

# THE EVOLUTION OF IRANIAN WARFIGHTING DURING THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

## *When Dismounted Light Infantry Made the Difference*

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After the Islamic revolution in 1979, two different perspectives on warfighting influenced the tactics of Iranian ground forces. There was a traditional military perspective, based on Iran's military history, which relied on modern equipment and European and American officer training. Then there was the revolutionary perspective that often placed Shiite religious values of perseverance and martyrdom ahead of some military practices. These two perspectives contradicted each other at times, and the troops on the ground were the ones most harmed by this. However, it was the synthesis of elements of these two that would eventually become Iran's most effective means of fighting by the end of the war.

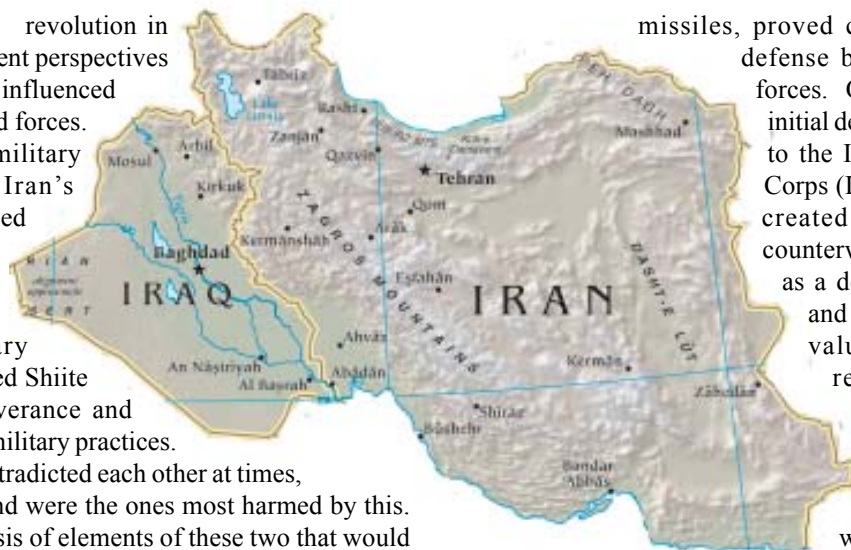
By the 1970's, Iran had become one of the most dominant military powers in the region, and the fifth largest armed force in the world. The armed forces had established contingency plans and training and relied on the west for equipment and support. They trained for conventional war, but had little combat experience. The Shah wanted to become the dominant military power in the region, and, by some measures, he had achieved this. The vestiges of this military development in Iran, in the form of military technique and leaders that had not been purged, provided the ability to pursue the war with conventional military tactics.

The clerics purged a large part of the conventional military structure after the 1979 revolution leaving the military broken and barely able to defend Iran from the initial Iraqi ground invasion in 1980. There were only two Iranian armored divisions with tanks in bad need of maintenance, and several infantry units in the main theater of Khuzestan at the time of the invasion, and it would be weeks before they could mobilize. While suffering from poor maintenance and lack of spare parts, the Iranian Air Force was able to launch a surprising counterattack just days after Iraqi preemptive strikes on Iranian air fields. They also launched a major airlift using Boeing 747, 707, and C-130 aircraft to move conventional forces to the front. The Iranian Air Force, equipped with Maverick

missiles, proved critical during the initial defense by attacking Iraqi ground forces. On the ground, most of the initial defense of Khuzestan was left to the Iranian Republican Guards Corps (IRGC). The Iranian regime created the IRGC in 1979 as a counterweight to the military, and as a defender of the new regime and upholder of revolutionary values in Iran. This group represented Shiite revolutionary values and initially disdained military professionalism and training. The IRGC was composed of two arms:

the cadre Guards (Pasdaran) and the part-time Basij militia. The Basij were a large group of volunteers, said to have numbered in the millions when fully mobilized. The Pasdaran were a better trained and equipped group of religious loyalists that commanded the Basij.

The IRGC in Khuzestan was hardly able to defend itself against the Iraqi armor and artillery, especially in the vast open areas of Khuzestan. Possessing only small arms, they retreated to urban areas and set up defenses. The slow advance of the Iraqi Army, often due to Iranian air power, gave them plenty of time to establish defenses and to bring in reinforcements. The Iranians set up very stout defenses in the cities that were able to withstand Iraqi armored and air attacks. Saddam's wish to minimize casualties resulted in Iraqi armor being sent into cities without infantry support. The IRGC was able to destroy many Iraqi tanks using only rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and Molotov cocktails. The Iraqis only captured one major city in Khuzestan: Korramshahr. Here, Iran initially repelled Iraqi armored attack as they were canalized into narrow avenues of approach through the marshy areas outside of the city. Finally a large force of Iraqi infantry took the city in house-to-house fighting. Even then, casualties were tremendous. The badly supplied Iranians made a controlled withdrawal street by street through the city. It took Iraq over a month to take the city while sustaining around 15,000 casualties and losing more than 100 armored vehicles to disorganized light infantry.



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conventional fighting force and not just a guardian of the regime. It is ironic that while Khomeini fully supported purging the regular military before the war, he had pressured Bani Sadr, the commander of regular military forces, to initiate the first counteroffensive. After this failure, the Mullahs continued to gain support for their revolutionary method of fighting, while the moderate secular voices were swept aside.

The IRGC gained favor and support from the regime and employed simple tactics of its own. Initially, the IRGC attacked with revolutionary fervor and huge numbers, hoping that this would overcome Iraqi advanced technology. They employed the human wave attack reminiscent of World War I. They sent in Basij volunteers as the lead element. These forces often consisted of old men and young children. The primary purpose of this initial wave was to clear mines, breach obstacles (often by laying on top of concertina wire), and to absorb enemy fire. Many of the Basij were found with plastic keys to heaven in their hands, or a note from the Ayatollah giving them permission to enter heaven. Separated perhaps by a few hundred meters, waves and waves of under-trained conscripts would storm Iraqi defenses. Eventually the more experienced, better trained and equipped IRGC Pasdaran would attack in an attempt to break through the lines and dislodge the Iraqis from their positions. This was not always the case however as Basij and Pasdaran would often be intermingled as IRGC tactics became more adaptive and complex. Sometimes, through superb infiltration, the IRGC would attack a unit's command center, thus breaking the integrity of the Iraqi lines and then defeating the Iraqi positions in detail. This tactic was possible due to the Iraqi's lack of defensive depth throughout the war. Iraqi units were often placed in isolated strong points. The areas between strong points were wide, and loosely patrolled, but heavily covered by artillery. The Iraqis often failed to garrison the urban areas that they had overrun, allowing Iran to mass troops in Iraqi rear areas. The armored and other heavy equipment units, which were organic to independent army units or integrated within the IRGC, were the last to join the battle. In the case of the IRGC, armor and heavy weapons would not be deployed below battalion strength until later in the war, and at the beginning of the war the IRGC did not even have any armor. This led to poor combined arms coordination and execution, particularly when supporting the infantry. In many cases, the armor would not move up to support the initial infantry push. This was probably done to curb tank losses, but lack of integration inevitably led to heavy Iranian casualties.

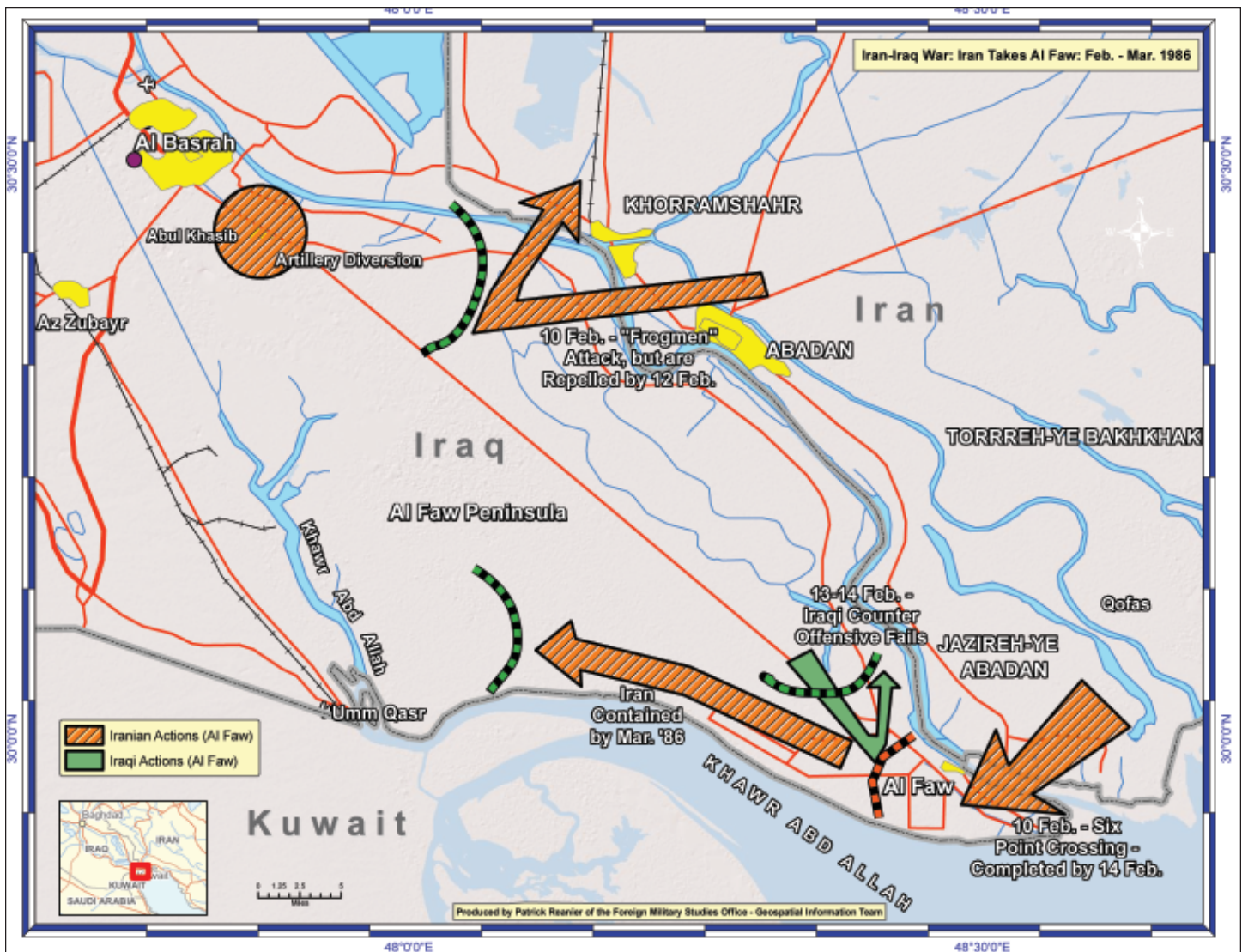
Iranian tactics improved throughout their initial campaign to expel the Iraqis from Khuzestan. One of their major improvements was at the small unit level. Faced with a vastly superior Iraqi Army, the Iranians learned the value of fire and maneuver, especially with their own armor. Just the mere fact that they were willing to maneuver, while the Iraqis put their tanks in static positions, often proved to be a decisive factor. While not discontinuing the human wave attack, the infantry and IRGC improved their patrolling and infiltration techniques. They began to rely on intelligence and scouting to find the weak spots in the Iraqi lines where they would launch their human wave attacks. They would follow an infiltration with surprise attacks at multiple points along the Iraqi lines. Iranian attacks created confusion in the Iraqi forces causing premature or incorrect commitment of

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reserves and shifting of forces. The Iranians demonstrated initiative and surprise in other areas during the early stages of the war. In operation Tariq Al Quds, they used heavy equipment to build a 14-kilometer road through an area of undefended sand dunes to attack Iraqi rear areas. They used the same approach later in the war to assail Iraqi mountain outposts. They also used electronic warfare to send false messages through the Iraqi's communications networks. The marshes that proved fatal to the Iranians at Susangerd provided great advantages to the Iranians in later battles. They intentionally flooded marsh areas to canalize Iraqi forces during their urban attacks. This also provided help to their infiltration tactics. The Iraqis were road bound so the marsh areas often fell under Iranian control and proved to be excellent avenues of approach for Iranian light infantry.

Iranians increasingly relied on night and poor weather attacks. They regarded the Iraqis as poor night fighters and attempted to take advantage of this. The Iranians never received night observation devices during the war, but relied on superior light infantry tactics. The use of the night and poor weather was also to counter U.S. intelligence efforts, including satellite imagery which supplied Iraq with intelligence on Iranian movements. Though they suffered various setbacks throughout the war, Iranian tactics gradually improved. The first human wave attacks were often carried out in broad daylight against fully-defended positions with no real mind given to terrain or proper planning. Eventually, they were able to launch limited attacks using infiltration, low visibility, and the static Iraqi defenses. However political differences among high level officials would often lead to the Iranian forces suffering from poor planning as conventional war fighting gained and lost favor with the regime.

After the initial Iraqi expulsion from Khuzestan, the Iranians decided to launch an invasion of Iraq. Their first target was the city of Basra in the south. Using more primitive planning than was often used in Khuzestan, Iran launched large human wave assaults on the prepared Iraqi defenses at Basra. These attacks did not yield the large victory that Iran was seeking. In 1984, the regime conducted reforms to correct the failures in capturing Basra. Unplanned, unsupported human wave attacks were not working. They began to improve leader training and procedures, coordination between the IRGC and conventional military, planning and logistics. The poor coordination between the IRGC and the conventional military may have been one of the largest contributors in the initial failures in Iraq. The regime's desire to invade Iraq had been opposed by the IRGC and conventional military leaders. The operations, which were imposed by the regime, put the IRGC and conventional military in an awkward and eventually disastrous position which again led the IRGC to operate on its own. These fundamental reforms gave the armed forces the successful foundation for integrated planning that would serve them well throughout the war and afterwards. However, these reforms were not enough, as better integration of Iranian forces would take years. While Iran could



Map 2

often achieve an initial breakthrough of Iraqi defenses, their lack of effective logistics and combined arms support prevented the Iranians from penetrating in depth and achieving “final” victory. The Mullahs supported achieving large operational goals, with tactics that could only achieve limited gains.

The shift from an idea of “final” victory was needed as this often proved to be overambitious and led to massing on the immediate objective becoming vulnerable to Iraqi counterattacks and artillery. The leadership’s idea was to launch sudden huge swarming attacks overwhelming the enemy on as many points as possible. They intended for the IRGC to advance from position to position not allowing themselves to lose momentum, become pinned down, and lose morale. There was a lack of military understanding within the IRGC supporters in the regime. While leadership

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and planning improved, the Iranian forces could only move as far as they could be resupplied and supported. More often than not, this was not very far and this proved to be one of the fatal flaws in the revolutionary style of fighting. These problems proved even more severe as heavy Iraqi fire, and chemical weapons, were used to strike Iranian supply centers.

The Iranian infantry tactics eventually were superior to that of the Iraqis. While the Iraqis relied on static positions and concentrations of armor, the Iranians found ways to cope with this. They honed their skills in infiltration, patrolling, night

fighting, and marsh and mountain warfare. They seemed to have had the most success in the marshy areas around the Majnoon Islands and the mountains of the North. This was the ideal area for them to use light infantry tactics using the mobility offered by helicopters and boats to give them an advantage over mechanized forces.

After pushing Iraq back to the international border, the Iranians eventually occupied the marsh areas around Howeiza. This gave them opportunities to attack Basra and launch attacks towards the Tigris in an attempt to cut off the Baghdad-Basra highway. The Iranians experienced continual failure in their attempts to break out of the marshes and occupy Basra and the outlying areas. Their forces and their tactics could not survive against a concerted defensive effort once they left the protection of the marshes. While they made limited gains, they lacked the support and

organization to move further into Iraq.

The combat in the marsh areas was another story. The marshes provided a great area for the Iranians to employ and hone their small unit tactics. The marshes' wet ground and tall, dense reeds provided concealment for the Iranian forces, impeded Iraqi armor, and absorbed artillery shells in its soft ground. Iran thoroughly scouted the marsh areas with patrols and numerous water craft. Iran used the lessons learned in this area to launch one of the most successful attacks of the war farther south (Map 2). While launching a diversionary attack north of Basra, Iran launched a commando raid using Basij frogmen, boats and pontoon bridges to cross the Shatt Al Arab and take the Al Faw peninsula. Their attack took advantage of darkness and rain and totally surprised the Iraqi defenders, many of whom fled their posts. The Iranians quickly established a bridge head and reinforced the peninsula. They dispersed their defenses and dug in quickly. They made all troop and supply movements at night to prevent the Iraqis from acquiring artillery targets. This attack provided one of the greatest demonstrations of the Iranians' potential in light infantry attacks in difficult terrain. Indeed, it seemed that Iran preferred, and found the most success, in light infantry warfare. Their ability in infiltration, use of the night, and lightning attacks gave them the advantage over Iraq's cumbersome forces.

The Iranian war began in a defense and counterattack to expel the Iraqi invaders, but once the Iranian forces were successful, they continued their conventional operations to invade Iraq. However, from the beginning, and throughout the war, Iran employed unconventional tactics to project its power. This often included supporting international terrorist operations like the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kuwait in 1986, and the coup attempt in Bahrain. Iran began its support for Kurdish uprisings in Iraq years before the war. However, this had little effect until Iran was able to control the Kurdish insurgency in its own country. In fact, they had hoped for a quick end to the war in Iraq with the revolt of the Iraqi Shiites in the south. At the time, Iran continued its attempts to export revolution. This includes Iran's support of Shiites in the war in Lebanon where they sent several hundred IRGC members to the Bekaa valley in 1982 as well as Iran's support for the Mujahedeen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The hit and run insurgency tactics and support of terrorists may have yielded the most lessons learned for the Iranians.

The northern area of Iraq was perhaps the most fertile area for Iran's insurgent aspirations. Iran's presence in the north dated to before the war where the Shah fomented rebellion amongst the Iraqi Kurds to pressure the Iraqi regime. In part, this eventually led to Saddam grudgingly accepting the Algiers Accord. Once the war began, the IRGC once again exploited differences between the Kurds and the Iraqi regime. This campaign was aided by the mountainous terrain of the north, and the fact that Iraq's main forces were tied down in the South. The Kurds often acted as scouts and guides for the Iranian forces in conventional attacks. Much more common, however,

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was the presence of Iranian agents who organized and directed small groups of Kurdish Peshmerga raiding parties. These were organized into small groups of about 12 Peshmerga. They were capable of operating semi-independently, relying on natural water sources and stashed arms and food. They also received extensive support from the local population and

infrastructure. They would carry out insurgent activities such as assassinations of government officials, car bombings of government buildings, and attacks on Iraqi Army troop formations and vehicles. One of their prime targets was the oil and population center of Kirkuk. They launched numerous raids on oil facilities and military posts in the area with some success. They even developed a rocket known as the "Karad" with a range of 20 kilometers in order to strike the city of Kirkuk.

In the final stages of the war, the Iranian regime had reached its highest tactical evolution. However, friction between the IRGC and conventional military continued until the end of the war. This evolution led to the capture of the Al Faw peninsula and the Majnoon islands in the Howeiza marsh areas. However, there remained several obstacles to Iran's success on the battlefield which eventually led to the failure of their invasion of Iraq. This was mostly due the Iran's inability to emerge from areas of difficult terrain and engage in combined arms warfare on open ground as occurred in Iran's various offensive operations which attempted to break out from the marshes.

Through eight years of war, the Iranian regime learned how to properly employ and integrate foreign guerilla forces, IRGC, and conventional military forces to defeat a more technologically advanced foe given the right circumstances. From a U.S. standpoint, it is difficult to say that their combined arms capabilities were ever performed satisfactorily. Command and control, logistical, and support problems, as well as failure to implement sound military doctrine prevented the Iranians from taking to open ground and hampered the Iranians' potential to make a large breakthrough in the war. They gained a definite tactical advantage over the technologically superior Iraqi forces when they employed light infantry tactics in difficult terrain. They learned to attain small gains with their coordination of these light infantry tactics, religiously-motivated conscripts, and guerilla tactics. While these were not enough to initiate an all out invasion of Iraq, they did prove effective in repelling the Iraqi invasion and creating havoc in Iraqi territory, especially in difficult terrain areas.

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The references for this article are on file and available through *Infantry Magazine*.

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