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Washington, DC

Iraq War Note: Iraq's Missing Air Force and Army Aviation
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March 31, 2003

Iraq's air force and army aviation are definitely the dogs that didn't bark. They are being hit hard by US air and are attempting to hide by dispersal and sheltering in civilian areas. Their current status seems to be as follows:

1. Iraqi Air Force: Fly or Die versus Last Spasm

The dispersal of the Iraqi Air Force and its total unwillingness to fly has given the US and Britain the highest level of air supremacy ever achieved against an operating air force. USCENTCOM says the lack of response is based on the understanding that if they fly they die. This did not deter Syria in 1982, however, or Iraq in 1991.

One alternative is the idea that they are being reserved for one last spasm of near suicide attacks – possibly with weapons of mass destruction – for the Battle of Baghdad. No evidence, and pure speculation, but possible.

The Iraqi Air force had around 20,000 men at the start of the war. It still had some 316 combat aircraft, although only about 50-60% were serviceable, and some estimates put the total around 100 aircraft. Senior pilots still flew 60-120 hours a year depending on the aircraft, but junior pilots fly as few as 20.

The Iraqi Air Force's key operational holdings before the war started seemed to include a total of 255 fighters and fighter bombers, and some 80 trainers -- some of which are combat capable. Iraq's total prewar holdings seem to include a total of 130 J-6, MiG-23BN, MiG-27, Mirage F-1EQ5, Su-7, Su-20, and Su-25 attack fighters; 180 J-7, MiG-21, MiG-25, Mirage F-1EQ, and MiG-29 air defense fighters; MiG-21 and MiG-25 reconnaissance fighters, 15 old Hawker Hunters, a surviving Il-76 Adnan AEW aircraft, 2 Il-76 tankers, and large numbers of transports and helicopters.

Estimates of its total surviving inventory by aircraft type vary by source, but Iraq probably retained about 25- 30 Mirage F-1s, 15 MiG-29s, 50-60 MiG-23s, 15 MiG-25s, 150 MiG-21s, 25-30 Su-25s, and 60 Su-17s, Su-20s, and Su-22s.

Although it is unclear how many air munitions Iraq retained after the Gulf War, some estimates put this figure below 50% of the pre-war total. Iraq, however, retains significant numbers of modern air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions. These stocks include AA-6, AA-7, AA-8, AA-10, Matra 530, Matra 550, and Matra Super 530 air-to-air missiles, and AM-39 Exocet, HOT, AS-11, AS-12, AS-6, AS-14, AS-301, AS-37, C-601 Silkworm; air-to-surface missiles; laser-guided bombs, and cluster bombs.

Iraq has deployed Matra Magic 2 "dogfight" air-to-air missiles on its Mirage F-1s since the war. This is virtually its only major improvement in air force equipment since 1990. It is not clear whether these missiles were delivered before the war, were stolen from Kuwait, or have been smuggled in since. They are an advanced type similar to the more advanced export versions of the US AIM-9, with high energy of maneuver and a maximum range of three nautical miles.

Iraq retained large numbers of combat-capable trainers, transport aircraft and helicopters, and remotely piloted vehicles. The trainers included some Mirage F-1BQs, 25 PC-7s, 30 PC-9s, 50-60 Tucanos (EMB-312s), 40 L-29s and 40 L-39s. Transport assets included a mix of Soviet An-2, An-12, An-24,



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An-26, and Il-76 jets and propeller aircraft, and some Il-76s modified to act as tankers. The remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs) included some Iraqi-made designs, Italian designs, and Soviet designs. It is unclear how effective Iraq was in using any of these RPV systems, but it did make use of them during the Gulf War.

Iraqi Air Force air-to-air and air-to-ground training was limited and unrealistic. In the past, command and control was over-centralized and mission planning often set impossible goals. The two No Fly zones further limited air training and combat experience. There are no modern airborne sensor, command and control, or intelligence capabilities other than a small number of UAVs. Air control and warning is still heavily dependent on outdated ground-based intercept capabilities. The Air Force has, however, practiced penetration raids by single low flying aircraft, and has shown that it can conduct independent offensive operations at the small formation level.

Iraq has, however, repaired many of the bases and air facilities that were destroyed or damaged during the Gulf War. It had 16-20 major air bases, with H-3, H-2, and Al Asad in the West; Mosul, Qayarah, and Kirkuk in the north, Al Jarah, Talil, and Shaybah in the South, and 5-7 more bases within a 150-kilometer radius of Baghdad. Many of these bases had surface-to-air missile defenses.

2. Iraqi Army Aviation

Although it tends to be forgotten, the same is true of Iraqi Army Aviation, which had roughly 100 attack and 275 utility/transport helicopters. Many had little effectiveness or sustainability, and a number were not operational at all. The armed helicopters included 12 Mi-25s, 20 SA-319s with AS-12 air to surface missiles, 10 SA-316s with guns, and 20 SA-342s with HOT anti-tank missiles. The transport and support helicopters included 20 SA-330Fs, 30 BO-105s, 10 Mi-6s, 30 Mi-8s, and 12 Mi-17s

The army aviation force had seven wings:

- The 1st Wing located in Kirkuk with five squadrons, including one SA-316 attack squadron.
- The 2nd Wing located in Baghdad and Taji and five squadrons, including Mi-26 Hind and SA-342 attack squadrons. The 3rd Wing is at Basra with one SA-342 attack squadron.
- The 4th Wing in Amara and three squadrons.
- The 5th Wing at Al Swenia, and three squadrons, including one SA-342 attack squadron.
- The 7th Wing is at Iskanderia (south of Baghdad) and two squadrons. The 8th Wing is at Iskanderia and one squadron.
- The Military Aviation School is at Al Suwaira, and one regular and two training squadrons.

3. Different Estimates of Iraqi Air Strength

Estimates of Iraqi air strength differ sharply:

- The IISS estimated that the air force has 6 obsolete H-6D and Tu-22 bombers, and 130 attack aircraft. These included Mirage F-1EQs, Su-20s, 40 Su-22s, 2 Su-24s, and 2 Su-25s. Iraq still had extensive stocks of short-range air-to-ground missiles and cluster bombs. It also has 180 air defense



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fighters, including 12 MiG-25s, 50 Mirage F-1EQs, and 10 MiG-29s, plus 5 MiG-25 reconnaissance aircraft. Additionally, the air force has extensive stocks of MiG-21s, training aircraft, and drones, and has experimented with using them as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs). It still has 2 IL-76 tankers and large numbers of transport aircraft.

- Jane's provided a different estimate with the following key combat types; the number estimated to be in service are shown in parenthesis: 40(0) F-7, 30 (13) Mirage F-1EQ, 36 (15-25) Mig-21, 35 (15-20) Mig23, 6 (3-6) MiG-25, 17 (1) Mig-29, 33 (15-18) Su-20/22, 21 (6-11) Su-25, 2 T- 22, and 3 Tu-16.