



Major General Ali Sayyad Shirazi (c), then-commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army's Ground Forces, discusses Army matters with Brigadier General Masoud Bakhtiari (R) on a train during the 1980s Iraq-Iran War. ● DEFAPRESS



Iraqi politician and field marshal Izzat al-Douri (front-L) hangs a medal around the neck of then-Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein. ● REUTERS

the slogan “Neither East nor West.” The country broke away from the US and, despite Soviet efforts, did not align with them either. This period coincided with the bipolar world rivalry. Next to Iran, the Ba’athist regime in Iraq — leaning toward the USSR — ruled. At the time, Iran was the region’s leading power, with a stronger Army than Iraq’s (Iran’s population and territory were four times larger). Saddam Hussein — a fiercely nationalistic and ethnocentric Arab — viewed Iran with envy. Influenced by the Ba’ath Party’s Arab nationalist ideology, Iraq positioned itself against Iran. Amid this, the US embassy hostage crisis in Iran occurred, souring Iran-US relations. The USSR expected Iran to align with it, but the Tudeh Party (linked to the Soviets) was banned. Thus, neither the Eastern nor Western Bloc favored Iran. Meanwhile, Saddam was seeking a pretext to invade Iran. Seeing the situation as opportune, he used border disputes to justify starting the war — despite the 1975 Algiers Agreement, which had resolved all border issues. Although Iran held a position of greater power, we imposed nothing on Iraq in this agreement and resolved the disputes with magnanimity. Under that treaty, the Arvand Rud (Shatt al-Arab) was recognized as a shared border, with both nations having navigation rights. But Saddam claimed exclusive rights for Iraq and even asserted that Khuzestan belonged to Iraq — despite Khuzestan’s millennia-long history as part of Iran. (Iraq was founded in 1920, while Iran’s civilization spans 7,000 years.) These events unfolded while Iran’s Army was grappling with internal issues and reorganization — it was like hosting uninvited guests while in the middle of moving furniture.

Did the Army not sense Iraq’s military buildup? Were there no warning signs? According to documented evidence, the Army did issue warnings at the time. Based on military movements inside Iraq and other indicators, the Army had declared that Iraq intended to attack Iran. Iraq had signed arms deals with the USSR and acquired numerous fighter jets — clear signs of Saddam’s intentions. Yet, some inside Iran refused to believe an attack was possible, and the Army’s warnings were not taken seriously. No one thought Iraq

would dare attack Iran. Moreover, Iran’s intelligence apparatus (named SAVAK before the Revolution) had been dissolved due to its torture of revolutionaries. Parts of SAVAK had been responsible for gathering foreign intelligence, but this function was now absent. Iran’s embassies abroad also lacked significant activity in this regard as diplomats (soldiers of peacetime) were also tasked with monitoring foreign developments.



The Iranians capture some 19,000 soldiers from a demoralized Iraqi Army in the re-taking of the city of Khorramshahr in 1982. ● WIKIMEDIA

Under these conditions — about 14 months before the war began, when no one believed Iraq would attack — Lieutenant General Mohammad-Hossein Shaker (then-chief of staff) summoned the commanders of the Ground, Air, and Naval Forces, warning of a threat from Iraq. Accordingly, the Air Force prepared Operation Alborz, the Navy Operation Zulfiqar, and the Ground Forces Operation Abouzar to counter this threat. Since Army forces are usually dispersed nationwide, such contingency plans are necessary for rapid response. However, armies worldwide require higher authorization to mobilize. At the time, the Army’s warnings were ignored — a consequence of the revolutionary transition period and disbelief in Iraq’s aggression.

Under these circumstances, Iraq attacked Iran. How did Iran’s Army and soldiers react? Iraq invaded Iran on September 22, 1980 — a Monday af-

ternoon. Suddenly, the Iraqi Air Force, with 190 fighter jets, bombed our airbases in Tabriz, Hamedan, Isfahan, Kermanshah, Tehran, Shiraz, Bushehr, Ahvaz, and Omidyeh. Saddam’s first move was to cripple our air force while our Army was unprepared. Conscription had been reduced from two years to one, effectively halving the Ground Forces from 300,000 to 150,000. Yet, hours later, our Air Force executed Operation Kaman 99



(Operation Alborz), launching a massive airstrike on Iraqi military targets, airports, and airbases across Iraq. Imagine: this operation was conducted after two years of minimal flight activity. Due to the aforementioned reasons, Iraq initially made rapid territorial gains. Our border defenses were thin, and mobilizing ground forces took time. The Army’s skill lay in deploying at maximum speed, halting Iraq’s advance within two months. In its final assault on Susangerd (November 17, 1980), Iraq failed to capture the city — marking the point where Saddam realized he could advance no further.

Saddam had boasted, “I’ll conquer Tehran in a week.” What led him to think this? Saddam miscalculated. He underestimated the Iranian Army’s strength. The patriotism and dedication of our soldiers thwarted his ambitions. The people’s involvement was also crucial. Countless civilians

volunteered to fight — many untrained in warfare — but their presence boosted morale, showing our troops they had massive public support. Our Air Force delivered a crushing blow on the first day, crippling Iraq’s air capabilities within two months. Similarly, by December 7 (Navy Day), our Naval Forces had nearly neutralized Iraq’s navy for the rest of the war. These successes stemmed from pre-war plans: Operation



Alborz (Air Force) and Operation Zulfiqar (Navy). In war, when attacked, standard military doctrine dictates first halting the enemy’s advance. This was achieved in the war’s first two months. You asked about the art of war: ours was stopping the enemy despite the Army’s unpreparedness.

General Bakhtiari, let’s discuss your role during the war. Amid the post-revolutionary purges, what was your status in the Army? At the time, I was in uniform and on payroll, but my position was uncertain. When the war began, I volunteered for the frontlines. Many retired pilots — even those discharged — returned voluntarily. Some even flew missions before formal reinstatement and were martyred. Given my expertise, I was deployed to Khuzestan, serving as an artillery commander in Dezful. When Major General Sayyad Shirazi became Ground Forces

commander in 1981, he invited me to join his operational headquarters in Khuzestan. You helped plan major operations like Beit al-Moqaddas and Tariq al-Quds under General Sayyad Shirazi. Could you elaborate? Operations are typically planned by a team, and I was part of it. These were among the war’s successful operations. Earlier successes (like Operation Samen-ol-A’emeh in 1981, which broke the siege of Abadan) occurred before my involvement. After General Sayyad Shirazi’s appointment, Operation Tariq al-Quds freed Bostan and surrounding villages, splitting Iraqi forces. Next, Operation Fath al-Mobin (west of Andimeshk) pushed Iraqi forces out of northern Khuzestan. Finally, Operation Beit al-Moqaddas liberated Khorramshahr. In summary, four operations freed vast stretches of Khuzestan:

- Samen-ol-A’emeh: 150 km²
 - Tariq al-Quds: 600 km²
 - Fath al-Mobin: 2,200 km² (Iraqis were pushed near the border)
 - Beit al-Moqaddas: 6,000 km² (Khorramshahr’s liberation)
- By the end, 8,000 km² of the approximately 15,000 km² occupied land was freed in 8–9 months. After Khorramshahr’s liberation, the war’s tide turned. Iraq had claimed to occupy 15,000 km², but after this, it had no leg to stand on. Politically and militarily, Saddam should have withdrawn. His goal — seceding Khuzestan — had failed. But his ego as the “Arab champion” drove him to continue, though he held no Iranian territory.

How did foreign support influence Saddam’s decision to prolong the war? Documents show Saddam had backing from 36 countries. About 95% of Iraq’s equipment was Soviet-supplied. When the war began, Iraq had 333 fighter jets vs. our 435. Throughout the war, for every one of our planes that was shot down, we had no replacement. Yet by the time the cease-fire took hold, we had shot down around 1,000 Iraqi aircraft — but Iraq still had planes left. In truth, Iraq was propped up by major powers like the Soviet Union and America, receiving steady supplies of equipment and intelligence, while Iran stood alone against these global powers and all the nations backing Iraq. That was our art of war.



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