

LABORATORIUM INDONESIA 2045

USxIran 2026 War Gaming

War Gaming Assessment — US Invasion Against Iran

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ANALYTICAL PURPOSE & SCOPE

ANALYTICAL PURPOSE

This assessment is a structured doctrinal wargame scenario produced for strategic intelligence analytical purposes. It draws on open-source military doctrine, unclassified force posture data, and historical precedent from Operation Desert Storm (1991) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003). It does not advocate for military action. It evaluates operational feasibility, strategic constraints, and likely outcomes of a hypothetical US-led ground invasion aimed at seizing strategic locations inside Iran.

This integrated assessment synthesizes three analytical pillars into a single comprehensive war gaming document:

- Iran's military strategy, operational methods, and technology drawn from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) as the foundational historical baseline;
- Iran's strategic legacy and the doctrine of asymmetric deterrence that has shaped its force posture from 1988 to the present;
- A structured scenario assessment of a hypothetical US ground invasion of Iran in 2026, designated Operation Persia Crucible, with comparative analysis against Iraq I (1991) and Iraq II (2003).

Three verdict lines structure this assessment:

- Iraq I (1991): The optimal US military campaign — limited objective, overwhelming force, regional legitimacy, rapid termination.
- Iraq II (2003): Strategically catastrophic — correct tactical dominance, fatally flawed post-conflict planning, 20-year quagmire.
- Iran 2026: Neither template applies. Iran is a different order of problem — larger, mountainous, nuclearly proximate, and regionally interconnected in ways Iraq never was.

PART I — IRAN'S MILITARY: HISTORY, STRUCTURE & OPERATIONS

1.1 Strategic Context: The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)

When Iraq invaded in September 1980, Iran's military was in profound institutional crisis. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 had decapitated the Shah's officer corps — through purges, executions, and mass resignations — leaving the regular armed forces (Artesh) hollowed out. The U.S. arms embargo following the hostage crisis severed the supply chain for Iran's American-equipped military. Iran thus entered the war simultaneously fighting an external enemy and rebuilding its own army under fire.

1.2 Dual Military Structure: Artesh vs. IRGC

Iran's most consequential strategic decision was operating two parallel military institutions:

- Artesh (regular army): Professional, conventionally trained, equipped with Shah-era U.S. hardware (F-14 Tomcats, M60 tanks, M113 APCs, TOW missiles). Provided doctrinal competence but was politically suspect in revolutionary eyes.
- Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran/IRGC): Ideologically loyal to Khomeini's velayat-e faqih, initially ill-disciplined but eventually evolving into a formidable parallel force with its own ground, naval, and air branches. The IRGC's Basij mobilization arm recruited mass infantry — including child soldiers — for human wave tactics.

This dual structure created chronic command-and-control friction but also gave Tehran political redundancy: neither institution could independently threaten the revolution.

1.3 Grand Strategy: Revolutionary Attrition

Iran's overarching grand strategy passed through three distinct phases:

Phase I (1980–1982): Survival and Reconstitution

Iran absorbed the initial Iraqi offensive, stabilized defensive lines, and used the breathing space to reconstitute forces under IRGC organization.

Phase II (1982–1986): Offensive Momentum — 'Liberating Karbala'

After recapturing Khorramshahr (May 1982), Khomeini rejected Iraqi ceasefire offers and adopted an offensive strategy aimed at regime change in Baghdad — framed in Shia religious terms as the liberation of Karbala and Najaf. This was Iran's most ambitious strategic phase.

Phase III (1986–1988): Strategic Exhaustion and Collapse

The failure of major offensives, Iraqi chemical weapons use, the 'Tanker War' internationalization, and U.S. naval intervention eroded Iran's strategic position until Khomeini accepted UNSC Resolution 598 — famously comparing it to 'drinking poison.'

1.4 Operational Methods

Human Wave Assaults (Moj Tactics)

Iran's most iconic — and costly — operational method was mass infantry assault. Faced with Iraqi armor and fortifications, the IRGC and Basij mobilized enormous infantry waves, relying on numerical superiority and ideological motivation to overwhelm defensive positions. Basij volunteers, including boys as young as 12–14, were sent across minefields — sometimes with plastic 'keys to paradise' around their necks. The doctrine prioritized moral over material factors, reflecting Khomeini's theological framing of martyrdom (shahadat).

Night Operations

Iran increasingly shifted offensives to nighttime to neutralize Iraqi air superiority and reduce exposure to artillery. Operations Fath-ol-Mobin (1982) and Karbala-5 (1987) incorporated extensive night movement and infiltration.

Amphibious and Marsh Warfare

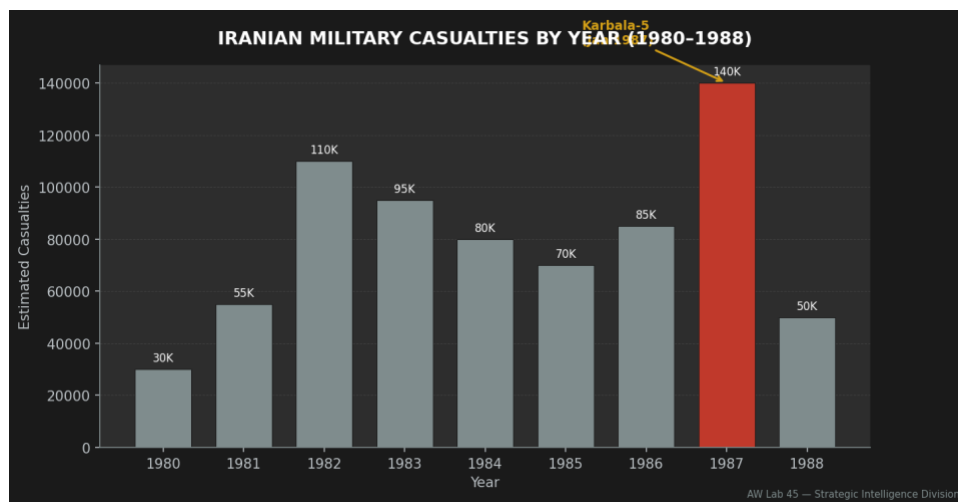
Recognizing Iraq's fortified land front, Iran attempted to outflank via the Shatt al-Arab waterway and the Hawizeh/Majnoon marshes. Operation Kheibar (1984) and Operation Badr (1985) used small boats, pontoon bridges, and marsh infiltration to seize the Majnoon Islands. This represented genuine operational creativity — turning terrain Iraq considered impassable into an avenue of approach.

The Faw Peninsula Offensive — Operation Dawn 8 (February 1986)

Iran's most successful major operation. A combined Artesh-IRGC amphibious assault crossed the Shatt al-Arab at night, achieving complete surprise, and seized the entire Faw Peninsula within 48 hours. This threatened Kuwait's border and access to Basra from the south — Iraq's strategic nightmare. Iran held Faw for over two years before Iraq's 1988 counteroffensive retook it in 35 hours, aided by chemical weapons.

Karbala-5 (January 1987)

Iran's last major strategic offensive, targeting Basra directly. Initial gains were impressive — Iran penetrated Fish Lake defensive lines and came within 10km of Basra. But Iraqi defense-in-depth, chemical weapons, and sheer attrition stopped the advance. Iran suffered an estimated 65,000–80,000 casualties in six weeks. This battle effectively broke Iran's offensive capacity.



Estimated Iranian Military Casualties by Year (1980–1988). Peak losses recorded during Karbala-5 (1987).

1.5 Naval Strategy: The Tanker War

Iran used the IRGC Navy and regular navy in a *guerre de course* strategy in the Persian Gulf:

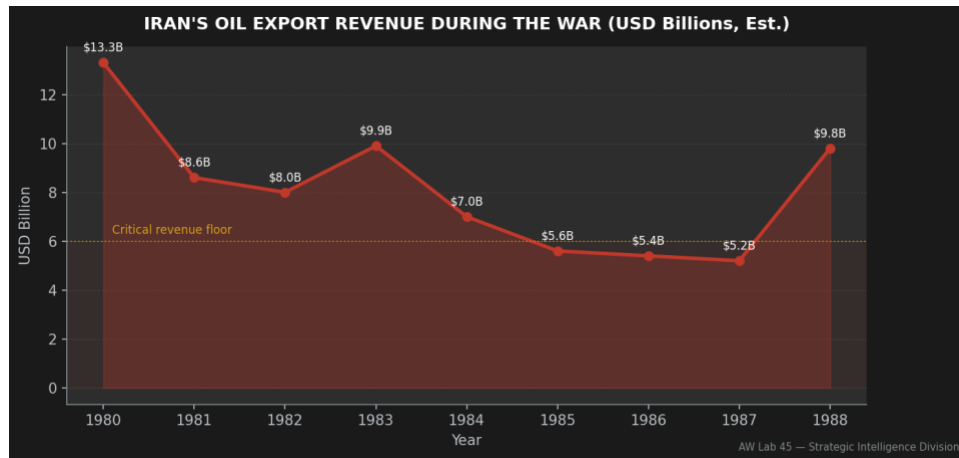
- Attacked oil tankers serving Arab Gulf states supporting Iraq (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia)
- Deployed Chinese-supplied Silkworm (HY-2) anti-ship missiles from Faw against Kuwaiti shipping
- Used Boghammer speedboats for IRGC swarm tactics against tankers and U.S. naval vessels
- Laid mines in international shipping lanes

This strategy backfired strategically: it drew direct U.S. naval intervention (Operation Earnest Will, 1987), leading to the destruction of Iranian naval assets in Operation Praying Mantis (April 1988) — a devastating blow that accelerated Iran's acceptance of ceasefire terms.

1.6 Air Power

Iran entered the war with the region's most advanced air force — F-14A Tomcats with AIM-54 Phoenix missiles, F-4 Phantoms, and F-5 Tigers — but suffered severe capability degradation: purged pilots and maintenance personnel, no access to U.S. spare parts, and aircraft cannibalization to keep a fraction operational.

Iran used its air force selectively and strategically rather than for sustained air superiority campaigns. The F-14's AWG-9 radar was used primarily for airborne early warning — tracking Iraqi aircraft at long range — rather than dogfighting, conserving the irreplaceable fleet. The Iran-Contra affair revealed Iran's desperate search for spare parts: Israeli and U.S. covert arms transfers provided temporary relief but could not restore full capability.



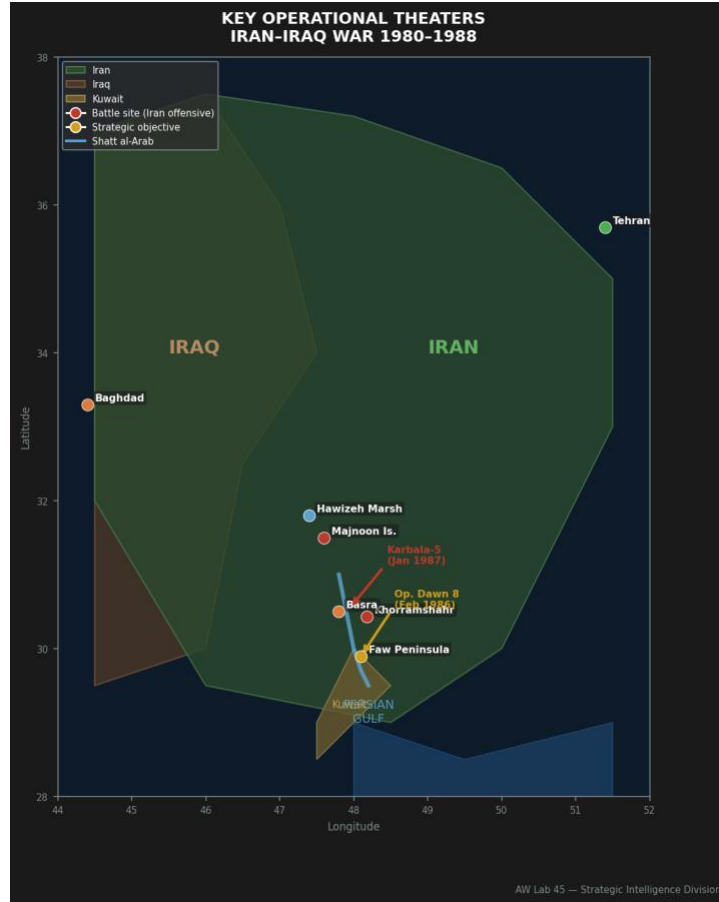
Estimated Iranian Oil Export Revenue (USD Billions), 1980–1988. Revenue collapse aligned with strategic inflection points of the war.

1.7 Technology & Weapons Systems

Domain	Key Systems	Notes
Armor	M60A1 Patton, Chieftain Mk.5	Shah-era U.S./UK tanks; chronic spare parts shortage
Anti-armor	BGM-71 TOW, RPG-7	TOW highly effective; sourced covertly via Iran-Contra
Artillery	M109 155mm SP howitzer, BM-21 MRL	Mixed U.S. and Soviet-pattern (captured/purchased)
Air defense	MIM-23 Hawk SAM	Degraded by embargo; some components via Iran-Contra
Aviation	F-14A Tomcat, F-4D/E Phantom II, F-5E Tiger II, AH-1J SeaCobra	Cannibalized fleet; serviceability rates ~20–30%
Naval	PF-103 frigates, Kaman-class missile boats, IRGC Boghammers	Chinese Silkworm missiles acquired 1986–87
Missiles	Scud-B (Soviet), Oghab MRL, Shahin	'War of the Cities' — ballistic missile exchange with Iraq
Chemical defense	Minimal	Iran lacked comparable chemical weapons; relied on masks, attrition

1.8 Key Operational Theater Map

The map below identifies the principal battle sites, operational axes, and strategic objectives of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Note the concentration of decisive operations in the Shatt al-Arab corridor and Faw Peninsula.



Key Operational Theaters, Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Principal battle sites, operational axes, and strategic objectives.

1.9 Intelligence and Deception

Iran demonstrated significant operational deception capability, particularly in the Faw operation — achieving tactical surprise against a prepared enemy through noise discipline, false positioning, and exploiting weather. However, Iran's strategic intelligence was poor: it consistently overestimated the willingness of Iraq's Shia population to revolt against Saddam, a foundational miscalculation that sustained the war three years beyond rational cost-benefit calculus.

1.10 Why Iran Lost the Strategic Initiative

By 1987–88, several structural factors converged:

- Iraqi chemical weapons (mustard gas, tabun, sarin) — used at industrial scale, including against Iranian positions at Faw and against Kurdish civilians at Halabja. Iran had no effective counter.
- Iraqi air superiority restoration — French Mirage F1s, Soviet MiG-25s, and Super Etendards with Exocet missiles gave Iraq a qualitative edge Iran could not match.
- International isolation — the 'tanker war' brought U.S. and European navies into de facto alignment with Iraq.
- Demographic exhaustion — Iran's human wave doctrine consumed its most motivated manpower. Basij recruitment collapsed by 1987.
- Economic attrition — oil revenue disruption, international sanctions, and war expenditure drained Iran's economic base.

PART II — STRATEGIC LEGACY: FROM TRAUMA TO DOCTRINE (1988–PRESENT)

"Drinking poison does not mean surrendering. It means choosing the next battlefield." — Strategic inference from Khomeini's ceasefire statement, 1988

The Iran–Iraq War did not end Iran's strategic ambitions — it transformed them. The eight-year conflict serves as the foundational trauma from which all subsequent Iranian strategic thought radiates: a war in which Iran fought a conventionally superior, internationally backed enemy while under comprehensive arms embargo, suffered mass casualties, and still emerged with its revolutionary government intact. That outcome — survival against impossible odds — became the prism through which the Islamic Republic reads every subsequent strategic environment.

Understanding the war's legacy is not an exercise in historical retrospection. It is essential intelligence for any contemporary assessment of Iranian behavior, from its nuclear posture to its proxy networks, from its ballistic missile investments to its calculus about confrontation with the United States. The ghost of 1988 haunts every Iranian strategic decision in 2026.

I. The Foundational Lesson: Conventional Warfare Is a Losing Game

Iran entered the war with the region's most advanced conventional military — F-14 Tomcats, Chieftain tanks, a professional officer corps trained by the United States. Within two years, the embargo, purges, and battlefield attrition had reduced this force to a shadow. The lesson, absorbed at enormous human cost, was structural: against a conventionally superior enemy with international backing, Iran cannot win a symmetric conflict.

This lesson produced what scholars of Iranian strategic culture term the 'asymmetric deterrence imperative' — the institutional commitment to developing capabilities that impose disproportionate costs on adversaries without matching them platform-for-platform. Every major Iranian defense investment since 1988 flows from this single insight.

The strategic logic is Clausewitzian in its clarity: if Iran cannot win a conventional war, it must make a conventional war too costly to wage. This requires:

- Weapons that can reach adversary assets far from Iranian territory (ballistic missiles, UAVs)
- Forces that can operate without state infrastructure (proxy networks, IRGC-QF)
- Domains where numerical and technological advantage is negated (cyber, asymmetric naval, information warfare)
- Ambiguity that raises the political cost of preemptive action (nuclear program)

II. The IRGC as Institutional Heir to the War's Memory

The war's most consequential institutional legacy is the supremacy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The IRGC emerged from the war not merely as a military force but as a parallel state — with its own economy, foreign policy apparatus (Quds Force), intelligence service, and ideological legitimacy grounded in wartime sacrifice.

The IRGC's wartime experience directly shaped its post-war institutional design. Having fought alongside irregular Basij forces and experienced the friction of dual command with the Artesh, the IRGC

institutionalized its own combined-arms doctrine — one that integrates conventional units, irregular proxies, and covert operations under unified command. This is the organizational template that the Quds Force subsequently applied across Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Gaza.

III. Ballistic Missiles: The Decisive Investment

Iran's post-war ballistic missile program represents the most direct and consequential operational lesson drawn from the conflict. During the 'War of the Cities' (1985–1988), both Iran and Iraq fired ballistic missiles at each other's urban centers. Iraq, with superior missile stocks, struck Tehran repeatedly and caused significant civilian panic. Iran's limited missile inventory was a strategic vulnerability that directly contributed to civilian morale collapse and ceasefire pressure.

Starting in the late 1980s, with North Korean and Chinese technical assistance, Iran launched a missile development program that has produced one of the largest and most diverse ballistic missile forces in the Middle East:

- Shahab-3 (MRBM, ~1,300km range): Targets Israel and U.S. regional bases
- Ghadr-110 / Emad (precision-guided MRBM): Manoeuvrable reentry vehicle; reduces the value of terminal defense
- Sejil (solid-fuel MRBM): Faster launch, harder to preempt; operationally decisive improvement over liquid-fuel systems
- Fateh-110 family (SRBM, precision): Used in strikes against ISIS, Erbil, Israel; demonstrated combat use
- Haj Qasem / Kheibar Shekan (hypersonic-glide variant): Designed to defeat layered missile defense

Iran's April 2024 direct strike on Israel — involving over 300 drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles — was the public demonstration of a capability built over 35 years in direct response to the 1988 missile vulnerability.

IV. Proxy Networks: The IRGC-QF's Strategic Innovation

The war's second decisive operational legacy is Iran's investment in non-state proxy forces. Iran sponsored the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon (1982), providing a template for what would become Iran's most effective strategic instrument: the cultivation of armed non-state actors that can project Iranian power without attributable Iranian action.

The IRGC Quds Force operationalized this into a regional architecture — the 'Axis of Resistance':

- Hezbollah (Lebanon): ~150,000 rockets/missiles; de facto second army on Israel's northern border
- Popular Mobilization Forces (Iraq): Iraqi Shia militias; political and military influence inside Iraqi state
- Houthi movement (Yemen): Anti-shipping capability in Red Sea; strategic pressure on Saudi Arabia and international commerce
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad / Hamas support: Military supplies, training, financing for Gaza operations
- Syrian armed forces advisory role: Maintained Assad government; land bridge to Hezbollah

V. Naval Asymmetry: From Boghammers to Anti-Ship Missiles

Iran's naval strategy during the Tanker War was operationally clumsy and strategically counterproductive. The post-war lesson was not to abandon naval asymmetry but to refine it. Iran invested in:

- Anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM): Khalij Fars ASBM, designed to strike moving carrier strike groups
- Submarine capability: Three Kilo-class submarines plus indigenous midget submarines for shallow-water operations
- Swarm tactics doctrine: Refined Boghammer-concept into coordinated fast boat swarms with anti-ship missiles and shore-based missile batteries
- Strait of Hormuz leverage: Capacity to threaten closure of the Strait — through which ~20% of global oil passes — as the ultimate economic deterrent

VI. Nuclear Ambiguity: The Ultimate Deterrence Insurance

The most structurally significant legacy of the Iran-Iraq War is Iran's nuclear program. The causal chain is direct: Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Iranian forces and Kurdish civilians with complete international impunity. The institutional conclusion drawn within the Islamic Republic's strategic elite was that WMD deterrence is the only credible guarantee against existential threats.

Iran's nuclear program reflects this deterrence logic rather than an offensive first-strike orientation. The strategic value of Iran's nuclear posture lies precisely in its ambiguity — a 'Japan option' approach of maintaining technological threshold status without weaponization. As of 2026, Iran is assessed to be weeks from weapons-grade enrichment capability if political decision is made, a threshold that itself constitutes a form of extended deterrence.

VII. The Indonesia Strategic Lens

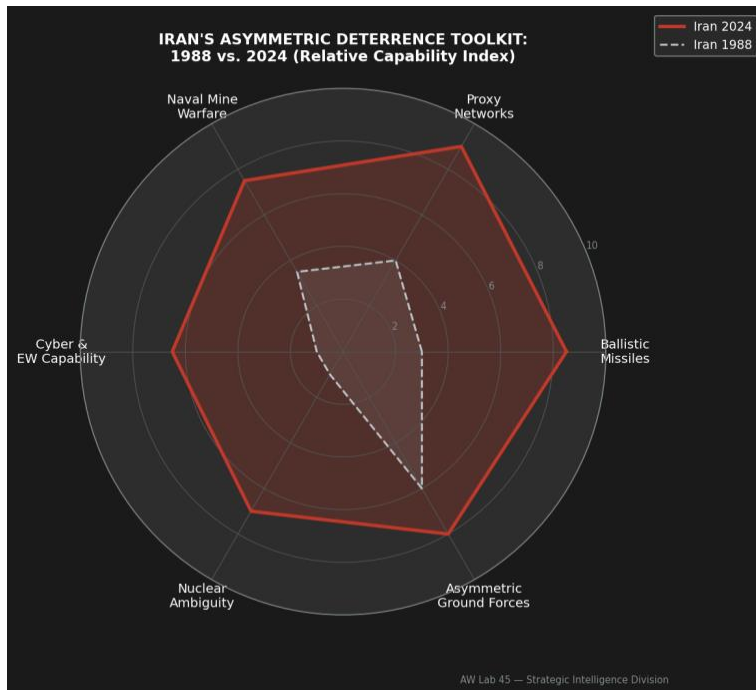
For Indonesian strategic planners, the Iran–Iraq War legacy is not a Middle Eastern abstraction. It is a case study in the strategic options available to a postcolonial, resource-rich, regionally significant state that faces sustained external pressure and international isolation.

For Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* ('free and active') foreign policy framework, the Iran case illuminates several tensions:

- Autonomous strategic depth vs. institutional alignment: Iran chose strategic autonomy at the cost of international isolation. Indonesia's doctrine implies a middle path — but the Iran case tests whether that middle path is stable under sustained pressure.
- Asymmetric deterrence vs. rules-based order: Iran's deterrence toolkit operates outside international norms. Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN centrality and international law creates strategic incompatibility with Iran's methods, even where strategic logic is shared.
- Lessons for archipelagic defense: Indonesia's Maritime Fulcrum doctrine and A2/AD development in the archipelago has structural resonances with Iran's strait-denial strategy in the Hormuz. The operational lesson — use geography and asymmetry to offset conventional disadvantage — is transferable, if the political context differs fundamentally.

VIII. Strategic Legacy Assessment Matrix

Legacy Domain	War-Era Lesson	Post-1988 Response	2026 Strategic Status
Ballistic Missiles	Missile inferiority caused civilian panic; forced ceasefire	Massive indigenous missile R&D; N. Korean / Chinese tech transfer	Largest MRBM force in Middle East; demonstrated in April 2024 strike
Proxy Networks	International isolation; no allied ground forces	IRGC-QF cultivation of Hezbollah, PMF, Houthis	Axis of Resistance operational across 5 theaters
Naval Strategy	Tanker War drew U.S. intervention; surface fleet destroyed	ASBM development; submarine acquisition; swarm doctrine	Strait of Hormuz denial credible; ASBM operationally deployed
Nuclear Posture	Chemical weapons used with impunity; no WMD deterrent	Clandestine nuclear R&D from 1990s; JCPOA/post-JCPOA enrichment	~Weeks from weapons-grade capacity; maximum strategic ambiguity
Irregular Warfare	Basij mass infantry effective but strategically costly	IRGC-QF integrated UW/IW doctrine; training foreign forces	IRGC-QF as primary regional power projection instrument
Cyber / EW	No capability during war; radio/SIGINT primitive	Post-2000 cyber program; Stuxnet response as accelerant	Tier-2 cyber actor; significant EW capability in Gulf



Iran's Asymmetric Deterrence Toolkit: 1988 vs. 2024 (Relative Capability Index). All six capability domains have expanded substantially since the war's end.

PART III — HISTORICAL BASELINE: IRAQ I & IRAQ II

3.1 Operation Desert Storm — Iraq I (January–February 1991)

Desert Storm remains the textbook case of successful conventional warfare in the modern era. Its lessons frame all subsequent US operational planning in the Gulf region.

Strategic Context

- Trigger: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (August 1990) — clear casus belli with UN Security Council authorization (UNSCR 678).
- Coalition: 35 nations, ~956,000 troops, genuine multilateral legitimacy.
- Objective: Liberate Kuwait — geographically bounded, politically unambiguous.

Operational Design

A 38-day air campaign (Operation Instant Thunder) established complete air superiority before a single ground soldier crossed the berm. The ground war lasted 100 hours. Iraq's Republican Guard divisions collapsed under combined arms assault and deep flanking maneuver (the famous 'left hook' through the western desert).

Key Enabling Conditions

- Flat desert terrain — ideal for US armored superiority (M1A1 Abrams, Bradley IFVs).
- Politically limited objective — no march on Baghdad, no occupation.
- Regional basing: Saudi Arabia provided strategic depth for 500,000+ US troops without restriction.
- Iran: neutral, internally recovering from its own 1980–88 war with Iraq.

Outcome Assessment

Military success: near-total. Strategic success: significant but incomplete — Saddam Hussein remained in power, creating the unresolved problem that led to Iraq II twelve years later. Coalition casualties: 292 killed in action. Iraqi military casualties: estimated 20,000–35,000 KIA.

3.2 Operation Iraqi Freedom — Iraq II (March–May 2003)

Iraqi Freedom demonstrated that tactical brilliance cannot substitute for strategic coherence. The three-week conventional campaign was a masterpiece. The subsequent 20-year occupation was a strategic catastrophe.

Strategic Context

- Trigger: Disputed WMD claims, post-9/11 threat inflation, unilateral US-led coalition (no UNSC mandate).
- Coalition: 49 countries nominal, but operationally US (250,000 troops), UK (45,000), and Australia (2,000).
- Objective: Regime change — geographically unbounded, politically ambiguous, post-conflict plan absent.

Fatal Strategic Errors

- De-Baathification: dissolved 400,000 Iraqi soldiers into the civilian population — instant insurgency feedstock.
- Dissolution of Iraqi Army: eliminated the only institution capable of maintaining order.

- Insufficient force: 150,000 troops to occupy a country of 25 million — Shinseki's pre-war estimate of 'several hundred thousand' was correct.
- No post-conflict plan: Jay Garner's ORHA replaced by Bremer's CPA within 6 weeks — institutional chaos.

Outcome Assessment

Conventional war: decisive US victory in 21 days. Strategic outcome: catastrophic. US casualties over 20-year involvement: 4,431 KIA, 31,994 WIA. Estimated Iraqi civilian deaths: 200,000–500,000 (including conflict-induced mortality). Cost: \$2 trillion+. The vacuum created by Iraq's collapse directly enabled ISIS and strengthened Iranian regional influence — the opposite of US strategic intent.

PART IV — IRAN 2026

The following scenario describes a US-led ground invasion of Iran optimized for capturing high-value strategic locations. It is structured in five phases across a 60-day campaign horizon. Iranian countermoves are integrated into each phase.

Phase 0 — Pre-Invasion Shaping (D-60 to D-1)

Objective: Degrade Iran's integrated air defense system (IADS), command-and-control nodes, and ballistic missile arsenals before any ground element crosses the line of departure.

US Actions

- B-21 Raiders and F-35Cs conduct deep strike missions against Khatam al-Anbiya Air Defense HQ, S-300/Bavar-373 battery sites, and long-range radar installations across the Alborz and Zagros ridgelines.
- Tomahawk TLAM and JASSM-ER salvos target IRGC ballistic missile storage at Imam Ali Base (Kermanshah), Shahid Nojeh (Hamadan), and underground launchers at Dezful.
- Cyber and EW operations suppress Fordo and Natanz underground complexes' external communications and seismic sensor networks.
- Special Operations Forces (Delta Force, SEAL Team 6) pre-positioned in Iraqi Kurdistan and UAE black sites begin HUMINT validation of precision strike coordinates.
- Psychological operations: targeted messaging to IRGC rank-and-file and Revolutionary Guard commanders on defection protocols.

Iranian Countermove

- Activates the Soleimani Doctrine: IRGC-Quds Force triggers proxy networks in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.
- Strait of Hormuz mining operations begin within 72 hours of first US strikes — estimated 50–80 mines deployed in shipping lanes.
- IRGC Navy fast-boat swarm activates against UAE and Saudi oil infrastructure — Kharg Island oil terminal placed on evacuation footing.
- Diplomatic: emergency UNSC session, OIC emergency summit, appeals to Russia and China for diplomatic intervention.

Phase 1 — Southern Axis: Khuzestan Penetration (D-Day to D+14)

Entry Point: Kuwait and southern Iraq border crossings into Khuzestan Province — the only terrain in Iran suited to US armored maneuver warfare.

Why Khuzestan?

- Flat, alluvial plain terrain — the only Iranian province where M1A2 Abrams and Bradley IFVs can maneuver freely.
- Contains Ahvaz (IRGC Southwest Command HQ), Abadan (refinery complex, 400,000 bbl/day capacity), and Bandar Imam Khomeini (Iran's primary commercial port).
- Majority Arab ethnic population — historically restive, potentially less ideologically committed to IRGC defense than Persian heartland populations.
- Proximity to Iraqi border limits Iranian strategic depth in initial defense.

US Ground Order of Battle

- 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) — Main effort, armored drive on Ahvaz along Highway 44.
- 1st Armored Division — Flank security west along the Shatt al-Arab corridor, preventing IRGC encirclement.
- 82nd Airborne Division — Vertical envelopment to seize Ahvaz International Airport (D+2) ahead of armor arrival.
- 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit — Amphibious feint toward Bandar Abbas to fix IRGC Navy assets.

STRATEGIC CAPTURE OBJECTIVE: AHVAZ

Ahvaz seized = IRGC Southwest Command neutralized. Iranian oil export infrastructure falls under US control or denial. Psychological signal to Tehran that the southwestern corridor has been breached. However, the city itself becomes a strategic liability — holding Ahvaz requires continuous forces that cannot be redeployed deeper into Iran. Estimated US casualties: 1,500–3,000 KIA/WIA for Ahvaz alone.

Phase 2 — Northern Axis: Kurdish Corridor (D+7 to D+21)

Entry Point: From Iraqi Kurdistan through Sulaymaniyah into Iran's Kermanshah and Kurdistan Provinces — a mountainous, light-infantry theater.

Forces

- 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) — primary maneuver element, helicopter-borne assault into mountain passes.
- Special Operations Forces — Green Berets partner with Kurdish Peshmerga auxiliary forces for terrain exploitation.
- 173rd Airborne Brigade — secures lines of communication through Sulaymaniyah toward Iranian border.

Objectives

- Kermanshah — IRGC ballistic missile storage complex. Seize or destroy Imam Ali Missile Base.
- Sanandaj — Cut IRGC reinforcement routes from Tehran toward western theater.
- Bisotun Pass — Control the only viable armored route from Tehran toward the western front. Strategic chokepoint.

Critical Constraint: The Zagros Problem

The Zagros Mountains are the decisive terrain feature that makes an Iran campaign fundamentally different from Iraq. Peaks range from 2,000 to 4,500 meters. Supply lines stretch 400+ km through mountain passes. IRGC mountain warfare doctrine — honed over decades of Kurdish suppression operations — makes every pass a potential ambush site.

- IRGC-QF activates Kata'ib Hezbollah and PMF units in Iraq to interdict US supply lines at the Iraqi rear — creating a simultaneous second front in logistics.
- Estimated US logistical loss rate in Zagros: 15–20% of supply convoys in first 14 days.

Phase 3 — Maritime-Airborne: Strait of Hormuz & Bandar Abbas (D+10 to D+25)

Objective: Reopen the Strait of Hormuz, neutralize IRGC Navy, and seize Qeshm Island and Bandar Abbas port complex.

Naval Order of Battle

- USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) and USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71) carrier strike groups — air superiority and strike missions.
- Aegis destroyers and cruisers provide area ballistic missile defense against Iranian medium-range ballistic missiles.
- Los Angeles-class and Virginia-class SSNs conduct anti-submarine warfare and cruise missile strikes.

HIGH RISK: PERSIAN GULF ANTI-SHIP ENVIRONMENT

Iran's anti-ship missile (ASM) arsenal — Noor (C-802 derivative), Khalij Fars (ballistic ASM), Hoot supercavitating torpedo, and Fateh-class submarine-launched torpedoes — makes the Persian Gulf one of the most lethal environments for surface ships in modern warfare. US Navy modeling suggests a 60–75% probability of losing 2–4 surface combatants and a non-trivial probability of losing one amphibious assault ship. Iranian doctrine assumes high-readiness saturation attack profiles.

Phase 4 — The Tehran Question (D+30 Onward)

This is the phase where the scenario becomes doctrinally catastrophic for US planners — and where the comparison with Iraq I and II becomes most analytically instructive.

The Distance Problem

- Tehran sits 1,400 km from the Kuwaiti border. Baghdad sat 600 km. Tehran is more than twice as far.
- Even with Ahvaz and Kermanshah seized, forces would need to traverse the Zagros ranges, the Isfahan plateau, and multiple heavily defended urban corridors.
- Isfahan — home of Iran's nuclear research facilities, hardened to 8+ meters of reinforced concrete.
- Natanz — underground enrichment facility buried under 8 meters of reinforced concrete and protected by mountain overburden. Ground assault is operationally infeasible.
- Fordow — buried under a mountain. Effectively invulnerable to ground assault by any force.

Force Ratio Problem

A march on Tehran is not operationally feasible without 400,000–600,000 committed ground forces. The US currently maintains approximately 180,000 deployable ground forces globally. Even with full mobilization, reaching Tehran requires sustained lines of communication through 1,400 km of defended territory, multiple corps-level battles, and a logistical tail that simply does not exist in current US force structure.

The Occupation Trap

Iraq II showed that defeating an army of 350,000 defending a country of 25 million led to a 20-year occupation. Iran has a population of 89 million — 3.5 times larger — with a Revolutionary Guard that is structurally designed to continue guerrilla warfare after conventional defeat. Occupation of even partial Iranian territory would require a sustained force commitment that no US administration could sustain politically.

PART V — COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: IRAQ I, IRAQ II, IRAN 2026

5.1 Operational Comparison Matrix

Dimension	Iraq I (1991)	Iraq II (2003)	Iran 2026 (Projected)
Coalition Size	35 nations / 956,000 troops	49 nominal / ~300,000 operational	Bilateral at best / ~200,000 US
UN Mandate	Yes (UNSCR 678)	No (unilateral)	No (certain veto)
Terrain	Desert — optimal for US armor	Desert/urban mix	Desert + Zagros mountains
Enemy Force Size	650,000 (degraded)	375,000 (degraded)	580,000 IRGC/Artesh + Basij 2M+
Air Campaign Duration	38 days before ground	Simultaneous	60 days projected minimum
Ground Campaign	100 hours	21 days to Baghdad	30+ days to Khuzestan only
Objective Boundedness	Clear (Kuwait liberation)	Vague (regime change)	Ambiguous (location seizure)
Proxy Threat	Minimal	Moderate (post-2003)	Severe — multi-front from D-Day
Nuclear Dimension	None	None (WMD pretext)	Active enrichment program
Distance to Capital	600 km (not targeted)	600 km (captured)	1,400 km (operationally infeasible)
Post-War Plan	Termination / exit	Absent (catastrophic)	No viable plan exists

5.2 Strategic Cost Projection

Cost Dimension	Iraq I (1991)	Iraq II (2003–2011)	Iran 2026 (Projection)
US KIA (Combat)	148	4,431	5,000–15,000 (Phase 1–3 only)
US WIA	467	31,994	25,000–60,000
Financial Cost	\$61B (2023 adjusted)	\$2 trillion+	\$3–5 trillion minimum
Duration	7 months total	20+ years	Indeterminate
Oil Price Impact	+40% short-term	+25% (Iraq offline)	+200–400% (Hormuz closure)
Regional Stability	Restored short-term	Destroyed long-term	Catastrophic — multiple theaters
Alliance Cost	Strengthened NATO/Gulf	Fractured NATO	Potentially terminal

5.3 Strategic Capture Feasibility Matrix

Target Location	Military Value	Capture Feasibility	Sustainability	US Cost Estimate
Ahvaz	★★★★★	Moderate	Low — urban attrition	High
Abadan Oil Terminal	★★★★	Moderate-High	Moderate	Medium
Bandar Abbas Port	★★★★★	Moderate	Low — ASM threat	Very High
Qeshm Island	★★★	High (SOF)	Moderate	Medium
Kermanshah Missile Base	★★★★★	Low-Moderate	Very Low	High
Natanz Nuclear Site	★★★★★	Negligible	Impossible	Extreme
Fordow Nuclear Site	★★★★★	Zero	Impossible	N/A
Isfahan Research Facility	★★★★	Very Low	Impossible	Extreme
Tehran	★★★★★	Not Feasible	Not Feasible	Existential

5.4 Key Differential Factors: What Makes Iran Different

Factor 1: Terrain as Force Multiplier

Iraq (both campaigns) was fought in terrain that systematically favored US military superiority — flat desert where satellite imagery, air superiority, and armored firepower were decisive. Iran's Zagros and Alborz mountain systems function as a natural A2/AD zone that nullifies US technological advantages and converts the campaign into an infantry-intensive, logistics-intensive slog. No US military planner who studied the Soviet experience in Afghanistan (1979–89) or US experience in the Hindu Kush could view the Zagros Mountains with anything other than operational dread.

Factor 2: Proxy Ecosystem

In 1991, Iran watched Desert Storm from the sidelines — it had just emerged from a devastating eight-year war with Iraq and had no proxy network capable of meaningful intervention. In 2026, Iran's proxy ecosystem is the most sophisticated in the world: Hezbollah (Lebanon, 150,000+ rockets), Kata'ib Hezbollah and PMF (Iraq), Ansar Allah/Houthis (Yemen), and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Gaza). A US invasion of Iran triggers simultaneous activation of all nodes from Day 1 — creating a multi-theater war that no US force structure is designed to fight simultaneously.

Factor 3: Nuclear Escalation Corridor

Neither Iraq campaign carried nuclear escalation risk. A US ground invasion of Iran — particularly any operation approaching Natanz, Fordow, or Isfahan — creates direct existential threat signals. An existential ground invasion changes the calculus of enrichment from deterrence-by-ambiguity to active weaponization pressure. The risk of Iranian decision to cross the nuclear threshold is nonzero and creates an escalation ladder that has no equivalent in either Iraq campaign.

Factor 4: Economic Interdependence

The Strait of Hormuz carries approximately 21 million barrels of oil per day — roughly 21% of global petroleum liquids. An Iran conflict that closes the Strait produces a global economic shock of a magnitude that no Western democracy can sustain for more than 90–120 days without severe political consequences. The 1973 oil embargo produced stagflation that lasted a decade. Hormuz closure would be geometrically worse.

PART VI — STRATEGIC ANALYTICAL CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Verdict by Campaign

Campaign	Verdict
IRAQ I	The gold standard. Limited objective, overwhelming force, genuine multilateral legitimacy, rapid exit. A template that cannot be replicated for Iran because none of its enabling conditions exist: no clear casus belli with UN mandate, no suitable terrain, no regional basing equivalent to Saudi Arabia, and no achievable political termination point.
IRAQ II	The cautionary precedent. Tactical masterpiece, strategic catastrophe. The absence of post-conflict planning converted a 3-week military victory into a 20-year quagmire. For Iran, planners face all the same post-conflict planning problems of Iraq II — amplified threefold by population, twofold by territory, with the addition of nuclear risk, proxy ecosystem activation, and logistically impossible occupation requirements.
IRAN 2026	Neither template applies. Iran presents a fundamentally different order of problem. The southern Khuzestan corridor is militarily viable as a raid or limited seizure operation. The Strait of Hormuz maritime campaign is executable at severe naval cost. But strategic capture of Iran's nuclear infrastructure is operationally impossible for ground forces. Tehran is unreachable without force structures that do not exist.

6.2 Five Strategic Lessons for Analytical Purposes

Lesson 1 — Iran Is Not Iraq

Terrain, population, decentralized command, proxy ecosystem, and nuclear proximity make Iran an order of magnitude more complex than either Iraq campaign. Planners who analogize from Desert Storm or Iraqi Freedom are committing a categorical error.

Lesson 2 — Proxy Warfare Creates a Second, Third, and Fourth Front from Day 1

Unlike both Iraq campaigns, an Iran invasion activates a pre-positioned, sophisticated, multi-theater proxy network simultaneously. The US would be fighting in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Red Sea concurrently. No US force structure is designed for this.

Lesson 3 — Nuclear Sites Cannot Be Seized by Ground Forces

Natanz and Fordow are operationally invulnerable to ground assault. The only military tools that can degrade them are specialized bunker-buster munitions (GBU-57 MOP) and cyber operations — neither of which requires ground invasion. The invasion's nuclear objective is therefore strategically incoherent.

Lesson 4 — Political Culmination Will Precede Military Culmination

As in Iraq II, the political breaking point — driven by oil price shock, casualty rates, allied defection, and UN pressure — will be reached before any military objective beyond Khuzestan is achieved. The campaign's end state will be negotiated, not military.

Lesson 5 — The Hormuz Variable Changes Everything

A Hormuz closure produces a global economic shock with no historical precedent in scale. Unlike both Iraq campaigns — where oil disruption was manageable — Hormuz closure immediately creates a crisis for every US ally simultaneously. This produces political fracture in any coalition within 60–90 days.

ANALYTICAL BOTTOM LINE

A US ground invasion of Iran for strategic location capture is operationally viable in its first 14 days in Khuzestan and the maritime south. It becomes strategically unmanageable by Day 30. It becomes politically unsustainable by Day 60. It cannot achieve its nuclear infrastructure objectives at all. Compared to Iraq I — the best-case precedent — Iran presents conditions that are categorically worse across every measurable dimension. Compared to Iraq II — the worst-case precedent — Iran presents all the same strategic pathologies at three times the scale, with the addition of nuclear escalation risk and a sophisticated proxy network that did not exist in 2003.

— END OF ASSESSMENT —

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