

Iraq's Military Capabilities: An Assessment

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

Oct 14, 1994

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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

The crisis along the Iraq-Kuwait border underscores Saddam Hussein's ability to reconstruct a formidable military force despite Iraq's crushing military defeat in Desert Storm and four years of sanctions. Nevertheless, Iraq's military is much smaller and less powerful than the force the U.S. faced in 1991.

Iraqi capabilities

Today, Iraq has the largest armed forces in the Gulf. These consist of 400,000 men organized into six corps with about 30 divisions (eight Republican Guard divisions, seven regular armored and mechanized divisions, and 15 regular infantry divisions) with 2,200 tanks, 2,500 APCs, 1,650 artillery pieces, and about 300 combat aircraft. Iraq has no surviving warships. That Saddam retained a large military after Desert Storm is due to a number of factors: Coalition airpower did not cause as much damage to the Republican Guard as believed during the war; the coalition failed to close the route of retreat for the Iraqi military before the ceasefire, allowing some Iraqi forces to escape; the U.S. agreed to the ceasefire before the forces fleeing from Kuwait could be routed; and the U.S. wanted to leave the Iraqi military with sufficient forces to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity and serve as a counter to Iranian military power.

Contrary to news reports, there is no evidence that Iraq rebuilt its forces or replaced wartime losses through major covert arms transfers from abroad; rather, rearmament has largely been accomplished by cannibalizing equipment and drawing on surviving inventories of spare parts accumulated during its war with Iran, although it is possible that some damaged equipment has been repaired with spare parts smuggled from abroad.

Sanctions have been key to assuring that Saddam is not a greater threat than he now is. The ban on the sale of oil (which could bring Iraq an estimated \$12 billion-\$15 billion a year in income) has denied Iraq the funds that would enable it to engage in the large-scale smuggling of dual-use equipment and technology needed to produce weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, the ban on arms sales prevents Iraq from restoring its conventional military capabilities by replacing Gulf War losses, modernizing its aging inventory of arms, or acquiring spare parts for damaged equipment. Further, the ban on trade prevents it from acquiring the repair parts and raw materials needed to restore its military industrial base; as a result, military production remains far below pre-war levels. Finally, the

general atmosphere of hardship and privation in Iraq caused by sanctions has contributed to the widespread demoralization of the armed forces. This is a major constraint since Saddam can only rely on his Republican Guard and a few regular armored and mechanized divisions to stand and fight in a confrontation with the U.S.; other units would probably suffer massive desertions.

After Desert Storm, Iraq's ground forces were reorganized. The Republican Guard and the regular armored and mechanized divisions were reconstituted and a large number of regular infantry divisions were disbanded. The Republican Guard emerged as the backbone of the ground forces; it was rebuilt by transferring men and equipment from the regular army's best armored and mechanized divisions. However, these divisions are smaller and less capable than they were before Desert Storm, since Iraq lost many of its most modern and capable weapons systems during the war. Moreover, the ground forces continue to suffer from a number of critical shortcomings that inhibit its ability to engage in sustained combat, including poor maintenance, severe deficiencies in the logistics system (particularly a shortage of wheeled transport), a lack of spares, and low morale. As long as sanctions remain in place, none of these problems are likely to be rectified.

Iraq's air force has about 300 operational combat aircraft, although less than half can be considered modern, and it suffers from a lack of aggressive, well-trained pilots; a dearth of modern, all-weather interceptors and strike aircraft; an inability to coordinate air and ground components of its air defenses; excessive reliance on vulnerable ground-control intercept procedures; and problems ensuring adequate maintenance and spares. On the other hand, Iraq's ground-based air defenses remain largely intact. Its hardened command and control centers survived heavy bombing during Desert Storm and remain operational; most of its SAMs and AAA survived the war since they were generally neutralized by non-destructive means (jamming and deception); and large numbers of air defense radars survived the war. However, it continues to rely largely on obsolete SAMs which are easily jammed, and suffers from the demoralization that afflicts much of the military.

Finally, the status of Iraq's nonconventional (nuclear, biological, and chemical) weapons programs remains unclear. According to CIA estimates, Iraq may still have SCUD missiles as well as hidden stocks of biological and chemical agents produced before Desert Storm. And Iraq's alleged involvement in recent attempts in Germany to acquire plutonium smuggled out of Russia and efforts last year to smuggle chemical weapon precursors and rocket fuel ingredients indicate that Iraq remains committed to acquiring weapons of mass destruction, even as it cooperates with UN weapons inspectors charged with dismantling these programs.

In summation, the U.S. now faces a much smaller and less capable Iraqi military than it faced in Desert Storm, thanks in large part to sanctions. Nonetheless, by regional standards, Iraq's military is large and remains a threat to its weaker neighbors.

Iraq's move toward Kuwait

In the past ten days, Iraq moved more than five divisions (including the Republican Guard's Hammurabi and al-Nida' divisions), with 80,000 men, 700 tanks, 900 APCs to within a few kilometers of the border with Kuwait. While these forces are currently withdrawing from the border area, the scope and depth of the redeployment remains unclear at this time. Moreover, Iraq could easily repeat the events of the past week anytime in the future unless constraints are placed on its ability to do so.

These forces were sufficient to overrun Kuwait, or seize disputed areas, such as parts of the port of Umm Qasr transferred to Kuwait after Desert Storm, the Rumayla oilfields, or Bubiyan or Warba Islands (which have been a long-standing source of contention between Iraq and Kuwait). And while this force was smaller than the force that spearheaded the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 -- three Republican Guard divisions and elements of a fourth division -- with 1,500 tanks and APCs (followed by elements of another seven divisions) -- it still possessed an overwhelming

margin of superiority against Kuwait's small armed forces with 11,000-18,000 men, 170 tanks, and 75 combat aircraft. This will remain the case until U.S. forces now en route to the region -- including 40,000 troops and 550 combat aircraft -- arrive in the coming days.

Conclusions

Four years after Desert Storm, Iraq's armed forces remain a threat to Kuwait and the Kurdish enclave in the north of the country. While sanctions have not prevented Iraq from restoring some of its military capabilities, they have been effective in preventing Baghdad from becoming a much greater threat than it is now. Saddam's reckless, aggressive behavior thus underscores not only the continued importance of sanctions but also the need to consider new options to ensure that Saddam is neither able to pin down U.S. forces indefinitely or to threaten Kuwait again.

Michael Eisenstadt is military affairs fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #130

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

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

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)