forces over a protracted period, with a potentially higher rate of casualties. The planners therefore relied on the naval forces in the Persian Gulf, warplanes of the US Air Force and Britain's Royal Air Force deployed in other Gulf states, and US Air Force bombers that could be operated from greater distances. The intention was to begin with the forces already available, that were deployed at appropriate ranges, and reinforce them with additional forces that could be brought in within a reasonable period of time.

The United States was able to choose this course of action because, during the time that had elapsed since the Gulf War in 1991, its ability to conduct a broad range of strikes at *strategic* targets with relatively small forces had dramatically changed.

The Gulf War was viewed by many military observers as a convincing expression of "a revolution in military affairs" (RMA). They were particularly impressed by the military capacity afforded by the combination of precision guided weapons (PGMs) with sophisticated systems for command, control, communication and intelligence (C⁴I) and target acquisition. Still, the Gulf War had provided only the first, partial expression of this revolution: Less than 10 percent of the air force and navy planes and the naval combat vessels were equipped to carry smart weapons; most of the attacks were with unguided weapons. Moreover, the advanced C⁴I systems necessary for efficient operation of smart weapons were still in the early stages of development and employment.

In 1998, the size of the force at the disposal of the United States was numerically much smaller than the air and sea forces available during the Gulf War of 1991, but it had a much greater capacity to effectively deploy precision guided weapons. The change was manifested both in the much greater number of platforms equipped with these PGMs and in the substantially larger stores of PGMs available. Almost every US Air Force and US Navy aircraft in the Persian Gulf region was capable of carrying and launching such armaments, and a large number of ships in the US fleet were carrying Cruise Missiles, which can be directed with precision at their targets. The C⁴I systems had also been improved and enhanced over the years, becoming far more advanced and efficient. A similar change

took place, though to a lesser degree, within Britain's Royal Air Force, the junior partner to Desert Fox.

The Progress of the Operation

In August 1998 Iraq announced, that it was suspending UNSCOM inspections and would allow only passive supervision of the weapons sites, via the sensors that had been installed there. In October, inspections were effectively halted, and the United States and Great Britain prepared themselves to take military action against Iraq. On November 14, minutes before the planned operation was set to begin, Iraq announced that it "was prepared to cooperate unconditionally with UNSCOM," and the operation was aborted. On November 15, President Bill Clinton outlined five conditions that Iraq had to meet: "Iraq must resolve all outstanding issues raised by UNSCOM and the IAEA. Second, it must give inspectors unfettered access to inspect and to monitor all sites they choose with no restrictions or qualifications, consistent with the Memorandum of Understanding Iraq itself signed with Secretary General Annan in February. Third, it must turn over all relevant documents. Fourth, it must destroy all weapons of mass destruction according to UN Security Council resolutions. Fifth, it must not interfere with the independence or the professional expertise of the weapons inspectors."

On December 15, UNSCOM Executive Chairman Richard Butler submitted a report (which was evidently "initiated" by

the U.S.) to the UN secretary-general, stating that "Iraq did not provide the full cooperation it promised on 14 November 1998 ... Iraq initiated new forms of restrictions upon the commission's work." The U.S. did not attempt to have the UNSC adopt a new resolution in support of a military operation against Iraq fearing it would encounter opposition from Russia, China, and France. Instead, the US and Britain used the Butler report as sufficient justification for the planned attack upon which they embarked that very night. It was important to the US to initiate the operation immediately, to avoid an attack during the approaching month of Ramadan. There was concern that attacks during Ramadan would serve Saddam Husein by enabling him to stir up anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. In the United States, there was some speculation that the decision to embark on the operation was linked also to President Clinton's desire to improve his image and deflect public attention from the Monica Lewinsky affair.

The Operation and Its Achievements

Operation "Desert Fox" lasted 90 hours, between December 16 and 20, as planned. Seven types of targets were attacked:

- Surface-to-air (SAM) missile batteries and air-defense control sites in southern Iraq. These attacks were meant to open flight paths for the aircraft that were to attack the main targets defined for the operation. Attacking the missile and air-defense installations ensured that the main

missions would be carried out with limited casualties. In all, 20 sites were attacked, achieving the objective of neutralizing them for the duration of the operation.

- National command and control centers, including leadership sites. Twenty such targets were attacked, and most were either destroyed or severely damaged.

- Installations and camps of the security units that were entrusted by Saddam with the mission of concealing surface-to-surface missiles and non-conventional weapons. Eighteen installations were attacked; seven were destroyed or severely damaged; six were moderately or mildly damaged.

- Targets that were defined by the U.S. military as "facilities for development and production of weapons of mass destruction". Yet, the Iraqis persist in concealing successfully their residual WMD capability. As far as it is known, there were, at the time of the operation, no active factories for the development and production of such armaments. Accordingly, attacks were focused actually on damaging the Iraqi capability to deliver weapons of mass destruction. The chosen targets were sites for developing and manufacturing short-range surface-to-surface missiles permitted by the Security Council resolutions. Eleven such production sites and installations were attacked; about half were severely or moderately damaged.

- Headquarters and camps of the Republican Guards. Nine such sites were attacked; three severely damaged and five moderately damaged.

- Military airfields. Attacks were aimed

primarily against airfields at which attack helicopters were deployed, in order to inhibit Saddam Hussein's capability to act against the Kurds and Shi'ites. An airfield that was the site of a project for converting L-29 jets to drones, apparently designed to carry chemical and biological weapons, was also attacked. Four airfields were moderately damaged, and the buildings used for the drone project were destroyed. It is unclear whether the drones themselves, or any attack helicopters, were destroyed.

Economic targets. Only one economic target was attacked: an oil refinery in Bazra from which oil had been smuggled out of Iraq in defiance of Security Council resolutions. The facility was moderately damaged.

It is extremely difficult to use the damage assessment reports to measure the accomplishment of the operation's goals. It can be assumed that if there was severe damage to buildings of installations where missiles were being developed and manufactured, the equipment within them was also severely damaged. The U.S. assessed that these attacks set back Iraq's surface-to-surface missile (SSM) program by a year. No facilities connected with chemical and biological warfare were attacked or damaged; therefore the residual WMD capabilities of Iraq remained untouched. Similarly, it seems that there were no significant casualties among personnel connected with development and production of SSM and WMD, since the attacks were carried out at night.

- With regard to attacks on the other

types of targets, it is almost impossible, in the absence of precise intelligence gathering within Iraq, to translate damage to buildings into degraded capabilities. An illustrative example is the attack on the HQ buildings of the Republican Guards corps and divisions. It is doubtful whether such attacks, even if totally successful, inflict real damage on the military capability of the Republican Guard for very long.

- Operation "Desert Fox" was concluded with no casualties to American and British forces, a noteworthy accomplishment. By contrast, during the Gulf War, in which casualties were relatively low among the coalition forces, 38 coalition aircraft were downed, 17 during the first week. This accomplishment resulted from a combination of technology, good military planning, and the diminished capabilities of the Iraqi airforce and air defense systems:

- The massive use of precision guided weaponry and cruise missiles enabled execution of the missions using a smaller number of aircraft.

- Use of precision guided munitions enables dropping the armaments outside the range of the enemy's anti-aircraft systems. During Operation Desert Fox, greater use was made of such munitions, part of which can be launched from a range of 40-50 kilometers (e.g. *television-guided missiles* launched from fighter aircraft) or many hundreds of kilometers (Tomahawk missiles launched from naval vessels and Air Launched Cruise Missiles (ALCM) launched from bombers). In addition, even short-range guided weapons, such as laser-guided bombs, can be deployed from

an altitude that is outside the range of anti-aircraft artillery, the main anti-air threat on the Iraqi front.

- The destruction of the surface-to-air missile systems and the air-defense command posts in southern Iraq at the beginning of the operation, and the later extensive use of electronic warfare, disrupted the Iraqi defense system. The remaining Iraqi threat consisted primarily of short-range anti-aircraft guns and shoulder launched short-range missiles, which depend less on command and control systems, but at the same time are less potent and can be evaded more easily.

- All attacks were carried out at night, in order to evade the Iraqi short range anti-aircraft systems.

- The Iraqi Air Force and air defense have not yet recovered from the results of the Gulf War. Indeed, these forces seem to have further deteriorated, both because they have not obtained replacement weapons for their losses and because they were damaged by additional attacks carried out since the Gulf War. The Iraqis did not even try to employ their interceptors against the attacking American and British aircraft. Almost no ground-to-air missiles launches were detected, and the only opposition was from anti-aircraft artillery.

The military accomplishments of the U.S. and British forces are particularly significant because they were achieved by a relatively small number of aircraft and naval vessels. The operation commenced with forces already deployed in airbases in the Persian Gulf area, which included 55 fighter aircraft and 14 bombers, and

naval forces that included only one aircraft carrier task force. The aircraft carrier carried a wing of 50 warplanes; at least seven of the accompanying ships were capable of launching Cruise missiles. The U.S. Marine forces, part of the total naval force, also operated a number of aircraft. The bombers also carried cruise missiles.

During the course of the operation, the total forces were nearly doubled, with the arrival of another aircraft carrier and several squadrons of the US Air Force, some of which participated in the last night of bombing. Yet this small force managed to launch more Cruise missiles (Tomahawk and ALCM) during four nights than were used during the entire Gulf War, along with very large numbers of other shorter-range precision guided munitions launched by the aircraft.

Israel and Operation Desert Fox

As part of the preparations for Operation Desert Fox, a number of American Patriot PAC-2 missile batteries, upgraded for use against surface-to-surface missiles, were flown to Israel and deployed to defend the Tel Aviv and Haifa areas. Prior to the operation, some Patriot system components used for an American exercise in Israel had been left in the country, obviating the need for this equipment to be flown to Israel, and enabling deployment of the batteries within a short time.

The Israeli government, the media, and the public had drawn lessons from the exaggerated reactions to the crisis in early 1998, and conducted themselves

differently this time. The Israeli Military Intelligence maintained the assessment given at the time of the crisis at the beginning of 1998, that Saddam Hussein would try to harm Israel only if he felt his rule was at risk, and this time the reactions within Israel to the same assessment were very calm. The Home-Front Command of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) opened additional stations for the distribution of personal-protection kits, but the public did not rush to these stations.

Lessons and Implications

Operation Desert Fox has not brought about any changes in Saddam Hussein's behavior, and so far UNSCOM has not been able to renew its inspection activities in Iraq. Moreover, Saddam demonstrates that the American attacks have not defeated him, and he has adopted provocative behavior, announcing that he no longer recognizes the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq. He has sent aircraft into those zones and has attempted to engage U.S. and British aircraft patrolling them, using "ambushes" of air-defense missile batteries to "ambush" these aircraft. The U.S. has responded aggressively to these provocations, by attempting to shoot down the Iraqi aircraft violating the no-fly zones and by attacking SAM batteries that threaten the U.S. and British aircraft.

The central question is whether Desert Fox advanced or harmed the effort to disarm Iraq's capability to wage non-conventional warfare. Those who opposed the operation argue that it brought UNSCOM activities to an end, thus

damaging the capacity to continue to disarm Iraq. Since this ability was primarily based on UNSCOM's work, they believe that continuation of this work, even with disruptions on the part of the Iraqis, is preferable to a total suspension of its activities. Others, however, including U.S. government officials, claim that, as a result of the severe Iraqi disruptions, UNSCOM had lost its ability to achieve significant results, leaving no alternative but that of direct military action to damage Iraq's capabilities.

It is too early to determine which contention is correct. Should operation "Desert Fox" turn out to have been a one-time effort, leaving Saddam Hussein free to do as he pleases within Iraq, then those who opposed the operation will be proven right. However, if the operation will prove to be part of an ongoing effort that includes close U.S. intelligence monitoring of developments within Iraq and attacks on all detected targets connected with surface-to-surface missiles or weapons of mass destruction, and if, in addition, sanctions against Iraq are continued, this approach may turn to be more effective than supervision by the UN commission.

An additional possible plan of action is that of sustained activities to weaken Saddam Hussein's regime by supporting opposition forces and by conducting additional American military actions aimed specifically to achieve this objective. There are signs that, under pressure from Congress, the Clinton administration may be leaning toward adopting this approach. While it is doubtful that, in the short term, Saddam Hussein's regime can be shaken,

it does suffer a number of long-term weaknesses, that are exacerbated by the continuation of UN sanctions. Moreover, in spite of the weakness of opposition forces within Iraq, the potential exists for developing an active struggle against the regime in both the north and south of the country.

The U.S. can take further action to weaken Saddam Hussein's military base of power. Indeed, the attacks on the Republican Guard carried out during "Desert Fox" signaled clearly that the US Air Force and Navy are capable of methodical attacks from the air, which would inflict real damage on the Iraq's elite forces. Accomplishing this, however, would require a greater number of sorties than carried out during Desert Fox, as well as more time to "search and destroy" the armor and artillery of the Republican Guards.

Implementing this strategy will require that the U.S. stand firm in the face of pressures from countries – primarily Russia and France – that aspire to bring about a gradual lifting of the sanctions against Iraq. In this regard, Saddam Hussein did a disservice to his goals when he attacked, right after the operation, the pro-Western Arab regimes, calling for their downfall. This made it easier for the United States to withstand the demands to ease the pressure on Iraq.

At the same time the events leading to operation "Desert Fox" again proved Saddam Hussein's ability to dictate the agenda and create crises when he so desires. During these crises, he uses the "power of the weak" - his regime's ability

to sustain damage, and his ability to present Iraq as the victim, thus gaining support in the Arab world and beyond. Indeed, Saddam's very ability to withstand U.S. pressure is regarded in the Arab world as a significant personal accomplishment. Thus, he succeeded in bringing about the suspension of UNSCOM supervision without creating a real threat to his regime, while at the same time gaining support among the Arab masses.

Based on his success thus far, Saddam can even hope that the processes he set in motion will result in the gradual lifting of the sanctions on Iraq. Whether this expectation might materialize would depend, of course, on whether the U.S. will continue its activities and on Saddam's future behavior. Paradoxically, the suspension of UNSCOM activities deprived him of a bargaining chip, since he can no longer use the threat to suspend these activities to create crises. This leaves him with only one option for creating crises: threatening his neighbors in the Persian Gulf. However, pursuing this option is of doubtful effectiveness, since it undermines the opportunity to exploit the sympathy accruing to Iraq among the various Arab publics when Iraq is perceived as a "victim of American aggression."

Israel, of course, has a great interest in all developments related to Iraq. In this context, it can draw a number of conclusions from Operation Desert Fox and its aftermath:

- The operation provided additional evidence that U.S. military actions do not directly threaten Saddam Hussein's

regime. At most, such activities can engender processes that may contribute to Saddam's downfall in the long term. Hence, U.S. attacks by air and sea are unlikely to cause Saddam Hussein fear that his existence is threatened. In turn, there is no need to worry that he might decide to launch surface-to-surface missiles with chemical and biological warheads against Israel, since it is only within the context of such a threat that he might consider launching these weapons. Moreover, should Saddam deploy unconventional weapons against Israel or one of his neighbors, this would engender a massive international military effort to destroy him, with the participants prepared to pay the higher price that would accompany such an effort.

- Israel must continue cooperating with the United States to dampen any attempts by Saddam Hussein to exploit the absence of UNSCOM supervision to rebuild his WMD capabilities. To this end, intelligence coverage of Iraq must be enhanced. The international community can combat such projects through military actions, and the continuation and intensification of the sanctions.

- The relatively calm reaction of Israel's government and people this time was manifested in the fact that only few threatening statements were made aimed at deterring Iraq. Thus "Desert Fox" did not provide a real test of Israel's deterrence vis-a-vis Iraq, since there was no real reason for an Iraqi reaction against Israel. It is, therefore, impossible to draw any conclusions on Israeli deterrence from this episode.

- The operation demonstrated impressive American military capabilities. These included massive use of precision guided munitions, as well as cruise missiles, command and control systems, and integrated intelligence, which enabled directing the forces at the proper targets, and no less importantly, battle damage assessment (BDA). Thus, it appears that the US Armed Forces have overcome a major part of the weaknesses that existed during the operations of the Gulf War. The impressive military success of the United States demonstrates once again the validity of the perception that we are at the height of a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). This derives from the combination of revolutionary technology with appropriate organization and military doctrine. Armed forces able to assimilate this revolution and materialize the potential it contains will enjoy a considerable advantage over armed forces that lag behind, at least in high and medium intensity conflicts. In this regard, Israel has a great advantage over its adversaries, since it has a better starting position: a broad technological base, an educated work force, and U.S. aid, while its past investments in R&D have contributed to the revolution. Israel's political and military leadership must now cope with the challenge and take the correct decisions for building the force that will enable it to implement this transformation successfully.