

Baghdad ready — but for what?

BAGHDAD — Yesterday's big event in Baghdad was a rousing march by three companies of the Popular Army — the recently mobilized national militia said to number five million.

This was as close as I've gotten to the real Iraqi army, since all military matters are strictly off-limits to the foreign press. The militia parade was designed to show Iraq is ready to mount a sustained national resistance against any foreign attack.

"Oh Saddam, we will defend our homeland," chanted the troops as they struggled to keep in step. Two companies were made up of university students and pot-bellied middle-aged men. All wore ill-fitting green fatigues and civilian shoes. A few even had AK-47 rifles. It was not a marshal display.

Iraq reportedly has nearly 600,000 regulars in Kuwait. The People's Army is designed to defend rear installations, bridges, factories and transport hubs.

Iraqi officers claimed that most of the five million militiamen — and apparently some women — keep rifles and ammunition at home. They have ready access to anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, mortars and some field artillery.

"We will fight for every house, every village, every street — even for 100 years," claimed an officer. "The Americans will never take Iraq."

ERIC MARGOLIS

In Baghdad



"Was America Iraq's number-one enemy?" I asked. "No, we don't want war with America," another officer replied. "Israel is our real enemy. We want to fight Israel and liberate Palestine."

"Israel is very strong," I objected.

"We are stronger," chorused three officers.

"But Israel has nuclear weapons," I said.

"Ah, my friend," one answered.

"We have the chemical weapons."

"Yes," I continued, "But chemical weapons are not very effective. What will you do if you are hit by 10 or 20 Israeli A-bombs?"

"Don't worry, we will win — after eight years of war with Iran, we can take anything."

To keep up morale, Iraqi military sources repeated the statement made earlier this year by Saddam, that Iraq has a new kind of chemical weapon able to pene-

trate all known types of gas masks. No one knows if this is true.

If fighting starts, many Iraqis expect a repeat of the eight-year war against Iran: Bloody, static trench warfare in which the enemy has no airforce to speak of and minimal armor.

I suspect they simply don't conceive of the hi-tech air and armored units waiting to attack them from Saudi Arabia. But, of course, the American generals in Saudi don't expect a house-to-house slogging match either.

A war between the two sides will probably turn out to be a combination of both types.

How long Iraq could sustain a Maoist-style people's war, no one can answer. I doubt the regime here really has handed out arms to five million people, as it claims. On the other hand, nothing unites a nation like the threat of foreign invasion.

Armies may, as Napoleon said, march on their stomachs. But modern war devours staggering sums of money. One wonders if Iraq can sustain much more siege warfare after eight years of fighting with Iran. Or for that matter, how much longer the U.S. and its allies can bear the cost of sitting doing nothing in the drifting sands of Arabia.

This whole business is turning out to be economic disaster for everyone.