

Can Air Power Win the War?

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

After nearly three weeks of sustained air operations, and over 45,000 sorties (half being offensive missions), the principal goal of the war -- the liberation of Kuwait -- remains unrealized. The allied air campaign against Iraqi forces in the Kuwaiti theater of operations has several major objectives:

- The destruction of ammunition and fuel depots, and the interdiction of main supply routes to undermine Iraq's ability to conduct sustained combat operations.
- The destruction of the Republican Guard as a viable fighting force in order to hasten the collapse of Iraqi defenses in Kuwait, and perhaps the downfall of the regime.
- The disruption of Iraq's command and control in order to preclude an effective response to U.S. and allied moves in the air, and on the ground.

Is it possible to achieve the liberation of Kuwait through air power alone, and through the realization of these objectives, or will ground operations be required?

Putting on the Squeeze

Forward ammunition and fuel depots in theater have been hit hard, and large numbers of secondary explosions have been reported, suggesting a degree of success in hitting these relatively large, vulnerable targets. Because Iraqi forces are in largely static positions, and have not yet expended large quantities of ammunition or fuel, they are not likely to feel the impact of this effort, however, until ground operations commence. The interdiction effort is reportedly meeting with great success as well, compounding the problems caused by the attacks on the forward stocks of ammunition and fuel. As many as 27 of 35 key bridges linking Baghdad with southeastern Iraq and Kuwait have been destroyed or damaged, and Iraq is reportedly meeting only 10 percent of the logistical requirements of its forces in the Kuwaiti theater. Troops are reportedly begging for food from Kuwaiti civilians.

The significance of these reports should not be exaggerated, however, since it is not clear whether hardships are shared equally by all units in theater. Military units probably enjoy a higher priority for food and water than the local civilian population, while within the military, the Republican Guard and the armored and mechanized units in theater probably have priority, and would not suffer as much from food and water shortages as front line infantry units. Because these units are at the end of the logistical supply line, and are likely to be the first to die in battle in any

ground war -- and hence are considered expendable -- they are probably not as well provisioned as other units.

Hammering the Republican Guard

Allied air power has hammered Republican Guard command and control facilities, ammunition and fuel depots, and troop concentrations. The Republican Guard is dispersed and deeply dug into static positions, however, and early estimates claim that only about 15 percent of the Republican Guard's dug-in armor and artillery were destroyed in the first two weeks of combat. The full effects of the aerial bombardment of the Republican Guard is thus not likely to become clear unless ground operations begin. While large parts of the Republican Guard might survive the bombardment, its combat effectiveness and ability to sustain operations for more than a few days is likely to be significantly affected by air attacks against its logistical infrastructure, and by the morale shattering effect of sustained aerial bombardment. In addition, because the Republican Guard is deployed in southern Iraq and northern Kuwait, it is likely to suffer heavy losses as a result of air attacks against formations moving in the open should it deploy units to the front in southern or western Kuwait.

Saddam's Eyes and Ears

From the outset, most of Iraq's command and control facilities have been hit by allied air power, and Saddam has had to take extraordinary measures to safeguard his security (such as spending much of his time in underground command bunkers). As a result, he probably has been unable to meet face-to-face with his commanders at the front as often as is desirable due to the risk of travel, and has been forced to rely to an inordinate degree on voice or written communications. Consequently, his ability to communicate with the front and acquire an accurate picture of developments there has been degraded. Communications between corps and division commanders in theater has reportedly also been hindered. However, as long as the situation on the ground remains static, this will remain a largely unexploited achievement.

Outlook

While the aerial campaign against Iraqi forces in the Kuwaiti theater appears to be achieving some notable successes, it is unclear that air power alone can dislodge Iraq from Kuwait, or lead to the collapse of Iraqi forces there. No aerial interdiction or battlefield support campaign has ever yielded success without follow-on ground operations, to destroy enemy forces, and seize and hold terrain. Ground operations would thus:

- Enable allied forces to exploit the immobilizing effects of air attacks on the enemy, which often damage and immobilize more enemy vehicles than they destroy, temporarily limiting his ability to maneuver and react to friendly moves.
- Force dug-in reserves to redeploy in order to counterattack allied units, and thereby risk attack from the air while en route to the front.
- Enable allied forces to fully exploit the shock, and morale degrading effects of prolonged air attack.
- Significantly increase Iraqi logistical requirements. The increased demand for ammunition, fuel, and spare parts would quickly outstrip the ability of Iraq's already hard pressed supply system to respond. Iraqi forces could run out of ammunition and fuel soon after the commencement of ground combat.

In addition, large-scale desertions -- if they occur at all -- are not likely to occur while the situation on the ground is static, but in the tumult and confusion of ground combat, after Iraqi command and control over its forces is disrupted.

Against these possible advantages must be balanced the likely heavy cost of ground combat in terms of allied lives. For now, the U.S. should let air power continue to erode Iraqi combat capabilities while avoiding Iraqi attempts to draw it into an early ground conflict. However, it will probably become necessary, sooner or later, to conduct a

ground attack to oust Iraq from Kuwait. From a military perspective, later is better than sooner, as it is the best way to maximize the potential contribution of air power to the ground campaign, while minimizing potential losses to allied forces.

Michael Eisenstadt is a research fellow in political-military affairs at The Washington Institute. He is author of the Institute study *The Sword of the Arabs: Iraq's Strategic Weapons* (Policy Paper #21, 1990). ❖

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