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Iraq: Use of Nerve Agent

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Summary

Iraq has begun using nerve agents on the Al Basrah front and likely will be able to employ it in militarily significant quantities by late this fall. An Iraqi nerve agent capability could have a significant impact on Iran's human wave tactics, forcing Iran to give up that strategy. Iraq's use of chemical weapons alone is not likely to result in an Iranian acceptance of a negotiated settlement, however, as long as Ayatollah Khomeini remains in power. [redacted]

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Nerve Agent Use

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Capabilities

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Iraq already has a small-scale nerve agent production capability and probably has a small stock-pile of nerve agent munitions. Unless the chemical facility at Samarra is successfully bombed or production mistakes are made, the facility should begin full-scale production sometime late this summer. Once full-scale production begins, Iraq should be able to produce sufficient nerve agents to fill about forty 250 kilogram bombs per day. This would give Baghdad about 3,000 bombs by December even with some production delays and limited battlefield use during the late summer and fall. [redacted]

Effectiveness

Nerve agents are much more effective than mustard chemicals on the battlefield. Exposure through breathing vapors, eye contact, or as little as one drop on the skin can cause reactions within minutes. The victim loses control of all organ functions and usually suffers an agonizing death. The nerve agent used by Iraq has a very short effective life span and depending on weather conditions is dangerous only for about five minutes to one hour. It is therefore a very good offensive as well as defensive weapon. [redacted]

Iranian Response

Tehran's attempts to bring international pressure on the Iraqis to stop the use of chemical weapons will probably continue to have little influence on Baghdad. While Iran has the capability to bomb Iraq's chemical weapons production facilities, we believe they do not know exactly where the facilities are located. [redacted]

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Implications

If Iraq starts using nerve agents in large quantities, Tehran will have to rethink its war strategy. Iran's human wave tactics are especially susceptible to nerve agent attacks, and if Iran does not achieve a major military victory by this winter, it probably will not be able to in the future. Those Iranians not directly injured by chemical attacks would probably suffer serious morale problems and are likely to flee the battlefield.

Iranian commanders will probably argue that Tehran must give up large offensives and go back to a war of attrition with only periodically small attacks along the border. Iran will probably increasing resort to terrorism and subversion in its campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

Iraq could also preempt Iranian attacks by using the weapon on Iranian supply and assembly areas. Direct hits would no longer be necessary to take out targets such as HAWK sites and headquarters. Baghdad could probably easily retake some territory, such as the Majnoon Islands, by using the nerve agent against Iranian positions about an hour before advancing. Attacks on civilian areas, such as Qom, in an attempt to force Tehran to the negotiating table, cannot be ruled out.

It is unlikely that Ayatollah Khomeini will agree to a negotiated settlement solely because of Iraqi chemical weapon use. It may instead spark Iran into harding its position on the war. At the same time, the prospect of suffering massive casualties could persuade Khomeini that the cumulative effects of the war pose a real threat to his regime. In that case, he might shift his hardline policy with little public warning.

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