

WAR GAMING

"USxIRAN 2026"

Comprehensive War Gaming Assessment — US Invasion Against Iran

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BASELINE	Operation Desert Storm (1991) · Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003)

ASSESSMENT STRUCTURE

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Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988 · Dual ARTESH/IRGC Structure · Operations

II

STRATEGIC LEGACY: FROM TRAUMA TO DOCTRINE

Asymmetric Deterrence Imperative · Missiles · Proxies · Nuclear

III

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PART I

Iran's Military: History, Structure & Operations

Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988 · Dual Military Structure · Grand Strategy · Operations

DUAL MILITARY STRUCTURE

Two parallel institutions — chronic friction, revolutionary redundancy

ARTESH

Regular Army

- Professional, conventionally trained
- Shah-era U.S. hardware: F-14 Tomcats, M60 tanks, M113 APCs, TOW missiles
- Doctrinal competence — politically suspect in revolutionary eyes
- Hollowed out by purges, executions & resignations post-1979
- Severed from U.S. spare parts by arms embargo

IRGC

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran)

- Ideologically loyal to Khomeini's velayat-e faqih
- Evolved into formidable parallel force with own ground, naval & air branches
- Basij mobilization arm: mass infantry including child soldiers
- Human wave (Moj) tactics driven by shahadat doctrine
- Eventually institutionalized as Iran's dominant security force

GRAND STRATEGY: REVOLUTIONARY ATTRITION

Three phases — Survival → Offensive → Collapse



1980–1982

Survival & Reconstitution

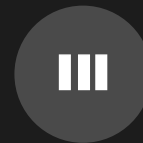
Iran absorbs Iraqi invasion. Stabilizes defensive lines. Reconstitutes forces under IRGC organization. Buys time against conventionally superior enemy.



1982–1986

Offensive Momentum 'Liberating Karbala'

After recapturing Khorramshahr, Khomeini rejects ceasefire. Aims at regime change in Baghdad. Framed as liberation of Karbala & Najaf. Most ambitious phase.



1986–1988

Strategic Exhaustion & Collapse

Offensive failures, Iraqi chemical weapons, Tanker War internationalisation, U.S. naval intervention. Khomeini accepts UNSCR 598 — 'drinking poison.'

KEY OPERATIONS & OPERATIONAL METHODS

MOJ TACTICS

Human Wave Assaults

Mass infantry assaults relying on numerical superiority & ideological motivation. Basij boys as young as 12–14 sent across minefields. Martyrdom doctrine over material calculus.

OPERATION DAWN 8

Feb 1986 — Faw Peninsula

Iran's most successful major operation. Combined ARTESH-IRGC amphibious assault at night. Seized entire Faw Peninsula within 48 hrs. Threatened Kuwait border. Held 2+ years.

KARBALA-5

Jan 1987 — Basra Drive

Iran's last major strategic offensive. Penetrated Fish Lake lines. Came within 10km of Basra. 65,000–80,000 Iranian casualties in six weeks. Effectively broke Iran's offensive capacity.

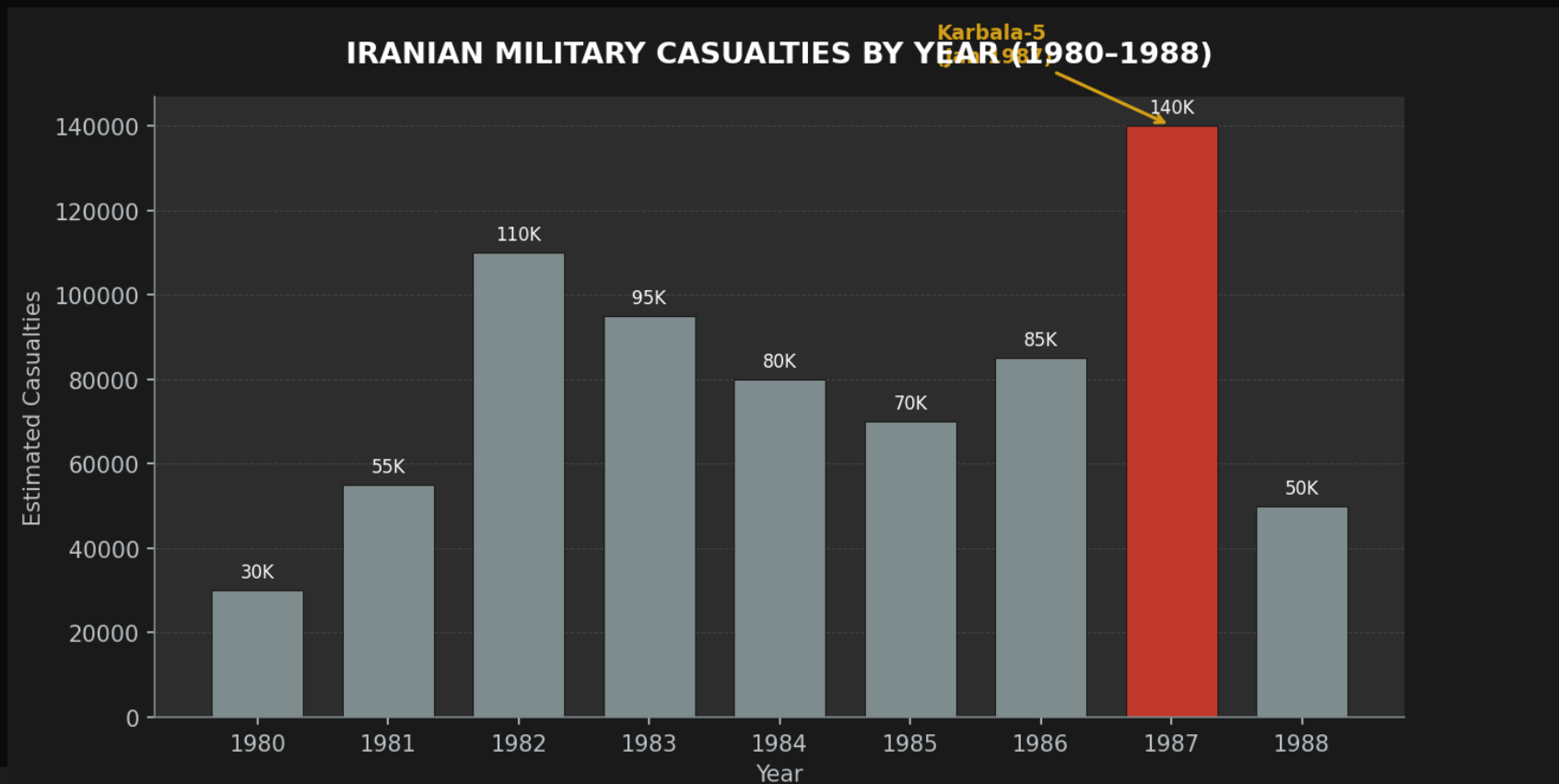
TANKER WAR

Naval Guerre de Course

IRGC speedboat swarms + Silkworm missiles targeting Gulf tankers. Strategy backfired: drew U.S. naval intervention. Operation Praying Mantis (April 1988) destroyed Iranian naval assets.

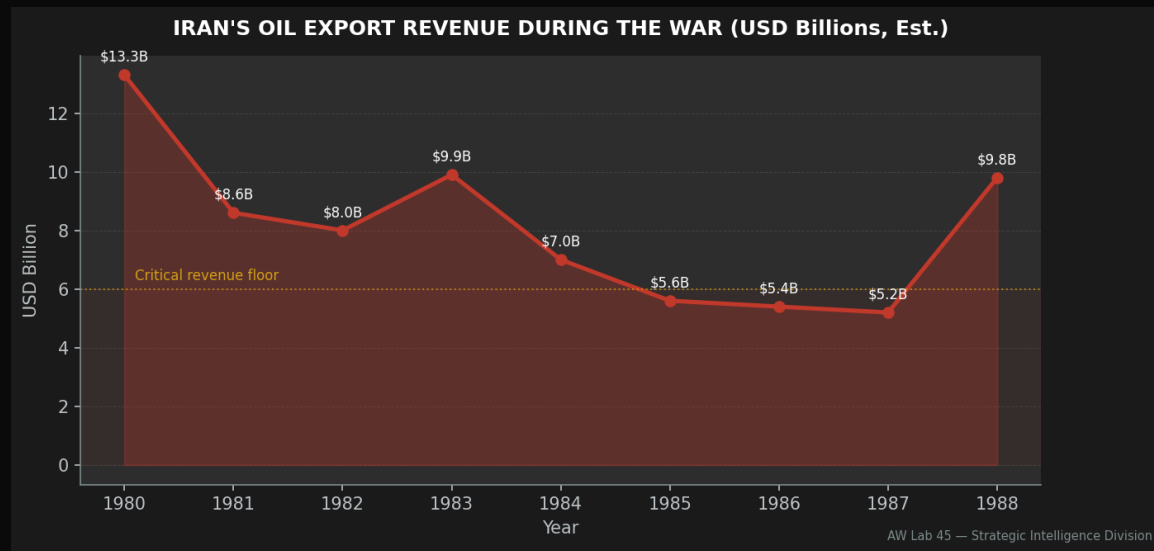
IRANIAN MILITARY CASUALTIES BY YEAR (1980–1988)

Peak losses at Karbala-5 (1987) — effectively broke Iran's offensive capacity



ECONOMIC ATTRITION & STRATEGIC COLLAPSE

Revenue collapse aligned with strategic inflection points — war expenditure drained Iran's economic base



WHY IRAN LOST THE INITIATIVE

Chemical Weapons

Iraqi mustard gas, tabun, sarin used at industrial scale. Iran had no effective counter.

Air Superiority Lost

French Mirage F1s, Soviet MiG-25s gave Iraq qualitative edge Iran couldn't match.

International Isolation

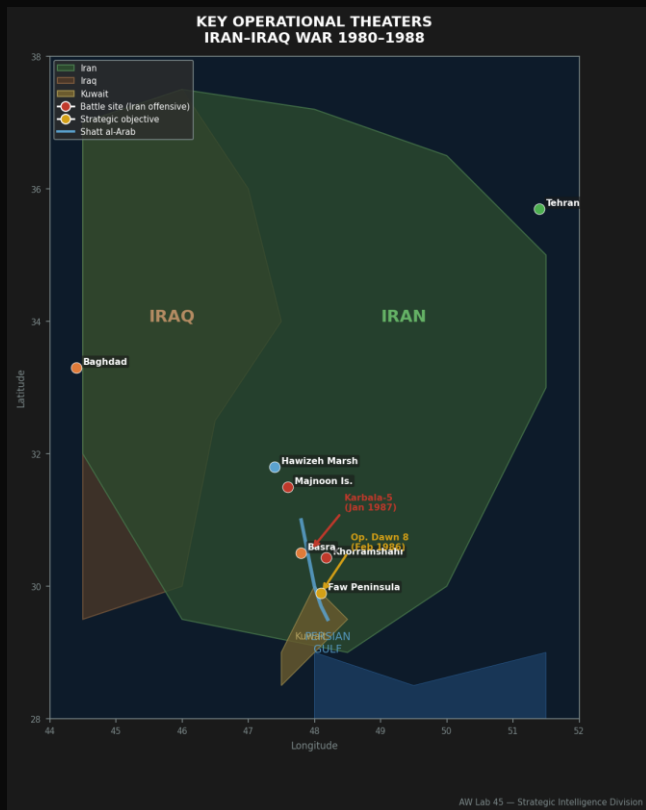
Tanker War brought U.S. & European navies into de facto alignment with Iraq.

Demographic Exhaustion

Human wave doctrine consumed most motivated manpower. Basij recruitment collapsed.

KEY OPERATIONAL THEATERS: IRAN-IRAQ WAR 1980–1988

Principal battle sites, operational axes & strategic objectives · Decisive concentration in Shatt al-Arab corridor & Faw Peninsula



SOUTHERN AXIS

Shatt al-Arab corridor and Faw Peninsula — site of Iran's most successful operations. Amphibious capability key.

BASRA THRUST

Karbala-5 (Jan 1987): Iran penetrated Fish Lake lines, reached 10km from Basra. Effectively broken by chemical weapons.

MARSH OPERATIONS

Hawizeh/Majnoon marshes exploited to outflank Iraqi fortifications. Operation Kheibar & Badr (1984–85).

OPERATION DAWN 8

Faw Peninsula seized in 48 hrs (Feb 1986). Iran's greatest operational success. Held 2+ years.

PART II

Strategic Legacy: From Trauma to Doctrine

"Drinking poison does not mean surrendering. It means choosing the next battlefield."

THE ASYMMETRIC DETERRENCE IMPERATIVE

Conventional warfare is a losing game — every post-1988 Iranian defense investment flows from this single lesson

BALLISTIC MISSILES

Largest MRBM force in Middle East. Shahab-3, Sejil, Kheibar Shekan. Demonstrated April 2024: 300+ drones & missiles on Israel.

PROXY NETWORKS

Axis of Resistance: Hezbollah (150K+ rockets), PMF Iraq, Houthis Yemen, PIJ Gaza. Multi-theater deniable power projection.

NUCLEAR AMBIGUITY

Japan Option: threshold status without weaponization. Weeks from weapons-grade if political decision made. Maximum deterrent effect.

NAVAL ASYMMETRY

Khalij Fars ASBM vs carrier groups. Kilo-class subs. Swarm tactics. Strait of Hormuz closure threat — 21M bbl/day.

CYBER & EW

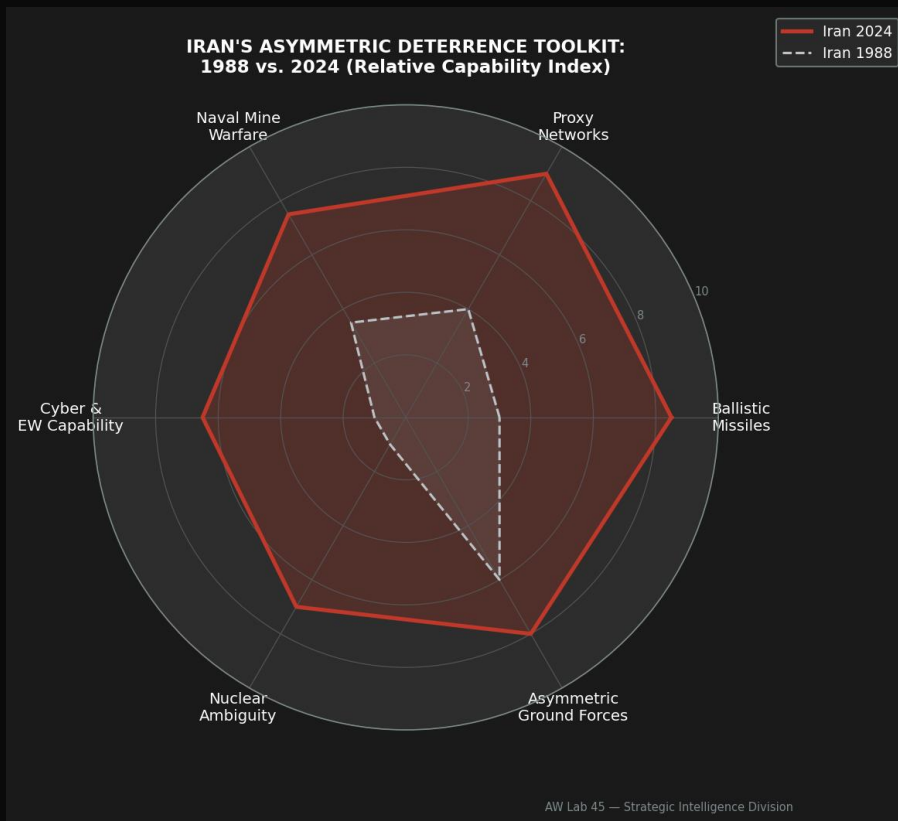
Tier-2 cyber actor. Stuxnet accelerated program. Significant EW capability in Gulf. Disruption without attribution.

IRGC-QF IRREGULAR

Combined-arms UW doctrine. Trains & funds foreign forces. Post-war reconstitution of Basij as domestic control + martyrdom narrative.

ASYMMETRIC DETERRENCE TOOLKIT: 1988 vs. 2026

Relative Capability Index — all six domains expanded substantially since war's end



PART III

Historical Baseline: Iraq I & Iraq II

Desert Storm (1991) · Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) · Comparative Lessons

HISTORICAL BASELINE: TWO GULF CAMPAIGNS

IRAQ I — OPERATION DESERT STORM

January–February 1991

Coalition: 35 nations · 956,000 troops · UN mandate (UNSCR 678)

Terrain: Flat desert — optimal for M1A1 Abrams armored superiority

Objective: Kuwait liberation — geographically bounded, unambiguous

Air campaign: 38-day Operation Instant Thunder before any ground contact

Ground war: 100 hours · Iraqi Republican Guard collapsed completely

Outcome: 292 KIA · Saddam survived — created Iraq II problem

IRAQ II — OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

March–May 2003

Coalition: 49 nominal · US 250K, UK 45K, AU 2K · No UN mandate

Terrain: Desert + urban — Baghdad fell in 21 days

Objective: Regime change — unbounded, ambiguous, no post-conflict plan

Fatal errors: De-Baathification dissolved 400K soldiers · Army disbanded

Cost: \$2 trillion+ · 4,431 US KIA · 200–500K Iraqi civilians

Outcome: Tactical masterpiece · Strategic catastrophe · 20-year quagmire

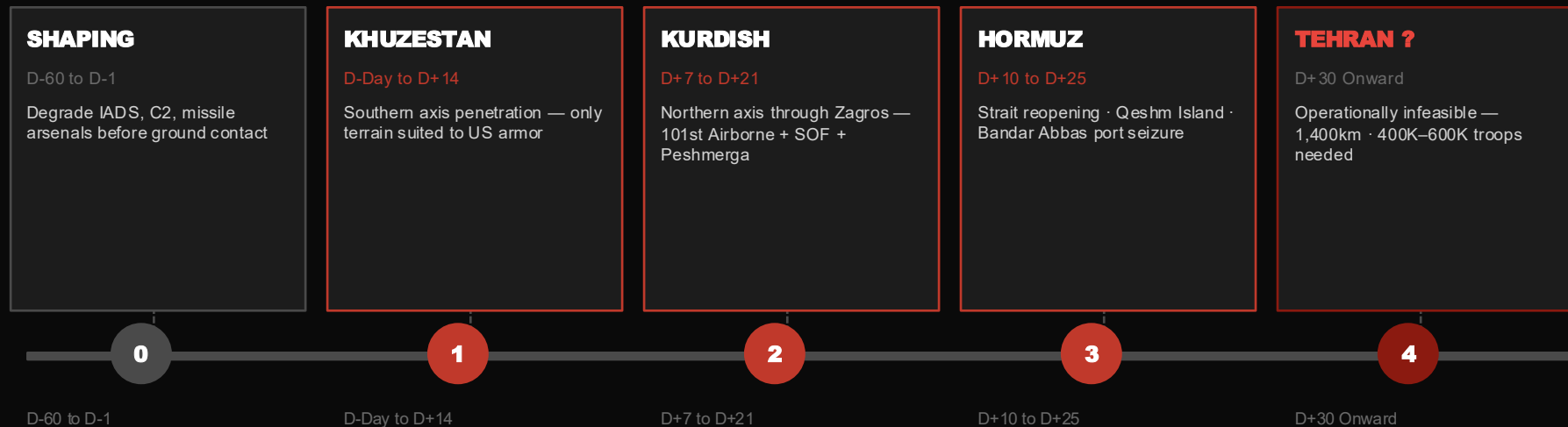
PART IV

Iran 2026

Five-Phase US Invasion Scenario · Phase 0–4 · Iranian Countermoves Integrated

FIVE-PHASE CAMPAIGN

60-day campaign horizon · Viability degrades rapidly after Phase 1



PHASE 1 — SOUTHERN AXIS: KHUZESTAN PENETRATION

D-Day to D+14 · Only Iranian province suited to US armored maneuver warfare

US GROUND ORDER OF BATTLE

3rd Infantry Division

Main effort — armored drive on Ahvaz via Highway 44

1st Armored Division

Flank security west along Shatt al-Arab corridor

82nd Airborne

Vertical envelopment — seize Ahvaz Airport at D+2

24th Marine Expeditionary

Amphibious feint toward Bandar Abbas — fixes IRGC Navy

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT: AHVAZ

1.4M

Pop. of Ahvaz

D+10

Projected seizure

3,000

US KIAWIA est.

400K

bbl/day Abadan

STRATEGIC WARNING

Ahvaz seized = IRGC Southwest Command neutralized. But holding the city requires continuous forces that cannot be redeployed deeper into Iran. The city becomes a strategic liability.

CRITICAL RISK: THE PERSIAN GULF KILL ZONE

Phase 3 — Strait of Hormuz & Bandar Abbas · D+10 to D+25

NOOR ASM

C-802 derivative

Anti-ship cruise missile. Multiple shore-based & naval launch platforms. High saturation attack risk.

KHALIJ FARS

Ballistic ASM

Designed to strike moving carrier strike groups. Direct answer to US Navy's 1988 decisive intervention role.

HOOT

Supercavitating torpedo

200+ knot underwater speed. Near-impossible to outmaneuver. Deployed from submarines & surface craft.

FATEH-CLASS

Submarine torpedoes

Indigenous submarine fleet augmenting Kilo-class subs. Shallow-water specialists in confined Gulf.

US NAVY RISK ASSESSMENT

60–75% probability of losing 2–4 surface combatants. Non-trivial probability of losing one amphibious assault ship. Iranian doctrine assumes high-readiness saturation attack profiles against any surface force entering Gulf operating area. The Strait carries 21M bbl/day — 21% of global petroleum liquids. Closure produces immediate global economic shock.

PHASE 4 — THE TEHRAN QUESTION

D+30 onward — this is where the scenario becomes doctrinally catastrophic

DISTANCE FROM KUWAITI BORDER

Baghdad (Iraq II)

600 km

Captured in 21 days

Tehran (Iran 2026)

1,400 km

Operationally infeasible

FORCE RATIO

400,000–600,000 troops required to march on Tehran. US currently maintains ~180,000 deployable globally. Logistical tail doesn't exist.

NUCLEAR SITES

Natanz buried under 8m reinforced concrete + mountain overburden. Fordow under a mountain. Both operationally invulnerable to ground assault.

OCCUPATION TRAP

Iran: 89M population — 3.5× Iraq. IRGC structurally designed to continue guerrilla warfare post-conventional defeat. No administration can sustain this.

PART V

Comparative Analysis: Iraq I · Iraq II · Iran 2026

OPERATIONAL COMPARISON MATRIX

DIMENSION	IRAQ I (1991)	IRAQ II (2003)	IRAN 2026
Coalition Size	35 nations / 956,000	49 nominal / ~300K	Bilateral / ~200K US
UN Mandate	Yes — UNSCR 678	No — unilateral	No — certain veto
Terrain	Desert — optimal armor	Desert / urban mix	Desert + Zagros Mtns
Enemy Forces	650,000 (degraded)	375,000 (degraded)	580K IRGC + Basij 2M+
Air Campaign	38 days before ground	Simultaneous	60 days projected min.
Ground Campaign	100 hours	21 days to Baghdad	30+ days Khuzestan only
Proxy Threat	Minimal	Moderate (post-2003)	Severe — all nodes D-Day
Nuclear Dimension	None	None (WMD pretext)	Active enrichment prog.
Distance to Capital	600 km — not targeted	600 km — captured	1,400 km — infeasible
Post-War Plan	Termination / exit	Absent — catastrophic	No viable plan exists

STRATEGIC COST PROJECTION

Iran presents all the same strategic pathologies as Iraq II — at 3× the scale

148

Iraq I KIA

4,431

Iraq II KIA

5–15K

Iran 2026 KIA est.

\$61B

Iraq I cost

\$2T+

Iraq II cost

\$3–5T

Iran 2026 cost

OIL PRICE IMPACT

+40%

Iraq I

+25%

Iraq II

+200–400%

Iran 2026
(Hormuz closure)

STRATEGIC CAPTURE FEASIBILITY MATRIX

Nuclear infrastructure is operationally impossible to seize by ground forces

TARGET	VALUE	FEASIBILITY	SUSTAIN	COST	
Ahvaz	★★★★★	Moderate	Low	High	
Abadan Oil	★★★★	Moderate-High	Moderate	Medium	
Bandar Abbas Port	★★★★★	Moderate	Low	Very High	
Qeshm Island	★★★	High (SOF)	Moderate	Medium	
Kermanshah Missile	★★★★★	Low-Moderate	Very Low	High	
Natanz Nuclear	★★★★★	Negligible	Impossible	Extreme	
Fordow Nuclear	★★★★★	ZERO	Impossible	N/A	
Isfahan Research	★★★★	Very Low	Impossible	Extreme	
Tehran	★★★★★	Not Feasible	Not Feasible	Existential	

WHAT MAKES IRAN CATEGORICALLY DIFFERENT

Four structural factors — each sufficient alone to disqualify Iraq analogies

01

TERRAIN AS FORCE MULTIPLIER

Zagros & Alborz mountain systems function as a natural A2/AD zone nullifying US technological advantages. Iraq was flat desert optimal for US armor. Iran converts the campaign into infantry-intensive, logistics-intensive slog. No US planner who studied the Soviet-Afghan experience could view the Zagros with anything other than operational dread.

02

PROXY ECOSYSTEM — ALL NODES ACTIVE FROM DAY 1

In 1991: Iran had no proxy network. In 2003: nascent. In 2026: most sophisticated in the world. Hezbollah (Lebanon 150K+ rockets), PMF (Iraq), Houthis (Yemen), PIJ (Gaza). US would simultaneously fight in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Red Sea. No US force structure is designed for this.

03

NUCLEAR ESCALATION CORRIDOR

Neither Iraq campaign carried nuclear escalation risk. A ground invasion approaching Natanz, Fordow, or Isfahan creates direct existential threat signals. Changes enrichment calculus from deterrence-by-ambiguity to active weaponization pressure. Escalation ladder has no equivalent in either Iraq campaign.

04

HORMUZ — THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC VARIABLE

Strait carries 21M bbl/day — 21% of global petroleum liquids. Iraq I & II had manageable oil price effects. Hormuz closure produces a global economic shock that no Western democracy can sustain for more than 90–120 days without severe political consequences. Coalition fractures within 60 days.

PART VI

Strategic Conclusions

Verdict by Campaign · Five Key Lessons · Analytical Bottom Line

VERDICT BY CAMPAIGN

IRAQ I

Desert Storm · 1991

GOLD STANDARD

Limited objective · Overwhelming force · Genuine multilateral legitimacy · Rapid exit. A template that cannot be replicated for Iran: no clear casus belli, no suitable terrain, no regional basing equivalent to Saudi Arabia, and no achievable political termination point.

IRAQ II

Iraqi Freedom · 2003

CAUTIONARY PRECEDENT

Tactical masterpiece — strategic catastrophe. Absence of post-conflict planning converted a 3-week military victory into a 20-year quagmire. Iran faces all the same post-conflict pathologies: amplified 3× by population, 2× by territory, plus nuclear risk and proxy ecosystem.

IRAN 2026

Persia Crucible

NEITHER TEMPLATE APPLIES

Iran is a different order of problem. Khuzestan corridor is viable for limited seizure. Hormuz campaign executable at severe naval cost. Nuclear infrastructure is impossible for ground forces. Tehran unreachable. Campaign ends politically — not militarily.

FIVE STRATEGIC LESSONS

Analytical conclusions for strategic intelligence purposes

01

Iran Is Not Iraq

Terrain, population, decentralized command, proxy ecosystem, and nuclear proximity make Iran an order of magnitude more complex. Analogising from Desert Storm or Iraqi Freedom is a categorical error.

02

Proxy Warfare Opens a Second, Third & Fourth Front from Day 1

US would fight simultaneously in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Red Sea. No US force structure is designed for this multi-theater engagement.

03

Nuclear Sites Cannot Be Seized by Ground Forces

Natanz and Fordow are operationally invulnerable. The only tools that can degrade them are GBU-57 MOP and cyber operations — neither requires ground invasion. The nuclear objective is strategically incoherent.

04

Political Culmination Precedes Military Culmination

Oil price shock, casualty rates, allied defection, and UN pressure will force negotiation before any objective beyond Khuzestan is achieved. The campaign ends politically, not militarily.

05

The Hormuz Variable Changes Everything

Hormuz closure immediately creates crisis for every US ally. Unlike Iraq I & II where oil disruption was manageable, this produces political fracture in any coalition within 60–90 days.

ANALYTICAL BOTTOM LINE

DAY 1–14

VIABLE

Khuzestan & maritime south operationally viable

DAY 30

UNMANAGEABLE

Strategic depth, proxies & Zagros make campaign unmanageable

DAY 60

UNSUSTAINABLE

Hormuz, casualties & coalition fracture force negotiation

ALWAYS

IMPOSSIBLE

Nuclear infrastructure unreachable by any ground force

A US ground invasion of Iran is operationally viable in its first 14 days in Khuzestan and the maritime south.

Compared to Iraq I — Iran presents conditions categorically worse across every measurable dimension. Compared to Iraq II — Iran presents all the same strategic pathologies at 3× the scale, with the addition of nuclear escalation risk and a proxy network that did not exist in 2003.

— END OF ASSESSMENT —

WAR GAMING "USxIRAN 2026"

Laboratorium Indonesia 2045 · March 2026

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It does not constitute policy recommendation or advocacy for military action.*