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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

30 January 1987

Iran at the Gates of Al Basrah [redacted]

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Summary

Iran's breach of Iraqi defenses east of Al Basrah has developed into one of the most serious military threats to Iraq since 1982. Surprise and Iraqi military mistakes have allowed Iran to gain positions which significantly increase the danger to Iraq's second largest city in the event of sustained Iranian attacks. Iran might be ready to cross the Shatt al Arab and advance on Al Basrah as early as the middle of February. [redacted]

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Iraq probably has only about an even chance of containing new Iranian operations that cross the Shatt. From the southern shore of the river, Iran could threaten Al Basrah from three directions, cut off Iraqi military supplies from Kuwait, or isolate Iraqi units near Al Faw. [redacted]

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Aggressive Iraqi ground attacks to regain lost territory and intensive air raids on enemy logistics and supply lines would reduce the Iranian threat. We believe, however, that Baghdad probably will take defensive measures--build fortifications, deploy more men to the area, and launch minor

This paper was prepared by [redacted] **the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis** [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA, [redacted]

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raids--to try to prevent Iranian advances. Even if the Iranians are contained, their current positions still pose a major threat to Baghdad's defense of Shia dominated southeastern Iraq. [Redacted]

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Iranian troops have advanced to within 13 kilometers of the center of Al Basrah, Iraq's second largest city, as a result of their attack that began on 8 January. They now occupy about 100 square kilometers in the Shia dominated southeastern part of the country and threaten important roads and rail lines that carry military equipment and consumer goods from Kuwait's ports through Al Basrah to the rest of Iraq.

[Redacted] **Iranian front lines run from the lower part of Fish Lake to the northern shore of the Shatt al-Arab river and include Bawarin and Tuwailah Island and part of Fayyaz Island.** [Redacted]

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The Karbala V Battle

Surprise and the skillful, but ruthless use of troops helped Iran develop the Karbala operation from a relatively small scale attack to an important battle that threatens some Iraqi lifelines. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] **Tehran quickly exploited its early gains by sending in more men and at least 100 armored vehicles over the causeways to expand its bridgehead. It maximized its infantry advantage by infiltrating men into the dense palm groves along the Shatt al-Arab, where Iraq's mechanized forces were at a disadvantage. By continuing to attack, Iran kept Iraqi units off balance and rendered their counterattacks ineffective. Throughout the battle, Tehran has been willing to accept high casualties to seize and hold areas.** [Redacted]

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Intensive fighting between 9 and 21 January, when the Iranian advance was halted, inflicted heavy losses on both sides. We estimate Iran has had between 35,000 and 45,000 killed and wounded, mostly from Iraqi artillery and air attacks. Iraq probably has suffered at least 15,000 casualties and lost about 100 armored vehicles and at least 10 aircraft. Many of Iraq's losses have been from elite Republican Guard units. [Redacted]

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Iran's Military Options

We believe the gains from Karbala V have put Tehran in a position where another major operation might enable Iran to seize all or part of Al Basrah. Another main assault probably would begin with Iranian units crossing the Shatt in an effort to seize a bridgehead on the southern shore of the river. They would then be able to attack Al Basrah from three directions--from the south along the southern shore, from the southeast up Fayyaz Island, and from the east along the northern shore of the Shatt. These approaches would support each other and outflank Iraqi defenses by moving through palm groves or urban areas that favor Iran's infantry. [Redacted]

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A less likely option for Iran would be to cross the Shatt and, with the Iranian troops in Al Faw, attack Iraqi forces in VII Corps. This operation would attempt to trap and threaten to capture or destroy over 150,000 Iraqi troops. Iran also would then be in a strong position to capture the port of Umm Qasr and stop Iraqi naval access to the Persian Gulf. By occupying territory on Kuwait's border, Iranian troops could also cut the flow of supplies to Iraq from Kuwaiti ports and pressure Kuwait to reduce its support for Baghdad. [Redacted]

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A third option--less ambitious and less risky--for Tehran also would include crossing the Shatt, but would be limited to cutting the two roads to Al Faw. By hindering supplies to VII Corps, Iran could force Baghdad to withdraw from the area or risk that VII Corps would be weakened and eventually destroyed. From positions south of the Shatt, Iran also might threaten to cut or hinder the passage of supplies from Kuwait. [Redacted]

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Iraqi Defenses....

Baghdad's forces on the northern shore of the Shatt are formidable, although they suffer from weaknesses Iran could exploit. We estimate that Iraq has about 50,000 troops, 1,000 armored vehicles, and 500 artillery pieces east of Al Basrah between the city and the Iranian positions. Iraqi engineers have begun to improve fortifications along a canal that runs from Fish Lake south to the Shatt. Such defenses, however, might be bypassed by Iranian attacks farther north on the western edge of Fish Lake. Moreover, the Iraqis have not cleared areas in the palm groves or deployed sufficient infantry in them to stop Iranian infiltration. [Redacted]

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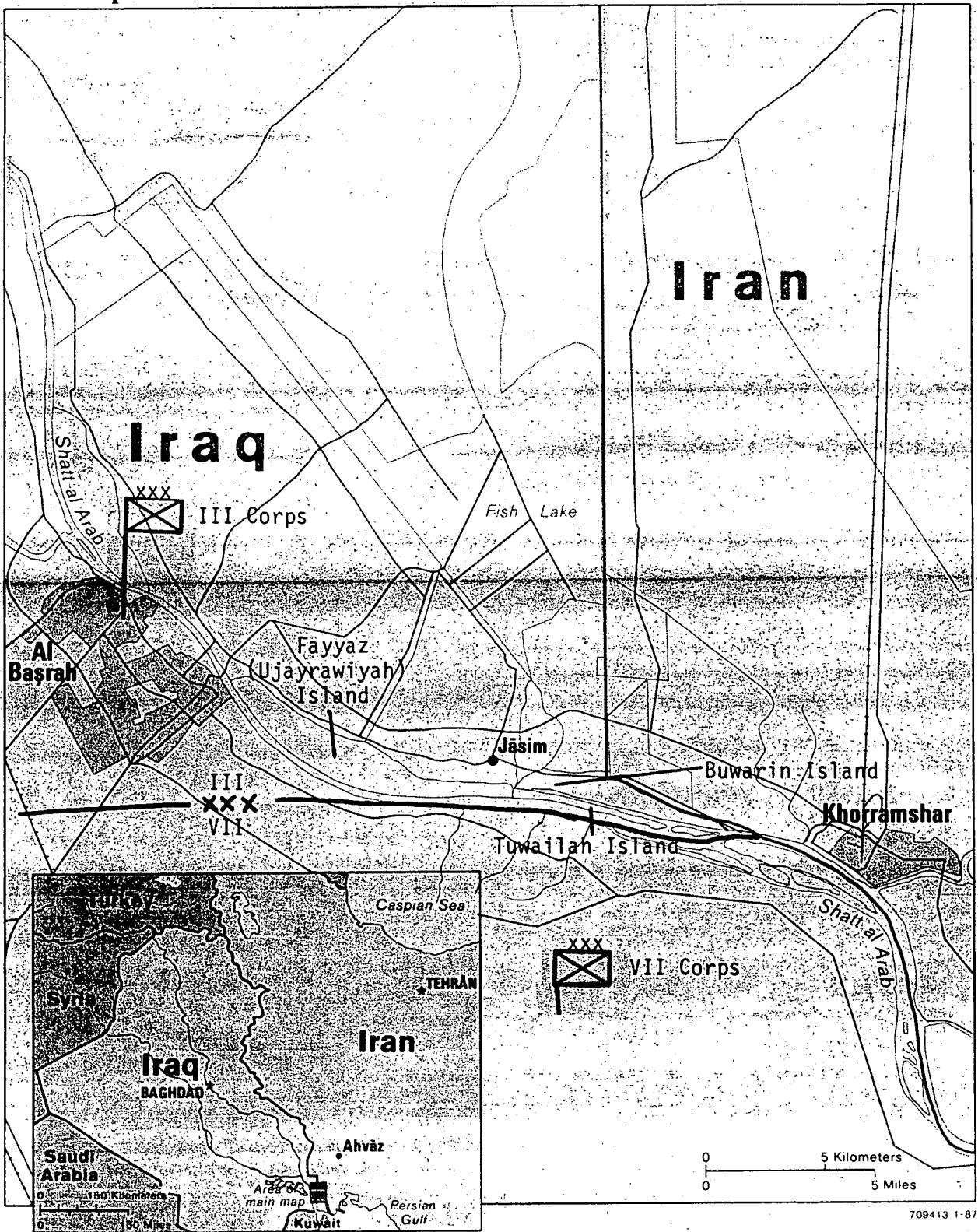
Iraq has made some efforts to strengthen its weak defenses on Fayyaz Island and the southern shore of the Shatt. [Redacted]

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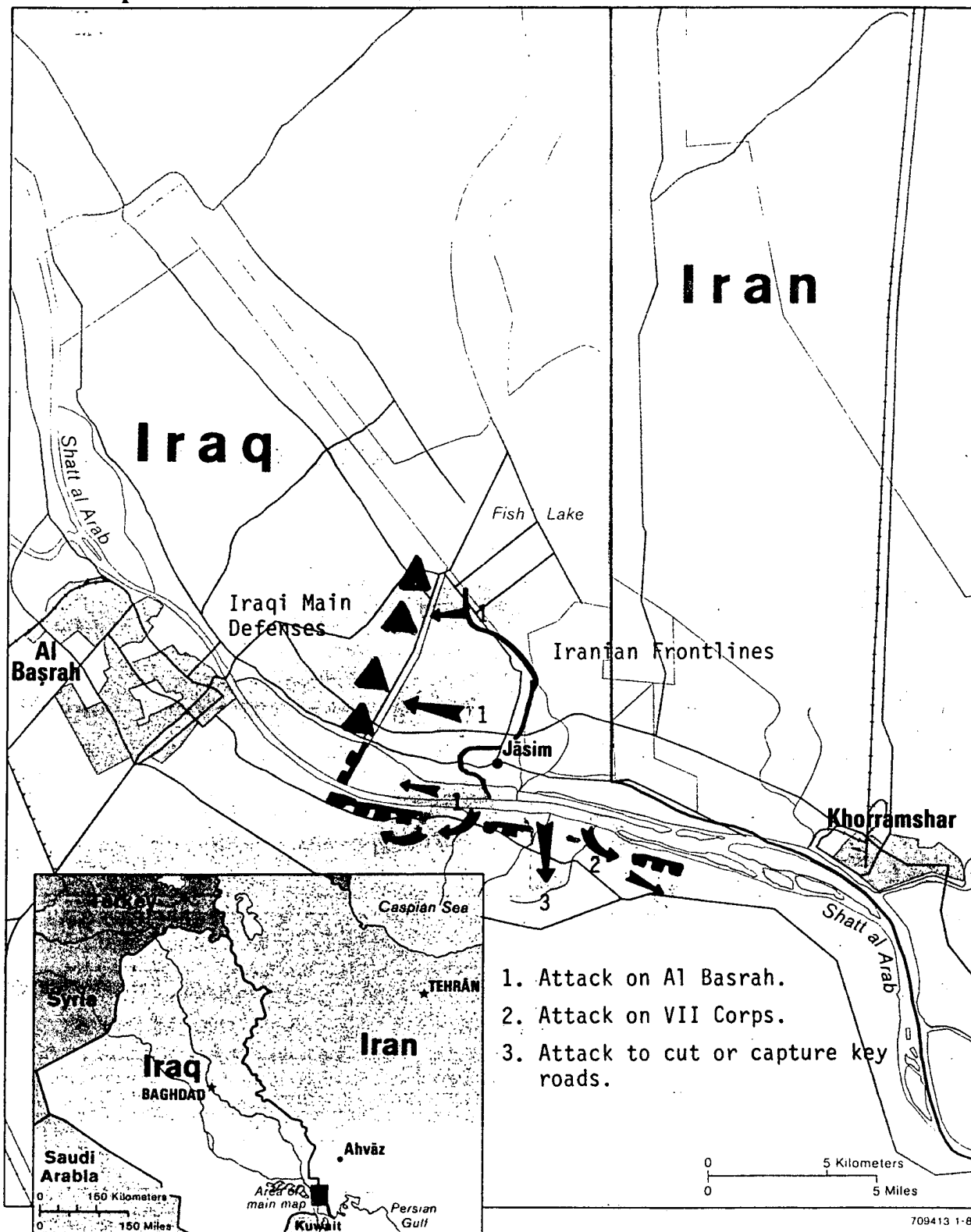
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Iran-Iraq



Iran-Iraq -- Iranian Offensive Options



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[Redacted] Iraqi units have begun to build defensive lines across the width of Fayyaz. [Redacted] they are also building new fortifications along the southern bank of the Shatt. [Redacted]

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...and Options for Attack

Baghdad has the forces to launch major attacks that would stall the Iranian operations and perhaps inflict a severe defeat on Tehran. Iraq would have to commit large infantry forces and considerable equipment in a coordinated attack and be willing to accept high losses. Intensive artillery and air attacks could first weaken enemy defenses and prevent Iran from reinforcing its positions. A large armored attack--with over a hundred armored vehicles attacking simultaneously against the three kilometer western front of the salient--would drive eastward to the water barrier. Massed infantry on foot would follow the armor and destroy or isolate Iranian positions on the western shore of Fish Lake and in the palm groves. They also would hold territory against Iranian counterattacks. [Redacted]

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In less ambitious operations, Iraqi units might cross the Shatt and attack the Iranians on Bawarin, Tuwailah, and Fayyaz Islands. Amphibious commando raids on these islands would disrupt Iranian efforts to move westward and slow or prevent them from crossing the Shatt. A larger Iraqi attack--with units from VII Corps--might attack the lightly defended eastern ends of Tuwailah and Bawarin. Such an operation would likely disrupt an attack on Basrah by threatening to cut Iranian supply lines. [Redacted]

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If Baghdad were unwilling to launch ground attacks, it still could reduce the threat to Al Basrah by making better use of its firepower. Any Iranian advance on the city will depend on Tehran's ability to mass supplies and troops near the front and move them across the water barriers on bridges, causeways, or boats to the frontlines. Iraqi artillery could destroy the bridges and boats and prevent their repair. Iraqi aircraft or surface-to-surface missiles could launch effective strikes on vehicles and supply dumps in the Iranian rear. Such attacks would not only reduce Iran's ability to launch new attacks but would also undermine its defenses against Iraqi counterattacks. [Redacted]

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Prospects For the Near Term

We believe Iraq is likely to remain on the defensive with its main effort aimed at stopping more Iranian gains. Fear of losses probably will keep Baghdad from launching effective counterattacks to regain lost territory east of Al Basrah. Such fears probably also will prevent Iraq from using its air power to destroy relatively well defended Iranian logistic targets. Instead, Baghdad will continue to use air and artillery--including chemical weapons--on Iranian units near the front in the hope that heavy casualties will deter Iran. Such attacks alone, however, are unlikely to be enough to stop Iran from launching further attacks. We believe that, given time, Iraq also will construct extensive fortifications opposite Iranian positions. [Redacted]

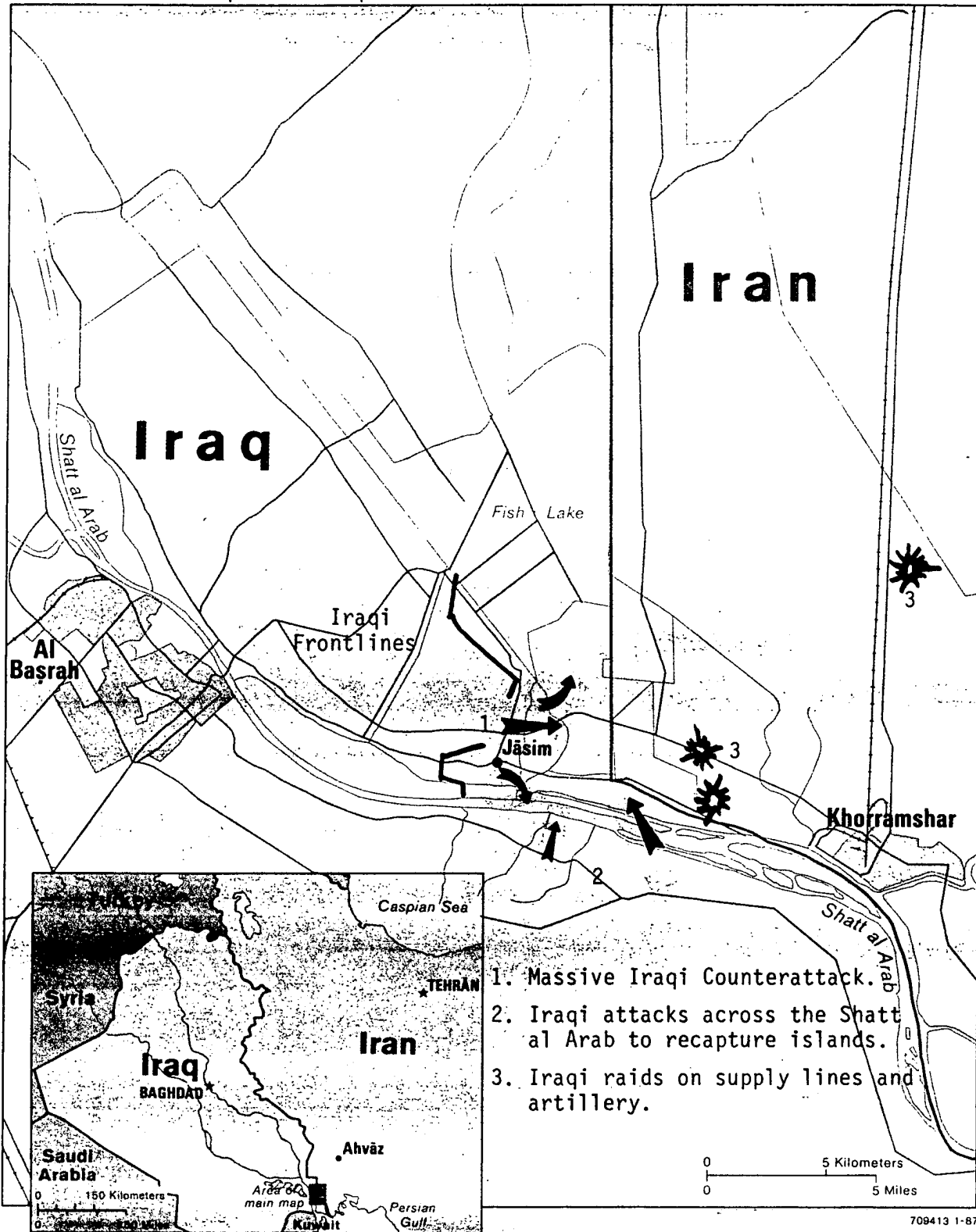
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Despite Iraq's extensive forces and weaponry, we believe Baghdad would have only about an even chance of containing a major Iranian assault launched in the next

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Iran-Iraq -- Iraqi Attack Options



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month. In our view, a combination of factors could cause Iraqi defenses around Al Basrah to collapse. Elite Iraqi units--critical to stopping Iranian attacks--have suffered serious losses and would be less able to stop new assaults. Iraqi fortifications in many areas are still weak and could be overwhelmed in a surprise attack. A large-scale Iranian assault on a small front--possibly with limited chemical weapons--could lead to a breach in Iraqi defenses. Mistakes by Iraqi commanders or Baghdad's interference might lead to a major breakthrough that would allow Iran to cut off a large number of Iraqi units. Low morale may cause some Iraqi units to panic during an attack and begin a disorganized retreat. [Redacted]

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Iran might be ready to cross the Shatt and advance on Al Basrah as early as the middle of February. [Redacted] **the Iranians have continued to mass men and supplies east of the battle area. They also have gathered 1,300 small boats near Ahvaz that probably would be used in an amphibious attack across the Shatt.** [Redacted]

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In the next few weeks Iran will likely continue to probe Iraqi defenses while building up more forces to prepare for a major effort to take Al Basrah. Small Iranian attacks will keep the Iraqis off balance and hinder their efforts to build strong defensive lines. Tehran also will continue to shell Al Basrah to disrupt civilian and military activities there. Iranian units will build shelters and dig trenches in the battle area to reduce losses from Iraqi air and artillery attacks. [Redacted]

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Implications of Iran's Success

Even without the fall of Al Basrah, Iran's victory in Karbala V has damaged Iraqi civilian and military morale. In the short term, the heavy casualties--especially among elite units--will weaken Iraq's ability to defend against Iranian attacks anywhere along the front. Failure to drive the Iranians from Iraqi territory and the high losses are likely to increase civilian and military criticism of Baghdad's conduct of the war. Despite his strong grip on power, Iraqi President Saddam Husayn may face greater challenges from the ruling Ba'th Party and the military. [Redacted]

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Iranian leaders will see their success as further proof that--despite economic problems and military equipment shortages--Iran can eventually win the war. Victory in Karbala V will improve Tehran's ability to continue the war over the long term by shoring up civilian support for the clerical regime's war goals. We believe Iranian leaders will try to use their military success to pressure the Gulf states to reduce their support for Baghdad or at least be more accommodating toward Tehran. [Redacted]

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