

Military Action against Iraq: Critical Considerations

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

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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.



Brief Analysis

As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright prepares to meet with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Russia tonight in Geneva to discuss a possible diplomatic solution to the standoff between Iraq and the UN, Washington continues preparations for a military option: the U.S.S. George Washington carrier battle group is steaming toward the Persian Gulf where it will join the U.S.S. Nimitz carrier battle group later this week; six F-117s, six B-52s, and four KC-135 tankers are en route to the region; and a 30 plane Air Expeditionary Force consisting of F-15 and F-16 fighters and B-1 bombers based in the United States has been put on standby. Should Washington eventually opt to use force to compel Iraqi compliance with the UN or to respond to an Iraqi attack on U2 aircraft, several considerations should shape U.S. military planning.

A Sustained Effort: Saddam probably entered this crisis ready to absorb the type of pinprick strikes that the United States launched during past confrontations with Iraq. Military action—in the form of air and missile strikes—will have to be of greater scope and duration than past operations of this type. After all, the minimum goal of any operation must be to compel full Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions, not just the restoration of an unacceptable status quo ante, when Iraq routinely tried to undermine UN weapons inspectors ferreting out data on Baghdad's weapons of mass destruction programs. How can this be accomplished?

The key is to threaten the only thing that Saddam really cares about: his survival. This depends on his ability to intimidate and crush his domestic opponents. Military action should thus focus on humiliating Saddam and weakening his grip on power by attacking those organizations that are the foundation of his rule:

- 1) the Special Republican Guard, which is deployed in and around Baghdad (and which has played a major role in concealing his residual WMD capabilities);
- 2) the four heavy Republican Guard divisions which are the backbone of his offensive might;
- 3) Iraq's surviving fleet of attack helicopters (which were crucial to putting down the uprising after the 1991 Gulf War); and
- 4) the few remaining capable aircraft in Iraqi inventories (several dozen Mirage F-1s, Su-25s, and MiG-29s). And if

adequate intelligence is available, worthwhile WMD-related sites should be hit. If Saddam believes that U.S. military action threatens his rule (either because he fears that the Republican Guard might undertake a coup against him if they suffer heavy losses, or because they will be incapable of countering a coup by the regular army), he will yield on UN weapons inspections.

While President Clinton has rightly underscored the grave threat posed to U.S. interests by Iraq's renewal of WMD development, it is important to recognize that air and missile strikes are not likely to succeed in destroying Iraq's residual WMD capabilities. During past crises, Baghdad removed critical files and key pieces of equipment from strategic facilities so they would not be damaged in an attack. Iraq's remaining WMD stockpiles have almost certainly been spirited off to hide sites in someone's attic or basement or some farmer's field. Thus, attacks on dual-capable facilities would probably be fruitless (though if the United States obtains reliable intelligence concerning the location of worthwhile WMD-related targets, these should be hit). The best way to assure that Saddam's surviving WMD capabilities are dismantled is by compelling Baghdad to permit UN weapons inspectors to do their job unhindered. This should be the overriding objective of any military action, unless the United States acquires adequate intelligence to target Saddam himself.

Such an operation will require more than a single Tomahawk cruise missile strike. Tomahawks lack the precision and payload to do substantial damage. A relatively large salvo of 40-50 Tomahawk missiles is roughly the equivalent of a single strike by no more than 6-10 aircraft equipped with precision munitions. An operation to force Iraqi compliance will require both missile and air strikes, and it might take a week or so of round-the-clock strikes to achieve the desired effect.

Various political and military factors could make such an operation difficult to sustain. Civilian casualties caused by a misdirected bomb, and French and Russian diplomatic efforts to stop the fighting, are likely to create pressures for the termination of military operations before U.S. goals are met. Moreover, Baghdad is likely to disperse its attack helicopters, combat aircraft, and the Republican Guard before a conflict, making them difficult targets. Because vital American interests are at stake in the current show-down with Iraq, should the United States go the military route, it must be ready to accept the political and military risks involved, and persevere in the face of possibly harsh criticism of its actions.

The Force Mix: A campaign relying mainly on carrier-based naval aviation and long-range air force bombers will take longer than one that also involves air force aircraft currently based in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. With two aircraft carriers in the area, the United States will have about 100 naval combat aircraft available for air strikes on Iraq (the addition of at least one more aircraft carrier to the forces now in the region would be highly desirable), reinforced perhaps by a small number of B-1 and B-52 bombers flying out of Diego Garcia or the continental United States. Land-based airpower in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait could add some 100 additional combat aircraft (30 from Turkey, 50 from Saudi Arabia, 25 from Kuwait) and several highly capable support aircraft to the force mix. However, gaining Turkish, Saudi, and Kuwaiti support for such an operation will not be easy. Turkey feels that it has paid a heavy price for supporting the United States in Desert Storm (\$35 billion in lost income due to sanctions on Iraq) and reaped few rewards (Congress has blocked proposed arms sales to Turkey). It is not clear that there is much that the United States can do to pull Turkey along on this issue. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait fear that by supporting a U.S. strike they would expose themselves politically at home and abroad for few if any gains. Only if the U.S. projects resolve, and convinces the Saudis and Kuwaitis that it means to deliver a meaningful blow to Saddam and his regime, will they agree to support American military action.

Conclusions: If Washington chooses the military option, it must make the most of this opportunity by making every strike count. It must not squander prestige, political capital, and a rare opportunity to achieve key objectives by hitting inconsequential targets, nor must it dilute the limited military resources at its disposal by trying to hit too

many different target sets. The United States should focus its main effort on the Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard, dealing concentrated blows against these units and related facilities, in order to convince Saddam that he risks his very survival by continuing to obstruct the UN. At the very least, striking the Republican Guard will reduce Saddam's ability to threaten his own people and his neighbors (in itself, this would be an achievement), and under current conditions, it may be the only way to force Saddam to allow UN weapons inspectors to resume their work of ridding Iraq of its remaining WMD capabilities, unhindered by obstacles continually placed in their way by a regime that clearly has something to hide.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior research fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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