

Saddam's masters of concealment

Army digs in, ready for battle

The road to the front in central Iraq is a place of fast-moving vehicles, blazing Iraqi anti-aircraft guns, tanks and trucks hidden in palm groves, a train of armoured vehicles bombed from the air and hundreds of artillery positions dug into revetments to defend the capital. That a Western journalist could see so much of Iraq's military preparedness says as much for the Iraqi government's self-confidence as it does for the need of Saddam Hussein's regime to make propaganda against its enemies.

True, there are signs of the Americans and British striking at the Iraqi military. Two gun pits had been turned to ashes by direct air strikes and a military barracks – empty like all the large installations that were likely to be on the Anglo-American target list – had been turned into grey powder by missiles.

On a rail track south of Hillah, a train carrying military transport had been bombed from the air, the detonations blasting two armoured vehicles off their flat-bed trucks and hurling them in bits down an embankment. But other armoured personnel carriers, including an old American 113 vehicle – presumably a captured relic from the Iranian army – remained intact. If that was the extent of the Americans' success south of Baghdad, there are literally hundreds of military vehicles untouched for a hundred miles south of the capital, carefully camouflaged to avoid air attack.

Like the Serb army in Kosovo, the Iraqis have proved masters of concealment. An innocent field fringed by palm trees turned out to be traversed with bunkers and hidden anti-aircraft guns. Vehicles were hidden under motorway bridges – which the Americans and British do not wish to destroy because they want to use them if they succeed in occupying Iraq – and fuel trucks dug in behind deep earth revetments. At a

Robert Fisk » Saddam's masters of concealment

major traffic intersection, an anti-aircraft gun was mounted on a flat-bed truck and manned by two soldiers scanning the pale blue early summer skies.

Above the centre of Hillah, home to the ancient Sumerian Babylon, a distant American Awacs plane could be seen circling high in the heavens, its path followed by scores of militiamen and soldiers. Driving the long highway south by bus, I could see troops pointing skywards. If hanging concentrates a man's mind wonderfully, fearing an air strike has almost the same effect. Driving the highway, a lot of illusions are blown from the mind. There are markets in the small towns en route to Babylon, stalls with heaps of fruit and vegetables. The roads are crowded with buses, trucks and private cars – far outnumbering the truckloads of troops and, just occasionally, the sleek outline of a missile transporter with canvas covers wrapped tightly over the truck it is hauling.

In the town of Iskandariyah, cafes and restaurants were open, shops were selling take-away meat balls and potatoes. This was not a population on the edge of starvation; nor indeed did the people appear to be frightened. If the Americans are about to launch an assault through this farmland of canals and forests of palm trees and wheat fields, it looked at first glance yesterday like a country at peace.

At one point, only 20 miles south of Baghdad, there came the thump of bombs and the bus shook with the impact of anti-aircraft rounds. A series of artillery pieces to our right were firing at an elevation over our heads, the gun muzzles blossoming golden flame and smoke, the shells exploding above the canopy of grey smoke from Baghdad's oil fires which now spreads 50 miles south of the city. The images sometimes moved towards the boundaries of comprehension. Children jumping over a farm wall beside a concealed military radio shack; herds of camels moving like biblical animals past a Soviet-made T-72 battle tank hidden under palm branches; fields of yellow flowers beside fuel bowsers and soldiers standing amid brick kilns; an incoming American missile explosion that scarcely prompted the farmers to turn their heads. On one pile of rubble north of Hillah, someone had fixed the red, white and black flag of Iraq, just as the Palestinians tie their banners to the wreckage of their buildings after Israeli attacks. ♦