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March to Baghdad Slowed, U.S. Forces Weigh Strategies

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

CAMP DOHA, Kuwait, March 27 — The United States military now faces a series of difficult calculations in its efforts to overthrow Saddam Hussein and his government.

One way to accomplish that goal is to try to advance quickly to the outskirts of Baghdad, destroy the Republican Guard troops defending the approaches to the capital and then win the fight inside the city.

Once Mr. Hussein is deposed, the fedayeen and other paramilitary forces that have been attacking allied troops as they head north would find themselves cut off from the main source of their power.

In this view, the paramilitary forces would then be defeated by American and British troops or destroyed by Shiite Muslims eager to settle scores after decades of repression. A new order would be established in Iraq from the inside out.

But there is another possible approach, one that commanders indicated earlier this week they might favor. That is to defer the rush to Baghdad and to focus instead on ridding Iraqi cities in the south of fedayeen. That would make it easier for the United States to run supply lines north and could encourage the Shiites in the south to throw off the yoke.

In addition, the United States might take advantage of the delay in attacking Baghdad by bringing in additional forces from the United States, like the Fourth Infantry Division, and by readying them for combat to build up the offensive punch.

American and British forces could also start providing food, medical aid and other assistance to Basra and other southern cities, providing an incentive for Baghdad residents to cooperate with American forces. A new Iraq would be created from the outside in.

As military planners ponder the war's most crucial phase, it is likely that a hybrid of these two approaches will emerge, some kind of strategic third way that would allow the allies to retain their strategic focus on Baghdad.

That such considerations even exist at this point speaks volumes about this most unusual war. There are several reasons why allied forces have been forced to adapt their strategy and why the next steps by allied commanders still seem unclear.

First, the Bush administration misread the Iraqis. Defense Department officials warned for months that Mr. Hussein would make his final stand in Baghdad, but would try to slow the American advance to the capital by destroying the infrastructure in southern Iraq. The planners postulated that bridges and dams might be destroyed to delay the allied push north. In this view, the Iraqi authorities might also divert food shipments so that allied forces would have to care for civilians.

But Mr. Hussein had another plan in mind. His strategy, at least for a time, was to leave most of the country's infrastructure intact, stock the cities with food and cast himself as a defender of the Iraqi nation.

To tamp down any rebellion in the south, he sent fedayeen the other paramilitary units to that region to enforce loyalty. The paramilitary forces also used the cities as bases to oppose the Americans. The goal, it seems clear, was to take the wind out of the Americans' sails.

The Pentagon understood from the start that Mr. Hussein's forces would opt for an "urban-centric" defense. What the Pentagon did not understand was that the Iraqis planned to expand that strategy to include Nasiriya, Najaf, Samawa and other towns in southern Iraq.

The result was that after the American military raced north toward Baghdad, it discovered that it had a difficult and unexpected threat in its rear areas.

Another reason why the war in Iraq has been so vexing for American commanders is that the Pentagon did not gather an overwhelming force to start the campaign. The current force is less than half the size of the coalition forces that fought the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and his aides insist that the size of ground forces is no longer such a key measure of capability. Rather, they argue, even relatively small formations can be a powerful force as a result of advanced command-and-control systems, improved reconnaissance, improved ground systems and an expanded arsenal of precision-guided bombs. Small, mobile but potent forces, they say, are the wave of the future.

But airplanes do not hold territory. Faced with the unexpected prospect of urban warfare in Iraq's southern cities and a looming battle in Baghdad, the allied force has found itself to be stretched thin. It also faces the prospect of a longer war, as Gen. William Wallace, commander of V Corps, indicated today.

The Iraqi military may be a third the size of the force that fought the American-led coalition during the 1991 war. But Iraq is a far larger country than Kuwait, and the Iraqis compounded that fact by deciding to fight the Americans in much of it.

The failure to persuade Turkey to allow the deployment of a sizable American force to attack Iraq from the north also complicated the task.

Traditionally, the American way of war is to keep up pressure on the enemy. Waiting for more divisions to arrive is not an attractive option for a force that is schooled in offensive operations and seeks to keep the initiative.

Avoiding a prolonged war, no doubt, is also part of the United States diplomatic strategy. Still, striking without waiting for reinforcements entails more risk.

Allied commanders may now be tempted to finesse such a choice. It may decide to try to reduce the problem from the fedayeen in the southern cities even as it advances on Baghdad, in effect resigning itself to a multi-front war.

Reinforcements can be worked into the plan as they arrive. Whatever happens, the war is fast becoming a demanding test of the commanders' ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, synchronize their diverse forces to get the most from them and prevail in a complex, risky and most unusual war.