IRON RESOLVE
A VISION OF FUTURE WAR

R D HOOKER, JR

IMAGES BY PEDRO VELIÇA
Is state-on-state war really a thing of the past? R D Hooker, Jr imagines what could happen in a Middle East not far removed from that of today should Israel strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Iran’s retaliatory move of invading Iraq triggers in turn a series of regional and international responses that culminates in a US-led coalition fighting a conventional ground war against Iran – and the power dynamics of the region being unexpectedly rewritten.
As the Journal went to press, the situation in Gaza remained tense, providing a sobering reminder of how real a possibility war in the Middle East still is. While R D Hooker, Jr’s ‘vision of future war’ is an imaginary account of an imaginary war, captured in hand-drawn graphics, the deaths and destruction of the latest confrontation between Israel and Hamas are all too real. Yet this makes it even more important to think about what an all-out confrontation in the region would mean: which alliances would come apart and which would emerge? How would regional and domestic dynamics be altered, and how would an international coalition wage a conventional war successfully? These are the questions explored in this article. Ultimately, of course, the largest question remains unanswered: how to achieve a just and lasting peace.

15 November 2014. The world was not surprised when, on 16 February 2014, Israel attacked nuclear sites across Iran in a stunning pre-dawn raid. Increasingly isolated, with the Muslim Brotherhood in power in Egypt and an emboldened Hizbullah on its northern border, Israel’s hardline leaders reacted to Iran’s defiant public announcement that it had crossed the nuclear threshold with a swift and sudden response.

The Israeli raid included ninety-six F-15 and F-16 aircraft in six strike packages transiting Jordanian and Iraqi airspace and attacking well before dawn. Iranian air defence received pre-strike warnings before the Israelis entered Iranian airspace but were unable to defeat the strike, downing two F-15s and five F-16s. Israeli Jericho II ballistic missiles and sea-launched cruise missiles joined in the attack. The targets included the major underground facility at Fordow, near Qom; the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz; the heavy-water plant in Arak; the Ardekan Nuclear Fuel Unit; and the Uranium Conversion Facility and Nuclear Technology Center in Isfahan, as well as other key sites. There are persistent, but unconfirmed, reports that high-end Israeli special mission units may have participated in the mission on the ground at one or more target sites. Interestingly, the Israelis made no attempt to attack Iran’s national air-defence system, confining their effort to point suppression of local air-defence missile sites and radars. Even now it is unclear whether Iran in fact had fielded a nuclear weapon or weapons, and if so, whether they were destroyed in the raid. What is painfully clear is what happened next.

Executing a long-prepared plan for just such a contingency, Iran struck back with ballistic-missile strikes and unleashed its Hizbullah and Hamas surrogates, who flooded Israeli towns and villages with rockets and missiles, causing scores of civilian casualties. Spoiling for a rematch since 2006, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) quickly sent large ground forces across the Lebanese border and into Gaza.

The mullahs did not stop there. Citing Iraq’s inability to control its airspace, and leveraging their close links with Shia leaders in Baghdad, Iranian army and Revolutionary Guards Force ground units quickly overran southern Iraq, seizing the key oil terminals at the head of the Gulf, occupying Basra and installing a compliant regime in Baghdad. Angry announcements that “the straits are now closed” added to the crisis atmosphere, though no attacks were immediately carried out. The resulting attempted breakaway of the Kurdish republic and a second Sunni ‘Awakening’
in western Iraq effectively collapsed the Iraqi state, throwing the region into profound turmoil. On its border with Afghanistan, Iran increased its forces but did not invade. Across the arc of crisis the Islamic world roiled, with the Gulf Arabs torn between fear of Iran and anger at Israel.

All eyes now turned to Egypt. Though much of the Sunni Arab world took a measure of inward satisfaction at the humbling of the arrogant ‘Persians’, Israel’s smashing strike against an Islamic state – and its remarkably rapid invasion of south Lebanon and reoccupation of Gaza – touched Arab pride. Deeply angered, the Egyptian government threatened to abrogate the 1979 Treaty of Peace and dissolve the Multinational Force of Observers, and alerted several divisions. Mindful of Israel’s air power and nuclear inventory, Egyptian forces did not advance into Sinai, but the mobilisation of ground forces sent an unmistakable signal that the strategic accommodation that had lasted for almost four decades was at grave risk. Turkey found itself preoccupied with the Kurdish Republic, now openly asserting independence. Syria, now free of Iran’s embrace following the collapse of the Assad regime in February 2013, still struggled to form a new government.

In Washington, the administration strove to contain the spreading crisis with little effect. Efforts to seek a UN resolution authorising removal of Iranian forces from Iraq and international waters ‘by all necessary means’ went nowhere, with Russia and China voting in opposition. Even friendly nations loudly questioned America’s possible involvement in the Israeli strikes. With no attack on a member state, NATO showed little enthusiasm for major theatre war against Iran.

**America Responds**

Once it became clear that diplomacy had failed, the US began to seriously consider military options. The sudden prospect of large-scale, state-on-state conflict was shocking – many had seen it as a thing of the past. There was general agreement that the primary strategic objective should be a return to the status quo, with Iran out of Iraq, freedom of navigation assured in the Gulf, and the return of Israeli forces to pre-war boundaries. To no one’s surprise, debates inside the beltway were intense and acrimonious. America was still emerging from more than a dozen years of persistent and grinding counter-insurgency conflict, followed by an angry and divisive presidential election. Still mired in a confidence-sapping economic malaise, and deeply involved in massive military downsizing, the nation and its national security apparatus were ill-prepared for the crisis. Despite the urgency of the situation, no clear consensus emerged.

In these dark hours, the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs stood out. There may have been differences of opinion between the secretary and chairman but, if so, they remained private. The secretary’s strength of character shone forth particularly in his insistence that the interagency face facts. At meetings of the National Security Council and the Principals Committee, and in congressional testimony, the secretary and chairman presented a united front. Their message was simple and direct: the regional and global security environment demands that Iran be put back in the box – but forceful regime change through invasion and occupation is a bridge too far and risks a possible nuclear response; allies – and especially Arab allies – must be part of the plan, with prominent roles; this cannot be done on the cheap. We will take losses. Be ready to pay a price – but mass and numbers deployed now will avoid casualties later; avoid target fixation – even as we address this problem, keep a weather eye on other emerging threats.

The debate was far from one-sided. Where many argued that diplomacy, UN acquiescence, more sanctions or ‘international opinion’ be given time to work, the secretary of defense argued forcefully that the global economic order could not long withstand Iran’s potential control of a third of the world’s oil supply. Meeting in almost continuous session, interagency principals attempted compromise after compromise. At the urging of the secretary of defense, and after close consultation with Congressional leadership and allies, the president ended debate in mid-March with a firm decision for war. Indeed, with the worsening global economy, there
was little choice. His guidance was clear, expressed in an address to the nation on 1 March: ‘America and its allies seek nothing more than peace and stability in the region and the world. But we will accept nothing less than the restoration of the territory and sovereignty of a free Iraq, and freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf as guaranteed by international law’. Explicitly omitted were any references to overthrowing the Iranian regime or resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian question.

In this crisis, the chairman and the Joint Chiefs met several times with the president and secretary, together with the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and Special Operations Command commanders, for substantive discussions. Always alert to service parochialism, the secretary and chairman came down hard on one-service solutions for joint problems, insisting on functional and not service command of air, sea and land forces. After spirited debate it was decided that Commander CENTCOM would control all Special Mission Units (or ‘black SOF’) operating in-theatre at his level, while other SOF formations (‘white SOF’) would be task-organised under the functional component commanders.

In one important respect, political guidance seriously limited planning options. We now know that in Oval Office briefings, the president forbade any military operations inside Iranian airspace or on Iranian territory, except for strikes against shore-based, anti-ship missile and naval sites. All strikes against non-coastal targets were strictly prohibited. Though the Pentagon grumbled, it is now clear in hindsight that the president was right. An unhappy and restless Iranian population, far from enthusiastic in its support of the mullahs, might rise against the regime for provoking international intervention. But a war on Iranian soil would only unify all Iranians against the coalition, while regime change as an explicit war aim risked the possible use of nuclear weapons by an unpredictable and erratic opponent. Here the president was again firm in narrowly scoping his military and civilian planners. There would be no repeat of 2003, when invasion gave way to years of open-ended counter-insurgency and ‘nation-building’. We would set conditions for a return to normalcy. But we would not again become bogged down.

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All efforts now turned to planning. Existing war plans provided a solid basis, but the Iranian surge into Iraq required new solutions. Responsibility for detailed planning fell on CENTCOM and its new commander, Marine General Jim Ardent. A brilliantly successful officer, with a résumé that included senior command in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ardent announced that he would go forward and command the operation, code-named Iron Resolve, from CENTCOM forward headquarters in Qatar. An Arab officer, Saudi Air Force General Abdel Hassan Al-Jandali, was designated to serve as Ardent’s deputy, while the air, land and maritime component commanders were assigned deputies from the UAE, UK and France respectively.

The first challenge was clearly to maintain control of the straits and freedom of navigation, for commercial oil tankers as well as warships, inside the Gulf. This task fell primarily on Naval Forces US Central Command (NAVCENT), built around the US Fifth Fleet with three carrier-strike groups. With Vice Admiral Hal Herold in command as Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC), the Fifth Fleet would secure the straits and establish absolute control at sea inside the Gulf. US Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT), commanding the Ninth US Air Force with eighteen squadrons of fighters and bombers, a large tanker wing and a wing of unmanned Predators and Reapers, fell under the command of USAF Lieutenant General Al Swope as Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC). Flying from bases in Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it would quickly gain air supremacy. French, British and Arab air and naval units augmented this force. Nothing less than complete dominance of the battlespace in the air and at sea was envisioned. As one
senior military official commented on background, ‘nothing Iranian will fly or sail, except once’.  

Next came the ground phase. Army General Curt Strong, fresh from corps command in Afghanistan and now US Third Army commander, was quickly promoted to four stars and named to command all Iron Resolve land forces. Leveraging its extensive support facilities in Kuwait, CENTCOM would marshal and commit a large land force under Third Army, consisting of the army’s III Corps (1st Armored Division, 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized) and 1st Cavalry Division) and XVIII Airborne Corps (82nd Airborne Division, 101st Air Assault Division, 1st Cavalry Division (Mechanized), with supporting units.) No more than ninety days was provided to deploy this force and ready it for combat. The II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) with 2nd Marine Division and a Marine air wing and logistics group was also positioned ashore under the Joint Force Land Component Commander, while the 13e Demi-brigade de Légion Étrangère (13th Foreign Legion Half-Brigade, or 13e DBLE) based in the United Arab Emirates and the US 21st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) formed the theatre strategic reserve. British, French and Arab heavy units also joined the force, together with a number of allied special operations units.

Many critics argued against such a large land force, citing the much smaller ground component employed in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the need to maintain a strategic reserve. Here the chairman and CENTCOM commander carried the day. In their minds, the previous decade had decisively discredited ‘transformation’ advocates who saw networked technology as a substitute for ‘boots on the ground’. Iranian ground forces were large – some 500,000 army and Revolutionary Guards troops organised in five corps, backed up by 350,000 reserves. The experience of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s suggested that Iran might potentially field huge formations if given time, and would not lightly cede the field. The Iranians would be found firmly embedded in built-up areas, including Baghdad and the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, intermixed with civilian populations. In this case, air operations alone were unlikely to suffice, with civilian casualties a real concern. Planners also worried that the 225,000-strong Iraqi army (overwhelmingly manned by Shia soldiers) and irregular militias might also fight with the Iranians. With luck, the Iranians might quickly collapse under coalition air power and the threat of such a massive ground force. If not, the plan provided ample force, at sea, in the air and on land, to deal with the worst case. Speed formed a vital part of the plan. A slow, deliberate campaign would give time for Iran to mobilise its huge reserves, strengthen its presence inside Iraq and pressure its neighbours. It would also draw out America’s window of vulnerability, when a smaller US military might well be challenged by a simultaneous emerging threat in Asia or elsewhere. The bad news was that American and coalition stockpiles of munitions, spare parts and supplies were depleted from years of continuous warfare. The good news was that rapid deployment had become almost second nature in all services.

The previous decade had decisively discredited ‘transformation’ advocates

As army, marine and allied units flowed into theatre, major combat operations were scheduled to begin on 12 April with co-ordinated air and naval operations to secure the Strait of Hormuz and the waters inside the Gulf. Heretofore Iran had only threatened, but on 10 April, Iranian MiG-29s attacked two oil tankers with missiles, badly damaging supertankers TI Oceania and AbQaig and shutting down all commercial maritime traffic as civilian vessels fled to port. Iranian naval units also began laying mines in the Strait of Hormuz. Initially operating outside the strait, carriers USS Harry Truman, USS Dwight Eisenhower and USS Carl Vinson, in concert with submarine-launched cruise missiles and land-based air support, immediately launched intensive strikes on Iranian anti-ship missile batteries, surface units
and naval ports on the Iranian coast, targeting virtually all fixed sites in the first seventy-two hours. Informed that all known missile sites, warships and other craft had been attacked, General Ardent directed a ‘maximum effort’ battle damage assessment for twenty-four hours, leading to second attacks on seventeen different locations on 17 April.

In the air, Iranian activity was virtually nil. Allied combat air patrols shot down any Iranian fixed- or rotary-wing aircraft that left Iranian airspace or launched from southern Iraq, and by 17 April virtually all enemy air activity had ceased. Satellite imagery showed surviving Iranian aircraft dispersing to many smaller airfields, backed up by communications intercepts directing air units to scatter and stand down.

On 21 April, as strike aircraft continued to scour the lower Gulf for surviving Iranian surface craft, US and UK amphibious forces pre-positioned in the Gulf States attacked and seized Greater Tumb, Lesser Tumb and Abu Musa islands in the straits, overrunning them in surprisingly fierce ground combat. Two days later, coalition amphibious forces took Farsi Island at the head of the Gulf by helicopter assault, again after fierce pre-assault fires. On all four islands, Iranian mobile anti-ship missile launchers were found and destroyed.

Next, US and coalition minesweepers protected by surface warships went to work to sweep the narrow, 2.5 mile-wide shipping channel. So far, aside from amphibious operations, there had been almost no casualties, with no losses at sea and only a handful of strike aircraft damaged. Now, coalition luck began to change for the worse. On 22 April, the minesweeper HMS Middleton struck a mine and sank with the loss of twenty-one of the forty-six crewmen, including her captain. The Bahraini frigate Sabha was hit the same day by missiles that had somehow survived strikes. Sabha went down with great loss of life. On 23 April, the destroyer USS Winston S Churchill was attacked by the Yunes, an Iranian Kilo-class diesel electric submarine which had sortied before commencement of hostilities. The ship was badly damaged and returned to port with eight dead and twenty-five wounded.

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On the same day, 23 April, in response to the worsening military situation, Iranian ballistic missiles began falling on UAE, Bahraini, Omani and Kuwaiti cities and military installations – anti-ship missiles moved in from the interior joined in with strikes targeting UAE, Omani and Kuwaiti oil terminals and platforms. Often inaccurate but destructive, they added a dangerous dimension to the conflict. CENTCOM forward headquarters at Doha and the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Al-Udeid air base, both in Qatar, the massive US staging and logistics hub at Arifjan in Kuwait, and the Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain all came under intermittent surface-to-surface missile attack, causing casualties but no disruption to operations.

An aborted suicide attack against US trainers in Riyadh raised the spectre of larger-scale Iranian terrorism across the region.

In Washington, these events provoked another round of urgent interagency debate. Media coverage fed the perception of heavy coalition losses with dramatic footage of blazing warships and burning buildings. Seventeen million barrels of oil per day stopped moving through the Gulf, driving up the price of petrol despite the use of strategic reserves. The president’s prohibition against strikes inside Iran offered, in the view of many, impunity for Iranian missile strikes throughout the region. Coalition capitals and regional partners began

Media coverage fed the perception of heavy coalition losses

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to reconsider their participation, while the president’s opponents in Congress savagely attacked his leadership. Interagency critics who had opposed military action from the beginning now redoubled their efforts. Increasingly, Iron Resolve and its underlying strategic framework were called into question. In the West Wing, in capitals and on the E-Ring, the campaign threatened to unravel.

In this stressful period the chairman played a decisive role. A transcript of a Principals Committee session held in the White House Situation Room and subsequently leaked to the New York Times shines an interesting light on events at this critical time:

CJCS: ‘First, the campaign is proceeding well. Coalition air and naval forces have secured the Straits and now have absolute air and naval supremacy. We are ready to flow our ground forces into our staging areas in Kuwait ... We have sustained some losses and frankly they were expected. This is not the Gulf War, or even Iraq in 2003. This is major theatre war against the strongest power in the region. Right now, the enemy is relying on its surface to surface missiles to hit back, mostly against civilians ... Some of you think we should quit. Some of you think we should go downtown and hit his C2 and missile sites with everything we’ve got ... Let me remind you. Iran may be a nuclear power now. If we quit, our friends in the Gulf, and probably everyone else, will never trust us again. We’ll be finished in the region. If we escalate, we risk a possible nuclear event if the regime thinks we’re trying to decapitate them. In my view, the campaign plan remains viable. The President’s guidance remains sound. I believe the regime will not use its nuclear weapons – assuming some survived the Israeli strike – unless it feels its survival is threatened. Hunting for missile launchers inside Iran will kill civilians and won’t be a satisfying exercise for anyone, and in any case we assess their inventories are close to being exhausted. I understand the tension in capitals and the way events are being portrayed in the media. Now is not the time to lose our nerve. The campaign is in good shape. We are in good shape. Nothing is certain in war ... but achieving our objectives on our timeline is damn near certain’.

For at least a week in mid-April the administration hesitated while the campaign continued, with the carrier groups moving into the Gulf to strike targets in southern Iraq. Gradually, the frequency of Iran’s missile strikes fell off (though they would continue throughout the campaign). On the diplomatic front, neutral third-party states (particularly Turkey, Switzerland, Sweden and India) worked behind the scenes to reassure the mullahs that the coalition had no intention of invading Iran, but would not stop until the pre-conflict status quo had been re-established. Strong signals were sent that any nuclear event would be met with a crushing and overwhelming response. The secretary of state, engaging in constant shuttle diplomacy, sought to reassure the Gulf States and other coalition partners. The UK, as always, remained firm. France argued strenuously for limited air strikes inside Iran, at one point threatening unilateral action, but eventually remained in the fold. But it was the Saudis, masters of regional politics, who played the biggest role in stiffening the resolve of the Gulf Arabs. In the end, the crisis passed. After careful reflection, the president and secretary of defense concluded that the plan would not be shelved or amended, and the war continued.

Outside the Gulf the war raged, with the Israelis pushing up to the Litani River in south Lebanon in corps strength by early April. Fighting was intense, but Israeli ground strength and superb air-ground co-ordination carried the day. Iranian and Hizbullah missiles continued to rain down on northern and central Israel, but civilian casualties were thankfully limited due to exceptional civil defence and a prepared population. Hamas in Gaza attempted to strike into Israeli territory with mortars, rockets and suicide bombers, but Israeli counter-measures proved effective. Interestingly, except for heated rhetoric, the Palestinian Authority’s response in the West Bank was muted, probably in the hope that the IDF would break the power of Hamas. Although the Israeli air force ranged far and wide over Lebanon, seeking out Hizbullah’s long-range
Surface-to-surface missiles, air strikes were more discriminate and precise than in 2006.

Something, too, had changed inside Hizbullah. Strategic direction seemed lacking, while Hizbullah fighters failed to show the same determination as before. In an unexpected development, some Lebanese Christian, Sunni and Druze units joined with Israel in mid-April against Hizbullah and by the month’s end Israel’s victory was complete. The Lebanese government, partially controlled by Hizbullah, now fell and the successor coalition soon outlawed Hizbullah as a political party. Lebanese units joined the IDF in joint patrols south of the Litani, and Israel and Lebanon requested UN and NATO support for an international force to police south Lebanon. Supported by a UN Security Council Resolution, the North Atlantic Council agreed.

Though sporadic terrorist attacks continued, large-scale fighting now ceased. In Sinai, the IDF prudently offered no incitement and remained well inside Israeli borders. Quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy brokered an agreement whereby Egyptian troops – without heavy weapons – would move into Gaza to provide security and humanitarian assistance, with UN monitors. Privately, but firmly, American, Egyptian and Saudi diplomats pressed their case: Israel’s security situation had now evolved, and for the better. Iran was now under attack by the great powers of the West – with Arab forces in the field. Hizbullah and Hamas had been crippled if not destroyed. The time was ripe for a genuine effort to resolve the Palestinian question, and Israel must do its part.

The enemy had hidden most of its combat power in cities and villages

Through the rest of April and May the concentration of forces continued. Most troops were flown in, while most equipment came by sea – except for four heavy brigade sets stored in the region, two prepositioned ashore and two afloat. Kuwait groaned under the weight of 250,000 arriving coalition troops, scattered across the desert in rough camps and assembly areas. Inside Iraq, SOF units conducted strategic reconnaissance while coalition air forces pounded Iranian ground units – when they could be found. The intelligence picture showed the more elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) units concentrated in corps strength in and around the Basra conurbation, clearly intending to contest the coalition’s advance near the border with Kuwait and using the civilian population as a shield. One IRGC division also garrisoned Baghdad. Iranian army units were grouped in built-up areas stretching north, particularly in An Najaf, An Nasiriyah, As Samawah, Karbala, Al-Kut and Al-Amarah, and along the lines of communication stretching back to the Iranian border. Iraqi divisions appeared to be concentrated in and around the greater Baghdad area, their intentions unclear.

By mid-June the coalition stood poised to cross the berm into Iraq, an eerie sensation for thousands of US troops who had fought in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. For weeks now, air strikes had pounded any troop and armour concentrations that could be found south of Baghdad, but a wily enemy had hidden most of its combat power in cities and villages. Despite persistent surveillance from satellites and a fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles, the search for command-and-control nodes, logistics dumps, artillery parks and other lucrative targets fell short. As before in 2003 and 1991, and despite more sophisticated sensors, many enemy units would not be located until engaged by ground units in ‘meeting engagements’.

The March Up Country

On 22 June the famed US III Corps surged across the border into southern Iraq with four heavy divisions (1st Cavalry, 1st Armored, 1st Infantry, 1st (UK) Armoured). The coalition war plan quickly revealed itself as the corps sprinted for An Nasiriyah to the northwest, bypassing and screening Basra with the 1st (UK) Armoured. The coalition war plan quickly revealed itself as the corps sprinted for An Nasiriyah to the northwest, bypassing and screening Basra with the 1st (UK) Armoured. It was hoped that once encircled, Basra would either fall without resistance, or its defenders would retreat to Iran to escape annihilation. Resistance was light, as only scattered
reconnaissance units were encountered. Reaching An Nasiriyah late on 23 June, lead units bypassed the city – crossing the Euphrates upstream at the Highway 1 bridge crossing. Moving on parallel routes farther to the west, XVIII Airborne Corps with 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) in the lead, barrelled towards the holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala, accompanied by French and Kuwaiti armoured brigades. Ahead flew swarms of AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters and OH-58D Kiowa Warrior scout helicopters, screening the advance.

Given the strong coalition forces present, the fall of An Nasiriyah was a certainty, but for four days the fight was sharp and brutal, as Iranian army units fought house to house. The 1st Cavalry led the way, seizing the western approaches and the all-important bridges over the Euphrates. The 1st Infantry Division then crossed, taking the city centre in bitter urban combat on 26 June. An Nasiriyah was defended by an Iranian army division with tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, strong-pointed in key locations. Sensitive to civilian casualties, coalition forces often could not bring close air support, helicopter gunships or artillery to bear. Here lessons learned earlier in Iraq bore fruit, as M1A2 Abrams tanks and M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles worked closely with dismounted infantry to destroy pockets of resistance. Iraqi Shia militias were often encountered in the streets, dressed as civilians but well armed with automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and shoulder-fired air-defence missiles.

Meanwhile, 1st Armored pressed north on Highway 8, took As Samawah in tough street fighting, and then crossed the Euphrates after dropping off one brigade to secure the city and crossing sites. The rest of the division pressed on for Al-Kut. 1st Cavalry – less a brigade securing An Nasiriyah and its vital bridges – and 1st Infantry headed in the same direction. Farther to the west, the 3rd Infantry Division (with one brigade from the 101st attached) and the 82nd Airborne (with the French and Kuwaitis under command) secured An Najaf and Karbala by the end of June, again shattering Iranian army units and Shia militias in short, sharp engagements. Here, XVIII Airborne Corps stopped, covering Baghdad and waiting to see if the Iraqi army would fight.

The enemy now fielded considerable numbers of more capable systems

An Nasiriyah fell on the morning of 29 June, as advance units of III Corps closed up on Al-Kut. The victory was decisive but costly. Several hundred civilians, prevented from fleeing by Iranian units and Iraqi militias, were killed in the fighting with more than 1,000 injured. Embedded media beamed back real-time footage of savage street fighting unlike any seen in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Steadily the ground advance continued, picking off major Iranian units one by one. Al-Kut fell on 30 June to the 1st Armored Division, with 1st Infantry Division now advancing on Al-Amarah. By the end of the first week of June, the coalition had been drawn tightly around Basra. Iranian army units had been isolated from the IRGC in the south, while Iraqi units had been left unengaged in the greater Baghdad area. While coalition troops fought magnificently, rapidly overrunning the enemy, in most cases the Iranian defenders did not run or collapse. The tactical superiority of coalition units seemed assured. But a tenacious Iranian defence suggested that many hard fights were to come.

Coalition commanders were surprised to learn that, unlike the war in Iraq only a few short years before, the enemy now fielded considerable numbers of more capable systems. In place of the venerable RPG-7, Iranian forces routinely employed more lethal RPG-18s, RPG-22s, and the feared RPG-29, capable of penetrating the frontal armour of Western main battle tanks. Taking a page from Chechen insurgents, these systems were often employed in groups or swarms, in concert with light-machine-gun teams for protection and often fired from upper stories. Large numbers of equally feared Explosively Formed Projectile weapons were also encountered. Iranian units used highly capable SA-16, SA-18 and Misagh-1 and Misagh-2 man-portable anti-aircraft missiles in large numbers, fired from...
rooftops as coalition aircraft descended to provide more precise close support. Helicopter losses steadily mounted and stand-off attacks and higher operating altitudes were quickly adopted to counter the new threat. In the first month of combat, US losses were 513 dead and 2,343 wounded; a sobering reminder of the cost of major conventional war against a large and resolute opponent.

US commanders also noted that, while their units excelled in city fighting, many conventional skills had atrophied after more than a decade of COIN operations. Mobile operations at the battalion level and above lacked the smooth, seamless precision of 1991 and 2003. The integration of fires with manoeuvre fell well below the standard seen in earlier conflicts, as many artillery battery and even battalion commanders lacked experience in massing fires on the move.51 Infantry and tank units struggled with breaching operations, movement to contact and counter-reconnaissance operations. The force was combat hardened and well led by experienced commanders and senior NCOs at every level. But the effects of many years of counter-insurgency were felt.

At the start of July, with the temperature well above 43 degrees, coalition forces now held all critical crossing points. XVIII Airborne Corps with its two divisions and the Kuwaiti and French brigades controlled the southern and western approaches to Baghdad. I MEF with its three large Marine regiments and powerful air wing, backed up by the 101st with two brigades and one combat aviation brigade, remained poised to assault and clear Basra.

In the air, the Ninth Air Force with its coalition, naval and Marine partners ruled the skies, proving once again that air power remained the crown jewel of American military might. The few enemy units that attempted to move, at night as well as in the day, were quickly destroyed. In the cities, enemy formations, command posts and even individual combat vehicles were attacked by precision munitions, often from UAVs, whenever they could be located. Enemy air activity had long since ceased. At sea, coalition dominance was similarly supreme. Commercial oil tankers under escort were able to resume normal operations by early May even as war raged nearby on land.

The Battle for Basra

Despite incessant air attacks and round-the-clock information operations, IRGC units in and around Basra showed no inclination to withdraw despite the powerful forces drawing ever closer. For weeks they had carefully prepared for the final battle. No effort was spared to induce them to leave, and to assure the Iranians that they could leave in safety. Sophisticated deception plans were employed to lure IRGC units into the open, but all failed. In Tehran, the mullahs remained defiant, calling up reserves, rallying the faithful, and showing endless video clips of mobilising soldiers and suicide bombers. On 12 July General Ardent, with approval from the National Command Authorities, made the decision to take the city.

**The fighting surpassed even the second Fallujah battle in 2004**

Supported by Strong, Ardent gave the mission to the II MEF Commander, Lieutenant General James Hawker USMC. The 101st (less one brigade) and 1st UK (Armoured) Division, along with 13 DBLE, were task organised under Hawker for the assault. With great élan, the British insisted on leading the attack, which started on 15 July in blazing heat. Leading with tanks, 7th Armoured Brigade attacked from the west on a narrow front astride Highway 31, seizing a foothold at the airport just outside of town. Up front, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards raced towards the Basra canal, only to see the bridge fall into the water after multiple explosions. The Commonwealth Brigade, again with armour leading, jumped off from the intersection of Highway 8 and Highway 6, attacking northeast. Its lead unit, the 1st...
(Australian) Armoured Regiment, quickly ran into trouble when the Zubair bridge over the Basra canal just outside the city was also blown up.

The British commander, Major General John Caswell, immediately ordered up assault bridging and the two brigades crossed under heavy fire, supported by close air, attack helicopters and artillery under a heavy smoke screen. The fighting was horrendous, surpassing even the second Fallujah battle in 2004. Now Hawker ‘chopped’ the French legionnaires to Caswell, adding a powerful punch to his attack. IRGC units fought to the death, supported by Iraqi Shia militia fighters in large numbers. With plenty of time to prepare the defence, Iranian troops were well dug in and protected at street level, in upper stories, and even below ground in city sewers and tunnels. Mines, obstacles, wire and IEDs choked the streets, while hundreds of RPGs were fired from upper windows and rooftops. British and Commonwealth units pressed rapidly forward, bypassing pockets of resistance whenever possible to dislocate the defence.

Following the armoured brigades in close support, 16 Brigade resorted to Second World War urban tactics, ‘mouseholing’ its way forward by blowing openings into structures and clearing from the top down to avoid the open streets. Enemy casualties were 10:1, but the British took painful losses. Interviewed on the battlefield by the BBC, Colour Sergeant Robert Maxfield put it well: ‘this isn’t Stalingrad mate, but you can bloody well see it from here’. Within thirty-six hours 1st (UK) Armoured successfully secured its limit of advance inside the city astride Highway 6, sealed off the northern approaches to the city, and set up a screen line south of the city reaching all the way to the river. The western third of Basra was now firmly in coalition hands. South of Basra, Navy SEALs and the 21st MEU attacked from the sea to secure the port of Um Qasr, which was taken intact.

The carnage and violence of modern high-intensity war exploded onto YouTube

During the campaign, the four-star commanders moved constantly. Ardent, operating from Qatar, toured the component commands frequently for face-to-face meetings with commanders and staffs. Strong conducted almost daily battlefield circulation, visiting the corps and MEF commanders and often showing up at division and even brigade headquarters. General Al-Jandali focused on the Arab partners, often piloting an F-15 personally to visit counterparts from Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the Emirates. All three consulted each night in person or by secure video teleconference. At least once a week, Ardent also participated by video teleconference in a meeting of the National Security Council.

The ‘break-in’ had been a tough fight, but worse was yet to come. To clear the city centre, General Hawker now passed 2nd Marine Division (2nd, 6th and 8th Marine Regiments) through with the mission to push ahead to the Euphrates River. No tougher city fighters exist, but for forty-eight hours the Marines could make only small gains. As at Fallujah, restraint quickly fell by the wayside as casualties mounted. Taking a page from the Royal Marines and Paras, the leathernecks moved through buildings whenever possible, supported from behind by tanks and light armoured vehicles. Combat engineers proved invaluable in all phases of the city fight, clearing obstacles, enabling mobility, and always fighting as infantry when required – which was constantly. Fire from rooms, windows and rooftops was met with massive firepower, often from Marine Sea Cobras and army Apaches. Marine and Special Forces snipers firing from atop buildings and towers did great execution, paying particular attention to enemy leaders and heavy-weapons crews.

The Marines had encountered nothing worse since the battle of Hue in 1968. Some sense of the ferocity of the fighting can be gauged by the fact that a battalion surgeon and three journalists were killed in the first twenty-four hours of the Marine assault, along with eight company commanders and two battalion commanders. The city was simply alive with enemy fighters, perhaps as many as 25,000 jammed into a space barely 15 x
10 km². Coalition loudspeakers and radio broadcasts exhorted the IRGC troops to leave the city, promising safe passage back to the border just a few miles away – the bridges over the Shatt Al-Arab had been left untouched by coalition strikes for just this purpose. Radio intercepts told a different story. The Iranians were not going to quit.

The battle for Basra placed severe pressure on coalition political leaders, who had agreed to allow embedded journalists to accompany the troops in the thick of the fight. The carnage and violence of modern high-intensity war, mostly shielded from the public in Iraq and Afghanistan, exploded onto YouTube, the front page of newspapers and journals around the globe and on every television screen. Media coverage was brutally real, but for the most part it was truthful and accurate. A YouTube video, taken by a young journalist who died in a mine strike the next day, captured the media’s role in a conversation, taped against a cacophonous backdrop of explosions and automatic weapons fire. Crouching behind a Marine tank, the reporter said: ‘I’m not here to take sides, man … I’m just here to report this war. You make up your own mind’. Many civilians reacted to these images with horror and consternation, calling for an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal. But many more expressed determination to continue until victory. As the battle wore on, public opinion stiffened in favour of the campaign. More than the casualties, it seemed the public feared the prospect of failure and yearned for a quick success.

A multi-ethnic transitional council took power in Baghdad

By nightfall on 20 June, the Marines had pushed the IRGC defenders to the east to within 2,000 m of the river. Casualties in the Marine rifle companies exceeded 30 per cent and the attackers were exhausted after seventy-two hours of intense combat with virtually no rest. Now General Hawker pushed the two brigades of the 101st forward to finish the job. For eighteen hours the air-assault soldiers battered against what seemed like a solid and unyielding defence, and then suddenly the enemy cracked. Racing forward, the infantry pressed on to the river, as surviving IRGC soldiers ran, or threw down their weapons and surrendered. More than 10,000 had been killed outright, and many of the survivors were wounded. On foot and in civilian vehicles, they made for the border unhindered. Basra had fallen.

Across southern Iraq, from Baghdad to the Shatt Al-Arab, resistance began to disintegrate. Attacks from diehard religious extremists would continue – and indeed continue to this day – but the crisis began to pass. Remaining Iranian units on Iraqi soil were disarmed and repatriated. With the collapse of Iranian resistance, the Iraqi puppet regime fled as well, leaving the Iraqi security forces to impose order, which they did with remarkably few incidents of reprisal or lawlessness. After a sharp fight, the Iraqi 9th (Mechanised) and 14th Divisions ejected the IRGC 2nd Division from the capital, whereupon it surrendered and was allowed to return to Iran minus its heavy weapons. Under UN auspices, a multi-ethnic transitional council took power in Baghdad and began to function. With the Shia extremists thoroughly discredited, the promise of a more fair distribution of oil revenues and effective autonomy at the regional level induced the Kurds to rejoin a federated Iraqi state. A judicious distribution of political posts and federal revenues brought the western Sunni back in as well. The deliberate decision not to engage Iraq’s armed forces paid handsome dividends. For the first time in more than a generation, the prospect of a secular, moderate Iraq began to emerge.

Inside Iran, the regime was badly shaken. US policy-makers had long known that within the theocratic state, power fissures existed. Most Iranians hated the harsh rule of the religious elites. The destruction of much of Iran’s military power and the political and military failures that led to defeat sent shockwaves through the country. In many cities, large numbers of Iranian citizens took to the streets. All through the month of August, units of the Iranian army broke out in open revolt, targeting selected IRGC garrisons and leaders. Here the US president’s resolute restraint
paid off. His insistence on not striking Iran’s cities and infrastructure and not violating Iranian territory ensured that the Iranian people would not rally around the mullahs. It is still too early to predict Iran’s political future. But the current turmoil suggests at least some chance that secular, democratic political structures may appear.

**Insistence on not striking Iran’s cities and infrastructure paid off**

**Looking Back**

America and its allies had reason to rejoice in an outcome that was both quicker and more decisive than any had dared hope. But the price had been high. For America, 1,237 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines were lost in just over two months of combat operations, with 5,851 wounded and seven missing. Coalition losses were comparable. Combat losses and battle damage to tanks, ships, planes and helicopters was substantial.\(^\text{51}\) The ferocity of the fighting, civilian loss of life and property, and the terrible images that flooded a globalised world were stark reminders of the price of major conventional war in a world that many believed had seen the end of state-on-state conflict.

For both politicians and the military, valuable lessons were learned and re-learned. For the first time, nuclear states had gone to war, and the American president’s measured restraint, under incredible pressure, enabled the peace. Years of coalition operations, and decades of close interaction with NATO and Arab partners, enabled the force to come together quickly and operate smoothly. Clear political guidance, effective civil-military interaction, and skilled and persistent diplomacy provided the foundation for military success, leading in turn to political outcomes that exceeded pre-war estimates. Air and naval forces proved crucial to setting the conditions for military success, but powerful ground forces, and particularly heavy forces, were shown again to be essential for decisive victory. The US and its traditional allies were able to form a powerful coalition, with forces left available to confront another major adversary in a different theatre. Perhaps most importantly, speed and mass regained their place as critical strategic enablers, undermining the notion that short, sharp, decisive campaigns could not be waged successfully in the modern era.

Major theatre war with Iran was not on the president’s agenda when he assumed office on 20 January 2013. As so often in an uncertain world, it happened anyway. There were mistakes, to be sure, as will always happen in war. But not many. How the regional and global security environment will evolve in the months and years to come remains unknown. Yet it seems just possible that from this tragedy a better world might emerge. If so, that world will owe much to the coalition warriors who fought and died in the war of 2014 – and their iron resolve.

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Notes

1 Iran’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in late December 2013 ended inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency and was seen by most intelligence agencies as a clear sign that Iran was on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons. See The Times, ‘Israel Attacks Iranian Nuclear Sites’, 15 February 2014. There is no evidence to date that the US government was informed in advance of the Israeli strike.

2 The nuclear ‘threshold’ refers to transition from a potential to actual nuclear-weapon capability. It is highly significant because an adversary cannot know whether a weapon has been assembled and is ready for use, or not. Israeli and US intelligence services independently assessed that by the beginning of 2013, Iran had processed at least 140 lbs of uranium, enriched to 80 per cent — the minimum needed to assemble a nuclear weapon. As early as May 2012, The Economist reported that ‘on all counts, Iran is now very close to the nuclear threshold’. Citing experts from the International Institute of Strategic Studies and the Non-Proliferation Policy Education Center, the article concluded that ‘Iran already has everything it needs to procure a nuclear weapon’. See The Economist, ‘Sticks Now, Carrots Later’, 19 May 2012, pp. 57–58.

3 The reactor at Bushehr was not attacked for fear that contamination might affect civilian populations inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries, and to avoid casualties among the Russian workers there.

4 Israeli air defence was effective and few Iranian SSMs managed to hit populated areas. Hizbullah employed some SCUD-Ds, unavailable in 2006 but provided by Syria in 2010.

5 The Israeli incursion into south Lebanon forced the hasty withdrawal of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), a 12,000-man international force deployed south of the Litani River. The presence of hundreds of Hizbullah fighters and rocket launchers in south Lebanon demonstrated conclusively how ineffective the UN force had been in enforcing its mandate to keep the area ‘free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the government of Lebanon’.

6 Iranian forces did not invade Kuwait, where 15,000 US troops were stationed, probably to preserve the chance that a clash of large ground forces might be avoided in the crisis.

7 Approximately 35 per cent of the world’s commercial oil supply passed through the strait in 2012.

8 Turkey in particular opposed NATO participation, for obvious reasons.

9 Thus, army Special Forces came under the JFLCC, General Strong, while Navy SEAL units (except for designated Special Mission Units) came under the JFMCC, Vice Admiral Herold. This change eliminated doctrinal stovetoping and enabled closer integration between SOF and conventional organisations.

10 ‘Grumbling’ is perhaps too mild a term. Air advocates insisted that a strategic air campaign could not be waged without destroying the Iranian integrated air-defence system and attacking ‘strategic’ targets deep inside Iran. Leaks to the press and strong advocacy by some senior members of Congress and in the think-tank community hinted at an orchestrated attempt to shape the campaign in this direction. See Washington Post, ‘Experts Fault Iran War Planning’, 29 March 2014.

11 The eventual plan foresaw five overlapping phases: preparation and movement into theatre; air and naval operations to open and secure the straits and the waters of the Gulf; ground and air operations in southern Iraq to remove Iranian ground forces and restore the border; limited stability operations to restore security, basic services and critical infrastructure and restart national and provincial governance; and finally, transition and redeployment to home station.

12 Allied officers, both Western and Arab, were posted to all formations down to the two-star level.

13 During Iron Resolve, the three carrier-strike groups each operated with one supercarrier and air wing, two cruisers, a destroyer squadron of four destroyers and four frigates, several attack submarines and logistics and supply ships. The British added a surface group of eight destroyers, frigates and minehunters, in addition to the naval forces of the Gulf States. The French contribution included the carrier Charles de Gaulle with an embarked air group, three destroyers, two mine hunters, a nuclear submarine and a replenishment ship under a two-star admiral.

14 One squadron of F-22s participated in the campaign. The Saudis, Qataris and UAE added another seven fighter squadrons of Typhoon, F-15 and F-16 aircraft, while the French sent one squadron of Rafale and one squadron of Mirage 2000 fighter/ground-attack aircraft. The British contributed one Typhoon squadron and one squadron of Tornado ground-attack aircraft.

15 Lieutenant General Swope as JFACC controlled all Air Force, Marine and naval air forces, except those required for fleet air defence and close support of Marine ground units. All allied air units participated in the normal air-tasking process administered by the JFACC.

16 NAVCENT co-ordinated but did not command the naval forces of the Gulf States involved in the operation.

17 Also a veteran of repeated Iraq and Afghanistan deployments, Strong — like Ardent — had extensive experience both at CENTCOM and in the Pentagon. Having commanded light, heavy and airborne units in his distinguished career (all as a general officer in combat), he was uniquely qualified. Unlike Desert Storm in 1991 and Iraqi Freedom in 2003, Iron Resolve would see a four-star land component commander overseeing the three-star corps commanders and the three-star MEF commander.

18 The 101st included two large combat-aviation brigades instead of the one found in all other army divisions. For this reason it formed the JFLCC reserve.
19 5th and 7th Special Forces Groups, three artillery 'fires' brigades, and associated intelligence and logistics support units. Plans to move many active army tank units into the National Guard were quickly reversed as the crisis emerged.

20 Joint logistics planners balked at such aggressive timelines, but superhuman efforts by CENTCOM, USTRANSCOM, the services and the Joint Staff managed to get most – though not all – of the units and supplies needed in time to meet campaign requirements.

21 13 DBLE is the only ‘demi-brigade’ in the French army. The title is honorific; 13 DBLE is actually a battalion-sized task force of some 800 troops.

22 An Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) supported the MEU with an amphibious assault ship (LHA), an amphibious transport dock ship (LPD), a dock landing ship (LSD), and supporting vessels. The USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20) served as the Fifth Fleet command ship throughout the campaign.

23 One of the most effective units to fight in this war was the ‘Commonwealth Brigade’, an armoured/mechanised formation made up of British, Canadian and Australian contingents. New Zealand participated with a support group and a small but extremely capable SOF element. 7th (UK) Armoured Brigade, the famed ‘Desert Rats’, and 16th Air Assault Brigade (43 Commando Royal Marines and 2nd and 3rd Battalions The Parachute Regiment, with a company-sized task force LCC 20) served as the Commonwealth force of some 800 troops.

24 Even with Iron Resolve’s large land force, ample strength was left to cover other contingencies – or replace units in-theatre in the event of protracted operations – including the I and III MEF (the latter with two infantry regiments); thirty-six air force fighter and bomber squadrons (active and reserve); eight carriers and carrier air wings; 162 surface combatant and submarines; four active army divisions (one heavy and three light); an airborne brigade; and twenty-eight National Guard combat brigades. Selected reserve and National Guard formations were mobilised by presidential order, and some reserve aviation and logistics units participated in the conflict. This stay-behind force provided adequate resources for Afghanistan (now a much-reduced force) and to confront a second major regional contingency, such as an invasion of South Korea.

25 The outbreak of war caught the US Army in the midst of massive downsizing from forty-five to thirty-two ground combat brigades. The downsizing plan eliminated the fourth brigades from each of the army’s ten divisions, added after 9/11; however, the third manoeuvre battalion which had disappeared as part of army ‘transformation’ was returned. Army brigades thus regained the size and staying power to fight effectively in high-intensity combat. See Army Times, ‘CSA Relooks the Brigade Combat Team’, 7 April 2013.

26 The Chinese-built C-802 anti-ship missile (NATO code-name CSS-N-8 Saccade) was probably used in these attacks.

27 These included missile types Kowsar, Qadr, Noor, Nasr-1, SS-N-22 Sunburn and SS-NX-26 Yakhonts. Naval bases and installations at Bandar-Abbas, Khorramshahr, Larak, Bushehr, Bandar-e Mahshahr, Bandar-e Anzali, Bandar-é Khomeini, Chah Bahar, Jask and Kharg Island were pummelled, but significant efforts were also made to locate and target oil platforms and smaller installations along the coast as well as ‘hide’ sites, especially for fast patrol craft. The Kowsar and Nasr systems can be mounted on trucks as well as naval craft.

28 In a dramatic episode, the Iranian frigate Mowi attempted to sortie at night and was sunk with great loss of life – the first surface warship to be sunk by the US Navy since 1945.

29 Unconfirmed reports suggest that the US undertook offensive cyber-warfare on an unprecedented scale to cripple Iranian command-and-control, air-defence, intelligence and other critical systems, timed to collapse Iranian capabilities at specific times and locations as part of the overall campaign plan. One unnamed source described the cyber-campaign as ‘the most sophisticated and successful in history’.

30 The islands were defended by elite Iranian naval infantry, who gave a good account of themselves before succumbing to massive pre-assault fires and overwhelming allied forces. All three islands were seized from the UAE by the Shah in the 1970s following the withdrawal of British troops from the Gulf. They were fully occupied by Iranian troops in 1992. Since then, Iran has rebuffed all attempts at international arbitration. Iran reinforced the islands, as well as Farsi Island, in March 2014.

31 These operations were preceded by covert special operations, the details of which remain largely unknown. Presumably, the most challenging ‘black SOF’ missions were undertaken by the Joint Special Operations Command and its Delta Force, SEAL Team 6, 75th Ranger, Air Force Special Operations and 160th Special Operations Aviation components, likely aided by the British 22nd Special Air Service and other allied, high-end SOF units.

32 The Fifth Fleet included eight Avenger-class mine countermeasures vessels based in Bahrain, augmented for the campaign by others from the UK, France, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

33 The Yunes, built by the Russians, was among the quietest in the world. It was attacked and sunk minutes after firing its torpedoes.

34 The intent here was clearly to disrupt the coalition and inflict a price on the Gulf Arab States for co-operating with the Americans.

35 SSM variants known to have been fired include the SCUD-D, as well as missile types Zelzal, Shahab-1, Shahab-2 and the upgraded Shahab-3, with a range of 2,000 km. The radar-evading Fajr-3, capable of delivering multiple warheads, was not used. Saudi Arabia was not attacked, perhaps because of the presence of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Adding to the terror was the...
theoretical possibility that an Iranian missile might carry a chemical or nuclear warhead. Coalition planners dismissed this as a real threat, but the effect on civilian populations was tremendous. See Jerusalem Post, ‘Iranian Missiles Open New Front’, 24 April 2014.

36 As in 2003, Patriot missile batteries teaming with AEGIS cruisers and destroyers provided an effective defence, knocking down many SSMs.

37 A state of terrorist operations were launched throughout the spring of 2014 in North America, Europe and the Gulf, very likely directed by the Quds force, the arm of the IRGC concerned with external operations and reporting directly to the Supreme Leadership. Most were detected prior to execution by alert intelligence agencies, but one attack on an EU building in Brussels on 17 May killed eight civilians and wounded twenty-seven.

38 As in the ‘Tanker War’ in 1987–88, the Saudis increased oil production to help offset the disruption in oil supplies, but these steps could not have immediate effect and did not calm jittery investors and markets.


41 Hizbullah was estimated to possess some 40,000 rockets and 4,000 missiles of varying types before the war.

42 Various explanations have been advanced to explain Hizbullah’s performance: an aging leadership, the loss of the Syrian regime as an enabler, the prospect of Iranian defeat, and a rejuvenated Lebanese army urged on by the chance to defeat Hizbullah comprehensively in partnership with the IDF. Some or all of these factors undoubtedly played a role in the eventual outcome.

43 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, unanimously approved on 11 August 2006, was intended to resolve the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict. It called for the disarming of all armed groups inside Lebanon except for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), a clear reference to Hizbullah that was of course ignored. Up to 30 per cent of LAF officers and 60 per cent of its soldiers were Shia when the conflict broke out. Though many experts doubted that LAF units would ever oppose Hizbullah, the prospect of removing the LAF’s primary rival brought at least some army units into the field.

44 Iran did not deploy all of its ground forces into southern Iraq, but left substantial formations behind to secure the regime and guard the Turkish and Afghan borders. Iranian oil shipments to Kabul were curtailed and weapons shipments to insurgent groups were stepped up, but no Iranian units crossed the border.

45 This unit, the Iranian 2nd Infantry Division, was commanded by Brigadier General Haj Kharazzi, son of an Iranian commander killed in the Iran-Iraq War. Kharazzi was killed in action on the second day of the battle.

46 In the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, only Muslim troops were permitted to approach the holiest shrines.

47 This brief account describes the operation only in broad strokes. All along ever-lengthening lines of communications, the attacking divisions were forced to leave detachments for security. Resupply convoys were regularly attacked, but, unlike 2003, all were provided escorts, even at the expense of weakening front-line units. Here the loss of their cavalry regiments, reorganised as Stryker (mounted infantry) brigades only recently, deprived the manoeuvring corps of any ground covering force or dedicated rear area protection. Scarcely military police units were thrown into the breach with mixed results.

48 Sixty-two coalition soldiers lost their lives, and 247 were wounded. Twenty-six tanks and infantry fighting vehicles were destroyed, and seven helicopters were downed.

49 Al-Kut had been the site of the surrender of British Major General Charles Townshend and his entire force to the Turks in 1916. The fight here could not be compared to An Nasiriyah; nevertheless, eighteen Americans were killed, including brigade commander Colonel Laird Watkins, with forty-four wounded.

50 These are activated when the target vehicle strikes an infrared beam, which triggers a shaped charge of high lethality. They first appeared in southern Iraq and Baghdad in 2005 and, though accounting for only 2 per cent of vehicle strikes, caused almost 50 per cent of coalition fatalities. Their psychological effect on US troops was profound.

51 Army ‘transformation’ had reduced artillery firing units in the active army dramatically, particularly at the corps level. Though precision munitions had improved, army cannon artillery still fielded towed 105 mm and 155 mm and self-propelled 155 mm systems that were decades old; in many cases they were so slow they could not keep up with fast-moving mounted formations. Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) were used on occasion but proved difficult to employ in urban fighting with enemy and friendly troops and civilians so closely intermingled. Ground commanders cited inadequate numbers of firing units and the lack of responsive and effective indirect fires as the single greatest concern following the conflict, followed by the absence of ground cavalry formations for reconnaissance, counter-reconnaissance and rear area security. See Army Times, ‘The Death of Fires’, 11 September 2014 and Military Review, ‘Groping Towards Victory’, October/November 2014.

52 Eighty-nine dead, 212 wounded and two missing. Two-thirds of the casualties were suffered by the lightly armoured 16 Brigade.

53 To defend against Iran’s advanced man-portable anti-aircraft systems, coalition attack helicopters often fired from stand-off ranges up to 8,000 m away, at targets designated by lasers mounted on unmanned aerial vehicles. These techniques were extremely effective both for their precision, and because the incoming Hellfire missiles could not be detected prior to impact. See Army Aviation Digest, ‘New Techniques Turn the Tide in Basra’, 7 October 2014.

54 Coalition forces encountered few suicide attacks, either in vehicles or on foot, perhaps because of the close range and
chance of incurring friendly casualties. In any case, suicide bombers had far more often been identified with Sunni insurgent and terrorist groups than Shia ones dating back to before 9/11.

55 Tragically, civilian casualties were high, with estimates ranging from 5,000 to 12,000 killed and an unknown number of wounded out of a pre-war population of 2 million.

56 Army Apache pilot and VMI graduate Captain Siobhan Boyle became the first female service member in the modern era to be recommended for the Medal of Honor for actions over Basra on 18 June 2014. The commander of B Troop, 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry, Captain Boyle (call sign ‘Shadow 6’) landed her aircraft under intense ground fire northwest of the city to extract the crew of another downed Apache. Both the pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Nelson Shaw, and the co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jesus ‘Jessie’ Hernandez, were flown out, snaplinked to the outside of her aircraft, and survived. Captain Boyle and her co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Tim Wiley, were killed later in the day when their aircraft was hit by ground fire. Aerial observers reported seeing movement in the cockpit and small arms fire from the aircrew before the stricken helicopter was overrun by swarms of Shia militia. See Los Angeles Times, ‘The Last Flight of Shadow 6’, 21 June 2014.

57 Senior leader casualties in the IRGC units defending Basra were extraordinarily high; virtually all battalion, brigade and division commanders were killed or badly wounded, leading intelligence officers to conclude that strict orders had been issued forbidding flight to the east.

58 This was the intent following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but control of the government fell into sectarian hands and true power sharing failed to materialise.

59 Iran in 2012 was 70 per cent urbanised, with a population of 70 million under forty. 82 per cent were literate and 46 per cent reportedly had access to the Internet. This mass of young people, connected to the outer world and highly literate, had no experience of the Iranian revolution and did not in general share the fundamentalist religious views of the ruling elite.

60 The removal of Mohhamed Ali Jafari, commander-in-chief of the IRGC, and Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, in the weeks following the cessation of hostilities signalled to many that the moderates inside the Iranian political system had gained power in the turmoil which now gripped Iran.

61 Twelve coalition jets were lost in the campaign to ground fire or accident, along with thirty-eight helicopters and six UAVs.

A’ the Blue Bonnets
Defending an Independent Scotland

The return of an SNP government in Scotland in the May 2011 parliamentary election brought with it a manifest commitment to hold a referendum on Scottish independence by the end of the parliamentary session in 2016. With the timing of the referendum, the question to be posed, who should get to vote and so forth now determined, the debate on Scottish independence is in full swing and dominates political discussion in Scotland.

This Whitehall Report therefore makes a timely return to the issue of how an independent Scotland might organise its defence policy and its armed forces, the Scottish Defence Forces (SDF).

Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh
Whitehall Report 3-12, October 2012