
Operation Iraqi Freedom: Lessons Learnt

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Background

Post 9/11, President Bush had been exploring options for retaliation against Iraq and by the middle of December 2001, he had made up his mind to overthrow Saddam Hussein in the next phase of the US' war on terrorism. After the destruction of the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, speculation was rife that Bush would now go after Saddam Hussein. There was considerable international opposition to any military action in Iraq. Meanwhile, military build-up in Iraq started secretly. By the middle of 2002, the US build-up intensified for operations in Iraq.

The Iraqis had also started defensive preparations by deploying air defences around Baghdad by the middle of 2002. Air defence guns could be seen on top of multi-storeyed buildings and around government buildings. There were also reports of hundreds of balloons being tethered over sensitive buildings by night to hinder helicopter movements of US special forces in case they decided to capture Saddam Hussein and his ministers. There were reports of elaborate defences being prepared around Baghdad. It was also reported that the strategy of Saddam Hussein was to draw the US forces into Baghdad and other cities, where he hoped US air power would be less active due to the civil population. He would avoid direct military engagements and concentrate on providing heavy resistance in cities where civilian and military casualties would be highest.

Twenty-Six Fateful Days of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

The main operations lasted for 26 days, starting at 5.34 am local time on March 20, when strikes by the US and UK were launched with 40 cruise missiles and air strikes led by two F-117s with the twin objectives of removing weapons of mass

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destruction (WMDs) and overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein. President Bush had signed the launch order at 6:30 pm EST, on March 19. The early targets were elements of the Iraqi regime and refuelling facilities. About three hours after the strikes, President Saddam Hussein appeared on Iraqi TV and urged the Iraqi people to defend their country, and predicted victory. It was not possible to ascertain whether the broadcast was live. Prior to the initial strikes, special forces of the US and UK were operating in Iraq to establish contact with the opposing forces and gather intelligence on possible targets or objectives. Air raids continued on all important targets like missile sites, communication nodes, command and control centres, etc. Iraq launched three or four CSSC-3 Scud, surface-to-surface cruise missiles, two of which were shot down by Patriots.

President George W Bush addressed the American public after signing the orders for OIF and claimed it was the “early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger.”

At 3:57 pm local time, the first fire-fight took place between US and Iraqi troops. As the offensive progressed US and UK Marines captured Umm Qasr, an important sea port 30 miles south of Basra. By March 21, gas oil separation plants (GOSPs), crude oil export facilities and oil wells in Rumaylah were secured. Six major GOSPs and seven oil wells were set on fire by the Iraqis but fire-fighting crews moved in and put out the fire. An Iraqi division consisting of 8,000 troops, including their commander, surrendered and were made prisoners of war (POWs). The oil infrastructure was booby trapped in many places but was secured intact by timely action. As the operations progressed

Military Objectives of OIF

- To end the regime of Saddam Hussein.
- To identify, isolate and eliminate Iraq's WMD.
- To search for, to capture, and to drive out, terrorists from the country.
- To collect intelligence related to the terrorist network.
- To collect intelligence related to the global network of illegal WMDs.
- To end sanctions and to immediately deliver humanitarian support to the displaced persons and to the needy citizens.
- To secure the Iraqi oil fields and resources.
- To help the Iraqi people create conditions for a transition to a representative self-government.

during the day, the air operations were intensified by launching hundreds of aircraft and cruise missiles of the coalition forces on Iraqi leadership and military targets. Only precision guided munitions were used to minimise collateral damage, as compared to Operation Desert Storm where less than 10 per cent were used.

By end of the third day, about 14,000 Iraqi soldiers had surrendered. The first successful UCAV (unarmed combat aerial vehicle) strike of the US Air Force took place when an MQ-1

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Predator destroyed an Iraqi anti-aircraft mobile gun system with a AGM-114 Hellfire II missile. By the end of the fourth day, 6,000 sorties had been flown by the coalition forces. Efforts were on to secure Umm Qasr, Basra, and Nasiriyah. The Iraqi forces began to employ new tactics of giving indications of surrender and then opening fire when US forces came within firing range. The advance towards Baghdad continued.

The fifth day saw about 500 air raids, mostly on Baghdad and Mosul, and successful securing of Basra airport. Operations slowed down on the sixth and seventh days due to heavy sandstorms. About 1,000 Iraqi casualties were estimated in the vicinity of Najaf and about 8,900 POWs were taken. Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld issued a warning against assistance to the Iraqi regime by other nations due to reports that Syria was helping the Iraqi forces. One of the three major oil refineries i.e. the Basra oil refinery, was captured on the eighth day. By the eleventh day, Baghdad was being bombarded regularly and ground forces started operations around the key cities of Nasiriyah, Samawal, Najaf and Karbala. So far, only a cache of equipment had been found for defensive chemical warfare but chemical and biological weapons had not been found.

The dawn of the twelfth day (March 31) started with the launching of 2,000 sorties which included 800 strike sorties. A total of 8,000 bombs had been launched so far. Najaf airfield was also captured. April 1 started with the heaviest air strikes on Baghdad, but there were still no signs of an Iraqi surrender. The fourteenth day saw the coalition forces about 50 km from the southern outskirts of Baghdad. This was achieved in spite of Iraqi guerrillas continuously attacking the logistic columns and harassing the troops. US and British troops were fired upon from inside the Ali Mosque which is said to be the burial place of Ali,

Prophet Mohammad's son-in-law. However, coalition forces could not take any action as they had declared such sensitive areas as "no target zones." The northern front was considered essential for driving Saddam from power but no ground thrust was possible as Turkey had allowed the use of its air space but refused to permission for the use of its bases for war.

Big Five of the Ground Forces

M-1 Abrams tank, M-2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicle, multiple launch rocket system, Patriot air defence missile system and AH-64 Apache attack helicopters. The big five were originally meant to counter Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War era, as part of the air-land battle doctrine.

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Heavy air strikes continued on the fifteenth day (April 3) with the mounting of 1,900 sorties including 850 strike sorties which were mainly aimed at the Republican Guard units. April 4 saw the capture of Saddam (Baghdad) International Airport and the attack on Baghdad continued. On April 5, coalition aircraft struck at the residence of Ali Hassan al-Majid who was the cousin of Saddam Hussein and nick-named, "Chemical Ali," as he had ordered the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds. He was a member of Saddam's inner circle and also held the title of "Southern Commander of the Forces." The attack was part of the effort to end the regime of Saddam Hussein and Ali's demise was reported, which turned out to be incorrect. (He was sentenced to death on February 29, 2008, which had a deadline of 30 days and has expired.) The first aircraft, a C-130, landed during the late evening at Baghdad International Airport. Basra fell by April 7. On April 9, units of 1st Marine Division linked up with US 3rd Infantry Division, and pulled down a statue of Saddam Hussein. The scene was shown live on TV worldwide. Meanwhile, Kirkuk, Mosul and Tikrit remained under Iraqi control. The coalition forces continued to consolidate their position in Baghdad. As operations continued to secure the northern oil fields and a military airport near Kirkuk, widespread looting started in Baghdad and Kirkuk.

With US forces moving towards Tikrit, looting and street violence continued in Baghdad, Tikrit and Mosul. Gen Amir Saadi surrendered to US

soldiers in Baghdad on April 12. He was the highest ranking officer to surrender so far. Meanwhile, US forces continued through Samarra, Ba'qubah and entered Tikrit under light resistance. All major oil sites in northern Iraq were under coalition control. On the 26th day of the operations (April 14), US forces captured Tikrit, the last stronghold of Saddam Hussein. His village, Auja, was subjected to heavy air raids and ground attacks. A majority of the petroleum facilities were under coalition control and no oil wells were under fire.

The major combat operations ended on May 1, but military action continues as terrorists strikes and *fidayeen* action continues on a daily basis. The Iraqi cauldron of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds continues to simmer in spite of an elected government being in place and Saddam Hussein being captured (he was hanged on December 29, 2006.) The objective of overthrowing Saddam Hussein had been achieved and in any case there were no WMDs in the first place. The conventional war was over but when the war on terrorism will end, only time can tell.

“Apprehending him (Saddam Hussein) was probably impossible. We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq. The coalition would instantly have collapsed, the Arabs deserting it in anger and other allies pulling out as well.

“Had we gone the invasion route, the US would conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land. It would have been a dramatically different and perhaps barren outcome.”

— George Herbert Walker Bush
(US President - 1989-93)

Lessons Learnt

The macro and micro level examination of all aspects and all agencies involved in OIF is too involved a task and would serve no purpose for broadly understanding the strength and weaknesses of the operations. Thus, the endeavour has been to present a macro overview.

Preparatory Stage

The preparatory stage actually started way back during 1991 with the US forces stationed in Kuwait (for practically 12 years). It gave the US an opportunity to gather intelligence, shape the operations, and understand Iraq

in depth. The US was already at war in Afghanistan and a large number of operational aspects were evolved which could be used effectively in Iraq. The command and control facilities already existed in the region — these had taken a long time to build and would improve with time. The last aspect was pre-positioning of stock and creating adequate lift capability. Efficient planning and additional lift capability resulted in moving four times the stock in three months as compared to a quarter of the stock in seven months in 1991. The European bases acted as platforms for power projection and the advance work by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and European Command (EUCOM) helped in achieving interoperability within the coalition forces. Finally, for some reason, Iraq made no effort to impede or degrade the build-up.

Bandwidth

The capacity of the bandwidth was 42 times more than the last Gulf War, so an immense amount of talking could be done and large volumes of data exchanged. While the quality of staff work had improved, there were still problems with the last mile connection. Improvements were required so that the information could reach quickly and accurately, virtually to the tip of the bullet which was going to be fired by the soldier in front.

Training

Intense training was carried out on all aspects of the pending operations. Commanders and staff were given ample opportunity to train and then retrain, and carry out several realistic exercises many times over which became dress rehearsals for the pending operations. Dummy townships and villages were set up, with mayors to add realism.

Overwhelming Force

The US had overwhelming force which translated into greater numerical superiority and greater mass. However, there were fewer numbers present at the start of the war in Kuwait but overwhelming superiority was achieved in all respects at the time and place of own choosing by:

- Having superior and timely information as compared to the enemy.
- The ability to integrate the sea and air arms into the land operations due to achieving sea and air supremacy rapidly.
- Finally, applying precise firepower at an unprecedented scale and scope, matched with speed and depth of ground manoeuvre.

Joint integration and Adaptive Planning

Joint integration was achieved by the commitment to joint warfare by all the forces involved in the operations, having a joint doctrine and education, and carrying out joint training. Apart from joint doctrine and interoperability, this also involves investing in

human relationships, a facet often overlooked. Integration in Iraq did not imply interdependence but was about combining resources in such a manner as to produce results greater than the sum of the parts. Integration did not imply efficiency but effectiveness. The planning process was also given due importance, thus, in a fast changing scenario, the staff did not get into a flap —instead, they would identify the problems, war-game them and come out with modified plans.

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Integration of Special and Conventional Forces

The successful integration of special and conventional forces is one of the high points of OIF but it was not achieved overnight. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was formed after the failure at Desert One to rescue hostages in 1979. The special forces then became a separate branch, with dedicated resources which improved their capability but physically and culturally isolated them from the conventional forces. The gap became so much that a stage came that they did not always work well together. The process of integration started when they had to work together in the Balkans, and particularly in Haiti. It continued in Afghanistan and further improved during the planning stage of OIF. The integration in OIF was carried out at every echelon, throughout the theatre of operations, and on land, sea and air. They shared intelligence, fire support and medical cover. In the north, 10th Special Forces Group served as the controlling headquarters for 173rd Airborne Brigade and a battalion of the 10th Mountain Division. Units of the 10th Mountain Division supported the Joint Special Task Forces-North (JSOTF-North) to defend against Iraqi counter-attacks. The failure of their counter-attacks so demoralised them that Iraqi V Corps surrendered to JSOTF-North. Another successful innovation was interdiction of lines of control by employing a combination of Abrams tank and special forces to prevent Iraqi leaders and forces fleeing to Syria.

Urban Operations

During the planning of OIF, it was clear that bringing down Saddam Hussein

would involve fighting in Baghdad and many cities en route, which would require immense resources, cause heavy casualties, and destroy infrastructure which would be essential to restore normalcy later on. The US Army drew their lessons from their own experience in Mogadishu, Somalia, Vietnam, etc; from the Russians in Grozny; from Israel in the West Bank and World War II. From the study, they concluded that instead of considering the urban area as a complex terrain, it should be viewed as multiple areas/systems like military, civic amenities, political, religious, etc which constantly interact with each other. Understanding these systems in detail dictated the course of action which gave good results, with less casualties. Winning the close quarter battle was another key to successful urban operations. Precision munitions helped in reducing the collateral damage. Body armour, pads, laser pointers, etc. helped in improving the performance of the soldiers. Operations involved war-fighting, followed by security operations and humanitarian aid. Successful establishment of normalcy after the operations was as important as successful military operations, hence, civil affairs and psychological units were provided to the forces fighting in the urban areas. The earlier intense training also contributed to success.

Theatre Air and Missile Defence (TAMD)

The Services jointly provided solutions to establish an effective TAMD. The USS *Higgins* provided early warning and integrated the air defence capability of the navy to the Patriot. The 32nd Army Air and Missile Defence Command exercised operational command over all elements that provided TAMD. The 32nd provided the means to the Combined Forces Land Component Command to manoeuvre the Patriot units to protect the advancing columns. This allowed the ground forces to operate without fear of missile attacks.

Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance

The system worked well overall and a lot of information was collected but it was important to get it to the right place in time. The targeting cycle was worked very well, enemy locations and compositions were well known but assessment of damage needed improvement, specially considering the magnitude of the task when 600-1,000 targets were engaged during the night. Thus, getting the right information to the right person in time and post-strike assessment needed refinement.

Fratricide

Fratricide prevention was a weak area and has two aspects. The first one is

combat identification like identification friend or foe (IFF) or infrared (IR) bug lights; and the second aspect is situational awareness i.e. who is supposed to be there and who actually is there. Better standard operating procedures, better technology and improved training are required to prevent fratricide.

Use of Air Power

Coalition air forces and army aviation provided flexibility and responsiveness to support the ground operations right from the start of OIF. Extensive use of precision-guided munitions and air superiority of the coalition forces allowed them to undertake five tasks simultaneously i.e. defeat Iraqi air defences,

Air Campaign

Aircraft used

USA - B-1B Lancer, B-2A Spirit, B-52 H Stratofortress, F-117 Night Hawk, F-15E Strike Eagle, F-16 Fighting Falcon, F/A-18 Hornet, F-14 Tomcat and marine AV-8B Harrier. Army aviation supported some of the missions.

Coalition Forces

Tornado GR-4, Harrier GR-7 and F/A-18.

Targets

Military command and control installations, structures and buildings, theatre ballistic missile sites, deep battlefield shaping operations and close air support.

Air bases

Sorties took off from bases in the Indian Ocean, 30 locations in the US Central Command (CENTCOM) and five aircraft carriers. The B-2 flew the longest mission of about 34 hours round trip.

Cruise missiles

1,000 cruise missiles were fired, both of the navy and the air force.

Precision guided munitions

3,000 precision guided munitions were used on A day(equivalent to D day of the army).

Naval aviation

Naval aviation flew 7,000 sorties and fired 800 Tomahawk land attack missiles.

engage strategic targets, attack ballistic missile sites, carry out battlefield shaping operations and provide close air support. As per the comments of the ground forces, top class support was provided and, many a time, turned the tide in favour of the army. Some evidence even suggests that the high rate in desertion of the Iraqi Army could be contributed to air power.

Net-Centric Warfare (NCW)

The digitisation of the army has helped them to see the action and location of their units and rapidly decide on the future course of action. The army employed its only digitised division, the 4ID, which had been experimenting and training with a full suite of digital networked capabilities. Initially, the capability of 4ID could not be exploited as its land-based network could not keep pace with the vast distances and sheer speed of movement. However, once the situation stabilised, 4ID displayed the advantage of integral net-enabled surveillance and reconnaissance at brigade level. Only 4ID brigades employed

Lessons Learnt – A Snapshot

- Capabilities that achieved a high level of competence and need to be sustained and improved:
 - Joint integration and adaptive planning.
 - Joint force energy.
 - Special and conventional forces integration.
- Capabilities that were quite effective but need improvement:
 - Urban operations.
 - Psychological operations.
 - Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.
- Capabilities that did not match the objectives and require in-depth review and improvement:
 - Prevention of fratricide.
 - Planning of deployment and its execution.
 - Reserve mobilisation.
 - Battle damage assessment.
 - Coalition information sharing.
- Insights to future concepts:
 - Emerging battlespace.
 - Knowledge-enabled warfare.
 - Effects-based operations.

networked UAVs, long range acquisition and scout surveillance systems and Kiowa Warriors. 4ID could see the enemy, plan their own operations and implement them on their own terms. Certain aspects emerged which require examination. Firstly, the forces should be able to manoeuvre the net, and for this, the net must be so built that it can be manoeuvred to ensure full connectivity and capability. The second aspect is that to cope with fast paced offensive operations, the ground forces should do away with terrestrial-based communications and invest in space-based communications. The third aspect is that networks should remain simple with only essential functions so that they are easy to operate. Commanders basically want to know where the enemy is, where own troops are, and the means to pass orders, messages and graphics to coordinate their actions. The last aspect is interoperability. The Global Command and Control System-Army (GCCS-A) provides communications interoperability at higher levels of command, the Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) and Blue Force Tracking(BFT) network at the tactical level. The process of joint digitisation and standardisation should continue to achieve NCW in real terms.

Conclusion

OIF lasted for 26 days and achieved the twin objectives of removing WMDs(actually none were found) and bringing down Saddam's regime in a fairly fast paced action. Two features which emerge very clearly as winners are synergy and joint actions which were applied to all aspects of the operations and when coupled with speed, situational awareness and precision fires, led to success in action. The coalition forces had the huge advantage of resources and technology over the Iraqi forces which was further helped by Iraqi ineptitude in war-fighting — as such, they could not exploit the potential of the familiar urban terrain. Thus, any lessons or conclusions drawn should be seen objectively in this light.