

Crisis in Iraq:

Saddam Hussein, the Kurds, and U.S. Policy

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky), [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Sep 6, 1996

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



[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

Although the Clinton Administration's response to Saddam Hussein's attack on Erbil is based on a moral commitment to protect the Kurds of northern Iraq, Washington has focused its response on southern Iraq. U.S. strikes have hit targets in southern Iraq, rather than in the north; President Clinton has not demanded that Saddam roll back his troops; Secretary Perry stated that American interests lie in the south, not in the north; and Washington withdrew the small multinational troop contingent based in northern Iraq far from the fighting. Since the end of the Gulf War, that contingent, (known as the Military Coordination Commission, or MCC) had been a statement of U.S. and allied support and resolve in the area. For the first time since April 1991, there is no U.S. ground presence in Iraq.

The "southern tilted" policy which the United States is currently following needs a northern balance. Not only has Saddam attacked the Kurds, he has also killed almost 100 members of the U.S.-supported opposition group the Iraqi National Congress based in Erbil, and removed 1500 of their colleagues from the area. Washington must react to this. Also, this southern strategy has inadvertently sent a confusing signal to some in the region who see its focus on protecting the south, but not the north, as a form of United States support for Iran.

A more aggressive American strategy should consist of two elements: 1)Extend the no-fly zone southward to cover more of the Kurdish populated land. This would prevent Iraqi attacks and make a strong symbolic statement. The no-fly zone could move to the 35th parallel to include Sulaimaniya, to the 34th parallel to include all of the Kurdish populated land, or it could be extended to include all of Iraq, as was the case for one year after the Gulf War; and 2)Declare a no-heavy armor, no-heavy artillery zone in the north. Of course, this type of action would require Turkish support, since it would have to be enforced by Operation Provide Comfort, based in southern Turkey.

Unfortunately, there are obvious Turkish disincentives against supporting such an approach. Ankara's primary

goals in northern Iraq include preventing Kurdish autonomy and stemming PKK infiltrations into southern Turkey. If the United States wants Turkey to be responsive to its requests, it must reciprocate. For example, UN Resolution 986 is vitally important to Turkey as the reintegration of Iraq into the Turkish economy could potentially provide \$1 billion in trade. Turkey has suffered disproportionately under the UN sanctions and to gain Turkish support, at a minimum, Washington would have to assure Ankara that 986 will proceed once Saddam rolls back his troops.

AMATZIA BARAM

One rationale for Saddam's northward move was to reassert himself as a leader, in the eyes of both the Republican Guard and of the international community. In his mind, domestic support seems to be slipping away and this action emphasized his power and control. Moreover, since October 1994, the world has uttered Saddam's name less and less frequently, and knowing Saddam's psyche, he cannot stand this.

Saddam appears to have emerged from this confrontation with more gains than losses. Although he clearly took into account the potential for a U.S. response, he hoped that with U.S. elections approaching, Clinton would opt not to react. Thus the extension of the no-fly zone surprised him, and most likely, Iraq's air force feels constrained. However, taking Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, was a major accomplishment and more importantly, projects Saddam's power into northern Iraq. From now on, if Saddam is willing to pay the price, he can conquer the rest of Kurdistan. The good relations Saddam maintains with Massoud Barzani will require that he capture only the areas remaining under Jalal Talabani's control in order to impose an autonomy scheme led by Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party.

Looking ahead, Saddam will probably wait for the dust to settle before moving forward. At first, one may expect bombardments and gradual advancements. Eventually, his aim is to conquer Sulaimaniya and the rest of the Talabani-controlled sectors of Kurdistan. If the process is gradual, it will be difficult for Washington to oppose these actions. Thus in the long run Saddam will be causing the United States political embarrassment and the effort to contain him will cost the American taxpayer a great deal. These costs would come under the best of circumstances as Saddam might get lucky and actually down an American fighter. Perhaps the United States "collective" needs to reevaluate how to get rid of Saddam and his regime once and for all. Otherwise he will remain a thorn in Washington's side. True, the next regime might prove equally menacing, but the chance remains that this would not be the case.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

The U.S. missile strikes against Iraq had three objectives: 1) To restore credibility to U.S. deterrence; 2) to reduce Iraqi air defense, thus making it safer for U.S. and allied jets to patrol the extended no-fly zone, and; 3) to humiliate Saddam in front of his military. The United States has regained some credibility, yet at this time it is not clear who has won and who has lost. Furthermore, the refusal of Turkey and Saudi Arabia to permit U.S. aircraft based there to participate in recent hostilities exposed some of Washington's limitations. From a military point of view, the missile strikes on Iraq's air defenses will have only a modest, short-term impact on Iraqi military capabilities.

Washington's options for dealing with further Iraqi adventurism include:

- Extend the no-fly zone to all of Iraq. The Iraqi air force has not played a major role in recent operations and this move could place U.S. pilots at greater risk without greatly enhancing the security of U.S. allies in the region.
- ✦ Impose a northern no-drive zone. This would be impossible to enforce without Turkish support.

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

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-
analysis/iraq)