

THE IMPACT OF MILITARY SCHOOLS ON THE IRAQI ARMY AT THE EVE OF OF THE FIRST GULF WAR

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Abstract

The article examines the origins, development, and consequences of the influence of Western and Soviet military schools on the formation of the Iraqi Armed Forces. Using a historical-comparative approach, the author analyzes the reasons behind the failure of the decision-making freedoms theoretically granted to commanders through British and French military traditions.

At the same time, the problems of the officer corps operating under the rigid vertical of Soviet rule in the Iran-Iraq War are analyzed, and it is documented that in the first Gulf War, that officer corps, having the fourth most massive army in the world, suffered a crushing defeat not only in the technological field, but first of all in the culture of military management.

Through the influence of military schools on the Iraqi army, the author highlights the negative consequences of the rigid Soviet-style vertical management during the army-building phase of the RA Armed Forces during the 4-day and 44-day military operations in Artsakh.

Keywords: military schools, Middle East, Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, vertical governance, authoritarian governance, officer corps, RA Armed Forces, 44-day war

Prologue

The Army of the Kingdom of Iraq emerged following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and was officially established in 1921, when Iraq was still under British mandate administration. Most of the officer corps consisted of former Ottoman military personnel, while the structure, command system, and combat standards of the Iraqi Army were shaped almost entirely by British military doctrine until the July Revolution of 1958. As a result, the Iraqi officer corps remained intellectually divided for decades. Before the introduction of Soviet military influence, the Iraqi Armed Forces were fundamentally grounded in British military thought.

In 1924, a military academy was established in Baghdad, followed by the creation of a staff college in 1928 in response to the growing need for trained officers. The curricula and instructional methods of these institutions closely followed British models. Officers were expected to write essays, analyze historical campaigns, and participate in discussions, all of which reflected the traditions of British military education.

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The influence of British and French military schools on the Iraqi officer corps

The military coup of 1958 fundamentally changed Iraq's geopolitical orientation, redirecting the country toward the Soviet Union. This transformation intensified under the rule of the Ba'ath Party. The military command system gradually evolved into a rigid vertical hierarchy in which dissent was discouraged, orders were not questioned, and the belief that "the commander is always right" became deeply embedded from the cadet level onward.

In such an environment, creative thinking and independent initiative were systematically suppressed. Commanders often withheld information from their subordinates, who were frequently viewed as uneducated or incapable of independent judgment. Military education increasingly relied on rote memorization and mechanical transcription rather than analytical thinking.² Consequently, mutual distrust developed between officers and enlisted personnel: subordinates resented officers, officers distrusted subordinates, and commanders avoided independent decision-making. An atmosphere of fear permeated the Iraqi military establishment. Much like the Soviet system, where military discipline was reinforced through political supervision and punishment,³ Saddam Hussein constructed an even more restrictive network of surveillance and control within Iraq.⁴

Nevertheless, the institutional "genetics" of the British military tradition remained remarkably resilient. Even the large-scale Sovietization of the Iraqi military during the 1970s and 1980s could not entirely eliminate British influence from the thinking of many officers, particularly among the junior officer corps, which retained a limited degree of tactical flexibility.

One of the most enduring legacies of the British military school was the organizational culture of the Iraqi Army. Unlike the Soviet model, which was structured around divisions and corps composed primarily of numbered formations, the Iraqi Army retained elements of the British regimental system until 2003.⁵ The British regimental tradition was built around the concept of *esprit de corps*, where a regiment functioned not merely as a tactical unit but as a "family" with its own history, symbols, and traditions.⁶ Graduates of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst carried this ethos into the Iraqi military. For many Iraqi officers, the regiment became a symbolic "home" rather than simply an administrative formation. However, an important contradiction emerged: whereas British regiments were historically linked to specific geographic regions, Iraqi regiments were organized on a generalized national basis, weakening the social cohesion characteristic of the British model.

² De Atkine 1999.

³ Grechko 1975: 65.

⁴ Krivoruchko, Roshchupkin 2008. 125.

⁵ Malovany 2017: 3–8.

⁶ Stork 2025: 21–22.

British military influence also manifested itself in the Iraqi officer corps' preference for tactical independence. British doctrine encouraged junior officers to adapt to battlefield conditions and exercise initiative — an approach later conceptualized by the United States military as mission command. By contrast, Soviet doctrine emphasized the strict execution of centralized orders.⁷ This coexistence of incompatible command philosophies created a persistent internal contradiction within the Iraqi military establishment. Although the Iraqi Army remained fundamentally British in structure, from the mid-1970s onward it also came under significant French military influence. This shift reflected Saddam Hussein's strategy of diversifying Iraq's sources of armaments and military expertise.⁸ There is very conflicting information in open sources about how many soldiers have been trained in France, but considering the total volume and range of purchases, which was estimated at about \$15 billion, it can be assumed that Iraqi soldiers have received training in the areas of use and maintenance of the following weapons:⁹ Mirage F1 fighters, missile armament: anti-ship, antiaircraft, anti-tank, air-to-air missiles, and other military equipment. In addition, senior Iraqi officers attended military academies in Paris for advanced command education, while Iraqi scientists and military engineers underwent training in French nuclear research institutions. French influence became particularly significant within the Iraqi Air Force and air defense forces. A notable example of this influence could be observed during the Iran-Iraq War, particularly in Iraqi aviation operations in the Persian Gulf during the so-called "Tanker War." Iraqi operations in this theater were conducted largely according to French tactical concepts, which required a high degree of technical proficiency and individual decision-making — characteristics largely foreign to the Soviet "land-centric" approach to airpower.

The influence of the Soviet school on the Iraqi officer corps

On the one hand, for a large cadre of officers who had passed the Soviet school, the Soviet T-72 tanks were intended for mass attacks and deep breakthroughs, on the other hand, for supporters of the Western school, tanks were a tool for flexible tactics.

Iraq was the largest carrier of Soviet military thought in the Middle East in the 1960s-1980s. This influence was not just about selling weapons, but copying the entire military system. The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1972¹⁰ laid the foundation for massive rearmament and training of personnel. One of the significant results of this agreement was to be Iraq's nuclear enrichment and use in the military sphere, which, however, remained fruitless¹¹ and Saddam Hussein was forced to turn to the French.

From 1960 to 1990, more than 8,000 Soviet military specialists and soldiers visited Iraq, and more than 6,000 Iraqi servicemen of various branches of the Armed Forces

⁷ Grechko 1975: 32.

⁸ Krivoruchko, Roshchupkin 2008:130-131.

⁹ Garden 2023: La cooperation militaire entre Paris et Baghdad. analyze perspectives:

¹⁰ Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation 1974.

¹¹ Okorokov 2017: 13-15.

received education in the military educational institutions of the Soviet Union.¹² A significant part of the Iraqi senior officer corps, including the general staff, had studied at both the Frunze Military Academy and the General Staff Academy.

Simultaneously, a significant part of the Iraqi officer corps was educated at the Al-Bakr University for Higher Military Studies in Baghdad, which was founded in the 1970s and was in fact a copy of the British Staff College (Staff College, Camberley), but already modified according to the logic of Soviet teaching. At the same time, the Soviet Union spent huge funds on the introduction and dissemination of the Russian language and literature in Iraq.¹³

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) became a practical testing ground for these competing military traditions. During the initial phase of the conflict (1980–1982), Iraq attempted to implement the Soviet concept of the “armored fist,” which emphasized rapid breakthroughs, deep penetration into enemy territory, and destruction of rear-area infrastructure. However, the Iraqi command failed to maintain operational momentum or achieve effective operational breakthroughs.¹⁴ Although Iraqi artillery doctrine largely followed Soviet principles of concentrated fire support, Iraqi armored formations did not operate according to Soviet deep operations theory. Instead of being employed as maneuver forces for penetrating defensive lines, T-62 and T-72 tanks were frequently used from static firing positions in support of infantry operations.

In Soviet military works, many of which were based on the experience of World War II, the emphasis was largely the same: in the future, in the context of the development of the “Main Strike” theory, to use armored forces as a rapid strike force, forming Operational Maneuverable Groups to operate behind enemy lines with a rapid breakthrough. This is evidenced by the works of both Western military theorists devoted to the above problem,¹⁵ as well as the 1982 US Army regulation FM 100-5 “OPERATIONS”, which was based on the “Air-Ground Battle” theory.¹⁶ This approach contradicted Soviet military views on the use of armored formations and units in combined arms combat.

Stephen R. Ward, a retired Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst and expert on Iran and Middle East security issues, has studied Iraqi military history and culture for more than 25 years, notes: “The Iraqi officer corps in the 1980s was a ‘hybrid’ one. They had mastered Soviet operational art, but their tactical language and administration remained British. It created a unique ‘Iraqi military school’ that was far more dangerous than a mere Soviet copy”.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Iraqi experience demonstrated that traditions of tactical freedom could not function effectively within a rigid authoritarian command structure.

¹² Grigoryan 2025: 80-97.

¹³ Mosaki 2014: 79-84.

¹⁴ Cordesman, Wagner 1990: 102-110.

¹⁵ Donnelly 1982: 1177–1186; Glantz 1991: 544–581.

¹⁶ Hovhannisyan 2020: 637.

¹⁷ Ward 2009: 242.

In the memoirs of Iraqi officers, there are often episodes in which they speak disparagingly of Soviet advisers, considering them "tasteless" or "rude." This tension reflected not merely political disagreement but also a deeper cultural divide. Iraqi officers generally perceived themselves as members of an aristocratic professional class, whereas Soviet officers presented themselves as representatives of a worker-peasant military tradition.¹⁸ The British free-thinking officer corps, climbing the service ladder, with each successive position and rank, realized that they were becoming more servile. A significant part of the Iraqi generals, although having an excellent education, regardless of school, were deprived of the authority to make decisions, since they were close to the head of the regime, and at the top almost everything was decided by Saddam Hussein himself. His idol was the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, and it is natural that in an authoritarian state there can be no dissent in governance other than a rigid vertical one. This model of governance was common for the officer corps that had passed through Soviet military schools, and those who were carriers of Western culture could not perceive it. A similar phenomenon was also observed in the Armenian Armed Forces, in particular, many of the newly graduated officers who had graduated from Western military educational institutions were unable to integrate into the service, seeing the service as a distorted version of the already vertical Soviet management model. Officers demonstrating independent thinking or alternative professional perspectives were often marginalized, denied promotion opportunities, or forced out of military service altogether.¹⁹

During the Iran-Iraq War, General Nizar al-Khazraj, Chief of the General Staff, noted in his memoirs: "For our officers, the Frunze Academy in Moscow was considered the Mecca of military knowledge. We learned to break through defenses with tank wedges and organize fire strikes according to Soviet standards. Our task was to adapt this power to desert conditions".²⁰

The Iran-Iraq war showed some successful examples of the Soviet school of standards. In 1988, the "Ramadan Mubarak" operation to liberate the Fao Peninsula was carried out according to the rules of classical Soviet operational art. Iraq used powerful artillery preparation, airborne assaults, and rapid advance of armored forces. However, the Iraqi command was dogmatic. Although Soviet doctrine theoretically allowed subordinate initiative within operational depth,²¹ officers under Saddam Hussein's regime feared making independent decisions without direct authorization from Baghdad.

¹⁸ Woods, Murray, Nathan, Sabatier, Venegas 2011: 45.

¹⁹ Amirkhanyan 2022: 119-134.

²⁰ Al-Khazraji 2014: 89.

²¹ In our opinion, this was not so much a deliberate permission for autonomy as a theory, as in the West the principle of command by task, but rather a purely military-technical issue. Not being able to ensure the functioning of the control system in operational depth, according to the strict Soviet vertical, in the event of a failure of the operation, the superior would absolve himself of responsibility in the future.

Conclusions

The battlefield ultimately serves as the most objective measure of military effectiveness. The influence of competing military schools on the Iraqi Army before the First Gulf War can be assessed through the structural and operational problems revealed during the Iran-Iraq War and repeated in later conflicts.

1. The Iraqi command lacked operational flexibility and was reluctant to employ armored forces according to the principles of Soviet deep operations doctrine.
2. Despite the large number of personnel educated in Western military institutions, command authority remained highly centralized and strictly controlled from Baghdad.
3. Relations between officers and enlisted personnel frequently resembled those of master and servant rather than professional military cohesion.
4. Although many senior General Staff positions were occupied by Saddam Hussein's relatives or trusted associates, even they possessed limited operational decision-making authority.
5. Successes on the battlefield were systematically attributed to Saddam Hussein personally, while failures were blamed on subordinate commanders, who were often punished regardless of the objective circumstances. This atmosphere of fear discouraged initiative and encouraged passivity.

The fundamental cause of these problems was political. The authoritarian nature of Saddam Hussein's regime required a centralized and vertically controlled command structure in order to preserve political stability and personal rule.

As a result, the more liberal traditions associated with British and French military culture could not fully function within the Iraqi military environment, as they conflicted with authoritarian governance and individual initiative. By contrast, the Stalinist-Soviet command model proved more compatible with Saddam Hussein's political system.

Ultimately, the Iraqi military absorbed some of the most negative characteristics of the Soviet military tradition: the dehumanization of subordinates, mutual distrust between ranks, and the punishment of independent initiative.

Unfortunately, similar patterns could also be observed after the collapse of the Soviet Union within the Armed Forces of the newly independent Republic of Armenia. Although Armenian forces achieved victory during the First Artsakh War through comparatively flexible command practices despite institutional weaknesses, the military later increasingly adopted Soviet/Russian traditions of rigid vertical management and micromanagement.

The painful consequences of this transformation became evident during both the April 2016 Four-Day War and the 2020 Forty-Four-Day War in Artsakh.

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