

## Post War Issues #2:

### When Can the Troops Come Home?

Feb 28, 1991



Brief Analysis

**W**ith the suspension of hostilities in the Gulf War, when can American troops begin to come home? Assuming that a formal cease-fire goes into effect within the coming days, the need for the bulk of American forces in the theater will disappear. However, the United States will require a considerable force presence until it is certain that all hostilities have ceased. In the longer term, the United States should be able to reduce drastically its military presence in the Persian Gulf region.

If the cease-fire holds, the United States can rapidly convert its forces in the Kuwait Theater of Operations from an offensive army to a force dedicated to defense. Ground forces can be reduced to no more than three divisions, air forces to several squadrons, and naval forces to perhaps two carrier battle groups. Of course, the U.S. would need to maintain sufficient naval forces to sustain the continuing economic embargo against Iraq for as long as required. Apart from these forces, the most important continuing requirement would be in the area of air defense, to prevent any Iraqi surprise attempt to strike at key military and civilian targets.

The United States should be able to reduce its presence in the region in the near term from over 530,000 troops to some 100,000-150,000. Given the time required to clear the battlefield, reorganize, and redeploy the forces it could easily take several months to return these troops and their equipment to their home stations. This timing will be affected by decisions which may still be made about the amounts of equipment that will remain as pre-positioned assets in the Gulf and the numbers of U.S. troops deployed from Europe which will be returned to the United States as part of Defense Department personnel reduction efforts.

#### Near-Term Military and Political Requirements

What are American military requirements in the near term? To a large extent, this will depend on the posture taken by Saddam Hussein. If Iraq should break the cease-fire, discussions of extensive American troop withdrawals will have proven premature. Under the worst-case scenario, Iraq could still cause extensive casualties to coalition forces if it chooses to use aircraft (assuming Iran returns them) or artillery to strike with unconventional weapons. Under such a worst-case scenario, the coalition could even reexamine its decision to avoid marching on Baghdad.

If Saddam Hussein observes the cease-fire, U.S. military requirements will be far different. The United States has demanded that Iraq implement relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, cease all hostile action, release all POWs and Kuwaiti nationals, and coordinate mine clearing and other necessary actions with the coalition forces. If Iraq does so, the United States will soon have no military requirement to retain Iraqi territory. From a military point of view, the United States and its coalition allies merely require that Iraq agree to limit its military presence to the minimum (with no heavy equipment, artillery, aircraft, or missiles) in the zone currently occupied by coalition forces.

However, will coalition forces want to retain some Iraqi territory in the near-term for political reasons? Clearly, over the next few days, the coalition will want to convey the message to Iraq's populace that -- despite Radio Baghdad's

rhetoric -- Iraq has suffered a dramatic military defeat. Retaining Iraqi territory will contribute to getting that message across.

Holding Iraqi territory might also provide leverage if the coalition were determined to bring down the Ba'athist regime. Already, there are rumors of Iraqi EPW generals willing to march on Baghdad to overthrow the hated dictator. If the coalition continued to occupy Iraqi territory, it could provide a base for the equipping and training of such a liberation army.

Ultimately, however, such an approach would bear high political costs. The coalition would assume the burdens of occupation, and might enable Saddam Hussein to rally the support of his people in defense of Iraqi sovereignty. Coalition forces might become vulnerable targets for terrorism. Moreover, the United States might find itself committed to an unwanted involvement in Iraqi internal politics for the long term. Accordingly, it seems that the best course for the coalition would be to leave Iraq as soon as possible, preferably to be replaced by United Nations observer forces to ensure that Iraq did not redeploy offensive forces into the abandoned zone.

U.S. military requirements in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the near term are less complex. Here, one can anticipate a fairly rapid transition from the immense force evident today to one geared to defense, maintaining order, emergency reconstruction, and training local militaries. Over time, if the cease-fire holds and the perceived threat diminishes further, U.S. ground forces in Kuwait may give way to a UN or Arab-led force.

#### Long-Term Presence

Because of the decisive defeat which Iraq has suffered, it will be far less able to threaten its neighbors than before August 2, 1990. In *Restoring the Balance*, The Washington Institute's Strategic Study Group concluded that if Iraq were defeated the United States and other nations probably would "have to keep a limited military presence in the region, perhaps along the lines of the naval presence which the United States maintained from the late 1940s combined with an ability to redeploy rapidly to the region." It appears today that the United States may also want to maintain a limited air presence in the region, and will certainly desire to increase its combined planning, training, and pre-positioning activities.

Given the credit which the United States has earned with states like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, it is extremely likely that such an American role will be welcomed in the region. Moreover, given the success of Operation Desert Storm and the desire to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, the American people are likely to support a policy of continued U.S. military involvement in the Persian Gulf.

Marvin Feuerwerker is the senior strategic fellow at The Washington Institute and the principal author of the 1991 study *Restoring the Balance: An Interim Report of The Washington Institute's Strategic Study Group*. He previously served as deputy assistant secretary for policy analysis at the Department of Defense. ❖

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