# Current Iraqi Military Capabilities:

## An Assessment

by **Kenneth Pollack (/experts/kenneth-pollack)**

Jan 29, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kenneth Pollack (/experts/kenneth-pollack)

Kenneth Pollack is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Brief Analysis

With the Clinton administration warning that its patience with Iraq is wearing thin and that military strikes could be just around the corner, it is useful to revisit the question of Iraq's current ability to respond militarily to a new round of conflict.

Barely a Paper Tiger. The Iraqi armed forces today are a pale shadow of even their 1991 form. On paper, Iraq's army still looks formidable, with 400,000 men, 23 divisions (6 of them Republican Guard), 2,000 tanks, and 200-300 combat aircraft. However, most of Iraq's arms are obsolete and it lost most of its advanced weaponry during the Gulf War. In contrast, U.S. forces are considerably better armed today than they were in 1991.

Iraq's armed forces suffer from other significant shortcomings. During the Gulf War, Iraqi forces were crippled by overcentralized command and control, poor tactical leadership, an inability to take full advantage of their weapons, inadequate attention to reconnaissance, and near total incompetence in battles of maneuver both on the ground and in the air. There is no indication Iraq has made any progress in remedying these problems. Iraqi forces were also plagued by poor and haphazard maintenance practices which greatly reduced their numbers of operable equipment; most Iraqi Army formations rarely had more than two-thirds of their vehicles operational at any time. As a result of the UN sanctions, Iraq has been unable to buy spare parts, tools, lubricants, and other supplies, with the result that its maintenance problems have worsened. Many Iraqi weapons have rusted beyond use, lack critical parts, or have been cannibalized to keep other equipment running. To compensate, Baghdad has been forced to demobilize numerous divisions and reduce the numbers of weapons assigned to those remaining.

Iraqi Air and Air Defense Forces. Iraq's ground-based air defenses are the one part of its military that could cause U.S. forces difficulty, although they almost certainly can be overcome by a determined U.S. effort. The Iraqis have been able to reconstruct most of their pre-war integrated air defense system. However, they have not been able to expand or improve its capabilities, which proved inadequate to the task of defeating American air power in 1991. Indeed, the inability of Iraqi air defenses to deter or defeat periodic raids by the Iranian air force since the war suggests that the Iraqi air defense net remains in worse shape now than it was then. The Iraqis have been practicing some new tricks-such as distancing fire-control radars from SAM launch units, which makes the crews less

vulnerable to the high-speed anti-radiation missiles that proved so devastating during the war. But in the past, Iraqi forces have shown an inability to execute the more sophisticated tactics they have occasionally practiced. Iraqi SAMs are mostly obsolete and lack the capability to shoot down advanced U.S. combat aircraft without a lot of luck. Much of Iraq's vast array of anti-aircraft guns is inoperable due to age or poor maintenance, and Baghdad still has not found a solution to the U.S. tactic that proved so successful during the Gulf War: flying above the 10,000 foot ceiling of most Iraqi anti-aircraft guns.

The Iraqi Air Force is unlikely to prove more effective than it did during the Gulf War. Iraqi pilots were exceptionally poor-many could barely fly their planes, let alone dogfight-and were wholly dependent on directions from ground controllers, which were routinely jammed by coalition forces. As a result of the shortages caused by the embargo and the restrictions of the two no-fly zones, Iraqi air force pilots have generally had even fewer flight hours to practice combat skills than in the past. Iraq has not found a solution to the problem of U.S. jamming of its communications, nor has it been able to train its pilots to fight without direction from their ground controllers. Maintenance problems have hit the Air Force hardest of all, while the war left Iraq with only a handful of advanced fighter aircraft (maybe a dozen operable MiG-29s and possibly twice that number of Mirage F-1s). If Saddam were to try to contest a new U.S. air campaign, he would probably leave most of the work to his ground-based air defenses for fear of having too many expensive aircraft shot down by American fighters.

Conventional Retaliation. If Saddam cannot actually stop a U.S. air campaign, he may try to retaliate. Here as well, his military options are limited. The destruction of Iraq's logistical assets during the Gulf War-plus its maintenance problems-effectively preclude long-distance armored offensives such as would be needed to threaten key objectives in Saudi Arabia (such as Jubayl or Riyadh) or Jordan (such as Amman or Mafraq). U.S. air interdiction along the limited road networks from Iraq to Saudi Arabia and Jordan would probably make it impossible for Iraq to attack even less important, but closer, objectives such as Hafr al-Batin in Saudi Arabia or Jordan's H-4 air base. In the absence of U.S. forces, Iraq probably could once again overrun Kuwait; but today, a U.S. brigade task-force is based north of Kuwait City backed by formidable air power in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and on two U.S. carriers in the Gulf. Moreover, the forces Baghdad currently has in place in southern Iraq lack the combat skills and mobility to be entrusted with such a mission. Consequently, as in 1990 and 1994, Saddam would undoubtedly rely on the Republican Guard for an invasion of Kuwait. At present, all of the Guard's armored divisions remain in their garrisons around Baghdad. In October 1994, the United States demonstrated that in the time it would take for Iraq to move these units to the Kuwaiti border, Washington could deploy far more military force to the region than could Iraq. In addition, the U.S. currently has more powerful military forces in Kuwait than it did in 1994, and would therefore need even less time to prepare for battle, while Iraq probably will be reluctant to concentrate the Guard for an offensive out of fear that it would then be vulnerable to U.S. airstrikes.

Nor does Saddam have much of an airstrike option. First, the Iraqis flew most of their advanced strike aircraft to Iran during the Gulf War. All of Baghdad's Su-24 Fencers are now in Iranian hands, as are most, if not all, of Iraq's Mirage F-1EQ5/6s-the strike variant of the Mirage F-1. Second, Iraq's remaining inventory of attack aircraft consists of older Soviet planes which carry less sophisticated munitions, have shorter ranges, poorer avionics, and less ability to penetrate enemy air defenses. These planes realistically could only attack targets in Kuwait, eastern Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia, or southeastern Turkey, where they would likely face U.S. fighters and Patriot missile batteries that would make short work of any Iraqi attackers.

Weapons of Mass Destruction. In the worst case, Saddam might consider employing his hidden arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to retaliate. The UN inspectors believe Saddam may still have as many as several dozen Scud-type missiles, along with warheads and bombs filled with chemical and biological agents. If Saddam believed that he were about to be overthrown, he might lash out with WMDs in a desperate effort to stave off his downfall.

However, short of such dire circumstances, the risk that Baghdad would retaliate for U.S. military action with WMDs is slight. In the past, Saddam has only used WMDs when his adversary could not respond in kind, and has been careful not to use them when his adversary could. Thus, he scrupulously refrained from firing WMD-filled Scuds at Israel or Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War for fear that the U.S. or Israel would retaliate with nuclear weapons. Indeed, Saddam would probably think very carefully about attempting to employ WMD even clandestinely; he will no doubt consider that-as with his attempted assassination of George Bush-the United States would discover Baghdad's hand behind any mysterious outbreaks of anthrax or terrorist attack with nerve gas and retaliate against Iraq. Because of Saddam's inherent conservatism when it comes to taking risks that could threaten his regime, he will probably weigh very carefully any action that could provoke a massive U.S. or Israeli attack on Iraq.

Kenneth Pollack is a research fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #297

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)


BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

## TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)