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# How to Take Baghdad

By DARYL G. PRESS

HANOVER, N.H. — American and British ground forces are approaching Baghdad, but the war has not gone as smoothly as the Bush administration had hoped. Neither intense psychological operations nor precision missile strikes has toppled Saddam Hussein's government. The Republican Guard is standing by its man. And the Iraqi security forces appear willing to give their lives to defend the capital. Coalition leaders now face a difficult decision: they can besiege Baghdad, encourage Iraqi civilians to walk out of the city, and patiently wait for the regime to collapse — or they can take Baghdad by force.

While it is still possible that the Republican Guard and Iraqi security services may turn on their leader, such hopeful predictions run squarely against the behavior of these forces in the 1991 Persian Gulf war. During Operation Desert Storm the Republican Guard was hit by relentless bombing for more than five weeks, but when the United States launched its ground offensive the guard fought tenaciously. And after the war, when Saddam Hussein's downfall appeared imminent, the Republican Guard and the security services remained loyal and suppressed popular uprisings.

For these reasons, a fight for Baghdad seems to be in the cards. However, several factors suggest that our expectations should not be clouded by images of Stalingrad or the Russian assault on Grozny in Chechnya. While seizing the capital would be far more difficult than any of the coalition's operations against Iraq to date, it would probably not be the military catastrophe that some fear.

For starters, Baghdad's terrain is not ideal for an urban defense. Urban assaults are hardest in cities with many tall buildings — the taller the structures, the more places for snipers to hide. Tanks, which provide essential fire-support in urban areas, cannot shoot high targets because their main gun barrels do not elevate enough. However, Baghdad has few buildings that rise above three stories.

Narrow streets make some cities more difficult to assault. Simply disabling the lead and rear vehicles of a convoy can trap the entire column, setting it up for an ambush. When a Russian armored column got caught in the narrow streets of Grozny in 1994, 122 of 146 armored vehicles were destroyed. The Americans had similar problems in Mogadishu; roadblocks in the tight streets hampered the movement of American convoys, delaying the rescue of United States forces. The old city in Baghdad does have narrow roads, but most of the city, especially the parts around many of Mr. Hussein's compounds, is crisscrossed with wide boulevards that would be harder to block.

In addition, coalition ground forces will benefit from superior equipment. It is true that urban terrain erases some of the coalition's technological advantages — for example, because buildings interrupt lines of sight, there aren't many long-range shots for United States forces to take using highly accurate sensors and weapons. But the technological playing field will be anything but level. Night vision goggles and night scopes are widely distributed among American and British infantry; some Iraqi troops have night vision equipment, but most will

be blind in the dark.

Coalition forces have other material advantages: American and British infantry will use sophisticated wall-breaching explosives to enter some buildings without using doors and windows. By breaking through walls from one building to the next, they'll be able to surprise the enemy and stay out of the street. Finally, attack planes, helicopters and tanks will be used in close coordination with coalition infantry to destroy difficult defensive positions.

There are other ways in which an urban assault against Baghdad would play to Iraqi military weaknesses and coalition strengths. In urban fighting, small combat units are often isolated; for example, infantry squads fighting within a building often cannot communicate well with other friendly forces. Urban combat therefore requires junior officers to take initiative and to solve tactical problems on their own.

While the United States and Britain encourage junior officers to think on their feet, the Iraqi military trains its officers simply to execute orders. Independent problem-solving is not encouraged. The result is that Iraq's army is better suited for well-scripted maneuvers (like the invasion of Kuwait) than for the chaos and confusion of city fighting. This helps to explain Iraq's poor performance defending Basra in the Iran-Iraq war.

Recent history suggests that well-equipped armies, especially if their soldiers are taught to exercise initiative, can seize urban areas at surprisingly low cost. In 1967, Israeli soldiers defeated the approximately 6,000 Jordanian troops who held East Jerusalem; 200 Israelis were killed. The following year, American marines fought roughly 4,000 North Vietnamese soldiers south of the Perfume River as part of the battle to retake the city of Hue; 38 marines died in the fighting. And in 1989 the United States Army fought against approximately 5,000 Panamanian Defense Forces for control of Panama City; 23 Americans were killed in action.

The fatality ratios are especially revealing. In Jerusalem the Israelis lost three men for every 100 Jordanians deployed to defend the city; in Hue the ratio was one marine for every 100 enemy soldiers killed, wounded, captured or driven away. In Panama the fatality ratio was half that suffered by the marines at Hue.

What do these numbers suggest for a battle in Baghdad? To estimate coalition losses one must first estimate how many Iraqis might fight. The Iraqi fedayeen militia has at most 40,000 men. The paramilitary Special Republican Guard has another 20,000. Add several thousand more from the palace guard and the intelligence services, and the combined forces in Baghdad would total about 65,000 men.

In addition, Mr. Hussein might pull one or two Republican Guard divisions into Baghdad, adding 10,000 to 20,000 troops to his defenses.

With their technological advantages, coalition forces in Baghdad should perform at least as well as the Marines in Hue; the poorly trained Iraqis can be expected to fight less effectively than the North Vietnamese did. Depending on how many Iraqis resist, total coalition deaths might be in the 400 to 800 range. However, if the Iraqis perform as poorly as the Panamanians, coalition fatalities would be only half as high. But if the Iraqis are as skillful as the Jordanians were in 1967 — which seems unlikely because the Jordanians at the time were the best soldiers in the Arab world — then coalition losses could rise to between 1,000 and 2,000 dead.

Even if a battle for Baghdad "only" claims several hundred coalition lives, it would be terrifying for the combatants and horrifying to watch on television. Coalition infantry companies that are ordered to clear well-defended buildings, or that are caught in ambushes, will pay dearly. And the number of injuries will be several times higher than fatalities. Soldiers will be taken prisoner.

While images from the battle are likely to shock us, they are also likely to inflame much of the world. Civilians will be caught in the crossfire. Images of the dead will be broadcast around the world. The Israeli assault on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank last spring, portrayed by the world's press as a massacre, claimed the lives of fewer than 30 noncombatants. An assault on Baghdad will be far worse.

As American leaders face their two bad choices — a siege or a grim urban assault into Baghdad — we should ask ourselves what broader lessons we can learn. One thousand fatalities is, by historical standards, a relatively low price to pay to conquer a country of 24 million people. But the American public was led into this war with intimations that few of Mr. Hussein's soldiers would fight hard for their leader. America would do well not to embark on future wars whose political success depends on the assumption that the enemy won't fight.

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