

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM: A MILITARY GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE*

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ABSTRACT. The war in Iraq has spanned the full spectrum of military operations: intense combat, stability-and-support operations, and peacetime activities. Regardless of their nature and relative intensity, military operations are shaped by the characteristics of the military operating environment. Consequently, the scale, tempo, and complexity of any type of military endeavor are linked to the physical and cultural landscapes of the region in which it is conducted. Military geographers use geographical information, tools, and techniques to examine those links. Iraq's operating environment is studied to identify the relevant components of its physical and human geography. This military geographical examination of Iraq tells us a great deal about how the physical and cultural environment have influenced the war, as well as how the complexity of its human landscape continues to affect the postwar rebuilding of the country. *Keywords:* geotechnology, Iraq, military geography, Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Wartime military operations stem from and are governed by political decisions and are usually considered a last resort, to be employed only in defense of the country or after diplomatic, economic, informational, or lesser military options fail to achieve their desired effects. Military activities within the context of stability-and-support operations, however, are often humanitarian in nature, and, although they are generally well received even in the most hostile or austere places, they can be equally if not more complicated and volatile than conventional combat operations (Palka 1995, 2003, 2005). Stability-and-support operations include nation building, security assistance, disaster relief, providing support to counter drug operations, peacekeeping, arms control, combating terrorism, shows of force, noncombatant evacuation, and providing support to domestic civil authority (Palka 2005). Understanding the natural and human environment is a fundamental requirement for planning and conducting military activities, irrespective of their nature or where they occur (Palka and Galgano 2005). Military planners routinely strive to understand the physical and human geography of potential areas of operation, as well as to identify and incorporate the appropriate geographical tools to support and sustain their analysis throughout a campaign.

This article provides a geographical analysis of the Iraqi operating environment and of Operation Iraqi Freedom. We first briefly outline the deterioration of relations between the United States and Iraq that eventually led to the ongoing war. The analysis of Iraq's physical geography addresses its location, size, landforms, and rivers and considers the pervasive influence of weather and climate on combat opera-

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