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THREATS AND RESPONSES: MILITARY PLANNING; Iraq Strategy Is Seen as Delay and Urban Battle

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Iraq's strategy to thwart a United States-led attack calls for slowing advances by American troops toward Baghdad and then confronting them with the prospect of a bloody street battle in the Iraqi capital, according to American intelligence.

To impede American and allied forces, Saddam Hussein's administration has developed plans to blow up dams, destroy bridges and ignite its oil fields, United States Defense Department officials say. They say Iraq may also deny food to Iraqi civilians in the southern parts of the country to try to create a crisis that would saddle advancing allied forces with the responsibility of caring for millions of desperate Iraqi civilians.

Once American and allied forces approach Baghdad, they will encounter two defensive rings of elite Republican Guard forces, the Defense Department officials say. Many of the Republican Guard forces are now dispersed, a move that is intended to help them survive the airstrikes that would open the allied campaign. But as allied ground forces approach Baghdad, the Iraqis are expected to rush to fighting positions that have already been stocked with ammunition and supplies.

Some Republican Guard units are equipped with chemical protective gear, as are Special Republican Guard units and some intelligence and security forces inside Baghdad, according to intelligence reports. This is one of several signs that have led American officials to conclude that Iraq will try to use poison gas or germ weapons against the American and allied forces.

American intelligence officials have also concluded that it is likely that Iraq will try to strike Israel with Scud missiles, which they said could be armed with poison gas or germ warheads. ''We have indications that their goal is to delay, impede and deny U.S. forces a clear and quick victory,'' a defense official said. ''The basic strategy can be summed up as disperse, absorb and move to military operations in urban terrain.''

As the United States, Britain, Australia and other members of President Bush's ''coalition of the willing'' prepare for military action to topple Mr. Hussein, American intelligence is working hard to figure out Iraq's intentions. American officials say Iraq's deployments and even statements by Mr. Hussein provide an indication of Baghdad's strategy.

Senior American military officials say they are aware of Iraq's options and are still confident of achieving a decisive victory and of avoiding a prolonged war. Allied ground forces are far better trained and equipped than Iraqi troops, and allied air forces already command the skies.

Iraq's army is about a third the size it was during the Persian Gulf war of 1991. There are mounting indications that the morale within Iraq's regular army and even some of the Republican Guard forces is low. Mr. Hussein faces multiple threats: one from the American-led invasion force and another from a restive Shiite population and perhaps some elements of his armed forces that would rather try a coup than see the United States invade and occupy the country. ''At the end of the day, if called on, win we will,'' said Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the head of the United States Central Command, said in an interview.

Iraq, however, is striving to take a weak hand and make the best of it. Its objective is much different than it was in the 1991 conflict. During that war, Iraq's goal was to hold on to Kuwait, and it positioned the bulk of its ground forces far from its capital.

But this time, Mr. Hussein has one overriding goal: survival. His aim seems to be to force the Bush administration to seek a political compromise that stops short of toppling his administration by spurring fears of extensive allied casualties, dragging out the war and raising concern around the world over the fate of Iraqi civilians.

''There is no victory option for Iraq,'' said Gen. Joseph P. Hoar, a retired marine and former chief of the United States Central Command. ''The question for Iraq is how to prolong the conflict. For Saddam, the goal is to inflict casualties and allow the Arab news networks to broadcast pictures of civilians dying. He will try to gather international support and try to find a place in history.''

An American defense official said: ''What lessons have they learned from the last war? They have learned that the possession of weapons of mass destruction is a force multiplier even if they are not used. And they have learned that they should not deploy forces out in the open but disperse them and then move into urban terrain and intermingle with the civilian population.''

Slowing the Allied Advance

Drawing on its experience during the gulf war, Iraq is not mounting a major defense of its borders. But it is taking several steps to try to bog down American and allied forces as they try to advance to Baghdad. Defense Department officials said Iraq had shipped rail cars full of ammunition and demolition equipment to its oil fields. That spurred concerns that Iraq planned to blow them up to hamper the invasion and portray it as an economic and environmental catastrophe.

United States officials said Iraq had also considered plans to destroy dams and flood the Euphrates River, a move that could make it more difficult for forces to cross the river, slowing an offensive. Iraq's 11th Infantry Division has been stationed near the city of Nasiriya, where it can try to put down a Shiite rebellion in the city and guard the crossing points over the river. Iraq has also moved some light infantry and artillery south to the Basra area.

''If hostilities begin, Saddam is likely to employ a 'scorched earth' strategy, destroying food, transportation, energy and other infrastructures, attempting to create a humanitarian disaster significant enough to stop a military advance,'' Vice Adm. Lowell E. Jacoby, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told Congress this week. He said the Iraqis would try to blame American forces for the damage.

Iraq is also positioning surface-to-surface missiles. Iraq has placed Al Samoud missiles north and west of Baghdad. American intelligence believes that the missile can travel much farther than the 90-mile range that is allowed by the United Nations. Iraq has also placed Ababil-50 and Ababil-100 missiles and Soviet-designed Frog rockets north of the capital. Defense Department officials say the missiles have been put in place both to strengthen Iraq's defenses in the north and to threaten population centers like Kirkuk and Mosul if they fall into the hands of American or Kurdish forces.

To threaten Kuwait and American forces there, Iraq has also deployed mobile missile systems in the south near Basra. On Tuesday, American and British planes attacked an Ababil-100 mobile missile system there, and on Wednesday they hit another. Those missile deployments, as well as the deployment of an antiship missile launcher near Basra that was attacked last month, showed an escalation in Iraqi preparations.

American intelligence reports that Mr. Hussein has authorized his commanders to use chemical and perhaps biological weapons. It is difficult for intelligence experts to determine if the munitions being sent to Iraqi forces have chemical or conventional warheads. But American intelligence has noted that protective gear against chemical attack has been given to Special Republican Guard forces as well as intelligence and security personnel charged with defending Baghdad and other cities. It has been given to some Republican Guard units outside Baghdad as well.

United States intelligence agencies have concluded that Iraq will try to use chemical weapons against American forces. The intelligence agencies believe that Iraq has a small covert supply of long-range Scud missiles, which can be equipped with chemical or biological warheads. The intelligence agencies believe it is likely that Iraq will try to fire them at Israel in an effort to portray the war as a battle with an American and Israeli coalition and build support in the Arab world.

Defending Baghdad

It is in Baghdad, however, where Mr. Hussein's administration is expected to make its last stand. A city of 4.5 million, it is a potential urban battleground where Iraq has its best command and control and most loyal forces. The Pentagon has received reports that the city is stockpiling food, apparently preparing for a long siege. The approaches to Baghdad are protected by three Republican Guard divisions: the Medina to the south, Al Nida to the east and the Hammurabi to the west. The Republican Guard is considered Iraq's most capable and loyal force.

Mr. Hussein has kept regular army forces far from Baghdad, because he does not trust their loyalty and they are not deemed to be very effective. A brigade from the Third Armored Division, however, has been stationed for months at Ramadi, on a western approach to the capital.

To defend Baghdad, the Republican Guard units are establishing two defensive rings: the first is about 50 miles from Baghdad, and the second is on the outskirts of the capital. The use of defensive rings is part of a long-established Iraqi strategy, one that Iraq employed to protect Basra during its war with Iran and that Mr. Hussein talked about in a January speech to top military commanders.

Defense Department officials say that Iraq's defenses consist of fortified fighting positions, including dug-in emplacements for tanks and other heavy equipment. Iraq is not constructing long defensive lines or trenches as it did during the 1991 war. This appears to be part of Iraq's plan to ride out the American and allied airstrikes.

Having experienced 43 days of bombing leading up to the 1991 gulf war and four days of day and night bombing during the 1998 campaign ordered by the Clinton administration, Iraqi forces have considerable experience with American air power. Because of that, Iraq has dispersed its tanks and other heavy weapons. Some military equipment is also positioned near schools and mosques in an effort to shield them from attack.

Iraq's strategy seems to be to absorb the initial round of American airstrikes and then rush its forces to their fighting positions outside Baghdad before allied forces arrive. In terms of air defense, many batteries of antiaircraft artillery have been placed in Baghdad. The Iraqi military is constantly moving its mobile surface-to-air missile systems in an effort to elude American attack.

Fighting in the Streets

A central question, however, is whether Mr. Hussein will pull the Republican Guard divisions inside Baghdad as the Americans and their allies close in. Traditionally, only the Special Republican Guard and Iraq's intelligence and security services are allowed inside the capital, a precaution against coup attempts.

''To fight effectively in the city, he will have to pull important elements of the Republican Guard inside,'' a defense official said. ''But he will be extremely reluctant to do so until the last moment, since they can be as much a threat to him.''

Perhaps the main factor is not the number of Iraqi troops nor their specific tactics: it may come down to the Iraqi military's will to fight against a technologically superior and better trained adversary. American intelligence officials believe that the morale of Iraq's regular army forces is low and on the decline. Even the morale of some Republican Guard units is suffering, officials say.

Much will depend on whether Iraq's generals conclude that Mr. Hussein is going to fall, on how they assess their chances of surviving the fighting, and on what place they might secure in a postwar Iraq.

''We expect some resistance from the Republican Guard,'' a Defense Department official said. ''From the regular army, we expect very little.''