

Basing Restrictions Shape Concept and Conduct of War

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Brief Analysis

With Saudi Arabian, Turkish, and Jordanian host-nation restrictions limiting coalition ground and air operations, the United States has begun to develop a range of Iraqi airfields as forward operating bases for combat aircraft. This is ironic considering that successive U.S. governments spent billions of dollars to develop an unparalleled basing environment to support U.S. power projection in the Gulf. Recent decisions by Saudi Arabia and Turkey -- key U.S. allies -- have arguably prevented Washington from waging a shorter and less costly war in terms of both blood and treasure. Yet, the United States has benefited greatly from its policy of diversifying basing assets in the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, recognizing that Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman are dependable allies and that Iraq may one day replace Saudi Arabia as a key airbase provider.

Background

As the German government has been keen to point out, and as GCC states are keen to obfuscate, some of the most significant military contributions to Operation Iraqi Freedom have come from states outside the "coalition of the willing," with Kuwait the only Arab state willing to be listed as one of the forty-four members of this nebulous grouping. Having long served as Iraq's small coastal opening into the Gulf, Kuwait is now providing the aperture through which the United States and Britain have had to move their major land forces -- a far cry from the 1991 Gulf War, when the full breadth of Iraq's 488-kilometer Saudi border was available for land operations.

Ground Forces

Although Baghdad and Basra would have been major objectives in any war strategy, the coalition's inability to insert major ground forces through Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Jordan has significantly reduced its choices concerning its axis of advance. One often-overlooked consequence of this restriction has been the loss of military access to crucial Saudi ports. While Kuwait's container terminal at Shuwaikh has twenty-one deepwater berths, Saudi Arabia's port complex at Dammam boasts thirty-nine, including six specifically designed to accommodate the roll-on, roll-off ferries being used to transport the Kuwait-bound armored vehicles of the 4th U.S. Infantry Division and other units.

Planners were also denied the opportunity to develop an alternative axis of approach (out of Saudi Arabia) avoiding the cities along the Euphrates river valley, which are now centers of high and low-intensity Iraqi resistance. The

possibility of developing a wide flanking threat using the 101st Air Assault Division from either Saudi Arabia or Jordan was forestalled early on, while the powerful 4th U.S. Infantry Division -- arguably the most modern U.S. military unit -- was effectively taken out of the war until mid-April due to the failure to secure Turkish basing rights, which denied Washington a powerful northern thrust and the ability to insert troops directly into the Ba'ath heartland.

In other ways, however, the concentration of coalition ground forces in Kuwait has proven to be a blessing. Kuwait was perhaps the only Arab country that could rhetorically justify allowing such access to U.S. forces, given the Iraqi invasion and annexation in 1990. Moreover, strong Kuwaiti government force-protection measures have reduced the potential for attacks on deployed coalition personnel. A significant portion of the country has been turned into a militarized zone. Kuwaiti checkpoints dot key highways; the Kuwaiti Security Services and police forces launch preventative actions to preempt terrorist attacks; and Kuwaiti naval forces patrol the entrance to the Shatt al-Arab waterway, in one case protecting U.S. forces by destroying an Iraqi dhow believed to carry saboteurs. Although such measures have caused considerable damage to agricultural land and road infrastructure, Kuwait's citizens can harbor no illusions about their national stance -- Kuwait made the war possible and has supported it ungrudgingly.

Air and Missile Forces

Basing restrictions have also complicated the task of providing the high sortie rates required during the unfolding assault on Republican Guard divisions near Baghdad, with the smaller GCC states, aircraft carriers, and forward bases in Iraq taking up the shortfall caused by Saudi restrictions. Kuwait and Oman have allowed unrestricted overflight and basing of combat aircraft, while Qatar has provided full basing rights at the al-Udeid airbase. In contrast, the United Arab Emirates has permitted only reconnaissance assets to operate out of its territory. Although Saudi Arabia has provided command and control facilities from Prince Sultan Air Base and allowed all-important tanker, surveillance, combat search-and-rescue, and Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) aircraft to operate from its territory, it has closed its bases and airspace to strike aircraft. Moreover, both Saudi Arabia and Turkey have closed Tomahawk cruise missile launch baskets in the Red and Mediterranean Seas, respectively (although Riyadh has agreed to missile-overflight rights along specified routes). Turkey has also tightly limited any use of Incirlik airbase for strikes in Iraq, even restricting overflight rights by placing limits on tanker sorties.

The key limitation for land-based air forces has been the shortage of bases near the Iraqi border that can be used for bombing missions. Kuwait has absorbed as many combat aircraft as possible, but this solution has resulted in serious overcrowding of the airspace. Both airfield security and flight safety are at risk under such conditions, particularly given the fact that Iraqi and U.S. missiles fly through the same airspace. The danger of this situation was highlighted by the recent downing of a returning British Tornado GR4 by a U.S. Patriot missile.

With the majority of strike assets forced to operate from U.S. aircraft carriers, Diego Garcia, Britain, Oman, and Qatar, the key effects of Saudi Arabia's unwillingness to base additional forces have been to reduce the sortie rate, decrease the availability of on-call close air support, and increase support requirements (e.g., tankers). To solve this problem, the United States has developed numerous captured Iraqi airfields as forward air bases that can generate higher sortie rates and provide sufficient close air support as forces engage in large clashes near Baghdad. Although this strategy entails a higher risk of airbase attacks and imposes a considerable support burden, it provides the requisite proximity.

Regional States Shape the U.S. Plan

As expected, the war has shed interesting light on the limitations of both U.S. unilateralism and host-nation leverage. Without Kuwait, Operation Iraqi Freedom clearly could not have involved a credible ground element. Saudi Arabia and Turkey defined the axis of advance and caused unexpected levels of logistical bottlenecks by denying access

to their ports. Nevertheless, barring Kuwait's crucial role, regional states have learned that they cannot stop U.S. military operations by restricting basing rights -- they can only make them longer, more difficult, and more costly to the United States in terms of blood and treasure.

Michael Knights is the Mendelow defense fellow at The Washington Institute.

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