

# The Crisis with Iraq:

## Reviving the Military Option

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt), [Kenneth Pollack \(/experts/kenneth-pollack\)](/experts/kenneth-pollack)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



[Kenneth Pollack \(/experts/kenneth-pollack\)](/experts/kenneth-pollack)

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



### Brief Analysis

**S**addam Husayn's speech last Saturday marking the anniversary of Operation Desert Storm confirmed that the current impasse is no ordinary Iraq crisis. Saddam gave the Security Council until May 20 to lift sanctions on Iraq or he would cease cooperation with the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM). Saddam's speech also called on all Iraqis to prepare for a jihad to have the sanctions lifted.

Saddam's speech makes clear that he is not just seeking to hamper the UN inspection effort, but to shatter the entire sanctions regime. Iraq has long been building toward this confrontation; in fact, it had planned to inaugurate this crisis much sooner. As Iraqi Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan recently explained to a visiting Jordanian delegation, Baghdad had intended to initiate this crisis in summer 1995, but the sudden defection of Saddam's son-in-law Husayn Kamil al-Majid forced the Iraqis to delay their plans (see al-Ra'y, 27 November 1997, pp. 19-20).

The fact that Saddam is playing for such high stakes suggests that he will push harder and accept greater risks than in prior crises. Given the lack of UN Security Council support for strong measures against Iraq, the United States may ultimately have to resort to unilateral military action to restore UNSCOM's freedom of action. Accordingly, it is important to dispel certain misconceptions regarding the utility of force that have arisen during the current crisis.

Misconception #1: Air Strikes Will Accomplish Nothing. Skeptics have claimed that a limited air campaign is doomed to fail, since even the intensive, six-week Desert Storm air campaign left much of Iraq's massive weapons of mass destruction (WMD) infrastructure intact. However, these criticisms miss the mark. First, Desert Storm aimed to achieve far-reaching military objectives-eliminating Iraq's formidable conventional and nonconventional arsenal-but a new air campaign should aim to achieve more limited political objectives. The goal of a U.S. air campaign should not be the elimination of Iraq's WMD programs or other military assets-simply because this is unattainable. Rather, it should aim to compel Saddam to allow UNSCOM unrestricted access to suspect sites.

Second, such criticism ignores the fact that the Desert Storm air campaign was a broad effort that encompassed over a dozen target sets; this limited the amount of damage done to each. This time around, a U.S. air campaign would likely focus concentrated blows on one or two target sets (such as WMD-related sites, airbases or Republican Guard units). By concentrating on only one or two key target sets, U.S. assets now in the Gulf region could fly more sorties against them in a few days than it flew against some targets during the whole of Desert Storm. Moreover, the U.S. military now has certain capabilities that it did not have in 1991. For instance, the B-1 bomber-recently deployed to the Gulf-can now carry the CBU-97 precision cluster bomb, which is ideal for use against large dispersed armor formations (Iraq has frequently dispersed its Republican Guard units in times of tension). A single B-1 can carry up to 30 CBU-97 bombs, dispersing 1,200 tank-killing submunitions over an area of several hundred acres, allowing each bomber to destroy scores of tanks per sortie.

Misconception #2: Saddam is Prepared to Risk it All. Foreign observers have too often fallen for Iraqi bluster, regularly overstating Saddam's readiness to fight to the death. While often putting on a brave face, Saddam has repeatedly demonstrated that he will back down when firmly challenged, or cut his losses when he blunders into disaster. For instance, in June 1982, when Saddam realized that the tide of the Iran-Iraq War had turned against him, he unilaterally ordered Iraqi forces to withdraw from Iranian territory in a vain attempt to placate Tehran. Similarly, on the eve of the coalition ground offensive during Desert Storm, Saddam belatedly blessed a Soviet attempt to seek a negotiated solution to the fighting once he realized the true scope of the damage being inflicted on his army by the Coalition air campaign. Once his forces were evicted from Kuwait, he agreed to a cease fire rather than fight on for a hopeless cause.

Moreover, Saddam has shown in the past that even limited "pin prick" strikes are sufficient to cause him to retreat. For instance:

- An American cruise missile and air strike launched in January 1993 convinced him to end his efforts to challenge the northern and southern no-fly zones and to resume full cooperation with UNSCOM.
- In October 1994, Saddam began moving Republican Guard divisions toward Kuwait, but quickly backed off after powerful U.S. forces deployed to the Gulf and he realized that he risked a major U.S. military response.
- The cruise missile strikes the U.S. launched against Iraq in retaliation for its September 1996 attack on Irbil caused Saddam to disperse the Republican Guard and probably call off an imminent attack on the Kurdish city of Chamchamal because he feared that the cruise missiles were the opening salvo of a more extensive air campaign.

Implications: Before the current confrontation with UNSCOM, Saddam probably calculated that he would be willing to absorb a U.S. military strike if it were of the same scale as previous pin-pricks. However, this does not mean that Saddam is unconcerned by this possibility. Any military strike-to which he cannot respond-is humiliating, frustrating and demoralizing to Iraq's armed forces and its people. These factors are particularly important to Saddam, who believes that his reputation as a strong, feared leader is key to maintaining his hold on power. For this reason, even limited military actions have achieved important political objectives with Iraq. And more than anything except an assassin's bullet, Saddam fears that the United States will launch a major military operation against Iraq that will either cripple his armed forces or spur them to rise up against him.

This is not to say, however, that another round of pin-prick strikes will be sufficient to accomplish Washington's objectives. Because Iraq is probably willing to absorb greater punishment now than in the past, the United States should plan for an intensive, sustained air campaign focused on a small number of target sets that Saddam truly values. Such a campaign will not only stand a good chance of convincing him to back down, but, by concentrating on targets such as Iraq's Republican Guard, WMD hide-sites, or Air Force, it will also reduce Baghdad's ability to threaten its neighbors. Given the seriousness of Saddam's objectives, the worst mistake the U.S. could make would be to pull its

punches out of fear that it could not compel Saddam to back down with military force if diplomacy fails.

Michael Eisenstadt is a military affairs fellow, and Kenneth Pollack is a research fellow, at The Washington Institute. ❖

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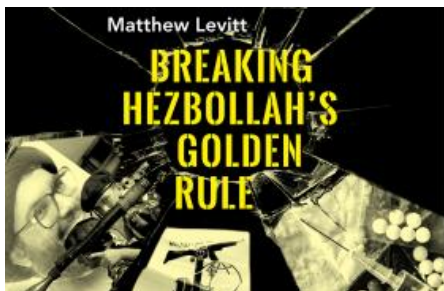
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