

# The U.S. Strikes on Iraq: What Was Accomplished? What Next?

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## Brief Analysis

The U.S. cruise missile strikes on Iraqi air defense forces yesterday and today were intended to have three main consequences: 1) to exact a price for the Iraqi army's actions in Irbil and thereby restore credibility to U.S. deterrence; 2) to degrade Iraqi air defenses in the newly extended no-fly zone, making it safer for coalition aircraft earmarked to patrol the area, and; 3) to humiliate Saddam in front of his military and thereby indicate that the price of military adventurism may be the stability of his regime. While the strikes may have regained Washington a measure of credibility, they are likely to have only a modest, short-term impact on Iraqi military capabilities and Saddam's calculations, for several reasons:

- The amount of explosives put on target by the 44 cruise missiles (27 on Tuesday morning, 17 on Wednesday morning Iraq time) was more or less equivalent to what a small 6-10 aircraft strike package could have delivered (in other words, not a lot). Moreover, the air defense-related facilities targeted are neither vital assets, nor are they easily disabled.
- The air defense command-and-control facilities hit are located in thick, concrete bunkers built to take punishment. (Some of these were hit during the 1991 Gulf War and in repeat strikes in January 1993, yet they have continued to operate.) Moreover, Iraq has hundreds of SAM launchers and thousands of missiles, and the air defense system has a degree of built-in redundancy which allows it to continue functioning despite losses.
- The apparent refusal of Turkey and Saudi Arabia to permit U.S. aircraft based there to participate in the operation along with the exclusive reliance on cruise missiles—presumably out of concern about the implications of casualties or the capture of personnel—highlighted the constraints on U.S. military action. The exposure of these limitations may have offset the positive impact of the missile strike.
- The northward extension of the southern no-fly zone will not significantly hinder Baghdad's military freedom of action because the Iraqi air force has not played a major role in recent operations against the regime's domestic or foreign opponents (though the extension of the no-fly zone to the outskirts of Baghdad may be a provocation which Saddam may feel compelled to challenge). This might, however, enhance U.S. reconnaissance coverage of the area, better enabling U.S. forces to conduct air strikes in southern Iraq if need be and enhancing U.S. early warning capability with

regard to potential threats to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

- Attempting to destabilize Saddam's regime by targeting his air defenses is probably futile. By and large, the armed forces both fear and loathe Saddam, and officers from nearly all its branches have been implicated in abortive coup attempts in recent years. The main obstacle to the success of these coup attempts is not a lack of will on the part of the military, but the efficacy of the regime's protective apparatus. As long as the Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard remain intact and loyal, coup attempts are likely to fail. Attacks on the Republican Guard not the air defense forces are a necessary condition for a successful coup against Saddam.

Finally, it is unclear what impact the decision to freeze implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 986 ("oil-for-food") providing for the easing of sanctions on Iraq will have on Saddam. He is known to have had reservations about the resolution because of its intrusive monitoring provisions, and he may have reasoned at this time that restoring government control to Irbil was a greater prize than the easing of sanctions. In any case, Saddam probably believes that UNSCR 986 can eventually be resurrected with French and Russian help.

Saddam's Response: Saddam's initial response to the two U.S. strikes has been to vow to challenge the no-fly zones and to mass his military near the town of Sulaymaniyah—traditional stronghold of the PUK (the Kurdish party that formerly held Irbil) and now headquarters of the Iraqi National Congress (the main umbrella group for the anti-Saddam opposition). Thus, if not effectively deterred, Saddam might follow up his success in Irbil by attacking Sulaymaniyah or challenging the no-fly zone. Retaking Sulaymaniyah would be a major victory for Saddam and a major blow for the opposition and the U.S. Thus, further challenges by Saddam are likely, necessitating a U.S. response.

U.S. Options: U.S. policy should be guided by several considerations: 1) Any perceived weakness by the U.S. will invite further challenges by Saddam; 2) Further provocations by Saddam should be met by a disproportionate response directed against vital assets of the regime, such as the Republican Guard, and; 3) Given flagging international support for American policy towards Iraq, the U.S. must make every strike count, choosing its targets for maximum effect. Available options include the following:

- Extend the "no-fly zone" to cover the entire country: However, because Iraq has not made much use of its air force since the Iran-Iraq War, this involves greater risk for U.S. military personnel enforcing the "no-fly zone" (since they would be spending more time flying over enemy air defenses) for a relatively meager payoff.
- Create a northern "no-drive zone" like the one in southern Iraq: While this seems an attractive option, it would be virtually impossible to enforce under current conditions. As long as Turkey (correctly) perceives little threat from the Iraqi army and is apparently unwilling to allow U.S. combat aircraft to fly strike missions from its soil, this option is a non-starter.
- Hit Iraqi oil production facilities: Even with UN sanctions, Iraq exports 100,000-200,000 barrels of oil per day, to Jordan, Turkey and Iran. Attacking refineries could stop oil exports for up to a year, undercutting Saddam's main source of revenue to purchase the loyalty of his Republican Guard and secret police. Such a move, however, would probably play badly in the region and be seen as proof of U.S. indifference to the suffering of the Iraqi people.
- Hit the Republican Guard: This will have a tangible long-term effect on Saddam's ability to threaten his own people and the region. Only three or four of the seven Republican Guard divisions are capable of offensive action. The U.S. should focus on the destruction of these units. This will greatly reduce his troublemaking potential and could create the necessary conditions for a coup.

In sum, the U.S. must make it clear to Saddam that any further provocations—obstructing UN weapons inspectors, attacking Sulaymaniyah, challenging the no-fly zone—will prompt retaliation against the three or four divisions of the Republican Guard that constitute the backbone of Saddam's offensive might and the main pillar of his regime. While

this might require an operation lasting several days, the use of manned aircraft (thus entailing a degree of risk), and the support of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (where U.S. combat aircraft are based), it is the only way to have a lasting effect on Iraqi military capabilities or to destabilize Saddam's regime. The U.S. should do whatever is necessary to lay the political and military groundwork for such action in the future.

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