

Revisiting state of Iran's Air Force during Iraqi-imposed

Technology alone not decisive in wars: **Veteran pilot**



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INTERVIEW

The National Sacred Defense Commemoration Week is a pivotal point for the re-reading of the epics of the eight-year Iraqi-imposed war; epics that not only safeguarded Iran's territorial integrity, but also resulted in the consolidation of its national and religious identity. Among the narratives of the "Sacred Defense," the role of the Iranian Army's Air Force and the pilots who entered the field from the initial hours of Iraq's aggression possesses a special station. The Air Force, under difficult conditions and simultaneously with the extensive transformations of the country during the early years of the Islamic Republic, was tasked with reacting against the Iraqi all-out aerial attack and preventing the advance of the enemy's forces. Second Brigadier General Pilot Hossein Chitforoush is one of the narrators of the Sacred Defense era who himself, from the cockpit of the Air Force's fighter jets, was present and observant of many of the events of that time. He was born in 1956 in Dezful and joined the Army three years prior to the Revolution's victory. Chitforoush was dispatched to America in 1977 for the completion of a pilot training course and, two months after the Islamic Revolution's victory, returned to Iran upon the completion of this course. The command of Dezful Airbase and the command of the IRIAF's Owj Complex were among his responsibilities during his service. Chitforoush also, throughout his years of service, was active in the operational, technical, and strategic domains of the Air Force. During the eight-year imposed war, he collaborated with a number of the Air Force's prominent commanders and pilots, including Major General Pilot Martyr Abbas Babaei. Chitforoush, in an exclusive conversation with Iran Daily, speaks about the importance of air power in wars, Iran's initial reaction to Iraq's attack, Operation Kaman 99, the Air Force's difficult conditions in the war's initial months, and the initiatives that took shape on the battlefield. He also, by reviewing the experience of the eight years of Sacred Defense, pointed to the alteration of the nature of wars and the role of new technologies in today's battles and spoke of lessons that the experience of that era can place at the disposal of today's generation for the understanding of and confrontation with future wars. In the following, you read the full text of that conversation.

Hossein Chitforoush



Brave pilots of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) go over their plans during the Iraqi-imposed war of the 1980s against the country.
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IRAN DAILY: First, please give us a brief overview of your time in the Army's Air Force and the Sacred Defense era.

CHITFOROUSH: I, throughout my service, possessed various responsibilities in Iran's Air Force. I also was active in various technical and support sections; from repair and maintenance to the preparation of aircraft and specialized technical tasks. I held responsibilities at Dezful, Isfahan, and Tehran bases and, later, was active in the domain of the aircraft industries and parts manufacturing and the Owj Complex. For about six years, I was the head of the Air Force's Research and Strategic Studies Office and, after that, for a while, I served as the aerial advisor of the Army's commanders. During the Sacred Defense era, one of my greatest honors was acquaintance, collaboration, consultation, and comradeship-in-arms with Major General Pilot Martyr Abbas Babaei. During the eight-year era of the war between Iran and the Ba'athist regime of Iraq, a portion of my missions also related to eavesdropping and electronic surveillance flights. These missions, from an intelligence standpoint, had great importance. At that time, on many occasions, it was necessary for us to fly for long hours at high altitude and monitor the enemy's communications and movements. For example, if the enemy's fighter jet intended to move toward Tehran or Dezful, we had to identify it and place the necessary information at the disposal of our own forces. This task played an important role in the guidance and management of aerial operations.

You have experienced the war for years from inside the aircraft's cockpit and from high altitude. What was the importance of air power in the war

and what role did our Air Force play?

In order to better understand the Air Force's role in the Sacred Defense, we must first recognize the place that air power has in war. At the end of World War I, powerful countries realized what an important role the aircraft possesses in war. The aircraft, in addition to bombardment, provided the possibility of observation from above, reconnaissance behind the front, and the rapid transfer of information.

After that war, various countries rapidly proceeded toward the development of air power and, in World War II, the aircraft's role became exceedingly more extensive. In the history of wars, various theories concerning military power have existed. Years ago, Alfred Mahan, a military theorist, emphasized the importance of dominance over the seas and the world's waters and, based upon this same thinking, aircraft carriers, battleships, and submarines were developed.

Later, this viewpoint was reinforced that any country that can possess dominance over space and the sky possesses greater military power. For this reason, satellites, high-speed jets, reconnaissance systems, and advanced aerial equipment were developed. If you examine the various wars of history, you see that air power, in many instances, has played an important role in determining the fate of the battle and the creation of military superiority.

The clear example of this matter can be seen in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The Arab-Israeli war is a clear example of the importance of air power. In that war, Israel's Air Force played an extremely important role in striking the forces of the Arab countries and an important portion of the war's fate was decided in the very initial hours. Iraq also, at the start of its war against Iran, attempted

to utilize this same model.

Saddam and Iraq's military commanders imagined that, with an extensive aerial attack, they could incapacitate Iran's military force and especially the Air Force in the very initial hours and then, by utilizing ground forces, finish the task. With this same idea and thinking, on September 22, 1980, with approximately 192 fighter jets and support aircraft, Iraq attacked approximately 15 important points and bases of Iran. Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Hamadan, Bushehr, Dezful, and several other bases and sites were targeted. The goal was to eliminate the possibility of reaction from Iran's Air Force, but their calculations did not prove correct.

Given the heavy and surprise attack of Iraq's Air Force against Iran, how was Iran's response and reaction to these attacks?

Despite the Iranian Air Force's difficult conditions after the Revolution and the enemy's heavy aerial attack, our forces responded to the enemy very quickly. Despite the managerial changes, problems, and personnel losses that existed at various levels of the Air Force, it still wielded a significant authority. This authority was not only based on equipment; it was a combination of expertise, experience, national pride, a sense of responsibility, and the motivation to defend the country.

A few hours after Iraq's extensive attack, Iran attacked two important and strategic Iraqi bases, namely Shu'aybiyah and Kut. Four Phantoms from Hamadan were dispatched for the attack on one of these bases and four other Phantoms for the attack on the second base; in total, eight aircraft.

Approximately three hours after Iraq's initial attack, these aircraft bombarded two bases. This event was extremely unexpected for

the Iraqis. They imagined that, with the initial attack, Iran's Air Force had been grounded, but suddenly they were faced with Iran's response. During the attack on Kut Base, two Iranian pilots, Martyr Mohammad Salehi and Martyr Khaled Heydari, attained martyrdom. Martyr Khaled Heydari was from our Sunni compatriots and the martyrdom of these two pilots alongside one another was a symbol of the presence and empathy of all Iranians in the defense of the country. This operation can be considered Iran's first response to Iraq in the eight-year war; a response that created an initial shock for Iraq's Air Force.

Also explain concerning the great Operation Kaman 99, which was executed by Iran's Air Force on the following day?

After this initial response of Iran, in less than 15 hours later, the great Operation Kaman 99 was carried out. Of course, the preparation of such an operation was not a simple task because prior readiness did not exist; the aircraft had to be armed, the bombs had to be taken out of the ammunition depots, special equipment was installed upon them, and the aircraft also had to be completely inspected. All of this required an extensive logistical and support system. But all of these tasks were performed with great and admirable speed. Ultimately, from dawn until noon and continuing into the day, Iranian aircraft targeted Iraq's important and strategic military points.

This operation, in the official narrative, became known by the title Kaman 99 or the 140-Aircraft Operation. Approximately 140 aircraft participated in the main missions and, by counting support and escort flights, the number of engaged aircraft was greater.

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aircraft performed the attack mission and the other aircraft bore the duty of escort and protection of the sky. For example, the F-14s performed the mission of aerial defense and confrontation with the enemy's aircraft, while the F-4s and F-5s possessed a role in the offensive and bombardment missions.

Is it safe to say that, in the war's initial days, the operational pressure upon the pilots was extremely heavy?

Yes, the conditions were extremely difficult. In the war's initial days, it was possible that a pilot would fly three, four, five, or even six times in a single day. Especially in Khuzestan, the conditions were extremely difficult. Iraqi tanks had entered the region and had even advanced to the vicinity of some of our military bases. The aircraft were compelled to enter action in order to confront the tanks. This was while the primary mission of the fighter jets was not necessarily confrontation with tanks. But the conditions of the battlefield had created such a necessity.

The aircraft would take off from the base, reach the region, bombard the tanks, return, again be refueled and armed, and again take flight. It was possible that a pilot would fly several times in a single day. Our aircraft were not specifically designed for the bombardment of tanks, but they performed this task anyway. This is an example of that same innovative and indigenous thinking that took shape on the battlefield; that is, when a new need was created, the forces were compelled to find a solution for it.

Does this mean that a portion of the initiatives of the Sacred Defense era were improvised on the battlefield itself?

Exactly. If you look at the war's initial months, you see that many methods took shape in response