

# Iraq's Republican Guard

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

Iraq's elite Republican Guard -- the best armed and trained unit in the army -- comprises the mainstay of its ground force's offensive capability, and the principal pillar of Saddam Hussein's regime. Republican Guard units in southern Iraq and Kuwait also form the backbone of Iraq's defenses there. Their destruction by U.S. and allied air power or ground forces would have a profound effect on the course of the Gulf war, and Iraqi capabilities thereafter.

### Origins and Development

The Republican Guard was established in 1963, and originally consisted of an armored brigade deployed in and around Baghdad to serve as the regime's praetorian guard and protect it from coups. Through the 1980s, during the war with Iran, it was gradually expanded to provide an offensive capability, and to counterbalance the growth of the regular armed forces. By 1988, the Republican Guard included six divisions, and about 110,000 men, and in the spring and summer of that year, it spearheaded a series of offensives to recover Iraqi territory held by Iran, contributing to Iran's decision to accept a cease fire. Following the war, the Republican Guard was further expanded by the addition of two more divisions. It subsequently spearheaded the invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990.

Because of its unique status in Iraq's armed forces, and its dual role as its premier offensive force and regime praetorian guard, the Republican Guard differs from conventional ground units in a number of ways:

- Republican Guard divisional organization is more flexible. Its eight divisions may each include up to four (and sometimes more) armored, mechanized, infantry, and commando brigades, which may be augmented by various independent units, as required.
- Republican Guard divisions and their subordinate units are generally larger and heavier than comparable units in the regular army, with additional armor, artillery, and logistical units, to provide offensive punch and staying power.
- While -- like other army units -- the Republican Guard is subordinate to armed forces General Headquarters (GHQ), its commander also reports directly to Saddam Hussein, to ensure that it remains responsive to his authority.
- To enhance its combat capabilities, deter coups, and foster the loyalty of its officers and men, the Republican Guard receives preferential access to the newest and best equipment in Iraqi inventories, such as the T-72 tank, the BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicle, and the 2S1 122mm self-propelled howitzer.

- A disproportionate number of officers are from President Saddam Hussein's home town of Tikrit and his tribe (the Begat), although this tendency has weakened in recent years as a result of its rapid expansion. However, regional, tribal, and personal connections still influence the placement of personnel in key positions
- Pay exceeds regular army salaries, and personnel enjoy superior conditions of service and various special privileges, as an additional loyalty inducement.
- Manpower is of higher quality than in the rest of the armed forces, and consists largely of college and high school graduates.

The Republican Guard is commanded by Major General Iyad Fatih Khalifa al-Rawi, a former division commander, and it currently consists of about eight divisions, with some 150,000 men. Five divisions are reportedly deployed in southern Iraq and Kuwait, while two are deployed near Karbala -- between Baghdad and the front -- and one around Baghdad itself, to defend the regime. The five divisions in the Kuwaiti theater serve as a GHQ reserve, and may account for up to one third of the combat power of Iraqi forces there. In a war they would be employed to blunt breakthroughs on the Kuwaiti front, meet an allied flanking movement from the west, or defend Basra. Because of their critical role in Iraq's defense of Kuwait, defeat of the Republican Guard is vital to the success of the U.S. and allied war effort. In addition, the destruction of the Republican Guard would severely curtail Iraq's post-war offensive potential. These units spearheaded a series of successful Iraqi offensives against Iran in the spring of 1988, and the invasion of Kuwait. The destruction of the Republican Guard units in southern Iraq would thus limit Iraq's ability to threaten and intimidate its neighbors after the war.

#### The Fate of the Republican Guard

For over a week now, U.S. and allied air forces have been bombing Republican Guard command and control facilities, ammunition and fuel depots, and troop concentrations in southern Iraq and Kuwait in order to degrade its combat readiness. This effort is guided by the assumption that the destruction of the Republican Guard will lead to the collapse of Iraq's defenses in Kuwait, and perhaps the downfall of the regime. This effort will be affected, however, by several factors:

- Republican Guard forces are dispersed and deeply dug into static positions, reducing their vulnerability to attrition through air attack, although morale might suffer.
- Because they are in static positions, they have not expended ammunition or fuel, or put wear and tear on their vehicles. As a result, they have probably not touched relatively plentiful forward stocks of ammunition, fuel, and spare parts.
- The Republican Guard probably receives preferential access to food and water supplies, and would thus suffer least from food and water shortages which appear to be affecting other units in theater.

The full effects of the aerial bombardment of the Republican Guard is not likely to become evident until ground operations begin. While it might survive the aerial bombardment largely intact, its combat effectiveness and its ability to sustain operations for more than a few days is likely to be significantly affected by ongoing air attacks against its logistical infrastructure. Moreover, in the event that the Republican Guard is committed to ground combat in Kuwait, it would probably suffer heavy losses as a result of air attacks against exposed units moving to the front, while surviving units will face the prospect of combat with fresh, well-supplied U.S. and allied ground forces.

Finally, while the aerial campaign against the Republican Guard might indeed hasten the collapse of Iraq's defenses in Kuwait and reduce Iraq's post-war offensive potential, the location of three Republican Guard divisions near Baghdad means that significant elements of the regime's principal pillar of support might avoid ground combat altogether and thereby survive the war, possibly insuring the survival of the regime, even if Iraq loses.

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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